

Getting ready for Christmas Eve service

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Getting ready for Calvary Chapel's annual Christmas Eve service is no simple task.

The program, which has been held at the National Car Rental Center for the past few years, involves thousands of "man hours," months of planning and a lot of prayer to make sure that everything comes off with as few hitches as possible.

The annual event, featuring music and the presentation of the Christmas story, attracts over 22,000 people and is one of the largest efforts each year for the Ft. Lauderdale congregation.

This year's program will feature special music by a 120-member choir, a contemporary band, a children's choir and soloists, according to Clay Hecoeks, the church's worship leader. Musical selections include contemporary arrangements of traditional Christmas carols and what Hecoeks describes as a very moving candlelight ceremony.

Of course, small problems always crop up. One year the scaffolding was not set up in time, delaying the opening of the center's doors for over 30 minutes.

Another year, an elevator stuck, trapping people and slowing down the movement of attendees to and from their seats.

One time, a vendor set up his kiosk outside of the facility, blocking a main entrance. Only patient diplomacy resolved the situation, allowing the vendor to continue selling his products without impeding the flow of traffic.

All of those headaches are worth the effort and the cost according to Carl Mims who oversees communications for Calvary Chapel. Estimating that the presentation costs the church over \$100,000 per year, Mims says that the program offers a non-threatening environment for those who want to celebrate the season without going to a church building.

"It's an evangelistic outreach where the Gospel is preached to people who are lost and hurting," Mims says. "Following the events of this past September, there is a heightened awareness of the preciousness of life and how quickly we can be taken."

Mims says that the church believes that the cost is worthwhile in terms of lives touched. "What's a life worth if you save somebody?" he asks. "It is worth every penny."

For Calvary Chapel's pastor, Bob Coy, the service is one of the highlights of the year. Because the church is so large, with multiple services, Coy says that Christmas Eve is "one time that we can get together as a church and celebrate the birth of Christ."

It is also an opportunity for ministry and outreach. "For those who are Christians, the message will be designed for them to learn," Coy reflects. "And, for those who are hearing the Christmas message for the first time, it will be an opportunity to tell the story of the Lord and his glory."

The church does not collect an offering at the service. In fact, according to Mims, while many churches round out their annual budgets at the Christmas season, Calvary sees a downturn because they do not take in contributions on Christmas Eve and the cost of the service is high.

Planning for the event begins months before Christmas according to Luis Segarra, Calvary Chapel's Service Oversight Coordinator. "We start specific planning around October 1, while the music groups start rehearsing in September."

The real crunch comes in the 48 hours before the program. "We will get access to the arena at 6 a.m. on Sunday morning, the day before the event," Segarra explains. "Much of the stage is prefabricated, so we just have to move it in," he says.

In addition, lighting has to be installed and sound equipment set up and made functional.

"It's not like a traveling concert series where the same people take up and tear down a stage every night and can do it in a few hours," explains Amy James, Special Events Coordinator for Calvary Chapel. "We do it once a year, and often we don't have the same people, so it takes more time."

Then there are the volunteers—nearly 500 of them. "We have about one volunteer for every 40 attending," Segarra says. "They serve as greeters, ushers, stagehands, promoters and many other functions."

Presenting a massive program outside of the church facilities has meant working closely with officials at the National Car Rental Center. "At first, they wanted to provide the ushers and greeters," Mims remembers. "They weren't certain how well our people would function in a strange facility. But, after the first year, they were so pleased with how it went, they came to us and asked if they could hire our people as ushers for the Super Bowl for which they were providing security and services."

Once the event is over, church staffers take a break and then start planning for the next year. "I recuperate on Christmas Day," Mims says.

"There is a lot of pressure," James remarks, but she says it is worth it. "We usually have between 500 and 600 people come forward at the end of the service to inquire about Jesus Christ and church membership. We work hard over three months for a two hour service, but we would not do it if God had not called us to do it."

"I feel blessed and honored that the Lord allows me to be a part of it," James affirms.

IF YOU GO

Calvary Chapel's Christmas Eve at the National Car Rental Center

2555 Panthers Drive
Sunrise, FL 33323

Monday, December 24

7 p.m.

Admission is free; tickets are not available in advance. Church officials encourage an early arrival—people have been turned away in previous years.
For more information, call Calvary Chapel at 954-977-9673

Getting ready for Christmas Eve service, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, Nov 30, 2001