

The Living Crèche

One of the great traditions at First Church during the 1950's and 60's was the Living Crèche. This was a live presentation of the nativity presented on the front lawn put on by the Senior High MYF. Performances were done daily for ten days to two weeks leading up to Christmas. It's hard to imagine now, but back then there was a youth group just for the high schoolers and another for the junior high, with a pool of at least 50 kids available to each! At its peak there were performances scheduled for 4PM, 6PM and 8PM every night, with noon performances on Saturday and ones after the 9:30 and 11:00 worship services on Sunday. The biggest was always at midnight on Christmas Eve, right after the Candlelight Service. Everyone came out of the church and stood around to watch it. It didn't matter how many times you'd watched it before. Those who had gone off to college all came back to see their old friends and sometimes we had "alumni" in the cast. One year the "*Long Island Press*" ran a two page feature about it. People from all over came to see it and, of course, many people driving by the church during a performance would pull over to watch. The original set for this was a large lean-to structure with a back wall, roof and two front posts, probably about eight feet square. This was later replaced by a two sided pyramid that was easier to put up, take down and store away in the garage. There was real straw on the ground. I think the manger is the one that's still being used today. Most of the time the stable and manger sat empty on the lawn until the next performance. Schedules were made up for the cast at each show. There was always a Mary & Joseph and three wise men, but the number of shepherds varied based upon the time of the shows, from only one to 5 or 6 on Christmas Eve. Music was piped out from a second floor window and for several years there was also a recorded narration by Charlie Fink. There was no dialogue, just a tableau. Mary & Joseph first entered, coming from the West side of the sanctuary. The Kings came from the East, around the side of the parsonage, and the shepherds came out the door by the church office. A performance probably lasted 15 minutes or more. Mary got to sit, but Joseph had to stand there for the entire performance, they were the last to leave. I remember getting to be Joseph once. It was snowing and I gallantly tried to protect Mary as the flakes flew in from the open side. Fortunately, the costumes allowed for heavy coats underneath. Over time the number of performances dwindled, as there were fewer MYFers available and finally it was just held after the Christmas Eve service, before disappearing altogether to me, it wasn't really Christmas until that last shepherd departed and Mary picked up the Babe and walked away with Joseph on Christmas Eve.

Merry Christmas!
Pete O'Neill