

### What Birmingham Friends Meeting community looks forward to at holiday time

1. Our **Giving Tree** is a project of our Youth Committee. Youth Committee includes all our middle schoolers and high schoolers. They meet monthly, more or less, to learn Friends decision-making process and put that process into practice by identifying, planning and executing service projects.
  - a. This project is coordinated with the staff of a local shelter for homeless families. The shelter organization likes to be able to provide gift cards throughout the year to its clients to help them shop for basic needs at local grocery stores, drug stores and other stores like K-Mart. The shelter staff sends our Youth Committee a list of the names of the stores and a suggested number of gift cards our meeting might typically supply based on our size and past participation.
  - b. At its November meeting, Youth Committee members make paper ornaments with the name of the store where the gift card is to be purchased and the amount (currently \$25). The youth put up a tabletop size tree in our social room, hang the paper ornaments, and announce the project after worship, inviting each household to take a tag, sign a list for our records, and bring the gift card to our annual Carol Sing. See below for more details about how the cards are collected.
2. **The Friendly Beasts procession** is typically held the Sunday before Christmas in the morning at the rise of worship. This is a multi-generational effort, which has been a tradition for decades. Anyone who wants to can take part. An instrumental ensemble plays each verse of "The Friendly Beasts" hymn slowly, while costumed children (and sometimes adults) process into the worship room on cue to gather at the manger. The audience sings along with the music. Details follow:
  - a. "The Friendly Beasts," (hymn #78, FGC *Worship in Song* hymnal) is played by an instrumental ensemble: Someone in our meeting adapted the musical score for the variety of musicians and instruments we have learned to expect. Each instrument has its own arrangement of the music. Two practices are held. One, the week before, before FDS and one on the morning of, during FDS time. (Violins, cellos, flutes, trumpets, drums, bells to name just a few.) After worship, the ensemble enters the worship room with instruments and sets up music stands on the facing benches behind a simple wooden manger.
  - b. Procession of the humans and animals to form a nativity scene around a manger. On the day of the event during FDS, adults hand out costumes, walk the participants through their paces, and practice once or twice with the musical ensemble. Costuming is kept very simple; we have enough for everyone who shows up and wants a part. Long pieces of fabric are draped or are tied across shoulders and around waists; smaller pieces of fabric tied with thick yarn or rope used to cover hair (Mary, Joseph, a baby, shepherds, and wise men). We have 2-3 sets of angel wings and a nice supply of homemade, fabric "hats" for the "beasts" to wear. "Hats" are secured to heads under chins with soft ties. We have: Donkeys, all shaggy and brown; Cows, all red and white; Sheep with curly horn; and Doves and Mice.
3. **The Carol Sing**, last but not least, occurs the Sunday evening before Christmas. One hour of singing and reading of Bible verses, followed by about 45 minutes for refreshments (cookies and punch) and fellowship. We have Christmas carol songbooks purchased years ago. Hymns and readings are arranged in order to foretell and tell the Christmas story. Youth do the Bible readings. One person has the role of MC. There is piano accompaniment. Within the program are designated two periods of "open sing" in which requests of favorite carols are taken. When the hour is almost over, "Jingle Bells" is suggested, and, after the first verse, we hear sleigh bells outside in the yard, and Santa strides in accompanied by two elves (from Youth Committee, described above). The elves walk around collecting the gift cards that were purchased through the Giving Tree project, while Santa greets the children and thanks everyone for the cards. The cards go in Santa's sack, and the he and the elves disappear almost as quickly as they came with echoes of, "Ho, Ho, Ho!" After one or two more carols, we always end with "Silent Night," once in English, once in German as the overhead lights are dimmed and candles are lit on the window sills.

Merry Christmas from Birmingham Meeting.