



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Madison Thompson, 13, right, hangs flags on a banner with Kaitlin Gustafson during a Christmas decorating party Monday at the Boardman Baptist Church.

BUSY SEASON

Churches kick into high gear for Christmas holiday

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Keeping a church running is a year-round proposition for pastors and volunteers, but Christmas is prime time.

There are advent candles to light, church halls to decorate, pageants to put on, nativity scenes to design, carols to practice, extra sermons to write, families to help and lots and lots of Christmas cookies to be baked.

At the root of it all is a belief that there are also hearts to be touched.

"Apathy sets in with familiarity," said Bill Griggs, pastor at First Baptist Church in Boardman. "I think Christmas kind of snaps us out of that and people say, 'Let's think about Jesus. Let's talk about church.'"

On Monday evening Griggs, clad in a black cowboy hat and boots, pitched in with parishioners who showed up to deck the church in lights, pine boughs and a large Christmas tree. They were still a little tired from putting on a community Thanksgiving meal for more than 400 people, but that hadn't stopped them from lighting the first advent candle Sunday as a narrator read the Biblical prophecies of Jesus' birth.

"I think that helps us shift gears and gets us in the mood," Griggs said of the advent tradition counting down to Christmas.

He said Christmas is an "exhilarating" time for him, as he remembers his first Christmas as a Christian and works hard to help members of his flock have the same feelings of joy.

In the sanctuary Monday, Rebecca Moore was helping sort through pieces of the artificial Christmas tree as her one-year-old son helped by pulling off old pieces of tape and sticking them together.

Moore had already been at the church for a while that night, wrangling about 10 children through a rehearsal for the congregation's annual children's Christmas pageant. This year between songs, each child will help explain the Christian symbolism behind various Christmas decorations, such as the star on top of many Christmas trees that gives nod to the star the New Testament describes as a guide to wise men seeking the baby Jesus.

"They seem really excited," Moore said. "They have a lot of energy. I have to rein them in at times, but they love the costumes, and they all want solos."

Moore said she likely got volunteered for the job of putting on the pageant because she used to be a music teacher. That's how things usually go in small congregations — everyone is asked to play to their strengths to help pull off Christmas activities for the congregation and community.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Zibah Sowa, 4, helps Tami Ramsey decorate a chest with fake flowers during a Christmas decorating party Monday at the Boardman Baptist Church.

Becky Hunt knows a thing or two about that. She's the "head volunteer" for Hermiston First United Methodist Church's living nativity, which runs this year on December 9-10.

"This is our 25th year," she said. "I didn't start it, but I kind of helped out and the next thing I knew I was doing more and more."

On Wednesday morning she was heading out to pick up a truckload of donated straw bales — one of many parts of the puzzle that will bring together a live nativity scene where people can sit and contemplate the original Christmas story and pet the donkey, chicken and the two fluffy sheep affectionately known as the "church ladies."

Inside, cookies and live music will be available for people as they warm up, and eight to 10 Christmas trees will each be decorated to represent a different charitable mission the church is involved in.

Hunt and other volunteers sew

costumes, set up and take down the set, act, publicize, prepare fellowship meals for the actors and serve Christmas cookies to guests. One person even spends the night in a trailer on the church property to keep an eye on the borrowed animals and set between the Saturday and Sunday performances.

Reverend James Pierce said the congregation gets "pretty excited about Christmas stuff" and this year they have the capacity to do even more since they have started sharing their building with Grace and Mercy Lutheran Church.

"They have been worshiping in our building for about a year now, so the Christmas preparation at the church has really gotten into high gear as we now have more volunteers and are increasing our season worship opportunities," he wrote in an email. That includes multiple services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

For most churches, Christmas and



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A small Nativity scene sits on top of a piano in the worship hall Monday at the Boardman Baptist Church.

Easter services are the biggest of the year, as some families have guests visiting from out of town and others only attend on those two religious holidays.

Pastor Mark Adams from Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Hermiston said the pressure is on to come up with the perfect Christmas sermon each year.

"You're telling the same timeless story, in a way that gets people to see it in a new light," he said.

Bethlehem Lutheran also lights a candle on the advent wreath each

Sunday leading up to Christmas. On Saturday, the congregation will help decorate the building, and this Sunday the children in the congregation will be asked to help find the baby Jesus hidden somewhere in the church to complete the nativity scene near the pulpit.

Children play an important part of Christmastime worship at the church, from the preschool's annual Christmas concert to child-created decorations on the walls. Youth, meanwhile, pitch in by performing solos and duets of carols during worship services, while adults help out by making sure families in need get the food, presents and service needed to have a good Christmas.

Those volunteers with special skills are often extra busy.

"Our organists get to play a lot of songs, a lot of hymns, a lot of carols," Adams said.

For Adams himself, December is also his busiest month, with extra sermons around Christmas weekend and the addition of midweek advent services starting next week. But despite all the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, he hopes everyone in the congregation takes some quiet time to meditate on the beliefs behind the celebration.

"That should give us all pause for reflection," he said.

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Emmitt Skeen wraps a tree with a string of lights during a Christmas decorating party Monday at the Boardman Baptist Church.

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