



COVER STORY

AWAY IN A MANGER

The enduring appeal of the Christmas crèche

BY ANNE BOKMA





Rev. Brian Kiely's full-circle crèche tradition

For 30 years, Rev. Brian Kiely didn't have a crèche in his home. As a boy growing up in a Catholic household in Montreal, he loved unpacking his family's nativity scene from its nest of tissue paper and arranging it in the fireplace hearth. But as he grew older and left the church — eventually becoming

a minister at the Unitarian Church of Edmonton — he put away what he considered childish things.

But then, when he was 48, he had his first child, Lily, now 11, followed by Elora, now 9. Both were born at home, wrapped in towels warmed from the oven. "They were handed to me, and I had the first hour with each of my

daughters and held them in my arms," he says. Soon after, Kiely bought a crèche from a church supply store. "Where the story of the nativity has power for me is as a father who was there when his children were born. Each night a child is born is a holy night; there is so much potential in every birth."

Rev. Paul Shepherd remembers helping his four-year-old son, Gareth, fashion a homemade stable out of a wooden box that once held oranges. After arranging the nativity figures, inherited from Shepherd's grandparents, inside the crèche, Gareth had an ingenious idea: he tore a 12-foot piece of white masking tape from the roll, laid it across the living-room carpet and marked 24 lines on the tape that led to the nativity scene. Each day leading up to Christmas, Gareth and his brother, Ian, would advance the magi one mark closer to the manger under the Christmas tree.

The story of the wise men's long journey across a vast desert with only a single star to guide them obviously left a deep impression on Gareth's imagination. "It was all his idea. He loved playing with the figures, and he found a wonderful way to express the anticipation of waiting for Christmas," says Shepherd, who serves Wesley Mimico United in Toronto.

Such is the allure of the crèche that we can't keep our

hands off it. Shepherd knows this from personal experience. When he was a boy, he and his two brothers would find creative new locations for the nativity figures, once even plunging them into a bed of stones at the bottom of a fish tank. "My mother was not impressed," he says. "But to me, it was a very real way to be engaged in this mythical story."

Maybe that's why Shepherd was unperturbed when the large outdoor wooden crèche at his church was vandalized a couple of years ago. "It looked like kids had simply moved some of the characters in the story around — in particular, they laid the shepherds down as if putting them to sleep." Members of the congregation were upset; someone suggested installing a security camera. In his sermon the following Sunday, Shepherd urged them to reconsider. "Is the nativity story — and our crèche — something that we want to keep in some preserved state, safely locked away, or is it something that we want the community to engage with in a meaningful way?" he asked. He suggested erecting a sign to encourage people to move the figures "in respectful ways to allow them to tell the story in their own way."

Alas, it was not to be. The following week, a vandal



Rev. Debbie McMillan's garage-sale find

Sometimes the richest treasures can be found in the humblest places. When Rev. Debbie McMillan, 43, purchased a \$2 garbage can at a garage sale a few years ago, she peeked inside and was surprised to discover a bag containing hand-knitted representations of the nativity characters. “Baby Jesus and all the

other crèche critters had been tossed into a grocery bag,” she says. “When I asked if they were for sale too, I was told, ‘They’re just junk.’”

McMillan, of Unity United near Midland, Ont., considers the crèche priceless. “Someone had put a lot of effort into making this crèche. It’s incredibly valuable to me, and I’ve

used it in sermons and during my time with the children in church to talk about how common it’s become to toss aside the real meaning of Christmas. There are nativity scenes made out of fancier materials, but I love this one for its childlike simplicity and humility. It’s a reminder to live the life Christ calls us to.”

cut off Mary’s nose and broke Joseph’s arm, and a security camera was installed.

The crèche — among the most popular Christian symbols — refers to the feeding trough for animals in which Mary placed Jesus after his birth. But for Christians around the world, it’s a venerable holiday tableau that serves to enchant the imagination, revive childhood memories and, yes, sometimes invite negative attention.

Crèches are captivating because they bring together faith and art, represent a timeless tradition and reflect a wide diversity of cultures. There are ebony crèches from Africa, German figures carved in wood, Mexican Josephs dressed in ponchos, and Inuit baby Jesuses swaddled in rabbit fur and lying on sleds. Each one emerges at Advent from a musty storage box, the figures lovingly freed from their tissue-paper wrappings and displayed under the tree

or on the mantle. All of them tell of the unfolding mystery of the nativity, the revelation of Jesus’ humanity in the image of a squirming baby.

“There’s a feeling of love that is expressed in the crèche,” says Nancy Mallett, a member of the international Friends of the Crèche association and the archivist at Toronto’s St. James Anglican cathedral, which hosts an annual exhibit of some 200 crèches every year.

Recreating the scene of Jesus’ birth has transfixed us for centuries, ever since St. Francis of Assisi presented a dramatic staging of the nativity with real people and animals during a 1223 Christmas Eve mass in Greccio, Italy. Elaborate static manger scenes caught on in Italian churches, then smaller versions, fashioned by artisans out of wax and wood with the figures dressed in fine fabrics, began appearing in the homes of the wealthy. Today, 800



Catherine Schuler's finger-puppet creations

A handmade finger-puppet crèche still occupies a place of honour on the mantle of Catherine Schuler's home in Ancaster, Ont., some 25 years after she fashioned the characters of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the three kings and two sheep out of felt and popped a wine bottle cork into each one to make them stand up.

The 67-year-old textile artist

created the crèche from a craft magazine in an effort to teach her young sons, Matt, now 30, and John, now 28, about the Christmas story. She had hoped they'd be captivated by her creation and use the puppets to act out the nativity tale, "but that didn't really happen," she says, noting that they've grown up to appreciate it as adults.

Schuler, who grew up Catholic

and is now a Unitarian, says she felt it was important that her sons know the Christmas story. "I believe that if you are part of the Judeo-Christian heritage, you should know the important stories from the Bible," she says. "Without necessarily believing in the deity of Christ, I can still believe in the importance of his humanity. . . . The crèche is one way of [expressing] that."

years after St. Francis's theatrical debut, you can walk into a Toys "R" Us and pick up a made-in-China plastic Fisher-Price "Little People" nativity set for a mere \$39.99.

No doubt about it — Christians are crazy for the crèche. There are hard-core collectors who own hundreds of crèches and scour the world in search of unusual sets. There are crèche newsletters, conventions and European crèche travel tours. The styles range from the sublime to the sentimental to the silly — consider, for example, a Cape Cod crèche that features Mary as a mermaid, Joseph brandishing a trident, the baby Jesus covered with a striped beach towel and wise men consisting of a crab, a crocodile and a horse.

It gets even more ridiculous: Christian author Mark Oestreicher of San Diego has collected 50 of the "worst and weirdest" nativities on his blog, WhyIsMarko.com, including many that are edible (and therefore downright tacky), such as a crèche made of bacon and sausage and another made of marshmallows. He doesn't exactly cele-

brate these creations, viewing them instead as "whimsical attempts for people to engage in a mystery."

Sometimes engagement with the crèche has negative outcomes. Joseph figurines frequently go missing, likely because he's the patron saint of home. According to Catholic lore, burying his statue in the yard promises a quick sale on a house. Vandalism of church crèches is also widespread, and the babe in the manger is the most common victim. "Stolen baby Jesus" is an actual Wikipedia entry. There's even a company that sells a GPS tracker for high-tech protection of nativity figures.

Despite the risks, museums, churches and even entire communities continue to stage massive crèche displays. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Walkerton, Ont., for example, has exhibited the largest interfaith display of crèches in the world, with more than 3,000 nativities from 165 area churches and hundreds of individuals. Organizer Flora Nabrotzky says the idea



Dianne Baker's crèche makes a political statement

If a trio of foreign kings tried to enter Bethlehem today, they'd be stopped by an eight-metre-high separation wall that extends for hundreds of kilometres and seals in the Palestinian population. That's the reality reflected in the crèche Dianne Baker purchased from a craftsman in Bethlehem's Manger

Square when she lived in the West Bank a few years ago as a volunteer with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches. Her crèche, carved from olive wood, depicts the magi praying on one side of a wall that separates them from the holy

family. "It's a powerful metaphor to have the wall represented in the crèche; it symbolizes the brokenness of the world community," says Baker, 54, a therapist who attends Crescent Fort Rouge United in Winnipeg. "I have vowed to have this wall as part of my crèche until there is genuine hope for peace in Palestine and Israel."

came to her in a dream. "When it came time to set up the display, it was as easy as doing a paint-by-number — God was the designer, and I simply matched it up with the vision He gave me." Nabrotzky took on the massive project for eight years running (it's currently on hiatus) because "there's a lot of suffering in the world, and we need the light of our Saviour."

A few years ago, 150 people in Creemore, Ont., created an impressive community crèche on the snow-covered grounds of St. Luke's Anglican Church. Diane Hutchings, an artist and St. Luke's member, was the driving force behind the display. She had children draw pictures of actual townsfolk, from the local newspaper editor to the server in the coffee shop, as well as local wildlife such as skunks, rabbits and deer. Craftpeople then transferred these images onto 30 life-size wooden characters. Each morning in the days leading up to Christmas, a character was erected on the lawn, and each day they were

all moved a little closer to the manger that sat outside a teepee under a cedar tree. On Christmas morning, Jesus was placed in the manger. Says Hutchings, "It was really magical. It brought the people of our village together."

But nothing beats the efforts of the people of Rivière-Éternité, a picturesque village of 500 in Quebec's Saguenay region that's known as the "Village of the Crèche" or "Modern Bethlehem." The village hosts an annual international exhibition of hundreds of nativity scenes, about 150 of which are installed outdoors. Some 25 life-size crèches are displayed in the centre of town, and a six-metre crèche perches on a mountainside, accessible by a path. "It's one of the most beautiful places I've ever been," says Catherine Limbertie, a former executive director of the Toronto Community Folk Art Council who wrote a paper about the town.

Public nativity scenes, however, can also generate controversy — particularly when displayed on government



Tim Schmalz's joyous, grateful Joseph

When sculptor Tim Schmalz decided to create a crèche three years ago, he wanted it to be anything but sombre. So he designed Joseph as a robust figure with his arms jubilantly raised to the heavens in gratitude for the gift of a child. Schmalz's depiction highlights Joseph, a figure more often relegated to the sidelines. "Joseph

looks about my age, which is 44. A lot of the time, he is made to look like an ancient man — I think that's to avoid having us think about any intimacy between him and Mary."

Schmalz, who lives in St. Jacob's, Ont., creates sculptures and monuments that have been installed throughout Canada, the United States and Europe. He is best known for his *Jesus the*

Homeless sculpture.

"I try to take my emotions and bring them to a piece," says Schmalz. He imagines the night of Jesus' birth as a great celebration. "I think it was a blast, and there was a great feeling of intoxication in the air. I wanted to change the tradition of crèche displays, which usually involve folded hands and everything being presented as very proper."

property. A few years ago, the Montreal suburb of Mount Royal removed a nativity scene from its town hall rather than acquiesce to a request from a Muslim group to erect Islamic religious symbols. And there have been numerous lawsuits in the United States challenging the Supreme Court's 1985 ruling that nativity scenes on public lands violate the separation of church and state unless they comply with the so-called reindeer rule, which calls for equal opportunity for non-religious symbols to avoid any hint that the state is endorsing religion. Commenting on this law, late-night TV comedian Jay Leno quipped, "The Supreme Court has ruled that they cannot have a nativity scene in Washington, D.C. This wasn't for any religious reasons. They couldn't find three wise men and a virgin."

Jokes aside, at different points in history, displaying a nativity scene has been dangerous. Crèches were banned during both the French and Russian revolutions. In the 17th century, the English Puritans outlawed Christmas decorations, including the crèche, and even passed legislation against the English tradition of baking a mince pie in the shape of a manger to hold the Christ child until dinnertime, when the pie was eaten.

Later, when the Nazis tried to ban crèches, people hid them under their floorboards, says Mallett, the archivist at St. James Cathedral. Prisoners of war have fashioned crèches out of whatever objects they could cobble together, making simple nativities from tree branches and buttons. "They wanted to keep the story alive, even if they might have been killed if they were found out," she says.



Sister Theodosia's souvenir crèche collection

When Sister Theodosia and the other nine nuns of Saskatoon's Ukrainian Sisters of St. Joseph travel throughout Europe to do mission work, they bring back crèches instead of souvenirs. Their collection has grown to more than 500. Five

years ago, they began displaying it in their chapel over Christmas. "It seemed selfish to keep them all to ourselves," says Sister Theodosia, 67.

People come from far and wide to see the crèches, but what touches Sister Theodosia most is how children react. "I'll never forget

one little girl who came upon one of the larger images of Jesus in the manger. She started playing with him and then . . . took one of her pink mittens and placed it on Jesus' outstretched hand," recalls the nun. "She must have thought he might be cold, so she shared her mitten."

Keeping the story alive is certainly a motivation for many who display a crèche at Christmas, even those who believe the story is just a beautiful and enduring myth with elements of sacred truth. Christ's birth is noted in only two of the Gospels (Matthew and Luke); there is a manger, but no stable, animals, innkeeper, singing angels or drummer boy. The magi appear only in Matthew, and it's unlikely they visited Jesus until he was a toddler. Luke makes no reference to a special shining star.

Rev. Steve Willey is the program co-ordinator of education and leadership development at the United Church's General Council Office. He has written an online resource about the significance of the intercultural crèche and says it's important to consider who *isn't* represented in the nativity scene. "Certainly a midwife would have been there, for example." While crèches may not jibe with the scriptural record, it's the spirit of the story that matters to Willey. The nativity scene is "like a vision that has blurred edges," he says. "It dwells in

the same category as Jesus' transfiguration or Moses' burning bush. It's a hopeful vision that allows us to move toward a future that is ordained by God."

And this hopeful vision includes many things close to the heart: the miracle of birth; the comfort of the family unit as represented by Mary, Joseph and the baby; the power of community symbolized in the attending shepherds, angels and wise men; finding the divine in the commonplace; the promise of a new year and a fresh start.

"The familiar Christmas crèche is a lens that helps us to see God's vision for the world," writes Willey. "[It] evokes Eden before the fall. Bethlehem witnesses a moment of paradise regained where all God's creatures dwell in harmony." No wonder we find the crèche so compelling. "Its enduring fascination and appeal speaks to something inside of us, something deep in our spirit," Willey says.

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