

Handmade jewelry was one of the many crafts made in the Bethlehem marketplace at the time Christ was born.



The Bethlehem Event

*Saturday & Sunday, December 18 & 19
Noon to 5 p.m.*

*English Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity
1509 King Street in La Crosse.*

Admission is free. Donations accepted.

*To find out more about The Bethlehem Event
and to see a complete calendar of events,
visit www.englishlutheran.org.*

little town of bethlehem

The Bethlehem Event—a re-creation of the city of David at the time Christ was born.

Story by Brad Quarberg, photography by English Lutheran Church members

In the mid-1970s, Donna Fink grew tired of the church's annual Christmas program. As Sunday school superintendent for English Lutheran Church in La Crosse, she wanted to do a Christmas program that helped students have a deeper understanding of the Christmas story and included their families.

Donna wanted the story of Christ's birth to relate to the children more—and to the rest of the congregation. So she thought about trying something new for one of the world's oldest and most popular stories. Little did she know where her idea would lead.

More than just memorized parts

Donna decided the children needed to experience Christ's birth rather than simply talk about it. She did her homework. She went beyond the Bible. She pored over books. She reviewed other resources about what the city of Bethlehem and its people were like at the time of the birth. She found out how the homes were built. She researched the food they ate and how they prepared it. She discovered what clothing they wore and how they groomed themselves.

For that first Bethlehem Event in 1976, Donna helped Sunday school classes use cardboard boxes to build replicas of homes, making them as authentic looking as possible. She and others sewed period clothing. They even cooked some Middle Eastern fare. The



Donkeys were the beasts of burden and transport in ancient Bethlehem. Live animals add a realistic touch to The Bethlehem Event.

newly-developed Christmas program was an instant hit.

Donna never expected her idea of a simple Sunday school project for Christmas to take off as it did. But, the children's excitement got the parents involved which, in turn, fed the children's excitement. "To me, the children feel the importance of the story by witnessing so many adults committing so much time to the re-creation and the many facets of the event," she explains.

The success got people talking. They wanted to do it

again. Others in the congregation wanted to help, too. "The Bethlehem Event" was born. It has become so popular and extensive that the church only puts on the production once every three or four years. This year marks the eighth production, but Donna says the number of productions really doesn't matter. It's working hard together to create something special that matters most.

Do you hear what I hear?

"Have you heard about the child born here?" "Shalom!" These are just two phrases heard throughout the man-made city of Bethlehem. Along with those cries are the smells of food and real animals. And, there's music of the period.

The setting, of course, reflects the time when Caesar Augustus has decreed the taking of a census. The mandate has drawn a crowd. Throngs of people are walking through the city waiting to be enrolled.



Left: It takes months of preparation to create the set for The Bethlehem Event. Staged in one of the church's large gym-sized rooms, the set includes life-sized trees, buildings, live animals and authentic food of the time. **Right:** In ancient Bethlehem, all men wore beards. Some event participants grow beards, while others get some help from the costume department.

Everyone from goat herders to goldsmiths, perfumers and cheese makers take part in retelling the Christmas story. Merchants are making and displaying their wares. Other tradesmen are there as well. Live animals populate the city's terrain. Middle Eastern donkeys, sheep, Angora goats (even one for the children to milk) and chickens are within the city's walls.

But before those attending begin their journey through the ancient city, they receive information about the period in specially-printed newspapers. They hear the prophecy from Simeon and Anna, along with traditional music. The visitors walk through a museum where they can view ancient artifacts from personal collections and on loan. La Crosse residents and English Lutheran Church members Ruth and John Monson, who lived in the Middle East, have prepared the exhibits to enhance the understanding of the period.

Then, the visitors proceed to the set of the city. They become citizens entering Bethlehem because of the census. The census lasted two years, so the question of why Mary and Joseph journeyed when she was about to have a baby remains speculative among scholars.

"The details of the re-creation help people understand what it was really like," explains Donna, still the major architect of the massive multifaceted production. "The project is the result of hundreds of people reaching beyond expectations and working very hard. It takes a sincere dedication to the belief that the event reaches out and touches the lives of others with a valuable Christmas experience."

Cast and crew set the stage

The Bethlehem cast and crew involves around 500, plus at least that many behind the scenes. Planning begins nearly a year before the production. Those working on the set begin in October. Men in the congregation begin growing beards in the fall so they don't have to wear costume facial hair at the event. Re-enactors spend time studying their trades and roles in the Bethlehem community.

At the event, the villagers tell the story of Christ's birth as they may have at the time of the actual event. They give visitors an in-depth view of what it was like during the first century. Those involved in the production rely on historical accuracy and detail. Their goal is to make the re-creation a memorable experience for the hundreds who visit.

All this is done amidst a backdrop that allows visitors to forget that they're inside a church and it's the 21st century. Much is done to make the re-creation of the city realistic. And, the city receives building and set improvements each time the production is run. "The scenery construction and details are the result of many years of dedication by a group of talented builders," notes Donna.

One of the most labor-intensive projects during the 1996 Bethlehem Event was a colorful mural, 70 feet long and 14 feet high. Two volunteers from outside the congregation painted it. The mural includes city streets and a wash house for a laundry, along with a peek outside the city walls at a nearby village. It was painted on sections, allowing it to be broken down and stored for the next production.