

Christmas for a Rural Church

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12-17-02

Few, if any, rural churches will celebrate the season with "living Christmas tree" choral presentations complete with an orchestra. Few will have massive nativity pageants with casts of hundreds. Few will contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars to support overseas missions. But they will all celebrate Christmas in ways that are appropriate for themselves.

Both children in the congregation of Springhill church, dressed in their finest, sang Christmas songs for us on the first Sunday of December. After the service we all hugged them and thanked them for their contribution of music. They beamed. On the afternoon of the last Sunday before Christmas the whole congregation that is able, 10 or 12, will climb aboard a farm wagon and make the rounds of the community singing carols to the shut-ins.

The first Sunday evening of December the youth at Stansel church excitedly reported about their trip to Atlanta to assist in the sorting and packing of shoeboxes full of Christmas gifts that will be sent to children in Third World countries, gifts that demonstrate the love of the Christian faith. They had carried with them more than 50 shoeboxes that had been filled by members of their church. These boxes joined more than 1,000 others from the sister churches in their association; and, in turn, these joined millions from across our nation.

The nursing homes of rural America will be centers of ministry activities this month. One of the area Women on Mission groups set up a store in a home where residents, with play money, buy little gifts. In turn, the residents wrap and give these gifts to family, caregivers and other residents in the nursing home. This enhances the dignity of the residents. Wonderfully, the sponsors of this ministry have realized the importance of the "principle of reciprocity." Paul captured it in the phrase, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Sunday School classes are busy gathering food to box up and carry to needy families. Some will adopt a family in their community and provide toys and clothing for the children. Often this activity is poor folk helping those who are even poorer.

The eight children of Union Chapel Church are busy learning their lines for the annual Christmas program, which will be on the last Sunday evening before Christmas. Some are nervous. Some are excited. One of the two teenagers in the church will play some carols on the flute. Down deep we all know that it will come off well, and we will assess it as being the best ever.

Lots of fellowship meals at the churches will mark the season. At Arbor Springs, Ms. Polly's coconut cake will disappear quickly. At Mineral Springs, the peach fried pies of Ms. Ethel will not even get cooled. And John McDaniel's barbecue at Ethelsville will be so popular that second helpings will not see the light of day. Again, reciprocity. They give their best; and they are blessed in return.

At Mt. Pleasant, it will be a joyous time. Their new pastor and his family will be moving into the parsonage. The church has been without a pastor for over a year. They are working extra hard to make the cantata this year something very special.

All of the pastors are excited about the season. They love to share the story of the incarnation and what it means. Some worry about having something fresh to say. Others sense that the story can and should be repeated again and again. Somehow, it is always fresh and moving.

Certainly, it is wonderful that within the Christian movement some churches have the resources to present music and drama extravaganzas for the special times of the Christian year. These events can and do make a great impact.

But in God's plan it is also wonderful that there are smaller congregations in smaller places where people know one another well. Here, "high touch" is the order of the day. Children are able to perform, telling about the incarnation. They can be more than an audience for a great event. They can be an integral part of an event of great meaning in the church of which they are a vital and loved part.

In the smaller places, those people with material needs are visible. They are people that we know and see regularly. Demonstrations of love are face to face. Here, we cannot retreat into some gilded ghetto and not deal with basic needs until Christmas comes around next year. These needs are present, convicting, challenging every day.

On Dec. 22, New Salem will begin the day with a breakfast fixed by the men of the church. Worship will be in an auditorium where the several Sunday School classes have each played a role in decorating for the season. Then in the afternoon, the congregation of about 60 will gather at the pastor's nearby camp house for a carry-in meal, songs and expressions of sincere love.

Not a bad way to enjoy Christmas. They are calling it an "Old Fashioned Family Christmas." Family is the nature of small rural churches. Common, comfortable, moving. It will be another memory and a milestone in the life of this church.

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