

Frances Kipps Spencer 1917-1989

Frances Kiku Kipps Spencer was born of missionary parents in Karuizawa, Japan on July 8, 1917. When she was three years old, her family returned to the United States, and she was reared in various cities and towns in Pennsylvania, where her father served as a Lutheran minister. She attended Lenoir Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina, and graduated from Averett College in Danville, Virginia. In 1940, she married Harry Wooding Spencer, a Danville native who died in 1973. She lived at 13 Chestnut Place in Danville for the greater part of her married life.

Mrs. Spencer held various positions at L. Herman's Department Store in Danville throughout most of the 1940's. When she left the store in 1948, she was Training Director and Fashion Coordinator. Later, she worked as a freelance artist in television and other commercial areas. Her most important contribution, however, was in a volunteer activity: the origination and development of the Chrismon idea.

In 1957, Frances Kipps Spencer began thinking of a way to decorate the Christmas tree in her church that would be more suitable for a sanctuary. She thought that the usual brightly colored Christmas ornaments were just not appropriate for a setting of worship. So, she began researching and looking for something that would reflect the Christian faith.

Mrs. Spencer began by trying to imagine herself in the shoes of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She asked, "How would Mary celebrate Jesus' birthday?" The answer from our culture and time-period would be to have a cake with candles and his name on it. Mrs. Spencer then looked upon the traditional Christmas tree as a cake and placed on the tree the name Jesus and his title Christ. Instead of using the name and title in English, however, she used Greek monograms. Thus, the letters in Greek, "Chi Rho," became one of the earliest Chrismons because they are the monogram for *Christos*, the Greek word for Christ. The word chrismon itself is a combination of the words Christ and Monogram.

Simple monograms of Jesus and Christ, as well as a few crosses, decorated the first Chrismon tree. As the beauty and meaning of Chrismons attracted people, Frances Spencer added other designs, which were copies in present day material, of signs and symbols used by the earliest Christians. These later ornaments grew more sophisticated in meaning and complex in execution. She began to create original designs that depicted Biblical teachings and events. For example, in 1960, a large figure 8 that delineated the Christian year, which follows the life of Christ, was added to the tree. In another case, at her husband's suggestion, Mrs. Spencer created a series of Chrismons based on the Beatitudes and added them to the tree in 1968.

According to the dictionary, a chrismon is a monogram of Christ. But the chrismons as ornaments are more than monograms; they may also tell about Jesus Christ. As the designs grew in number, they included references to the life, ministry, activities, nature, and teachings of Jesus. Thus, the Chrismons as symbols always point beyond themselves to God. Indeed, the vital feature of the concept is that each design must proclaim some truth about God as seen in Jesus. As the years passed, the Chrismon idea spread beyond Christmas. The ornaments have become meaningful decorations in homes and public places throughout the entire year. People employ them in table settings, in

shadow boxes, on bookmarks, and on banners. Some are even styled for use as Christian wedding cake toppers.

Mrs. Spencer also wrote and illustrated five books about the Chrismons: *Chrismons: Basic Series* (1959); *Chrismons: Christian Year Series* (1961); *Chrismons: Advanced Series* (1965); *Chrismons for Every Day* (1971); and *Chrismons* (1970). Earlier books have undergone several revisions. The books, which were written in response to how-to-do requests, explain the construction of the Chrismons and their meaning. Frances Spencer was also active as a speaker, interpreting the Chrismons and touring many states to tell the Chrismon story.

Through these books, the Chrismon idea reached countries all over the world. Churches of every Christian denomination used the idea to communicate that Christmas is indeed the celebration of the birth of Christ, as well as to help their members learn more about Jesus. Some follow the patterns in the books to the last detail, while others use the instructions as a starting point and, as the books encourage them to do, translate the ideas into native media. Because members of different churches often join to make Chrismons, the program has had a marked ecumenical impact. Through the Chrismons, many Christians have discovered the similarities rather than the differences in denominations. What was begun by Frances Kipps Spencer in a small Lutheran Church in Danville, Virginia, has been called the most significant contribution to Christian symbolism in the twentieth century.

Throughout the creation and development of Chrismons, Mrs. Spencer has never personally profited from the monetarily. Certainly the acceptance and sharing of the idea was a source of great gratitude to her. There is no question that the ornaments were a help and an inspiration to Christians all over the world, and that was the only compensation that Mrs. Spencer ever desired.