



# Miracle on Summit Avenue

*Rev. Kelly Cox Brings  
a Ministry of Joy to  
Those in Despair*

Back on September 21, 1897 a short, simple letter to the editor was published that would someday spread around the world.

It seems eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of New York's "The Sun." The paper's quick response was printed as an unsigned editorial.

The work of veteran newsman Francis Pharcellus Church has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial, appearing in part or whole in dozens of languages in books, movies, and other editorials, as well as on posters and stamps...

*Reverend Cox at Christmas party  
sponsored by the Metropolis Rotary Club.*

Photo courtesy of Clyde Wills,  
Editor Emeritus at the Metropolitan Planet.

DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.  
Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.  
Papa says, "If you see it in THE SUN it's so."  
Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?"

VIRGINIA O'HANLON.  
115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET.

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except [what] they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy...

Every year around this time I get a bit nostalgic, especially when it comes to Christmas movies: "It's A Wonderful Life", "Scrooge", "A Charlie Brown Christmas", "A Child's Christmas in Wales", and of course, "Miracle on 34th Street",

I'm sure you have your own favorites. For one reason or another they touch our hearts and take us to that time in life where we had the faith of a child. A faith very much like the one Jesus said was the key to the kingdom of heaven.

Recently I was introduced to Reverend Kelly Cox, the pastor of Christ United Methodist Church in Decatur. There was an instant connection on several levels. For example, I grew up at Christ United Methodist. Our house was just around the corner and my parents were one of the first people in the growing congregation. I was quite active in the church often spending more time there than most of my other activities.

But then there was another connection. One that threw me back many years to a time when I, too, had the faith of a child. Part of it was Pastor Cox's engaging personality. Another part of it was being in my old church again. But it just might have been his snow white hair, his bushy white beard, and his deep, joyful laugh that filled the office where we sat down to visit.

I know some people may think it strange an ordained minister should portray what is typically believed to be a



## And This Will Be a Sign...

*hang it on your tree!*

Ornaments from Hoerr's Berean Bookstore says volumes about you and your faith in Christ.

From decorative accessories to Bibles, Books, Gifts, Cards, Church Supplies and more, we are Central Illinois' largest independent Christian retailer.

*Stop in today and discover what's in store for you!*

**Hoerr's**  
**BEREAN**  
**BOOKSTORE**  
*serving Christ, by serving you...*

3180 N. Water Street in Brettwood Village • 872-7300

secular, fictitious figure. So I asked Reverend Cox, "How do you achieve a balance between portraying Santa and still keep Christ at the center of Christmas?"

"You know the name Santa means 'Holy', from the Latin 'Santas,'" replies Reverend Cox. "Every language has that word, or a derivative of it, in it. Some people call him Saint, and that's still 'Holy'. And some people call him Saint Nicholas, so that's where it originates. And of course Nicholas was actually canonized as a Saint. So there's that evidence as well."

"How did your ministry of being Santa Claus begin?" I asked with eager expectation.

"Basically the reason I started all of this was I was appointed to the Cairo United Methodist Church. I was a Rotarian at the time. The grade school sat just one block away from the church I was serving there at the time. The principal, Bill, was a Rotarian and he drove up one day to the house and he said, 'I need a Santa.' And all of this was not here," Reverend Cox explains, pointing to his beard, white hair, and round figure.

"I think I could do that," he told his friend. "He told me he had the suit and everything. So I said, 'Okay' and that's how it started. His school was Pre-K through second grade. So that first year I just went from room to room as Santa, you know, 'Ho Ho Ho.'" He then added with a huge grin, "And I liked it!"

Then, in a hushed whisper, he confided, "And I kept the suit." A delightful chuckle involuntarily escaped from his beard. "I called Bill and I said, 'You know I might want to use the suit for more than just the school.' He said, 'Don't worry about it! As long as you're in Cairo you can have the suit. You just use it for whatever you want.' And so I did."

The first two or three years I was only doing the school. It got to the point where I would go early in the morning to the school and by the end of the day I would just be drained. I had every child on my lap. Now back then I could do that; you could still let the children sit on your lap in the public school. And I listened to every child. I discovered I had to begin to formulate some kind of discipline, rules, because these were children that were living in one of the country's three poorest areas.

So I'm seeing these children. They had nothing. I asked one little boy one time, I said, 'What do you want for Christmas?' And he said, 'A door.' I did my ho ho ho thing and exclaimed, 'My goodness, what do you mean a door?' Well the teachers were always behind the children watching. I trusted the teacher and she's indicating to me that 'he means it, Santa.' I asked that little boy, 'What happened? You mean you want a front door?'... 'Yes.'

What had happened is, his momma's boyfriend and gotten upset with momma and literally knocked the door off the

hinges. There was no door. So this little boy and his family are sleeping in a house without a front door. Now if you're five years old and you hear traffic outside, you hear police cars, you hear dogs, you hear people, and you don't know if they're going to come in and get you, or take you, or hurt you?...

So through the Rotary Club, and through some of the business men and church members, by that evening, that young boy had a front door. It meant we had to replace everything. Everything had been destroyed. You couldn't just go and hang a new door.

The more often I did this, the more stories I would hear. Every year I would get..."

A long pause punctuated the affect of Reverend Cox's experiences. We regrouped for a moment and then he carefully continued.

"Children aren't always taken care of the way they should be. And so they would come. My suit always had to be laundered, because there could be feces, or urine, or vomit, whatever. It got to the point, especially in the early years, I would take toweling to put on my lap..." and then he said with a big laugh, "because Santa's suit can only take so much! So that's how I would do it. And it grew. Then different people would ask, 'Would you do this?' and word got out that I had a suit and I would do any nonprofit (organization) for free."

I never promise a child, even if I know him or her, I never promise a child they will get a specific gift. Because I don't want that child waking up and saying, 'Why? What did I do? I must have been bad because Santa promised.' And so I never promise."

I sense a shift in the tone of Reverend Cox's voice and demeanor as he pauses to reflect. "I also never tell children they have to be good," he continues. "I try to tell them to mind and to respect. You know we form our opinions about ourselves very early and most of the children I see are very poor. And they're told often enough that they are not worthy or they are of little value. The language we use with children can be so appalling. An adult would strike out, but a child can't."



*Reverend Cox at home in the Fellowship Area of Christ United Methodist Church*



*Reverend Cox was always the hit of the Christmas Parade.*

Photo courtesy of Clyde Wills, Editor Emeritus at the Metropolitan Planet.

God has given me great opportunities and it has become a ministry; I look at it as a ministry. In December I'm always in red. My wife and I are very good at hearing. If I go into Wal-Mart during Christmas, you can almost see it!" he chuckles out loud. "My wife will say to me, 'There's a little boy over there.' And sometimes all I'll have to do is go, 'Ho ho ho ho! My goodness!' and boy, the eyes get bright and they get wide! And especially if a child isn't doing exactly what momma is telling them to do and boy they'll just snap right up! You have their attention!"

We pause for a moment to enjoy the laugh and bask in what God is doing through such a simple act.

"Several years later," Kelly continues, "Bill, the principal at the school, and I were visiting at a social event. He said to me, 'Kelly, you don't understand. You are the only male some of these children will ever get a positive reinforcement from.' and so I don't take that suit lightly.

I have a new suit now. Well, it's in its fourth season. The way I got this suit, I was in a local restaurant, and I had put on weight, and put on weight, and put on weight...and the original suit was a one piece outfit. Well the year before, my wife was having to help me literally squeeze into it! And so we were talking to some friends in the restaurant and I said, 'I don't know what I'm going to do!' One of the ladies in our church was a really good seamstress. I said, 'I might have to ask Judy to sew a panel in the back so I can get into it!'" Again Kelly's full, round laugh filled the office.

"So the person we were with said, 'Well, just go buy one.' Well, you don't just go buy a Santa suit. They're costly, you know. My Santa suit cost as much as my vestments that I use in worship!" Kelly gets tickled and again his engaging laugh pours forth. "So I said, 'I don't think that is going to happen.' Well, we had our meal and everyone left. That was on a Sunday. On Wednesday in the mail box I received a letter with a check in it and it said 'It's too important for you not to have a Santa suit. Use this for a new suit.'

And so I went out to get a new suit. It used to be you could go any number of places and get a Santa suit. So I went to Penny's and they said they didn't have any. So I asked the

lady if she would measure me because it had been a long time since I had any new suit. As she was measuring me another lady runs up to me and asks, 'Are you Santa?'" Kelly get tickled again and continues, "Well, sometimes I am!"

Since we were at the mall, she thought I was the mall's Santa and she tells me she's in need of a Santa. So I tell her I do Santa, but I only do Santa for nonprofit organizations. Then she tells me this is for children with autism. She said the Santa they had planned on wasn't going to be able to be there. So I told her just tell me when. I explained to her I don't charge, I don't take mileage, and I don't take a gift, nothing. I just do this as a ministry. And so we set up the date.

But then I got worried because I had never done autistic children before. But I was on the Board of the mental health agency, and so I went down to the mental health agency and talked to some of our doctors and clinicians. I told them, 'I've got this new gig and it's scarring the socks off of me because I don't know how to act!' And they helped.

They explained one thing you can't do, because I always make this grand entrance ringing the bell and laughing my ho ho ho, they said I can't do that. They said I needed to be there first. 'You need to just sit, don't raise your voice and don't make any sudden gestures. Let the children come to you and discover you.' So that's what I did. At that event there were about fifty autistic children present.

There was one little boy who learned by touch. He would come to me, and touch my coat, and then run away. Then about twenty minutes later he would slowly come up and touch me again, and rub the fur on my collar, then run away. By the end of the day he was sitting on my lap and we were talking to each other. That is one of my favorite experiences, being with those children on that morning."

Reverend Cox explains he is relatively new to the Decatur area and is still "getting his feet wet" in regards to his Santa ministry. He did venture over to Oak Grove School last year. He has also done a Christmas party for the American Legion where they had gifts and treats for the children.

I mentioned to Kelly I had attended Oak Grove School when I was growing up and how glad I was to see one of the traditions I enjoyed had been resurrected—visiting with Santa. In my early years a fellow by the name of Harold Nichols assumed the role of Santa.

"A story about Oak Grove," Kelly chuckles, "I was kind of an afterthought I think...and they weren't sure what to do with me! So I had a chair and the children would come. Each class was making a craft with their parents. It was a very nice event; families making Christmas projects together, cookies and punch, and this old fat fellow over in a chair!"

Just as I was leaving, an older little girl, I'm estimating she was maybe eight, came up to me as I was leaving." He pauses then smiles, "Of course there's always the question of credentials!" Kelly breaks into another hearty laugh.

“She said, ‘If I thought you really were the real Santa, I would ask you for something.’ And I said, ‘Well you can ask me for anything and we can talk.’” Kelly begins to fight back the tears and pauses once again. He swallows hard and continues, “She said, ‘I want my dad to come home from Iraq.’” At this point we both pause to gather ourselves, reflecting on the impact of that little girl’s wish.

Kelly takes another deep breath. “I said, ‘You know what? That is bigger than Santa. But Santa believes in praying. and Santa believes in Jesus. And Jesus answers our prayers. And I will pray.’ And I asked her name, and I asked her dad’s name. I said, ‘Santa will pray that you see your dad soon.’

So God must have heard the prayer, because as far as I know, the child’s father is home; safe. So you know, it’s those moments that make it all worthwhile. That’s just God going before you. That prevenient grace of God. God doesn’t always fulfill all of our wishes, but sometimes He does.” I whisper a reflective, “Amen.”

There are those who believe Santa is only part of the huge commercialization of Christmas and in some respects, that’s certainly true. But I can’t help believe Santa is often under appreciated in Christian circles. After all, he does represent a lot of what Christianity is all about; generosity, joy, innocent faith, sacrificial giving, hope, and of course, love. We need to remember it was the Apostle Paul who said, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”

The Editor’s response to Virginia’s question regarding the existence of Santa included the following insight:

“You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that’s no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.”

We cannot see Christ, but that certainly doesn’t prove He doesn’t exist. Perhaps Santa is an earthly image created to be a bridge between an unbelieving child or adult, and Christ. Perhaps if we, ourselves, embraced the qualities of Santa and expressed them more openly to others, they might see glimpses of Christ within us. And that, my friends, is an opening to share the true love, grace, and mercy of Christ.

Virginia’s question of whether Santa really exists points to a much deeper question. Perhaps the question should be, “Why don’t more people live like **they** are Santa?”

Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.

*“This will be a sign to you:  
you will find a baby wrapped in cloths  
and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:12*

*Merry Christmas  
from all of us at Bendsen Signs.*



**Signs & Graphics, Inc.**



217-877-2345 • [www.bendsensigns.com](http://www.bendsensigns.com) • 2901 North Woodford • Decatur