



January 2013
Volume 86 Number 1

From the Clergy Associate

Bleating Sheep, Dancing Angels, and Christ among Us

Stemming from the Christmas Pageant costume exhibit in the parish hall this past December, I heard from some of the St. Elizabeth's teens about their favorite memories of the pageant. These memories included their times as younger children participating in costumes, as well as teens assisting behind the scenes. I found it quite sweet that the teens, older and younger, male and female, shared their stories with great energy and humor. Being a sheep seemed to be the overwhelming favorite. When I asked why the sheep role and costume were such favorites, one teen piped up that one got to wear socks on your hands when you played a sheep! (Who knew?!) While everyone agreed that bleating as loudly as you could and "stampeding" down the center aisle on your hands and knees and making lots of noise made being a sheep so overwhelmingly popular. The teens also recalled the fun and the challenges of assisting behind the scenes, with such things as helping the angels with their halos, wings, and candles.

It was obvious that these memories of the St. Elizabeth's Christmas Pageant would stay with these young adults for quite some time. And their stories made me think of the "dancing angels" of the Epiphany Pageant at St. Paul's Church in Paterson. I have traveled with St. Elizabeth's for the past two years on the pilgrimage to St. Paul's to join in their Three Kings Sunday celebration; and one of my favorite parts of their Epiphany Pageant is the "dancing angels". Both older teens and young children dance as angels heralding the birth of the Christ child. What always tickles me is the interaction between all of the angels: how the older angels serve as role models for the younger ones, gently encouraging and guiding them in the choreography; and how the younger angels look up to the teen angels, following their every move and gesture. These young ones place a great deal of trust in their guides, their "teen angels".

The St. Elizabeth's teens speaking with so much energy – and appreciative laughter - about their experiences of the Christmas Pageant, and the St. Paul's angels dancing with each other with such sweetness in their Epiphany Pageant, speak to the importance of formation of both individuals and community. The memories – both positive and negative – of participating in a pageant with others will probably last much longer than some of the "lessons" that we try to teach from books or sermons. Without a level of trust and respect among all who participate in a pageant (those in

costume, those assisting, those directing, and those taking it all in), the whole pageant experience can be “off”.

How important it is for church communities to provide safe spaces and nurturing opportunities, such as in these pageants, for our youth. Not only is it important for younger members to find strong, loving role models in the young adult members of their faith community, but is equally important for these young adults to realize the significance of their roles as models and mentors for these younger members.

Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the peoples of the earth. May each of us remember that we make Christ known to the world in our actions and words. By helping to create safe environments and opportunities, particularly for our youth, and fostering positive relationships, we are assisting each other in our formation as thoughtful followers of Christ. Whether it be through bleating sheep or dancing angels, may we remember Christ’s coming among us both in great humility and sacred mystery.

The Rev. Joan F. Conley
Clergy Associate