

# Artist features local people in Nativity scene



The new Nativity scene is currently on display on a table inside City Hall. Thandi Konguavi, Grandin Media

If the faces in the new Nativity display at Edmonton City Hall look familiar, it may be because you have seen the models for Jesus, Joseph, Mary, and the Three Wise Men walking about town.

All of the people in the manger scene are actual Edmontonians who know sculptor Ritchie Velthuis. Baby Jesus is actually baby Luke, the newborn son of Velthuis' two good friends, who also agreed to pose for him as Joseph and Mary.

"I think that because there is a bit of a personal spin – they are people, so they look like real people – I think it will capture and captivate people's attention," said Velthuis. "I hope it will."

The clay Wise Men and shepherdess are Velthuis' co-workers at Edmonton's annual Ice Castles event, which features large-scale handcrafted ice caves.

"I just asked them if they would pose for me," Velthuis said of his unique approach to the Nativity scene, which took him about a month to complete. "They don't look exactly like that, but it just kind of made it a special story for me."

"It's a pretty special story regardless of your faith or your denomination. It's a powerful story about love and faith and hope and ... that's what builds community."



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Velthuis' 115-by-50-centimetre crèche, or manger scene, depicting the birth of Jesus Christ was unveiled at City Hall on Dec. 1.

The work replaces a life-size outdoor Nativity scene, which was traditionally displayed in front of City Hall every Christmas season for more than 40 years.

City administrators say construction at Churchill Square, and the need to be sensitive to other faiths, prompted the move.

"We want to make sure that everybody feels inclusive. So part of our guidelines are that no one faith's display appears to be dominating over another faith,"

said Tannia Franke, the city's supervisor of civic events for Sir Winston Churchill Square.

But Christian leaders in Edmonton are disappointed the outdoor Nativity scene has been scrapped. They are in talks with the city to bring back the outdoor Nativity scene when renovations outside City Hall are complete.

"Our hope is that we will continue to have some form of outdoor Nativity scene presence," said Julien Hammond, ecumenical officer at the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton.

"If the intention of an installation is to celebrate a tradition, you don't want to hide it somewhere behind a pillar. It's a question of visibility and also of a longstanding tradition, not just in the city here but all around the world."

In the meantime, the city commissioned Velthuis' work because the Nativity has such powerful meaning, said city chaplain Rev. John Dowds.

"We wanted to make sure that there was some continuing reflection of some sort of Nativity within the City Hall complex, but with a Nativity that's different from the one we had which is in storage right now."

Dowds, a Presbyterian, said he is "personally delighted" with Velthuis' work.

"It's got creative elements, it's got traditional elements. It's quite striking and for me, it's quite engaging. I sort of stare at it from time to time if I have the opportunity," said Dowds, adding the artwork invites him to reflect on the story of Christ's birth.

"I'm Christian so for me it's central to my belief system. It invites me to reflect on the meaning of this season of the year that we're in."

Velthuis said he's indifferent to the controversy. He has completed artwork for the city in the past. In 2011, Velthuis designed a bronze memorial sculpture honouring the homeless, located north of City Hall. The sculpture depicts a large doorway with a homeless person sitting in front of it.