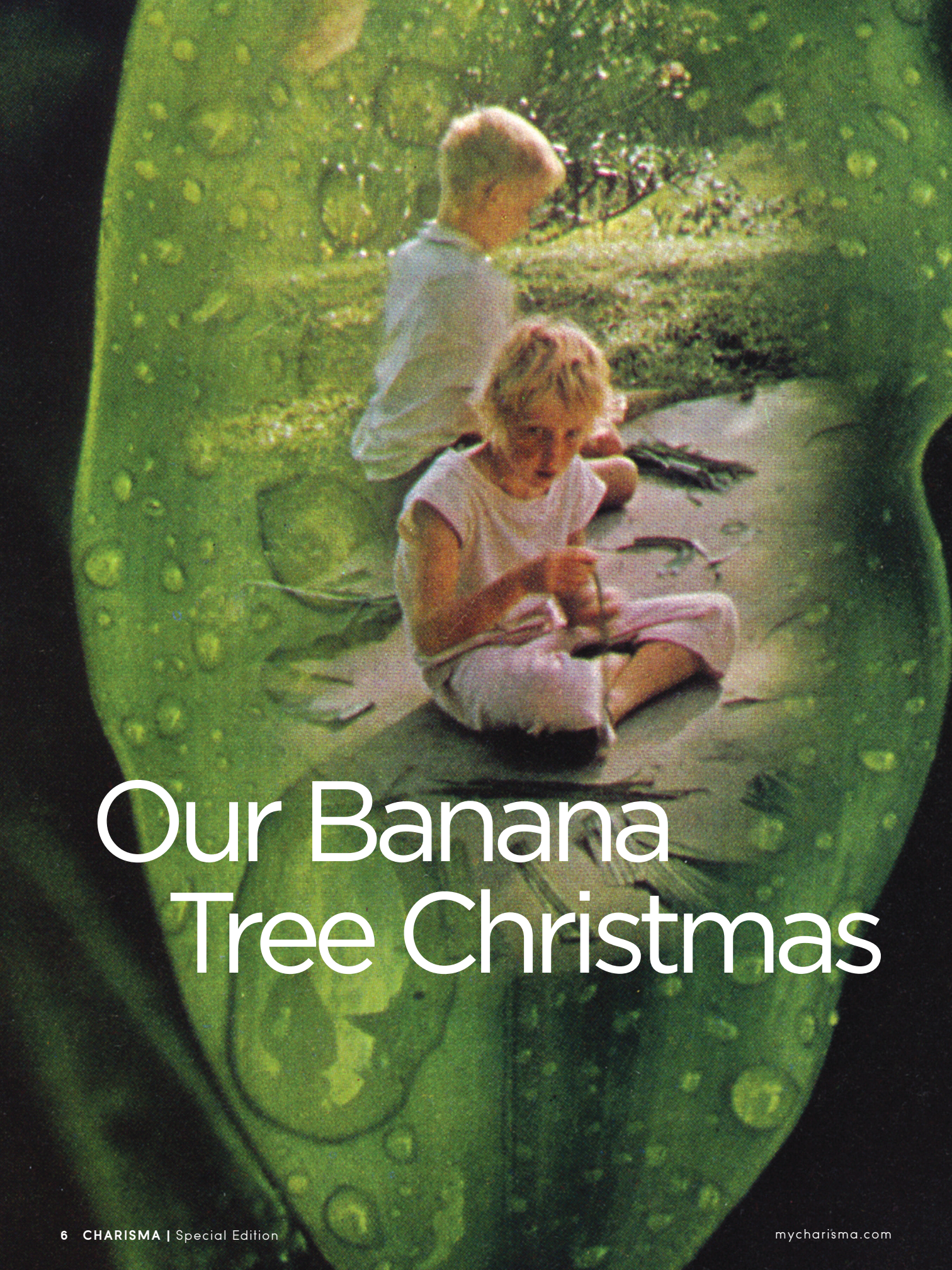
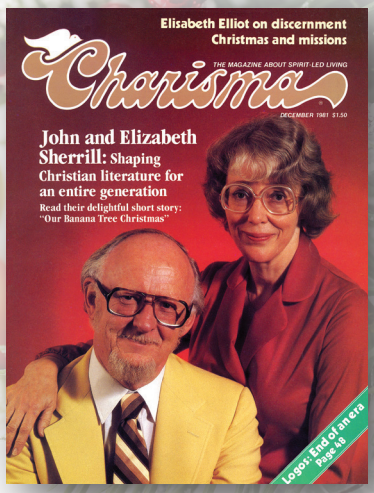


Our Banana Tree Christmas



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Facing a 'different' Christmas while in Africa, our family discovered new meaning in the season

BY JOHN & ELIZABETH SHERRILL

Christmas is the time when nothing ought to change."

Our newly married daughter, Liz, put into words what all of us were feeling. We had come from our home in New York state to spend the holidays with her and her husband, Alan, in their new apartment in Tucson, Ariz. Outside, on Christmas Eve, cactus-wrens hopped about the mesquite bushes beneath a glorious desert sky, while indoors the four of us gulped iced tea and thought of pine woods and falling snowflakes.

"Home in Leicester," Alan recalled of his Massachusetts upbringing, "we'd generally go skating about now."

"And tonight there'd be the midnight service at St. Mark's!" Liz said. "Remember, Mom and Dad, how you can see your breath, walking in from the parking lot?"

We did remember. We wanted every time-hallowed tradition just as it always had been. No changes. Not at Christmas.

And yet ... we remembered one very different Christmas. A Christmas when we'd learned something important about change—whenever it comes. We doubted that Liz could recall many of the details, since it happened years ago. So for her and Alan we related the story of our Banana Tree Christmas.

We had been sent with our three children—Scott, 12; Donn, 9; and Liz, 6—on a year-long magazine assignment to Uganda. Except for one elderly German couple who lived a quarter-mile below us on a jungle hillside overlooking Lake Victoria, our neighbors were Baganda people, living in mud and thatch houses. Everyone in the family was reveling in the differentness of Africa.

That is, until December. As Christmas drew near we began to realize that this was the

time of year when we treasured tradition, not contrast. In his own way, each of us began to mourn. We became positively maudlin about the Christmases we had known, lamenting that here on the equator we could never hang our stockings by the chimney with care.

Above all, how could we have Christmas with no Christmas tree—that beautiful evergreen symbol of the undying life that came to earth at Bethlehem? Stringing the lights, hanging the stars, setting the Herald Angel on the topmost branch—every stage of this joyous family activity had been an occasion to talk about the coming of God's Son. But of course evergreen trees do not grow in the tropics.

"It didn't look like a Christmas tree, but it was—well ... festive!"

At least, that's what we thought.

One hot, humid afternoon in mid-December we looked down the red-earth road that led up through the banana grove and saw the children returning from school. The boys were dressed in white shirts and short khaki pants, Liz in a green dress and gray bowler hat. But ... what on earth was Scott carrying! Over his left shoulder was what looked for all the world like a freshly cut hemlock.

Faces bright with achievement, the children stopped in our front yard. "Don't look!" Liz called, seeing us in the doorway. While we closed our eyes Scott stood the tree on its sappy stump. "Open!" cried Donn, flourishing—yes, it was a machete, the long, heavy-bladed tool, halfway between a knife and an axe, which every Ugandan household boasts. "Mr. Muwanga loaned it to us," he explained, naming a neighbor at the foot of the hill.

"But—the tree!" we finally managed to get out. "Where in the world?"

"There!" Liz pointed beaming down the hill toward the German neighbors. Now that we thought of it, didn't they have an evergreen hedge around their property? A painstakingly tended, infinitely fussed-over and well-nigh-impossible achievement in this climate, probably the only stand of hemlock for a thousand miles? We closed our eyes again, willing the tree not to be there when we opened them.

But it was, and there was nothing for it but to set out, all five of us, down the red dirt road to the Hammerscheimers' house.

Down through the banana grove we went. The children, thoroughly subdued, trailed behind, the boys lugging the tree between them. Around a bend there it was: the Hammerscheimers' hedge, a 6-foot hemlock screen, trim and manicured and even ... except for an 18-inch stump and a gaping hole in the very center.

We had met the Hammerscheimers twice and knew only that he had been a railroad engineer under the British and had stayed on in retirement, devoting himself to gardening. Who knew what patience and expense it had taken to keep evergreens alive on the equator?

As we rapped on the front door, Liz began to cry. Mr. Hammerscheimer spoke English with difficulty, his wife not at all, and we spoke no German. But we had no trouble communicating, given the tree, the tears, and—when we led the couple to the scene of the crime—the vandalized hedge. The old German put both hands to his head and began to rock back and forth. We were afraid he might actually be having a heart attack there on the spot, but after the first shock his chief concern seemed to be for his age-stooped little wife.

He spoke to her long and earnestly in German, repeatedly drawing the boughs of the adjacent trees together across the gap as though to reassure her that in time the hedge would fill in.

Then he gestured toward the house; several times we caught the word Tannenbaum.

When at last he carried the tree inside the house both were smiling. They even insisted we come inside while Mrs. Hammerscheimer put on strong Kenya coffee and her husband showed us where in their living room their unexpectedly harvested Tannenbaum would stand. When we left we had two new friends.

But of course we still had no Christmas tree. On either side of us, as

LINDA GILLOTTI - AI

we climbed back up the hill toward our house, nodded the long, tattered leaves of the banana jungle. These trees do not produce the yellow dessert banana we know in the States, but a small green fruit that looks like a "regular" banana before it ripens. No matter how long you wait, however, they never change color and never become soft.

These are matoke bananas: the Bagandans machete off the hard, green skin and cook the core like potatoes. Our neighbors consumed great quantities of them each day and, in what we took to be a grasshopper approach to the future, hacked down the entire tree to get at the fruit. Then with the ever-present machete they'd lop off the hand of bananas, leaving trunk and leaves on the ground to rot. The hillside on both sides of the dirt road was strewn with these fallen, unwanted trees.

"Maybe," Scott ventured, in the tentative tone of a leader whose previous plan had misfired, "we could use one of these instead."

Our hearts weren't in it, but nobody had a better idea, so we dragged one of the floppy-leafed plants into our living room and stood it in a corner. It did not even remotely look like a Christmas tree, but we set about decorating it anyhow. Our traditional ornaments were packed in boxes in our attic on the other side of the world. Nor did cranberries for cranberry chains grow in Uganda.

But we tore the leaves from another banana tree into strips, made bananaring chains and wound them around the pithy yellow trunk. We'd bought some long, dangling, bead earrings from a Masai tribesman; we hung these from the leaves and tucked small gifts in the leaf axils.

We stood back to admire the effect. It still didn't look like a Christmas tree, but it was—well ... festive!

What was there after all, we began asking ourselves, that was so sacrosanct about an evergreen tree? Part of a pagan tradition from the forests of northern Europe, it had become a Christmas symbol only because Christians looked for, and found, meaning of their own in it. Originally it had no more connection with shepherds and wise men than this funny-looking tree of ours—in fact the banana tree was probably more familiar to the men and women who took part in that first Christmas.

We decided to make a family project, in the week remaining before Christmas, of finding out everything we could about banana plants—maybe a Christmas message was hiding here too? Scott discovered from his science teacher why local people cut down the whole tree to harvest the fruit.

"Each banana tree reproduces only once," he told us. "No mater how long it lives, it won't flower again." What a wonderful symbol for God's only-begotten Son!

"The matoke banana is the staple food of central Africa," Donn read from a book he found in the library. "For some tribes it constitutes the sole food source." Matoke, in this part of the world was what bread was to Palestine ... and Jesus said, "I am the bread of heaven."

Liz's first grade class was studying the invention of writing. "In olden days banana leaves were used for paper." Then the great flat leaves of our tree could stand for the Bible, where the Christmas story was preserved.

Questioning our neighbors, we learned that there is no way to increase the banana's yield by human effort. The tree requires no pruning, no fertilizing. Its fruit is a gift—like Jesus.

By Christmas Eve we had become excited about our tree as a symbol for the season we were celebrating. We had invited neighborhood children in for a Christmas Eve party; to the pile of brightly wrapped packages that had been growing all week beneath the tree, now were added the Africans' gifts. And each came wrapped not in paper and ribbon, but in a banana leaf.

"It's traditional," explained Mr. Muwanga's daughter, Nnasuubi. "The leaf is what says, 'This is for you.'" Once more, a token of God's gift of Himself.

But it was the Hammerscheimers who added the best insight of all. They'd brought a platter of Mrs. Hammerscheimer's Pfeffernüsse for the party, and seemed as delighted as the children as we shared the various ways the tree was speaking to us about Jesus.

"The best you have missed, I think," said Mr. Hammerscheimer. He pointed to the base of the tree. "Where this tree grew, next year a new one comes!" Like the fruit, it occurs without man contributing or knowing how. But, for the new to be born, the old must die.

This was the best of the gifts we received from our banana tree that Christmas: a reminder of the whole Christian story. The joy of Christ's birth is balanced in the Christian year by the agony of His death. But in that very death, our tree told us, was the promise of resurrection.

How full of meaning our tree had become—once we stopped trying to shape it to some earlier model. Why do we resist change so strongly? Why do we cling to the way "it used to be?" It's as though change automatically meant diminishment—the robbing of something precious.

But is that what "change" has to mean? Was it true of the mold-shattering changes Jesus brought? Since He is God of the ever-new, perhaps we could make a lifelong game of looking for Him in the change itself.

There have been other Christmases full of adjustments since that one. Christmas following death ... separation ... career change. And each time, following a bout of nostalgia, we've found new meaning in the season through the altered circumstances themselves.

"And we can find it here in Arizona," we told Alan and Liz as we finished the story. That afternoon the four of us squeezed into the cab of their truck and headed out into the brown-and-gold desert.

"I wonder," Liz mused, "how a cactus would look as a Christmas tree?"

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co-founded Chosen Books and worked for Guideposts *magazine for many years. In the 1960s they wrote what became a classic on the Holy Spirit,* They Speak With Other Tongues. *They are the authors of Corrie ten Boom's* The Hiding Place, *David Wilkerson's* The Cross and the Switchblade *and many other books. "Our Banana Tree Christmas" was an original article penned for* Charisma *by the couple.*