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## Area Christian churches unite to celebrate the crèche

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**PEORIA** — The creche comes in myriad forms, from living scenes inhabited by humans and animals to objects crafted from every type of material imaginable.

A creative re-creation of the birth of Jesus Christ, the annual Christmas display is beloved by children and adults all over the world. It is also a scene that unites all Christian factions.

“There is no denomination when you look at a manger,” said Charles Beebe, a retired priest from the Diocese of Peoria. “All the different denominations have their various traditions, but everything goes back to Jesus Christ. All Christians believe that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem and is the savior of the world. We are united by this belief.”

Churches from three different denominations are sponsoring the Community Festival of Nativities on Dec. 1-3 — All Saints Greek Orthodox Church, St. Vincent de Paul Church, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where the event is being held. The display is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. today and Saturday, and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday. The church is located at 3700 W. Reservoir Blvd. A number of musical performances will be held during the event. To see a full listing and schedule, visit [www.communityfestivalofnativities.com](http://www.communityfestivalofnativities.com).

It is the second year for the event. Last year, 1,700 people attended to see the 600 Nativity displays brought in by members of the community. This year, organizers expect more than 1,000 Nativities to be in the display.

This year's display will feature the collections of Ronald Margherio, a monk at St. Bede Abbey in Peru, retired priest William Watson and Beebe. Also on display will be the Rolan Johnson Christmas ornament and a framed art collection owned by the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Immaculate Conception.

Several private groups toured the display Thursday and learned about the history of the creche from Beebe.

"The very first creche was created by St. Francis of Assisi in Greccio, Italy, in 1223," he said. "It was a living creche."

Beebe talked about his collection of 160 figures from the Italian manufacturer Fontanini, which he donated to St. Bede's Abbey in Peru when he moved to a smaller home after retirement. Beebe collected the figurines over his long career in the Peoria area. Many were gifts from parishioners, students and friends. He purchased his first piece about 30 years ago.

"Since I was a young priest I always wanted to collect them," said Beebe. "The figures are beautifully done. And the collection is extensive. Not only do you have the creche with the holy family, there are townfolk, shepherds, kings and their tents, the city gate and the temple. You have the whole scenario of the time period when Jesus was born."

Cast in resin and hand-painted, each figure comes with a backstory.

"Most of the Fontanini pieces come with a story card. They give these people names and lives," said Beebe. One of his favorites is a dog named Lexington.

"You never see a dog in a set," said Beebe, who first saw the dog in a life-sized creche in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

"Turns out, the rector of the cathedral adopted a dog from a rescue on Lexington Avenue. He decided it would be nice to have a dog next to the cathedral's Nativity scene, so he commissioned an artist in Italy to hand-carve a dog. Later, Fontanini got the rights to reproduce this little dog for its figurines. And the only place you can buy it, as far as I know, is the gift shop at St. Patrick's Cathedral."

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