

Parish offers community a special journey

By Richard A. Kiley
 Advent travelers to Greece's Trinity Episcopal Church figuratively joined the throng entering Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth as parishioners presented a living theater dramatization, "Journey to Bethlehem," December 2, 3 and 4.

More than 100 of the church's parishioners — led by a production crew — toiled meticulously over the set for more than eight months to create a replica of a street in Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Christ.

The church's narthex and halls featured a winding marketplace, featuring shopkeepers, animal traders, money changers, shepherds, beggars, and high priests among others. Members of the 40-member cast positioned themselves along the recreated street as the drama unfolded to reveal the climactic final scene in the manger.

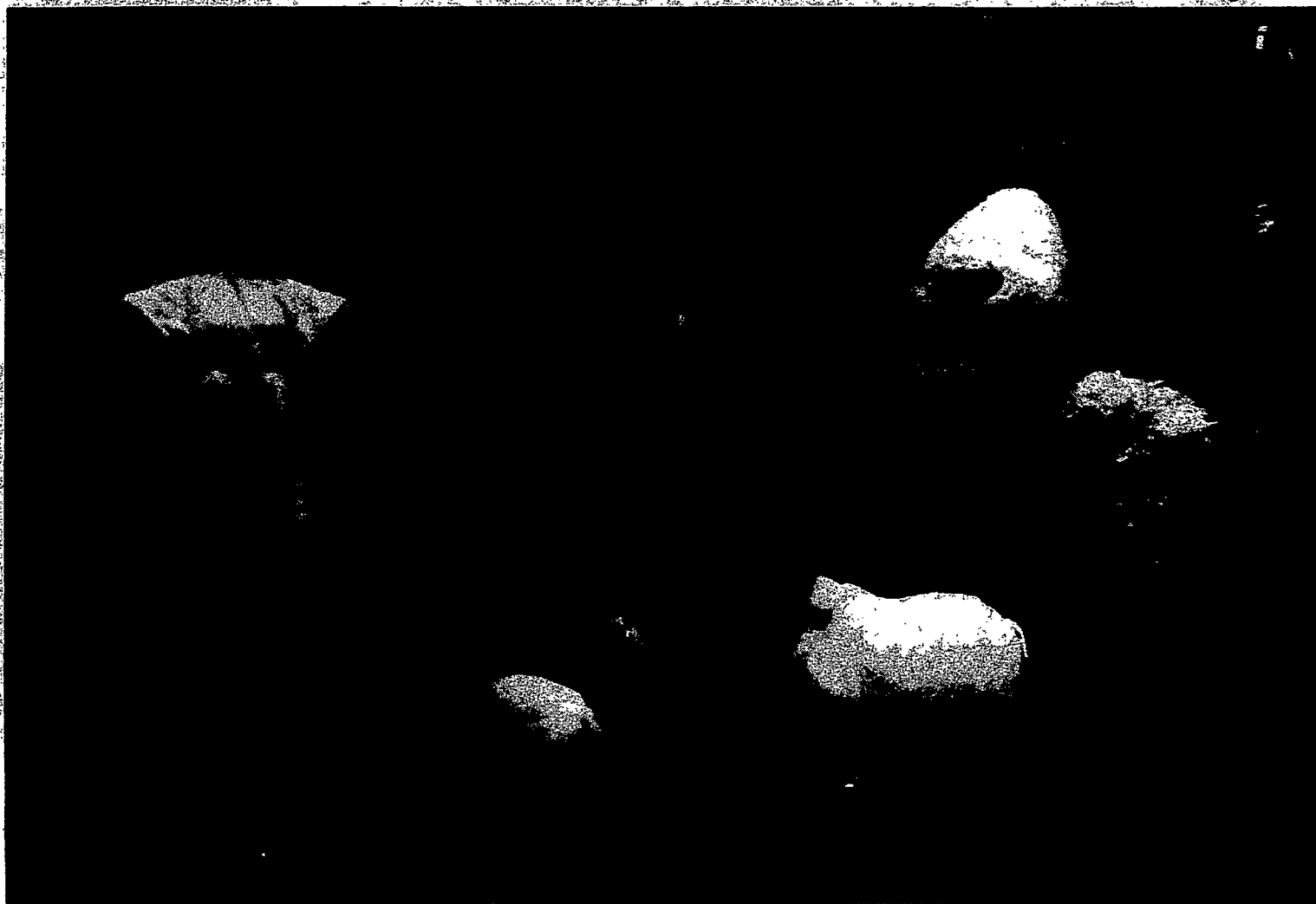
"I was surprised by how people were touched by the whole thing," said production coordinator Sandra Ostrowski. "There were people with tears in their eyes during the final manger scene."

Before entering the town gates of the simulated Bethlehem in small, guided groups, audience members had to donate canned goods or freewill offerings as an admission fee.

The church donated all food collected to the Greece Ecumenical Food Shelter and its profits to the Ronald McDonald House for families of hospitalized children. According to Ostrowski, "Journey" raised \$2,800 for the Ronald McDonald House and 55 bags of food for the shelter.

Unlike a traditional Christmas pageant, "Journey" immersed its participants in the sights, sounds and smells of Bethlehem. Audience members listened to discussions about prophesied events, and heard the prayers of the High Priest in the synagogue as he proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. The church's pastor, the Rev. Carroll Tavis, said the production offered parishioners and community members a special gift during Advent, as it provided them with "a unique way of acting out the Christmas story."

"It's a chance to explore the spiritual questions around Christmas," said the Rev. Tavis. "It is especially good for young people who are



An angel (Betty Fitzmorris) speaks to the three shepherds (Sheldon MacGregor, Matt Jablonka and Eric Robson) during one of the presentations of The Journey to Bethlehem.

Linda Dow Hayes, Courier-Journal

learning about Jesus becoming the Messiah. What makes it different is the very act of having people move through the production to the final scene."

The script for the production was partially derived from mystery plays of early medieval times. The script was written by Karen Travis, Rev. Travis' wife. Ostrowski said that Karen Travis drew from the medieval *Wakefield Se-*

cond Shepherd's Play, the York Mystery Cycle, and a modern interpretation from productions in Florida and North Carolina.

"I think it expresses the feeling if common people in this really strange event that happens in their midst," Karen Travis said. "Each of the characters in the drama reveals his hopes and fears — some by pointing to the star, some repeat omens or rumors. Each responds to the portent of things to come differently."

According to Travis, excerpts from the medieval plays were originally part of the Christmas Mass as it was celebrated at the culmination of the dark ages, circa A.D. 1000. The poetic quality of the mystery plays is evident throughout the drama, especially in the speaking parts of Joseph and the Three Kings.

One major difference between the contemporary southern productions and the Greece parish's living dramatization is the location of

the presentations. "When I contacted the parish in North Carolina, they told me it was more of a pageant-type production. They did their production outside," Ostrowski said.

Because Rochester's climate did not allow the members of the Greece church to do the same, parishioners decided to use the church building as the focal point of the production.

"I was skeptical about the whole thing at first, but I received a lot of positive feedback when I threw it out to the parish. We decided to do it in our own way to meet our own needs," Ostrowski said. "I tried to let things go in the direction the energy was doing."

Ostrowski collected more than 60 volunteers even before production plans were even drawn up. Eventually, enough parishioners signed up — on rolls of shelf paper no less — to form 15 committees. "The response was overwhelming."

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The three wisemen (John Monstream, Brian Bailey and Martin Volk) finally reached their destination in the city of Bethlehem, where they found Mary and Joseph (Diane Volk and Gary Petrozke) and baby Jesus (Alexandra Volk) in the manger.



A young tailor boy (David McKinley) practices on his sewing skills.