

NINETY MINUTES OF BEAUTIFUL SIGHTS AND SOUNDS



Sonja Reeves

The Belgrade Avenue United Methodist Church's handbell group performs "Procession of the Nobles" during Sunday's Minnesota Valley Regional Handbell Festival at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Mankato.

Hooked on handbells

By Mark Fischenich
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — The sights?

Well, there were about 180 people spread across the sanctuary of Bethlehem Lutheran Church. There were purple robes and black robes and crisp white dress shirts. They ranged from pint-size boys to elderly women, all holding gleaming brass bells in white-gloved hands.

The sounds?

"Oh dear," said Wendy Greiner, director of one of the handbell choirs that came together as one massive choir Sunday, when asked to describe the sound of 180 people ringing together. "It's a pretty awesome sound."

It's also a sound that is heard just once a year in Mankato when the Minnesota Valley Regional Handbell Festival is held. A handful of churches have taken turns the past 24 years hosting the annual event in Mankato-North Mankato, which appears to be something of a handbell hotbed.

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WENDY GREINER,
director of River Bend Bells

"There are only about four churches in Mankato that are large enough to host something like this," said Jane Sletta, who is director of the Bethlehem Gospbells.

In addition, Sletta plays in the River Bend Bells, the community handbell group that Greiner directs.

Greiner said handbells tend to get a hold on people. She started playing as a music education major in college and doesn't expect to stop anytime soon.

"I became hooked," Greiner said. "It's almost an addictive kind of instrument."

Sletta tells of a kid who played for the Bethlehem group until he went to college, enrolled in a Wednesday night class and announced he'd have to quit the handbell choir because that was their practice night.

"After the first semester, he called and said 'Can I come back? I made arrangements so I don't have a Wednesday night class,'" Sletta said.

The kid, Paul Biedscheid, is now engaged to be married in August.

"He asked us to play at his wedding this summer," Sletta said. "And he wants to play in it. So we'll have the groom in the first row."

Youth handbell choirs have been providing new members for the adult groups for years, and they were well-represented on Sunday — joined by the adults for a rendition of "Jesus Loves Me."

Hundreds of listeners filled the pews at Bethlehem, taking in the sights and the sounds for about 90 minutes and 19 songs. Like Greiner, Sletta was asked to take a shot at describing to a newspaper reader what the audience at Bethlehem heard.

"It's almost like surround sound when you get in there," she said, before deciding one word would sum it up.

"It's beautiful."