PRESBYTERY
of West Virginia

Wee People, Great Joy

The season of Advent holds many traditions that we look forward to participating in each year. There is the weekly Advent candle, children's programs, choir performances, candlelight services, and most recognizably, the Wee People.

In 1989, Grace Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Virginia, allowed Barbara Chalfant to expand on the idea of creating Wee People to help children understand the Christmas story. Originally made from boxes, the Wee People represented Mary, Jospeh, baby Jesus, the wisemen and shepherds, and eventually grew to even having a camel and sheep.

Chalfant moved to the Christian Educator position at First Presbyterian in Knoxville and they agreed to let her make stuffed Wee People. With full size dolls, scaled from Chalfant's arms and legs, and stuffed with a pillowlike body, she gave them backbones of dowel rods and placed a 2x4 on their bottoms so that they could sit.

"We had 1,200 members and two pastors. I had to explain to them that children have a hard time understanding God works overtime and that, for children, candles are for birthday cakes. The advent wreath did not work as well for the children I was working with," Chalfant said.

As the revamped Wee People were created, Chalfant tasked each Sunday School class with being responsible for helping to create one person. Taking in colorful fabric swatches for their skin and yarn for their hair and letting the children vote helped them feel more connected to these people. One highlight for the children was that they received permission to go to the costume closet to find clothing for their person. The Wee People were introduced on the first day of Advent with a note in the bulletin as to where the people might be found.

"I did not give any of the people faces," Chalfant explained. "No eyes, mouths or noses. I wanted the children to imagine what each person looked like."

The late Rev. Shirley Hutchins, a West Virginia pastor whose family attended First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, was visiting and saw the Wee People.

“She loved the concept, so I told her all about them, sent her the clues we put in the bulletins, told her how we included things like how far they traveled from our church to Bethlehem, and what you feed a donkey,” Chalfant said.

Barbara Hopta recalls Hutchins teaching a Festival of Faith Workshop about them in the 1990’s. At the time, Hopta was Director of Children and Youth at First, Bluefield, and remembers being captivated by the idea. The Wee People Hopta and the congregation created were a little different, particularly in that they were child size rather than the size of an adult.

“We introduced the Wee People at First, Charleston, during my first year as the Director of Child and Family Ministry in 2002-2003,” Hopta said. “I brought the Wee People we had created at First, Bluefield, to meet the Charleston session and explained how they help teach their story to the congregation. Having the session on board is important; once the Wee People are created, they become part of the church family.”

Although the Wee People have lost some popularity over the years, Hopta knows that First, Bluefield, and First, Charleston, still utilize this valuable resource for their children each year. While children are still captivated by them, adults visiting the sanctuary throughout the week are often startled by their presence.

“The Wee People are very touchable. They seem to soften the sanctuary in childlike joyfulness. When children are engaged in moving them, they especially connect to their story,” Hopta explained. “Their featureless faces encourage question and creative imagination. The sheep take on a life of their own as they sometimes stray from the shepherds on their journey to Bethlehem.”

While children’s directors often have creative projects to inspire youth, Chalfant has seen the Wee People come full circle.

“There is a Sunday School Teacher at First Presbyterian, Knoxville, now who remembered the Wee People from her younger days. She encouraged the church to begin utilizing them again, and the children still love them,” Chalfant said.

Both Chalfant and Hopta agree, there is great joy in seeing the children interact with and respond to the Wee People. There is no greater Christmas blessing than having the Christmas story click for kids.