

# Report to the Session regarding The Singing Christmas Tree

Presented to the Session - September 21, 2009

By the Singing Christmas Tree Evaluation Committee

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## A. CHARGE FROM SESSION

M/S/A: To appoint a Session Committee to perform a comprehensive, Biblically minded evaluation of the Singing Christmas Tree and bring a recommendation to the Session. Congregational input to be included in the evaluation.

## B. HISTORY OF THE SINGING CHRISTMAS TREE (SCT)

The Tree began twenty-one years ago with a one year break while the present sanctuary was under construction. There have been four principal leaders, Paul and Debbie Carroway, Todd Gillespie, Van Trapp and Ron Whittemore. Ron has been responsible for at least half of these. The pastors during these years have been Ed Graham, Gus Schill, Skip Gillikan, Ken Crabb, Mike Pegg and Chris Yates. The Tree was started as an evangelical outreach to the community. It had a stabilizing influence in the church during the years between Ed Graham's departure and the beginning of Pastor Yates's ministry.

The SCT has evolved from primarily a choral ministry by the people in it, to a much larger stage production with drama, dance, advanced lighting, etc. included in each musical production. Furthermore, the secular numbers in the production have increased, although the Biblical focus continues in the message from the pastor, the participation of the children and youth, and the banners proclaiming the glorious names of our Savior. There is obviously much good that remains in the SCT.

The committee is very grateful to Jim Warren, the Clerk of our Session, for reviewing all Session minutes and excerpting those which pertained to the SCT.

## C. BIBLICAL ORIENTATION

The following are some passages from the Bible which focus on evangelism and music. Both categories are basic to the SCT.

Matthew 4:19

And He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Matthew 5:14-16

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your

light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is heaven.”

Mark 16:15

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation...”

Psalm 13:6

I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Psalm 33: 2-3

Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; make melody to Him with the harp of ten strings! Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

Psalm 98: 4-6

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre and the sound of melody! With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!

Psalm 147:7

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God with the lyre!

Psalm 95:1-2

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to Him with songs of praise!

I Chronicles 13:8

And David and all Israel were rejoicing before God with all their might, with song and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and trumpets.

I Chronicles 16:23-24

Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of His salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!

II Chronicles 5:13

And it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord.

Isaiah 55:12

For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace, the mountains and hills shall break forth in singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Psalm 150:1-6

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty heavens! Praise Him for His mighty deeds; praise Him according to his excellent greatness! Praise Him with trumpet sound; praise Him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise Him with strings and pipe! Praise Him with sounding cymbals; praise Him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Ephesians 5:18-19

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart...

#### D. CONGREGATIONAL INPUT

It was important for the Singing Christmas Tree Evaluation Committee to see what the reaction of the congregation was regarding the SCT. A questionnaire to seek that information was put in the Sunday Bulletins of May 10, 2009; the same questionnaire could be accessed via the computer. From over 200 responses, the committee could get an idea as to the general feeling of the congregation about aspects of the SCT.

Because the questionnaire was purely voluntary, its results were not as statistically perfect as if every member of Arden Presbyterian Church had responded to the questions. Nevertheless, the answers that did come in gave the committee a general sense of the congregation's opinions. Most helpful to the Evaluation Committee were the many suggestions and comments, both positive and negative, which accompanied the returned questionnaires.

## Congregational comments

The general consensus of those who responded to the questionnaire is that the Singing Christmas Tree is valuable as an outreach to the community and as a means of facilitating fellowship and community within the Body of Christ at Arden. In addition, many respondents found the Tree valuable enough to recommend changes to enhance the ministry of the Tree and to lessen pressures on the participants.

A large number of respondents praised the outreach aspect of the SCT as being a positive influence in the community. Many noted the excellence of the performance enhances the message. Several commented that the quality of the SCT "reflects well on the church" and identifies us in the community. Often they see the SCT as a good opportunity to invite non-believers or the unchurched to Arden. Notable among the questionnaires is the frequent use of the term "non-threatening," as well as "non-intimidating." One respondent said that the SCT was a way to "further open our doors to present Christ to our community," and one observed, "The SCT was the first step to bringing me to belief in Jesus Christ as my Savior. I was touched by the sense of fun and humor, the beautiful music, the amazing costumes, the magnificent banners, and last, but not least, the sense of the entire Arden family working together in community. After the performance, I knew I wanted to continue attending Arden."

Another recurring theme of the comments in the questionnaire is the opportunity for families to participate together and the chance for new members to become a part of church life quickly. "I personally felt like I became part of the Arden family through the SCT" read one comment. Another called the SCT the "best sustained outlet of fellowship we've seen at the church. My kids have witnessed a Christian community in action."

It was interesting to note that nine respondents cited the Tree as a main reason for their decision to attend Arden; here are some sample comments: "Seeing the SCT was one of the things that made us know that Arden is really a wonderful place to worship;" "I personally felt I became a part of the Arden family through the SCT;" and "I became so impressed with the clear presentation of the gift of salvation and the quality of the music, I decided to find out what was behind the tree."

Below is a sample of comments regarding the Singing Christmas Tree:

### Appreciation:

- Not only does this ministry bring people to Christ and affect lives, it also brings a meaning to the Christmas season.
- People come because it is a good show, but they come away with a real meaning of Christmas.
- I value the outreach to the community above all else.
- I think the SCT is a powerful and God-lead program. I don't know if anything else could be as effective.
- Christmas is a time of year optimally to get non-Christians into the church to hear the Gospel.

- The SCT is a real outreach to the community...
- Lots of competition in Asheville. We have a niche.
- The SCT sets us apart and draws in people who would not ordinarily come to church.
- It's a blessing to so many in the church and community.
- Christmas time is ...when many people's hearts and minds are softened and warmed, making it a unique time to present the Gospel.
- The Christmas season is a very "non-threatening" time to encourage non-believers to listen to the message of God's love..."
- I have been able to invite non-Christians in a non-threatening way.
- Friends have been amazed and pleased to come and returned.
- I have purchased tickets & given them to friends. All have attended & plan to come back. It is a way to invite someone to the church in a very non-intimidating way.
- The follow-up after the SCT from the cards filled out is important.
- Many people have come to Christ and/or joined our church through the SCT.
- I began coming here as a result of this program.
- I started coming to this church after a member purchased me a ticket. The following year I joined the SCT choir...[and then] the church.
- As a new member, the SCT was a great fellowship opportunity for me. I met many families I otherwise wouldn't have.
- I loved meeting so many new people.
- I enjoy the fellowship of rehearsals and it is a great way to get involved.
- I love the whole family participating.
- Seeing the body work together for so many months was amazing!
- It is a major part of our church family fellowship.
- The SCT is such a wonderful, awesome experience as a participant.
- The SCT is the way I have met most church members.

- I don't know of anything we do as a church that has as strong a pulling together as a family of Christ.
- Standing in the tree and seeing evidence of people's hearts being touched...is a touching experience.
- I feel it is superb-both in content [and] mission.
- I especially value the evangelistic outreach & the excellence of the production.
- Nothing that APC has done in my 30 yrs has involved so many and effectively reached our community.
- Very well rehearsed and presented.
- I really loved being a part of it as well as being an audience member. Each night I understood a new aspect of Jesus' life & sacrifice- it brought me to tears.
- So many guests have made the comment of how professional the performance was, but more importantly, what a true and real presentation of the Gospel it was.
- I value the SCT because I feel this is one area I can use my talents.
- I love the walk with the banners when the handicapped, the police & others come to Jesus.
- How could we even consider not continuing what I believe is one our biggest outreach ministries, especially since we have added the Banquet of Hope?
- Banquet of Hope outstanding.
- I value the outreach of the Banquet of Hope.

Concerns:

- Church family talent [should be]used before outside talent is brought in.
- SCT is good but takes much energy.
- I feel left out because we can't participate.
- It bothers me that it costs so much.
- Too few people support the Tree in terms of food, child care, and extraneous activities.
- The time and emotional stress on children is unreasonable.

- I would consider reducing the “show” aspects a bit to focus on singing... The show could also be shorter (hour or so), as length causes a number of early departures. (I’ve ushered many times.)
- A couple [of guests] thought it was too long.
- Would appreciate less secular music.
- I wish it could be longer!
- There may be a more effective way...[to] present the Gospel message.
- I have always enjoyed the SCT and the only thing I would change would be to have more audience participation in singing.
- I like “Silent Night” as the closing, but think that contemporary loud... “music”...breaks the feeling the end of the program presents. Leaving the sanctuary in silent meditation is preferred.
- Everyone says the band is too loud.
- Take money that would have been spent on the Christmas tree, find those who are needy in our own community, and spend time & money with them.
- How about keeping the Banquet of Hope & some less time-consuming program of the Gospel.

#### E. Economics of the SCT

Originally, the SCT began as a ministry totally funded by the general budget of the church. As the popularity of the SCT grew, tickets were issued, free of charge, in order to manage the size of the congregation and the capacity of the sanctuary at that time. Later, in order to defray some of the costs of the Tree, tickets were sold to those who wanted to attend.

As expected, as the Tree and its performances grew, so did the associated expenses. In 1996 when the new sanctuary was built, the SCT was expanded with additional seating capacity and additional performances. Later on, a live orchestra was added as well as staging space “on the wings” of the main stage where the Tree was located. In 2006 when an additional tier was added to the Tree, this side staging was expanded to make up for the staging space taken up by the additional bottom tier.

Over the past four years, ticket sales have covered approximately 76% of the total costs of the SCT, leaving 24% of the costs to be covered by the general budget of the church. A dollar budget is established each year for this amount and the director is charged with keeping the expenses of the Tree within this budget. Over these four years, the Tree was under budget twice (2007, 2005) and over budget twice (2008, 2006). In 2008, the overage was approximately \$11,300 with the total cost of the Tree at approximately \$69,300.

Many factors affect the costs and ability to meet the budget of the Tree. Some of these factors can be controlled by the director, while others cannot. Obviously, the number of tickets sold in a given year can have a huge impact on the overall budget due to the heavy reliance on these sales to support the budget of the Tree.

## F. BANQUET OF HOPE

The Banquet of Hope has touched many lives, not only of the guests, but also of those who have served for it. Reaching out to those in need in our community has been a vital mission for our church. Sumptuous food, friendly smiles, gifts, and the opportunity to be cheered and encouraged by a Christmas message, through the Singing Christmas Tree, have truly combined to offer Christ's message of hope and mercy.

In fact, some concern was expressed that helpers wished they could do more to make the Banquet of Hope happen.

In addition, some were worried that the Banquet of Hope could not continue unless the Singing Christmas Tree continued with it, so Session needs to address that issue. It is important to note that the Banquet of Hope and the Singing Christmas Tree are not actually inter-dependent. The Banquet of Hope could still continue annually with a different program following it for the years the SCT is not done. For example, on non-SCT years, guests could be invited to sing Christmas carols, perhaps accompanied by the choir. Singing would add a meaningful, festive entertainment after the banquet and stay in keeping with the message the Banquet conveys.

The Banquet of Hope is definitely a ministry for Arden Presbyterian Church to continue.

## G. GENERAL COMMITTEE OBSERVATIONS

During its evaluation of the SCT, the committee raised or came across noteworthy points especially worth considering. Here are a few:

### I. What is the appropriate mixture of secular versus religious content?

The SCT is a ministry of Arden Presbyterian Church and so reflects the vision of this church. It is a form of outreach to our community. Christ, when He was here on earth, often used examples from the life He knew was around Him to explain His eternal teaching. We call these stories parables. Therefore, it is appropriate that the SCT presentation begins with what is around us, then moves to an increasing Christmas /Gospel message.

The theory of the outreach through the SCT is good; what needs work and prayer are the contents and presentation. In order to approach this consideration, it is useful to think of an analogy, which can be called The Parable of the Bridge. If you want to reach out to people who live in a land you can see but are separated from by a river, a bridge could make possible your mission. You need to make a bridge they can cross to come to where you want them to be, along with you. If you build but half a bridge, only the part coming from your side, though, you cannot reach those on the other side. Therefore, you need to build the part coming from the other side, too.

Now the SCT is like a bridge. If one segment is gone, the people you seek cannot come to where you want them to be. You need some secular part of the bridge on their side (i.e. what they already expect), in order to give them a way to reach the religious part of the bridge that brings them over to where you want them to come. To be a real bridge, for non-believers, then, the SCT needs to use the good teaching concept of "take them from where they are" to the Gospel message "where you want them to go."

## II. What is the appropriate length for the SCT?

Those who take part in the SCT, especially children, as well as those who come as members of the audience, have only so much staying power for a long program. It is important, then, to consider how long the SCT should be. Give serious thought to how the program can be shortened, yet remain full and effective, in around one and a half hours.

## H. CONCLUSION

The Singing Christmas Tree at Arden Presbyterian Church should be considered on an ongoing basis with some modifications and closer concern of the Session. The SCT is a valuable ministry, which has provided a meaningful observation of the Christmas message for members and non-members. It has been a vehicle for fellowship and also has given the Church a significant means of "outreach" to our community. Most importantly, it is a way we can praise our Lord and thank Him for His many blessings, especially His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Session should consider the results of this report along with other specific recommendations by this Committee as it plans the future for the music ministry and ministry vision of Arden Presbyterian Church.