

red deer lake united church

nativity scene



a nativity scene that is really an invitation

Christmas isn't just about celebrating something that took place 2000 years ago. It's also an invitation.

It's an invitation to get in on what that story about a virgin birth, shepherds, and baby Jesus is all about: that God is here – with us and for us – leading us toward new life and a new world.

Our Nativity scene helps draw us into that invitation. Advent is about getting ready for Christmas. Often that “getting ready” means decorating our outsides: putting up lights, decorations, baking, and all that good stuff. But it also needs to be about decorating our insides – doing some soulful reflection on what we need to do within ourselves so we can say yes to the invitation of Christmas.

That's what our artist-in-residence Larry Stilwell is expressing in this year's version of the Nativity scene. The shepherd holding the mirror isn't simply saying, “Hey! You're part of the story too,” he's encouraging us to do the inward reflection so we can arrive at the manger ready and willing to join in on what God is doing in the world.

That fits with Larry's vision: by contemporizing some of the traditional imagery and by decolonizing some of the characters, the hope is to create a scene that sparks curiosity, engagement, and wonder, and causes people to hear that invitation and enter into this story in a new way.

artist larry stilwell's inspiration behind the images

“Annually Christians return to find the awe in the nativity but encounter the same old visual references. Since the 14th century, European master painters have formed our visual opinion of what the nativity looks like, thereby shaping what it can mean.

As a Christian, I embrace the values of inclusivity but haven't found those values reflected in traditional nativity scenes. So, I chose to step away from tradition and develop a nativity installation that comments on homelessness by giving the stable a temporary, intentionally insubstantial feel, a physical reflection of the emotional state of a presumably teen mother in an occupied land.

The intent of this scene is to invite the observer to engage and re-discover the awe and wonder surrounding Jesus' birth and what it means for us. The viewer, intentionally fixed in the eyes of all participants, is at the threshold and is being asked: are you in or out?”

what do the images mean?

Larry kept Mary and Joseph looking young and overwhelmed, but wanted to portray their dedication to what God has asked them to do. Joseph is dressed in a typical labourer's clothing.

The shepherds are meant to reflect both current day and ancient workers who were stigmatized and dehumanized.

And the Angel is holding what's called a shofar – a trumpet that was typically used to proclaim good news and hope to people.

As a group, the Magi personify diversity, wisdom, and inclusion. The tall male Magi with the dreadlocks is songwriter and musician **Michael Franti**, known for his messages of love and hope through song. He brings the gift of music. Some interpretations of the "Wise Men" were that they were thinkers and astronomers. So the female Magi is **Dr. Roberta Bondar**, Canada's first female astronaut, a healer and space explorer. Hers is the gift of knowledge personified in the Milky Way constellation she is holding. The third Magi, offering a symbol of warmth and teaching with his gift of a blanket, is the current National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, **Perry Bellegarde** of Treaty 4 territory.