

Living Nativity is a Witness to Faith

by **Elliott Wright**



Lewes, Delaware, December 18, 2009--Welcome to Palestine in the reign of King Herod, the one history would call "the great." Look around, wander at leisure through 13 scenes that you can also find described in the Bible; watch the animals, some at a manger.

Here is the village of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem, and there are nearby shepherds on duty with their sheep in the night; also, a scene from a northern town, Nazareth, at the home of a young woman named Mary. See magi from afar who follow a star to the place where a very young child sleeps. And don't ignore the depictions of the ancestors of the child. There are just two, Ruth and Boaz in a grain field.

The scenes are life-size and have real people, all members of Conley's United Methodist Church in semi-rural Sussex County, Delaware, near Lewes. Across nine years, hundreds, now thousands of people, have come annually to Conley's Living Nativity, presented this year on the nights of December 18 and 19.

"We could not imagine not doing the Living Nativity," says Cheryl Wood, who with her husband, Robert, is in charge of the annual event. "The focus of Christmas at our church is on the Christ child, and it would seem strange to us not to present the birth and events around it to the community."

The "cast" includes some 100 persons from Conley's who consider the annual production more than a play. It is Christian witness, an opportunity to share their faith with others and to make clear that God's presence in Jesus, the Christ, was, as Pastor Mike Hurley of Conley's puts it, "a real event in a real time and place."

"A Real Event in a Real Time"

Dressed as shepherds, angels, wise persons, or soldiers, the cast members gather for prayer at each of the scenes before the gates open, asking God to bless those who will attend and, perhaps, find faith or have their faith renewed.

Conley's United Methodist Church, incorporated in 1838, is now a congregation of 554 members, with an average weekly worship attendance of 270. It was named for a carpenter who built its original building, a fitting decision given Jesus' vocation.

For several years, the Living Nativity was staged behind the church's historic building in the Angola neighborhood west of the Delaware beach resorts. It was moved three years ago to a new site where Conley's is building a new sanctuary and education facility. The original church, constructed in 1876, is far too small for the congregation today.



The "cast" of the Living Nativity includes 100 members of Conley's United Methodist Church in Delaware.

Image by: Courtesy Conley's United Methodist Church



A real event in a real time and place: Conley's United Methodist Church shares Christ's birth in a unique way each year.

Image by: Courtesy Conley's United Methodist Church

"One of our members, Karen Cannon, originated the Living Nativity," Ms. Wood explained in an interview. "It was done by a small group within the church; we had only six scenes and no speaking parts. Stories were told with printed placards in front of each scene. The third year we added speaking roles and provided guides for groups that requested them. We have gradually added scenes, now including Ruth and Boaz, as part of the family tree of Jesus."

Gift to the Community

Conley's Living Nativity is a gift to the community in multiple ways. Not only is it free of charge but contributions of money or food--and both are made--are all returned to the community. Local food pantries and shelters will benefit this year from the generosity of visitors to Bethlehem.

Depending on the weather, attendance at the Living Nativity (sometimes over three nights but only two this year) can reach 2,000. Church members have the parking challenge down to a science, and have plenty of room on the 21 acres where Conley's is building its new church and where the replica of Bethlehem stands. Golf carts are provided to persons with mobility challenges.

The steeple on the new building was raised on December 16, in time to be seen by those attending the Living Nativity. Only the exterior of the new church is finished, and what can be seen is paid for.

Members Do the Work

"The nativity is funded by the funds and labor of members of Conley's," Ms. Wood said. "Members buy the materials for the scenery and costumes, build the sets, and donate their time to the many jobs the presentations require. None of the funding comes out of the church budget."

Conley's is Pastor Hurley's home church, where he grew up and was called to ministry 13 years ago. Appointed to the congregation in 2007, he returned to find the Living Nativity an important part of the church year. "It came from a desire of people to do ministry, and they found out they can," he said. "Now, it is an occasion of witness, where we hope that visitors see or hear something that sparks their awareness of what God does in Christmas."

In addition to the Living Nativity prior to Christmas, Conley's holds four candlelight services of worship on Christmas Eve at its current building. The church's website is www.conleyschurch.com.

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Resources for Advent and Christmas

***Advent, the beginning
of the church year,
starts on the fourth
Sunday before Christmas.
It is a time
of
preparation,
anticipation, and hope.***