

Outer Space: Using Large Spaces to Teach  
the Christmas Story—Living Bethlehem

Centring Spaces: Creating a Spirituality Centre for Your Church

Inner Space: An Adventure in Prayer for Advent

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Marylu Pentelow and her husband, Lawrence, oversee the ministries at Crieff Hills Retreat and Conference Centre located just southwest of Cambridge, Ontario. Crieff Hills is situated in the heart of rural southwestern Ontario with beautiful fields and lush wooded areas. It is a perfect place to retreat! Crieff Hills Community is also surrounded by many rural towns and villages with some energetic and lively churches. In 2003, five of these churches (Duff's PC, Kirkwall PC, Knox Crieff PC, Mount Carmel-Zion UC, and Arkell UC) met at Crieff to discuss ways they could introduce Christianity to young families and the unchurched in the area. With Christmas fast approaching, they decided to use the season as a way of connecting. **Why not retell the Christmas story in a new way?** Soon, plans for **Living Bethlehem** at Crieff Hills Retreat and Conference Centre were underway.

Living Bethlehem is an interactive and creative way to tell and hear the story of the nativity of our Lord. It requires a good amount of space (indoors or outdoors) for people to walk from one scene to the next as they journey through each special moment of the Christmas story. At Crieff they do their Living Bethlehem outside but, with some adjustments, in can be done inside.

Here is their story...

Living Bethlehem has been running every December since 2003. Over the years, those attending have been a mixture of local families, grandparents bringing their grandchildren, youth groups, churches using this as an intergenerational outing, as well as individuals from every walk of life. For many,

it has become a part of their Christmas/Advent tradition.

In the organization of this event, you will need to consider the script, characters, props and costumes for each scene in the story. In our case, each of the participating congregations takes responsibility for all the parts of one scene in the story.

**Beginning our journey...** a modern-day family prepares for Christmas. The “crowd” looks in through windows and sees a living room with a family rushing through their Christmas preparations - wrapping, baking, gift picking, and tree trimming. Grandpa arrives and is warmly welcomed, but soon forgotten as the family rushes around. Grandpa tries to refocus the family as he begins to read aloud the story of the First Christmas. Suddenly the living room goes dark and a voice calls to the crowd from a path - “This way ... come this way.”

**Searching...** the skies for direction. Arriving to the next scene, the wise men greet the crowd. They say they have heard of an upcoming birth of a king, but they are lost. The crowd is asked to help them find their way. The wise men move away continuing on their search as a new voice is heard along the torchlit path ahead.

**Guarding...** the streets of Bethlehem. The crowd is stopped by Roman guards. These guards are cold, tired and demanding as they warm themselves by a fire. Before letting the crowd through the gates to the city, the guards question them as to why at this time of night are they trying to enter Bethlehem.

**Experiencing...** shepherds and angels on a hillside. Shepherds are trying to sleep on the cold ground and are grumbling loudly. Suddenly their world changes. Angels appear and through their song the shepherds learn of the “good news.”

**Celebrating...** the holy birth. The crowd is led to a stable. Seated on bales of hay and accompanied by donkeys, Joseph and Mary appear tired but are very much in a state of awe. They share these moments with the crowd - quietly of course, so as not to wake the babe.

**Sharing...** time with fellow travellers inside and warm on a winter’s night. Music fills the room where hot cider and cookies are enjoyed. All is calm as young and old, new friends and old friends gather in the warmth of the First Christmas.

Together, the churches of Duff’s, Kirkwall, Knox Crieff, Mount Carmel-Zion, Arkell and Crieff Hills Community are creating a unique opportunity to learn about and witness the Christmas story. Together, congregations and members of the broader community see the birth of Christ through the eyes of those living in the day.

*“Living Bethlehem brings the story to life and those who participate are given the privilege in doing this. To see the smiles of knowing the story, the joy on*

*children’s faces, the laughter at the humanity of the characters, makes it all worthwhile. I am truly thankful that we as a community of churches can offer this event that, for many, has become a part of their family and church Christmas tradition.”*

*- Deborah Deavu, minister to  
Mount Carmel-Zion United Church*

## Tips for a Successful Living Bethlehem

### DATE AND TIME:

A Sunday evening in early December works well for this event. Setting a timeframe (5:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.) after dark adds to the overall feel of the evening. Snow is actually a benefit as torchlight reflects beautifully on the snow.

### CAST REHEARSAL AND EVENT:

- A highlight for the cast is the rehearsal one week prior to the event. Joining together over a light dinner (soup and sandwiches), it is a time to rehearse, check costumes and iron out kinks. Just as importantly, it is a time to instill the feeling and importance of this team ministry. This need only be a short time commitment of about an hour and a half.
- Try to time the rehearsal for approximately the same time as the actual event so expected outside lighting can be experienced.
- Timing for the cast on event day: The cast tries to be on location at least one hour prior to the starting time. When possible, having pre-made sandwiches and beverages available to the cast members is a wonderful idea.
- Last tour around: At the end of the evening, when the last group begins, the cast joins the group so they too can experience this journey. This may mean the final journey may take a little longer as the cast for the next scene moves quickly ahead to get ready for the crowd. However, it is appreciated by those who have given of their time.

### SUGGESTED CHARACTER NUMBERS:

- Modern-day family - approximately 7 - multigenerational.

- Wise men - 3 and perhaps add one more who will be someone to interact with the wise men. Also, be flexible: you could use wise gals.
- Roman guards - 2 guards and 1 or 2 servant children.
- Shepherds - often a youth group, so numbers can be small or large.
- Angels - a church choir or other group. Numbers can be small or large.
- Nativity - 3 or 4 - Mary, Joseph and one or two who interact.
- If possible, use live animals, being aware of the animals health and safety. Weather may also be an issue at this time of year for the animals. At Crieff Hills, we are fortunate to have The Donkey Sanctuary as neighbours who join in making this a very special evening.



#### COSTUMES AND PROPS:

- All who are involved in this event wear period costumes. This includes those who meet and greet people in the parking lot. As this is an outdoor event, costumes need to have room for winter clothes underneath. Most costumes are robes with sashes and scarves worn on the heads. The angels wear choir gowns with white toques.
- Each scene has props, but these are kept to a minimum and must be weather resistant. It is effective to have pathways lined with torches or kerosene lanterns, which are available at many surplus stores.



#### GATHERING INTO GROUPS:

- Guests arrive and are given direction where to park their “camel.” They are then directed into a gathering area where washrooms are available. Groups of no more than 20 are taken at a time to begin the journey.
- Cast members who are referred to as “bridges” lead groups between scenes as they tell them where they are going next. This can be one person who travels the whole way with the group or someone who stays at one scene and meets each group as they arrive.

*Marylou Pentelow is on staff at Crieff Hills Retreat and Conference Centre.*



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