

'Nights of Nativities' illuminates God's gift of salvation for all nations, tribes, tongues

By Lindsey Williams

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Between Dec. 6-8, 400 starry-eyed guests visited the sanctuary of the Lincoln Baptist Association to enjoy over 300 nativity sets from more than 20 different countries around the world. The nights began as an idea planted on one ministry wife's heart, and God grew the vision into action through the friendship of two servant-hearted women.

Amanda Kilpatrick and her husband, Zach, have five children, and he pastors Mt. Zion Church in Brookhaven, where they have served together for seven years. "When the Lord gave me the idea," Amanda recalled, "I imagined it on a much smaller scale, just here at the church, lining the hallway with tables and asking families to bring their nativity sets." Last year, however, when the Kilpatricks were traveling home from his graduation in Texas, the family stopped in Louisiana to visit local events. Knowing what the Lord had laid on her heart to do, her husband found a church exhibiting a nativity display, and Amanda knew the Lord used that night as a special reminder. "The display was beautiful," she remembered, "and more than I could have imagined. There were nativities from all over the world, and the Lord reminded me that I have brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world celebrating the birth of our Savior."

As Amanda began to envision this event once again, thinking of a small empty chapel down the road from their home, God had

already prepared a space much larger than she first pictured.



Helen Dowling (left) and Amanda Kilpatrick

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Lincoln Baptist Association. God had brought the unused sanctuary to Amanda's

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Amanda and Helen first met at a Lincoln County WMU council meeting. While serving with Mt. Zion's food pantry ministry, the two women became more acquainted and were soon great supporters of one another. Helen has walked with God through many major life events in the last several years: breast cancer treatment, death of her spouse, and retirement. "My strength and my joy," she expressed, "are found in following God's guidance each day. At the age of 70, I'm active in the life of my family, church, and community ministries. As a member of Easthaven Baptist Church, a few years ago I joined two very special groups dear to my heart: Monday Morning Bible Study and my Women on Mission group. With these two groups of ladies, I've learned more about Jesus and grown in my relationships with Him and these ladies, which has caused me to desire to give my life to serve and to love others. When Amanda shared her vision for Nights of Nativities, I was ready right then to be a part of something so special and beautiful!"

As the two women brought their vision to life in the empty sanctuary, Amanda desired to involve as many churches as possible. She began by sending out text messages to friends and other ministry wives in the county, asking them to spread the news and find anyone willing to loan nativity sets for the event. Then as December neared, they advertised the event through the association's newsletter. "When we put out the

advertising for it," said Amanda, "we didn't have anything yet. We didn't even have the nativities. It was definitely stepping out in faith."

One area Amanda and Helen were painstakingly persistent to get perfect was the lighting of the dark sanctuary. White Christmas lights, angel lights, and lamp lights lit an atmosphere as soft as the infant Lord. A stage was fixed with a nearly life-size nativity set, with a baby Jesus in the center, on whom a spotlight directed visitors' eyes like the star which led the shepherds and wisemen to the scene. "How many times our hearts were thrilled by each step in setting up for this event!" Helen rejoiced. "How many times tears came to our eyes over the joy of seeing God's hand in every part of this event! Emmanuel – God with us!

"Preparing for this event," she remarked, "brought so many churches together, which grew relationships with old friends and made relationships with new ones. Some ladies brought nativity sets and Christmas trees, while others ironed tablecloths, and many of my friends from Easthaven shared their special or unique nativities. Men worked on lighting, painting, and many repair needs. Vacuuming all the little green pieces that fell off the Christmas trees was never ending!"

"The Lord provided every step of the way exactly what we needed," Amanda affirmed. "We really had no budget. It wasn't one specific church putting this on, nor was it necessarily sponsored by somebody, but He provided."

"After all the work," said Helen, "what an honor it was to then share the event with our community of Brookhaven and Lincoln county. 'We are better together,' as Amanda often says. Her devotionals and prayers, before each time we opened the doors for guests, were so meaningful. We knew she spent time in Bible study and continual prayer. I treasure my friendship with Amanda. We each love God and love His people.

She is such an encourager and a humble servant. May God receive all the glory!”

Three nights came and went as hundreds of visitors took in the sights of hundreds of nativity scenes. Guests also enjoyed drinking delicious hot cocoa and apple cider, reading the names of God on keepsake ornaments, and kids enjoyed candy canes and a cozy play area made just for them. Since signs marked the nativity sets with “Please do not touch,” children were given a special space to play and interact with unbreakable sets, a baby doll and manger, and children’s books about Christ’s birth. The common response from visitors seeing nativities from other countries was the good reminder that God is King over the whole world, and that Jesus is for every nation, tribe, and tongue.

“That was our prayer throughout the planning process,” Amanda remarked, “that each person that walked through that door would be reminded of the God Who loves them deeply. The people who came through were just so encouraging. And everybody said, ‘Well *next year* this or *next year* that.’ It’s funny because we had not necessarily planned on making this an annual event. But from almost the first conversation I had with Ms. Helen, she said, ‘Oh well we could do that *next year*.’ It became a joke between us because so many people kept bringing up *next year’s* event. So yes, I’m definitely open to it.

“Last year,” Amanda reflected, “the Lord used that nativity display as a reminder to me about Christians all over the world. This year, His reminder was a little bit different. It was the idea of Emmanuel – God with us – and a God Who loves us and wants to be with us. We can see that from the beginning, when God walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, led the Israelites by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and even in the Temple and the Arc of the Covenant being physical representations of God’s presence with His people. Then of course, what we’re celebrating at Christmas, that God left the splendor of heaven to take on

flesh as a baby. Then years later, being our sacrifice so that we could have that opportunity to have the Holy Spirit with us here in this life and in eternity spent with Him. As I watched each little nativity set come in, I was just reminded of a God Who loves us so much that He wants to dwell with us.

“So if the Lord prompts you to do something, no matter how crazy it may seem, step out in faith and do it. You may be in awe of how He provides, because I know that through this experience, I have been encouraged and in awe.”