

# As most Christians celebrate Christmas, small group won't

Some consider it a secular holiday, remembering a time when churches either ignored or actively discouraged it

By Tom Breen  
Associated Press

**CHARLESTON, W. Va.**: As Christmas draws near, Pastor John Foster won't be decorating a tree, shopping for last-minute gifts or working on a holiday sermon for his flock. After all, it's been 50 years since Christmas was anything more than a day of the week to him.

He's one of very few American Christians who follow what used to be the norm in many Protestant denominations - rejecting the celebration of Christmas on religious grounds.

"People don't think of it this way, but it's really a secular holiday," said Foster, a Princeton-based pastor in the United Church of God. He last celebrated Christmas when he was 8.

His church's objection to Christmas is rare among U.S. Christians. Gallup polls from 1994 to 2005 consistently show that more than 90 percent of adults, including 84 percent of non-Christians, say they celebrate Christmas.

That's a huge change from an earlier era, when many Protestants ignored or actively opposed the holiday. But as it gradually became popular as a

family celebration, churches followed their members in making peace with Christmas.

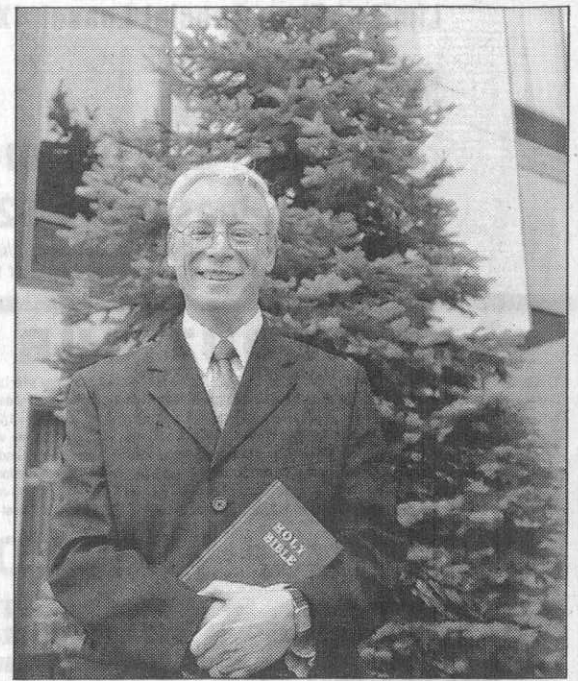
The change didn't happen overnight. Through much of the 19th century, schools and businesses remained open, Congress met in session and some churches closed their doors, lest errant worshippers try to furtively commemorate the day.

"The whole culture didn't stop for Christmas," said Bruce Forbes, a religious studies professor at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. "Government went on as usual, business went on as usual, school went on as usual."

In researching his book, *Christmas: A Candid History*, Forbes discovered that major American denominations - Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Methodists and Congregationalists - either ignored the holiday or actively discouraged it until the late 19th century.

That rejection was rooted in the lack of biblical sanction for Dec. 25 as the date of Jesus' birth, as well as suspicion of traditions that developed after the earliest days of Christianity. In colonial New England, this disapproval extended to actually making the holiday illegal, with celebration punishable by a fine.

"Some somehow observe the day," wrote Boston Puritan Samuel Sewall on Christmas Day 1685, "but are vexed, I believe, that the body of people profane it, and blessed be God no authority yet compels them to keep it."



JON C. HANCOCK/Associated Press

**Pastor John Foster of the Princeton, W. Va., United Church of God doesn't celebrate Christmas, rejecting the holiday on religious grounds.**

Some 322 years later, Sewall might be surprised to see his congregation - today known as Old South Church - proudly displaying a decorated Christmas tree outside the church.

"We think it's cheerful and seasonal," said Nancy Taylor, senior minister of Old South, one of America's most venerable congregations, counting

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## Holiday

Churches 'loosened up,' minister says

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among its past worshippers not only Sewall but Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams.

Now part of the United Church of Christ, Old South not only has a Christmas tree, but encourages its 650 or so members to exchange Christmas presents - although the focus is on charitable donations and service, rather than shopping.

"We are the descendants of the Puritans and Pilgrims, but we have loosened up a lot since then," Taylor said. "We have changed and adapted, and I think that's part of why we haven't died out."

Like Sewall's successors, the mainline Protestant churches have learned to ac-

cept Texas history professor Penne Restad, in which faith and family were intertwined in a complementary set of values and beliefs.

Christmas became acceptable as a family-centered holiday, Restad said, once it lost its overtly religious significance.

At the same time, aspects of the holiday, such as decorated trees and gift-giving, became status symbols for an aspirant middle class. When Christmas began its march toward dominance among holidays, it was because of a change in the culture, not theology.

"In America, the saying is that the minister follows the people, the people don't follow the minister," Restad said. "This was more of a sociological change than a religious one. The home and the marketplace had more sway than the church."

That's partly why Christians like the United Church of God reject the holiday: They say divine instruction,

the Bible," said Clyde Kilough, president of the United Church of God, which has branches all over the world. "The theological question is quite simple: Is it acceptable to God for humans to choose to worship him by adopting paganism's most popular celebrations and calling them Christian?"

There is still lingering unease with the holiday in denominations that once rejected it. This can be glimpsed in worries about commercialization and in individual Christians like Phillip Ross.

Ross is an elder at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Vienna, near Parkersburg, W. Va. Well-versed in the history of Christianity, Christmas and Presbyterianism, Ross knows his church historically objected to Christmas.

On the other hand, Ross is also a father of two, and while he made up his mind to reject Christmas as a teenager, his children's early years included gifts, decorations and a tree.