

Planning Advent for Children and Adults

It's hard to plan programs for this fall when you're not sure when vaccinations for children will be available and whether or not that will impact in-person worship and classes. Church staff and committee members are exhausted and the thought of the Delta variant (or yet some other variant) prompting another holiday of social distancing is overwhelming. We want to save you some legwork and offer a compilation of ideas to get your creative juices flowing. We've worked to pull together ideas that could be adapted for at home devotions or to utilize in the Sunday School room (or some hybrid of the two). This is another year to keep it simple as you determine how much of your church's Advent will happen on the church campus or at home. These ideas are meant to be springboards for what your committee might implement in your congregation.

Blessings to you for this Advent season,

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Encourage Intentionality for Children and Adults: Does your church encourage members to plan for “how” they want to construct their Advent/Christmas experience? In our consumer driven world, it is easy to simply let the culture around us dictate what the season will be like.

Family Meetings: This might be the year to encourage your families to be very intentional about how they want to celebrate the holidays. If children are old enough, having a family meeting (before Thanksgiving) to talk about Christmas expectations is beneficial. Discussion of what activities are most meaningful and feasible can set a tone for reducing the stress that the season can bring. Families can set priorities for the use of their time and determine what things/events/activity will be a top priority, emphasizing presence over presents.

Faithful Families for Advent and Christmas: 100 Ways to Make the Season Sacred by Traci Smith, APG Sales and Distribution, 2020. This resource provides stories, prayers and practices grouped by various themes of the season. Practices include: Making an Advent Wreath, Christmas Card prayers, Hot Chocolate Gratitude Party, Year Round Christmas Gift, Silent Night Star Walk, Birthday Party for Jesus, among others.

Individuals/Couples without children can also be encouraged to be intentional about how they want to celebrate the holidays. Traveling through a pandemic required all of us to assess what makes a “perfect” Christmas celebration. What did we learn from that experience that could help us be intentional about shaping this year's celebration?

Story book for young families – Families will continue to exhibit exhaustion this year. Consider wrapping and gifting your young families with a new Christmas themed picture book along with a note encouraging them to pause and savor the message of Christmas. OR if you have the volunteer/staff resources, record videos reading different holiday themed storybooks and send the link(s) to your families – be respectful of copyright laws and make sure you are utilizing a private (and not public) link. YouTube works great for this.

Hybrid Model for Broadly Graded Children (at church or at home with parents):

Materials created for rotation workshop or VBS are great springboards for bringing together groups of broadly graded children (while also offering some information that could be modified for families to do at home if in-

person classes need to be cancelled). Broadly graded classes allow siblings to travel together and provide a change of pace from the traditional teaching model. If attendance numbers are low, consider offering one broadly graded class each week of Advent. If numbers are high, recruit 2 teams of volunteers to offer 2 different classes simultaneously for the second and third weeks of Advent (kids self-select which topic to attend each week) and gather all kids for one celebration on the first week (general overview of Advent with craft or mission project) and fourth week (celebration of birth narrative) of Advent. Teens or additional adults might be recruited to assist younger school aged children move through activities (much like VBS).

Check out the varied **Rotation Workshop ideas** at <https://www.rotation.org/category/nt-lessons-jesus-birth-advent-christmas> The rotation workshop writers rose to the challenge last fall helping churches create options for at home worship for families. If you didn't borrow from their collection last year, it is worth your time to look for this year. Rotation.org is a generous group and provides lesson summaries, etc. for free. If you want access to ALL the lesson materials, become a "supporting member" for \$45.

Critters around the Crèche Activities for Sensing the Seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

This resource from the Pastoral Center (Roman Catholic) provides numerous ideas for learning centers which can also provide inspiration for home worship. (\$14 downloadable resource)

<https://pastoral.center/critters-around-the-creche-eresource>

Godly Play was another organization that rose to the challenge during the pandemic with its "A Season of Wonder" advent materials. They developed a series of videos which congregations could use during Sunday morning worship or provide for at home worship. Learn more about Godly Play at

<https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org> .

Unwrapping the Creche: Provide an opportunity for students to "unwrap" the various characters from the nativity story each week. If each classroom has the technology, you could have one volunteer embody a different character (Mary, Joseph, Shepherd, Inn Keeper, Angel, etc.) from the story each week as a video chat, short YouTube, or in person. Taking the time to pre-record YouTube videos that can be shown on a laptop or tv in a classroom provides you with the additional option of distributing a link for at home learning should classes need to be cancelled. (see **Appendix** for suggested at home materials).

Christmas Joy Offering: Each year the Christmas Joy Offering provides free resources to utilize with children (ages 5-10) in the broadly graded classroom or at home. You can find these on our denomination's website <https://specialofferings.pcusa.org>

Advent At Home

Getting families to pick up "kits" is always challenging. Consider contacting your deacons now to see if they would partner with your committee to deliver Advent kits (employing safe protocols for visits) while doing "check in" visits. If considering digital/YouTube/Facebook Live materials to distribute for home or classrooms, check with your denominational resources to see what videos might be available for use. For example, the United Church of Canada has produced an excellent child-friendly video entitled *Unwrap Christmas* providing an overview of the meaning of Christmas. The video link is <https://bit.ly/3ncXwNI>

Family Ministries provides “Advent in a box” to help congregations who want to provide at home devotion kits and activities to families. There is a charge related to these downloadable materials. <https://familyministrytools.org/2019/06/24/advent>

Hagar’s Community Church: Support a PC(USA) prison-church ministry by ordering an Advent devotional from Hagar’s Community Church. <https://hagarscommunitychurch.com/books>
The 2021 Advent devotional is entitled *Unlikely Prophets*.

Illustrated Ministry: Many churches utilize children’s worship bulletin materials from Illustrated Ministry throughout the year. Check out their Advent specific materials at <https://store.illustratedministry.com/collections/advent>

Outdoor Advent

Bible Trail: If you have a campus with green spaces and easy parking, consider gifting your presbytery and surrounding church neighbors with an Advent Bible Trail. Last year, Rotation.org offered some wonderful information for designing an Advent trail. Whether or not you are able to have in-person classes, this would be a wonderful addition to your advent season and a simple alternative to a walk-through nativity. https://www.rotation.org/topic/advent-bible-story-walk-through-nativity-trails?fbclid=IwAR0AP-Wv_pRgKg3olyKNiA6OVINdbCe4HkY_CE8nquxY2PMrZ_xR3nMrrTM

Chalk the Walk: Weather permitting, encourage families/individuals to create sidewalk chalk art around the church. Each week could reflect a different theme (hope, joy, peace, love, etc.). If winter weather prohibits sidewalk chalk, ask families to decorate white posterboard related to each week’s theme to be displayed during Advent. Or if in-person gatherings are permitted, consider creating art stations on the first week of Advent (prior to worship) that explore the themes – provide posterboard, supplies and prompts for members to create visual articulations of Advent themes.

Luminaria Devotional: The Presbytery of Baltimore wrote An **Advent Luminaria Devotional** for 2020 around the themes of hope, peace, joy and love. If you didn’t use it last year, you might look at it for this year as an alternative to advent wreaths for at home use. The presbytery offered it out for the rest of the church to utilize through this link: https://baltimorepresbytery.org/presbytery-lights/?fbclid=IwAR21X1FcFnLXls1NRIOS1WA_rb5aPfSmkMCxZ00vpFRkHcUx-22c77Ueol

Mission: Focusing on the needs of others provides church members with the opportunity to consider the gift of giving over receiving.

Joy of Giving: Honoring Christ’s birth is a perfect time to give Christ the gift of sharing ourselves with people in need. Volunteering to provide meals or holiday treats to a day shelter, delivering meals to a shut-in, inviting someone to share in a holiday meal at your home, performing an errand for a homebound individual, visiting a church member in a nursing facility, providing lunch for first a responder, feeding the birds, playing a game with a child, creating a prayer jar (pull a name out of the jar each night to focus on in prayer), writing a thank you note to someone who has provided care to you, making an ornament to give away, reaching out to a military family, etc. are just a few of the ways to spread Christ’s love. Some churches follow the St. Nicholas Challenge (December 6) and do something for someone in need while doing their best to not be caught. Tradition states that Nicholas (Bishop of Myra, 3rd century) devoted his life to secretly helping the needy, the sick and the suffering as a way of obeying Jesus’ words to “sell what you own and give the money to the poor.”

Preparing the Manger: A long time practice of pairing service with the concept of preparing a manger for Christ has helped families/individuals discuss and meditate on service as a part of our Advent disciplines. Individuals are encouraged to construct a simple manger and place a piece of “straw” (strips of yellow yarn) into the manger every time they do something helpful for someone else without being asked. The concept is to prepare a place for the baby Jesus.



Heifer Project offers a four-week family devotional which utilizes a giving calendar to enable families to focus on generosity during Advent (or any time of year). The devotional assists families in discovering ways to help neighbors in need around the world. <https://www.heifer.org/what-you-can-do/get-involved/faith/resources/fill-the-ark-family-devotional-calendar.html>

Self-Guided Advent at Church

Art and Prayer Stations: During the pandemic, many churches were able to set up self-led prayer stations for masked individuals to utilize during weekday hours. *IgnatianSpirituality.com* has posted its video prayer meditations for 2021 which provide good examples for how one might be encouraged to meditate on art to explore the Advent scriptures. <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/arts-faith-advent-first-Sunday-imaginative-prayer-exercise-3/>

Advent Selfie Wall: Do you have space (indoors or outdoors) in your church for a selfie wall that might reflect an Advent theme (i.e., peace, hope)? Create a back drop (in an area with adequate light) that presents your Advent theme. Encourage members to take a picture in front of the selfie wall and upload it to your social media page.

A Sanctified Art offers a bundle of multi-media resources (daily devotional booklet, words for worship, Longest Night liturgy, liturgy for First Sunday after Christmas, advent calendar for families, visual art, sermon planning guide and more) for Advent-Epiphany, following the RCL for Year C. Reverend Mary used this resource while interning in New Jersey. It is wonderful for creative worship and personal devotion time. All resources are digital and can be purchased individually, but are recommended to be used as part of a bundle. <https://Sanctifiedart.org>

Focus on the Christmas Story

Suggestions for Parents

“Waiting” for Christmas is a difficult task for children, especially when they are bombarded with toy commercials in September and stores that are decorated by October. Your children will need help in understanding what they are “waiting” for during Advent. Keeping the focus on “waiting” for Christ’s birthday can be a challenge.



One simple way to help children move through Advent in stages involves the use of a nativity crèche. At the beginning of Advent, bring out your nativity figures and review each one with your children – you can invite your children to “unpack” the figures and talk about each one as you unpack them. Place the figures into the crèche in stages. **Start with the angel Gabriel** who has the job of telling Mary that God was going to send his Son into the world. Invite your children to consider what an important job Gabriel had.

How does it make us feel when we have an important job? Remind your children that during this first week of Advent, we have an important job – it is to get our family ready for Christ’s birthday – putting up decorations is one of the ways we get ready.

Each week, add a different part of the story. The **second week you can add Mary**. Tell your children the story of Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Invite your children to talk about the story.

Why do you think Mary was confused by what the angel told her? Mary understood that she was going to be the mother of Jesus – this is very special. How do you think Mary felt to have such a special job? When mothers are expecting a baby, they have many things that they have to do in order to get ready for the baby. What do you think Mary needed to do? We have things that we need to do in order to get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Jesus wants our hearts to be ready to receive him anew on Christmas morning. One way we make our hearts ready is to do things for other people – this might involve taking cookies to a neighbor or helping an older adult with a task that is difficult for them. It might involve being nice to one another – even when we are grumpy or tired. When we do things for others, when we are nice to one another, we create a happy place in our hearts – that is a good place for Jesus to live (in the happy place). “That Christ may live in your hearts through faith.” (Ephesians 3:17)

The third week, you can add Joseph. Talk about an angel telling Joseph that Mary was going to have God’s Son and that they would name him Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25). Joseph would be responsible to help raise Jesus and make sure that as a little boy he was safe and taken care of.

Do you think Joseph had an important job? What do you think Joseph might have to do to keep the baby Jesus safe? Preparing for Jesus’ birth was a very special job for both Mary and Joseph. It is really important for a new baby to have family members to take care of him/her. Discuss what ways your family is going to prepare for Christ’s birth this week (i.e., learning the story about Jesus’ birth, doing something for someone else, doing something to remind us how important family members are in our lives).

The fourth week, you can add the stable animals (donkey, cow, sheep). Retell the story about how Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem and about how they were going to stay in the stable (Luke 2:1-7). The animals were going to be the first creatures to see the baby Jesus, other than Mary and Joseph.

Do you think the animals could guess that a very important event, the birth of Jesus, was going to happen in their home? Why do you think God might want the animals to be part of the story? In just a

few days, we will celebrate Jesus' birth. This is a very special event in our home. What do you think we could do to make the day more special?

On Christmas Eve, or Christmas Day, add the baby Jesus to the nativity scene. You can talk about what a wonderful gift God gave to all of us in the baby Jesus.

The Christmas season, in the church, begins on Christmas Day and runs until Epiphany. In the days ahead, you can add the shepherds and the magi to your crèche. Many people add the magi last (since they had the farthest to travel). Talk about the shepherds who heard from all the angels that God was sending his Son, Jesus, into our world so that we could learn more about how to love God and each other. The shepherds ran and told others about God's gift to us in Jesus. Remind the children that the Wise Men lived far away from where Jesus was born and when they learned about his birth they were so impressed about what God was doing that they wanted to immediately travel to meet Jesus. You might want to talk about the star that guided the Wise Men. *Are there ways we can help other people learn about God and Jesus?*



This guide was prepared by the Rev. Barb Tesorero who has granted permission to churches to reprint for distribution to families.