

They “Walked to Bethlehem” in Search of the Christ Child

By Marty Cottrill

Marty Cottrill of St. George’s Episcopal Church, Dayton, found the Walk to Bethlehem program appealing and volunteered to organize it. Although this program can be done successfully with the information in the program packet, Marty “went the extra mile” to give the congregation an experience in history they would never forget. Marty and her co-chair, Meredith Henrich, emphasized staying active while learning spiritual and historical background for countries on the route.

Marty’s husband, The Reverend David Cottrill, contributed enthusiasm and resources for the displays and handouts.



The Walk to Bethlehem kicked off in September. Handouts and the display board were prepared. The proposed route was posted, and announcements were made during services and in the Sunday bulletin. Weekly deposit slips were made available and collection boxes placed near the display board to encourage weekly submission of miles covered.

Members of the congregation seemed to go with the flow as they were encouraged to move and pray; reflect on where they were in this Advent journey; and move and pray some more. People signed up as individuals or as families, and parishioners from all three Sunday services participated. About 150 (of all ages) took part, or about half of the Sunday congregation. Weekly progress was shown on the map, on the display board, and in the Sunday bulletin.

St. George’s walkers traveled from Dayton, Ohio, through Pennsylvania, highlighting Bethlehem, PA, and noting how many U.S. cities are named Bethlehem. There are 19 of them! They headed for New York City, intending to “fly” across the ocean and resume their walk on the other side of the Atlantic. With the number of miles the congregation was walking, the leaders decided to “walk” the 3000+ miles of the ocean – but how?!

An Internet search led to a traveler’s blog kept while he was traveling and jogging on the Queen Mary 2. The group immediately secured passage on a virtual ocean journey, chartering the QM2 for their voyage. Photos were posted to show everyone that walking or jogging (or even doing physical therapy) could be done on the ship. The ocean miles were covered with no problem.

The congregation landed at Brest, France, and walked from there across France to Italy. But now they were faced with crossing the Alps! Again, the Internet came to the rescue: a hiking trail around Mont Blanc offered a way to hike from France through a small part of the Alps into Italy. Again, photos were posted showing a group that had actually done this.

A route was outlined, generally but not always following main roads. The route led through Turin, Rome, and Venice, Italy; Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Thessalonica, Greece; Istanbul/Constantinople, Ephesus, Cappadocia, and Antioch, Turkey; and then through Syria to the final part of our trek, into the West Bank, now in the Palestinian Territories, where Bethlehem is located. Once the group arrived in Southern Europe, handouts focused on saints from the countries along the route, particularly those who appeared in the stained glass windows at St. George's church: Saint Joan for France; Francis, Peter, and Paul for Italy; John Chrysostom for Istanbul/Constantinople, Turkey; and John of Damascus for Syria. Handouts for Turkey (ancient Asia Minor) focused on the Seven Churches of the Revelation in western Turkey.

Moving through Syria put travelers in touch with the turmoil experienced by residents of the Middle East for centuries. The civil war that began in 2011 has brought devastating consequences to that area, and Christians in Syria are being singled out for persecution. The message from that part of the journey was and is, "Pray for the people of Syria."

A huge Advent calendar, with devotional thoughts for each day was posted on the display board, and parishioners had access to copies of this calendar, a natural accompaniment to this journey. And then, at last, they made it to Bethlehem, the goal of the walk! That Sunday the focus was on the Church of the Nativity, built by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 339 on the traditional site of Jesus' birth— still a must-see site for Christian pilgrims.

The congregation voiced positive comments about the program. One parishioner had just had surgery, and her doctor said the best exercise she could do was walk. She reported that she was "walking up a storm." Another parishioner lost 10 pounds during the first few weeks. And one woman said, "This has been so encouraging. Can we keep going?"

So there you have it, all 8,710 miles of St. George's Walk to Bethlehem! Marty and Meredith highly recommend the Walk to Bethlehem program. They appreciate the way it encourages people to take care of their God-given bodies, learn some Christian history along the way, and pray for others around the world. Walk to Bethlehem was a good preparation for the coming of the Christ Child, helping parishioners focus on the "reason for the season," the birth of Jesus Christ!

