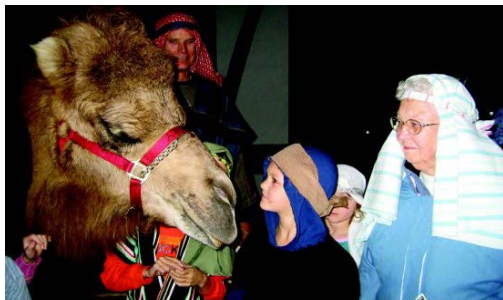


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Bethlehem event retells a timeless story

By Cathy Dausman



Kazzy the camel greets visitors to The Bethlehem Experience accompanied by his owners Rob and Robyn Lyon

Every two years or so, the Lafayette United Methodist Church transforms its Fellowship Hall, creating the illusion of a nighttime passage through the streets of Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. The church's Bethlehem Experience brings to life the Christmas story; 2017 marks the 20th anniversary of its presentation at LUMC.

Over the course of three days, guides lead groups of about 10-12 people on 50-minute tours through the marketplace of Bethlehem, capturing the spirit of what life would have been like on the night of the Messiah's birth. Performers dressed in robes and sandals sell their wares in market stalls, while festive Jewish music plays and unleavened bread is sold. There are even live animals in the stable, such as Kazzy the camel - the church's first and much-beloved therapy animal from Sonoma's Lyon Ranch.

The program was initiated in 1997 by then-program coordinator Bev Luther, says LUMC parishioner Teresa Geringer. Participants sing carols, hear live music and play a biblical trivia game. They may also dress as shepherds, although the latter is not required. In addition to being family-friendly, this is a family tradition for many LUMC members. "Fran and Vic Smith and Barbara and Rod Levander are still very active in the production of The Bethlehem Experience and are original set builders, greeters and actors," Geringer says. She added the Logan, Placzek, Kintner and Shepard/Seitz families as those who have contributed to the production.

Geringer says "the live animals in the manger scene are always a huge hit with kids and adults."

Some years the youngest actor is an infant portraying baby Jesus. Even inclement weather doesn't deter visitors - Geringer recalls that LUMC hosted the most attendees ever in 2006 "when it poured rain for the three nights."

The 20th annual Bethlehem Experience runs Dec. 15-17 at Lafayette United Methodist Church, 955 Moraga Road, Lafayette. Tours are first-come, first-served; doors open at 5:30 p.m. The last tour departs at 8:30 p.m. Suggested donation is \$5 per person or \$20 per family.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church offered its similar no-cost program Dec. 2 when MVPC's Live Nativity transformed the church courtyard into a Bethlehem manger featuring live animals.

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