

## A Walk Through Bethlehem Guide: Creatively Presenting History and Theology in a Community Outreach Event

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We have worked as a team to lead a community outreach Christmas event with our church, Mittagong Anglican, six times over 10 years. Having first seen such an event run by a church in Brisbane we were excited to think of the possibility of shaping and planning our own version of this in a rural country town in the Southern Highlands just outside Sydney. The aim has always been to present the fact that Jesus was born a real baby in a real place and time, and thus to challenge people to think about the Christian message at Christmas, the reality of the Incarnation. Having a teaching background, and with artistic and dramatic interests, we felt it was possible to try and engage all the senses of visitors so as they creatively interacted in 1<sup>st</sup> century Bethlehem, they would be learning through many styles, and would be more likely to take the message on board and recall it later. Thus it is not necessarily their immediate response we are looking for, but perhaps a seed that is planted or watered that may lead to faith.

Over the years we have adapted, changed and refined our event. Sometimes this was impacted by who in the church was willing to be part of the cast, and what resources we were able to access. Sometimes it was attempting to improve flow of people, interest levels, engagement with those outside the church, and increased readiness of cast members to present theological truths in the presentation. Refinements have enhanced the message of Jesus Christ born as the Saviour, the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies and inter-testamental hopes. Our aim is that those who have come and experienced our Bethlehem may have gained at least a taste of this historic and theological reality, and also an awareness that this has impacted the lives of church members involved, that they are presenting a truth they know to be real in their own lives; Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour.

Many people from other churches across Australia have shown interest in "Walk through Bethlehem" and there are other churches who have run similar events on a range of scales! However we have been asked about how we present the event, and so decided we would share our preparation and experience so that others can benefit from it.

Our church has an average attendance of 300-350 on a Sunday in a town of approximately 9,000 in a shire of 44, 500. We are not a mega church and have limited resources. In fact, Walk Through Bethlehem runs on a shoestring budget, with most props and equipment borrowed or donated by church members. Over the years our "cast" and crew has numbered between 35 and 90, depending on availability and interest level. The first WTB was small but convinced church members that it was worth doing the next time, and more joined in. We have some

people who have consistently been involved year after year, and others who are new to the church and keen to join in the outreach.

We do not charge an entry fee, as we want to share the Christmas message freely. We also offer free afternoon tea (with Christmas cake) and free prizes for children who have a go at the Kids' Trail. A Donation box is available but not pushed.

#### Set Up:

To change a contemporary church building and site into 1<sup>st</sup> Century Bethlehem is quite a challenge. It is vital to have a supportive Minister in charge!

The first year we prepared took quite a long time to prepare backdrops and shopfronts. I asked a carpenter in our church to create stable but foldable arched shop fronts out of wood, and he creatively came up with a 5 piece construction for each shopfront which is screwed together in situ a few days before WTB. A small team painted these to look like either wooden plank or stone construction. We currently have 11 of these and use them mostly indoors to create the front of the winding streets of Bethlehem. They are connected and roofed by sheets, hessian and painted backdrops to give the impression of a middle eastern village street. Modern tables and chairs are used in most shops but are covered with calico or earthy-coloured sheets and material pieces to convey older wooden furniture. We have used some wooden furniture in the more wealthy shops (eg moneylenders, scribes) and we find that hangings on the wall can convey wealth or simpler lifestyles.

Having painted shopfronts and backdrops the first time, there is only occasional need to paint more, although some cardboard walls and our village well made primarily of Styrofoam have needed revamping or replacing over the years. Our co-ordinators each year have planned the route of the Walk Through and what will be where, and they mark out the streets in the hall with tape so shopfronts can be erected on site, and set up crew can begin moving furniture and decorating space. The stable tends to take a while to set up in one room of our auditorium, as canvas needs to cover the floor, and walls need to become an ancient stable. But a few bales of hay, some old planks, a feedbox, some fleeces, baskets and pots, and hessian make a big difference. Some years we have even had animals in the stable eg chickens and ducklings.

We erect bunting and hessian around our site so people can see something's happening and be enticed to come in. At the entrance we have one of our shopfronts like a stone arch and 2 Roman soldiers stand guard, welcoming people in. We often have a tent with short introductory video, or at least shelter for outside cast if the weather is bad. Then there are sheep and goats, shepherds with their fire outside a tepee style shelter made of branches or hessian, a well with women and their water vessels, and an old style wooden signpost made by a parishioner. Here we also often set up the carpenters under gazebos, working with old saws, hammers and tools fashioned by another parishioner, from designs on the internet. One of our carpenters has researched things made at the time and tutors others in producing some articles. Stonemasons chipping away at rocks with chisels and hammers are

also outside, as is the potter's place. We are fortunate to have a covered veranda where we have people helping kids use clay to hand-fashion small pots, while a potter from our church uses a disguised electric wheel to demonstrate the skills.

More animals are scattered across the area, with chooks in coops, goats and sometimes horses behind old style wooden fencing, able to be patted. We have not managed to have either donkeys or camels yet, both because of the potential cost and their stubbornness!

Round the back of our hall we have the smith, often with a real small fire and hand bellows. We have been fortunate that a parishioner is able to shape metal this way and has drawn a lot of interest when he has been available. Other smiths beat away at copper sheets, and work with tools to produce small lamps and other items. The lamps look great when lit.

Inside the backdoor of the hall we use a stable door to the stage to either provide a "stable" complete with animal heads leaning over (papier-mâché or hobby horses) or we've used the space for a short video giving background to the true meaning of Christmas. On walls scattered in appropriate places through the site, we have some information to enrich the understanding of visitors. Some of these are relevant Bible verses telling the Christmas good news. Others are explaining lesser known information eg about the synagogue, or Roman occupation.

Streets are made to look more authentic with potted palms for trees, bulrushes in pots or baskets, washing hanging on rope from side to side, and water troughs, fencing etc. Large baskets of wool are placed in bare spots, with occasional wooden stools or haybales to sit on.

Inside the auditorium is a buzz of noise and smells; hay, hessian, herbs, leather and bread baking in our real kitchen to add that aroma to the experience. Leatherworkers hammer away, while shopkeepers call out their wares, and interact with passers-by, explaining their craft and playing their role. We always have some of our people in costume wandering the streets and interacting with shopkeepers, giving the feel of a real village. We include children and give them roles if they are able, like carrying water in clay jugs to participants, taking messages or sweeping the ground with traditional style brooms. Smaller children sit in shops maybe 'selling' products with parents, or play in the children's toy area with adult supervision.

Set up usually takes us 2 days of about 6 hours each, with people coming and going as available. Some come before or after work, while we rely heavily on teenagers on school holidays and retirees. We try not to have to do any set up on the actual Walk Through days (except for animals) as it can be quite tiring and we want to be enthusiastic and energetic to interact with our visitors.

Responses:

At the end of the interactive experience we have a Census, under the Roman Empire banner, with friendly census takers ready with forms to take information. As the cast have frequently discussed the Roman Emperor's census so that this is not a total

surprise. The census questions are listed; we have variations each year, but our aim is to see how they responded to the event and obtain contact details (especially email addresses) so that they can be invited back to other church events. For example we have used the addresses to invite visitors to the Mark Drama, a Light Party (alternative to Hallowe'en) and Celebrating Creativity visual art displays. Some have then attended these events, and also Christmas services, which we promote on the back of the map they receive as they enter.

After the census free afternoon tea is served in our foyer, including Christmas cake. Children who have attempted the Children's Trail activity report to a particular helper who will discuss it with them briefly and then reward them with a small "prize" eg wrapped sweet or small toy. People often sit in our café style set up and relax after the Walk Through, while Ministry staff take the opportunities to start conversations, and introduce themselves.

We have found that numbers attending have grown over the years, as word of mouth has impacted our community, as well as local advertising on signs, in shop windows, school newsletters, letterbox drops, and articles in the local paper and even on radio stations. Our first year attendance was about 200 and our biggest crowd ever was nearly 1000 over the 2 days. The census has shown attendees from our local community are the majority, but we also have travellers passing through (even from interstate), and people who visit from Campbelltown and Sydney. Nearly all responses have been very positive and appreciative, with encouragement and thanks expressed. As explained earlier, this is a pre-outreach in many ways, and an education of the reality of the first Christmas events for those outside the church. It creates a buzz in our town, and people know us as the church who does Bethlehem! Our hope and prayer is that they will come again to church, be more likely to attend our youth and children's groups and remember that we have shared that Jesus is the Saviour God sent into our world for us.