FESTIVAL OF NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS IN GUALALA

On Christmas Eve 2019, Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal-Lutheran Mission in Gualala, CA, hosted the annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at the Gualala Arts Center. Gualala is a coastal town of about 2,000 people located where Sonoma County meets Mendocino County. An exceptionally large crowd of more than 200 community residents and visitors from Gualala, The Sea Ranch, and Point Arena joined together to share the Christmas spirit by hearing the Christmas story in nine brief readings, interspersed with nine familiar carols that everyone joined in singing.

Gualala’s Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is an abbreviated version of the service at King’s College in Cambridge, England, first created in 1918 by Eric Milner-White, who had just been appointed Dean of the college after experience as an army chaplain in World War I. The structure of the service, the lessons and the prayers, has remained virtually unchanged since 1918. The BBC broadcasts the Lessons and Carols service live each year, as it has since 1928.

Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal-Lutheran Mission underwrites the Gualala event, coordinating with other local churches and spiritual groups with a goal of including clergy and lay readers from a wide spectrum of religious communities. In the 27 years since the Festival tradition began in the area, various clergy and congregations have worked together to maintain this tradition, with Shepherd by the Sea taking a primary role in recent years. The Gualala Arts Center generously provides the venue. For many, this ecumenical event is the only religious Christmas service they will attend. Following the service, several attendees observed that this sharing of Christmas fellowship, hearing the Bible readings and singing the beautiful carols, was especially needed in this tumultuous year.
The Festival has been a holiday tradition on the Mendocino Coast since 1992. Admission is free, although donations are encouraged to support South Coast Crisis Aid (SCCA). Each year Festival donations are the primary source of funding for SCCA, which provides emergency food, fuel and bus transportation assistance throughout the year via vouchers distributed by local clergy and the Action Network in Gualala and Point Arena.

Luminaries lit the way from the parking lot to the Gualala Arts Center, and the stage in the Coleman Auditorium was decorated with greenery and flowers. This year Sita Milchev, a frequent participant in the Festival’s earlier years and a local favorite, regaled the audience with a solo of *O Holy Night*. In the Festival’s early years organist and choir director Dale Wood, who died in 2003, was a key leader. The 2019 event acknowledged Dale Wood’s many contributions, and Milchev closed the program with one of Wood’s compositions, *May Love be Yours at Christmas*. Acoustic guitarist Wayne Harris played a beautiful instrumental prelude of carols, and Don Krieger again provided his wonderful keyboard accompaniment to the sung carols. During the singing of *Silent Night* the auditorium was darkened and the audience lit flameless candles. As Pastor Peg Otte, Shepherd by the Sea’s Lutheran advisory pastor, concluded her benediction, the auditorium lights returned as she said, “Our candles may now be extinguished, for an even greater Light has come to us.”

*By Linda Kennedy, Chair of the Mission Committee, Shepherd by the Sea*

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