



THE NATIONAL PRAYER EMBASSY

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"NATIVITY SCENE RETURNED TO NATIONAL CHRISTMAS PAGEANT" by Jeff Wright, director, National Prayer Embassy

In 1983 when we first began driving through Washington, D.C. to pray for the government each week, we noticed around Thanksgiving time, that on the south lawn across the street from the White House, on an area known as the "Ellipse," the National Park Service was preparing the annual National Christmas Pageant. This was set up around the National Christmas Tree, which is the one the President lights in an official ceremony broadcast on TV every year around the second Thursday of December. Around this huge living evergreen tree the Park Service prepares over fifty smaller, temporary trees to represent each of the fifty states and U.S. territories, many of them decorated with emblems distinctive of the states, such as Maryland crabs or Texas armadillos, etc.

They also put in a yule log pit, a pen for live reindeer, a stage for live music and sound speakers for recorded Christmas music. We discovered that this pageant had started in the 1950's and became an annual tradition. Originally and for nearly 20 years it included a life-size nativity scene, but in 1973 two atheists and a minister joined in a lawsuit to force the removal of the life-size nativity scene on the basis of the so-called "separation of church and state."

So, when we arrived in 1983 the life-size nativity scene was erected about a block away from the official pageant, by a private Christian group, as it had been for every year since 1973. This was one of the main things we prayed about that month of December 1983. You can imagine how pleased we were when the U.S. Supreme Court announced in January 1984 that it was constitutional for nativity scenes to be erected at Christmas time on public lands in pageants such as this. 11 months later in December 1984, for the first time in 11 years the nativity scene was brought back to the center of the National Christmas Pageant--for us, it seemed a significant symbol of Jesus Christ being brought back to the center of our national consciousness, in line with President Reagan's declaration of 1983 as the "Year of The Bible."

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NAT PARK SERVICE

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STATEMENT ON RESTORING CRECHE TO PAGEANT OF PEACE

Jack Fish, National Capital Regional Director of the National Park Service, has reinstated the creche as one of the traditional displays in this year's annual Christmas Pageant of Peace on the Ellipse.

The traditional inclusion of the creche had been discontinued in 1973, following a decision of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Fish indicated that in light of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision allowing a creche to be included in the city of Pawtucket, R.I., Christmas display, he was free to restore the creche to the Park Service display.

In reaching the current decision, Fish consulted with Pageant co-sponsor, Christmas Pageant of Peace Inc., and also took into account views expressed in a public planning meeting held earlier this fall.

Fish noted that his decision was concurred in by Interior Secretary William Clark, who noted that it was both "historically and legally appropriate."

--NPS--

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