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Bangkok's Journey to Bethlehem

By Lynne Waits

Latter-day Saints in Bangkok celebrated the Christmas season last year with a journey to Bethlehem, but they never left their meetinghouse. Their "journey" was a program of music and narrative whose purpose was to reach out to the community and testify of the Savior's birth. It succeeded far beyond expectations.

Its most important facet was the message it sent of belief in Jesus Christ. President Thipparat Kitsaward of the Bangkok Thailand Stake and his counselors had set goals for the year to achieve greater visibility as a Christian religion and to establish bonds of trust and cooperation throughout the community. Reviewing their Christmas activity afterward, members of the stake's public affairs council reported that the program had done more to establish Latter-day Saints as believers in Jesus Christ "than all our verbal claims over the past 20 years."

The program, based on an idea found in a book of activities for Primary-age children, had guests visit Bethlehem through biblical-era scenes re-created with live actors. Pulling it all together required patient, loving cooperation. Members of the Thai wards and the English-speaking branch, many of whom did not speak each other's language, worked together in decorating and staffing meetinghouse rooms where the scenes would be staged and in creating a Middle Eastern town facade in the meetinghouse parking lot. Elder Leland Gygi, serving a mission in Thailand with his wife, Karen, contacted other Christian churches and local organizations, explaining the LDS effort to provide a family-oriented Christmas experience and inviting them to participate. Members of the public affairs council helped publicize the event among both Thai natives and English-speaking residents. Sister Gygi wrote new arrangements and harmonies for some well-known Christmas carols.

The stake president spent many hours prior to the program trying to fulfill his assignment of locating hay for use in decorating. When he finally found some in a field outside the city, it was surrounded by water, a result of flooding because of Thailand's rainy season. President Kitsaward offered to buy it, but the farmer said he could have it if he would haul it away. The president promptly rolled up the legs of his suit pants and began wading through the water. He made 30 trips before the back of his pickup truck was filled with hay. The farmer, impressed, engaged him in conversation about why he was doing this; by the time the truck was filled, the man had accepted a Book of Mormon.

Guests arriving for the program on Friday and Saturday nights, 13 and 14 December 1996, walked on the hay as they stepped back into ancient times—a Bethlehem market

just inside the meetinghouse gates. All visitors were asked to visit the census booth, where they registered and were given "gold" nuggets they could use in the market area. In that market, Relief [page 33] Societies from several wards offered Middle Eastern foods as well as fruit plates and juices and other treats.

Lynne Waits, "Bangkok's Journey to Bethlehem," *Ensign*, Dec. 1997, 33

But the focal point of the displays outside the building was the manger scene with a young Mary and Joseph and a porcelain babe in the manger. Many families asked if their children could be photographed holding the porcelain infant or if they could put their own babies in the manger to be photographed as Mary and Joseph watched over them.

Inside the meetinghouse, visitors entered the Relief Society room, whose walls had been covered with yards of dark fabric to represent the night sky. At one end, the solar system glowed in the illumination of a black light. The "angels" in front of it, arrayed in white satin and arranged among clouds of quilt batting, invited the guests to "be not afraid" and began the telling of the Christmas story in word and song. The visitors moved on to other rooms, where they found the shepherds; the innkeeper, who explained how he had tried to find accommodations for a young couple who seemed to have something special about them; the Wise Men; and even proud Herod. In each room there were actors fluent in Thai and English.

In the chapel there was a program of Christmas music, which involved members of many local churches, schools, and other organizations. Performing groups included a widely known Catholic children's choir; the United Nations Refugee School's chorus; and singers from the international Sweet Adelines organization. In addition, individuals from throughout the community offered instrumental selections.

Lynne Waits, "Bangkok's Journey to Bethlehem," *Ensign*, Dec. 1997, 33

The stake had planned for perhaps 400 to 500 visitors over the two nights. Some 1,200 came. About 350 of these were Church members. Local leaders believe this may have been the first LDS activity in Thailand where guests outnumbered members. The public affairs council reported that "there was a good mix of Christians and non-Christians, though it is hard to estimate figures." The guests included officials from the Thai royal palace.

Full-time missionaries served as greeters for the visitors, but because the activity had been planned as a way simply to reach out to the community, they did no proselyting. Some of the visitors, however, showed a desire to learn more about the Church and its teachings. One clergyman of another faith requested a Book of Mormon after his visit on Friday, saying that up until that day he had misunderstood the teachings of the Church; later he returned to request a second book for a colleague. Word of the program spread even after it was over, and one young man decided to investigate the Church simply because of what he had heard.

Many visitors lingered in "Bethlehem" after the program was over to contemplate the events that had been depicted. That was gratifying to members who had hoped their guests would find the peace offered through Jesus Christ. The members' reward was in visitors' statements like this one: "I've been to a lot of Christmas programs around the world. This one really got it right."