



GETTING READY FOR ADVENT, CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY

Ideas based on work by
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As your congregation prepares for this season, feel free to the following suggestions to guide your planning.

*“My heart praises the Lord; my soul is glad because of God my Saviour.”
(Luke 1: 46b-47).*

Suggestions for Pre-Advent

- Before Advent, hold an Advent Festival for the entire congregation. Activities may include making Advent wreaths, baking cookies, colouring Advent devotional booklets, Advent puzzles, games and food.
- Order Advent calendars from Church Offices (presbyterian.ca/resources)
- Encourage writers and artists in your congregation to create an Advent devotional booklet for everyone to use. (Lots of people like to practice their desktop publishing skills!)
- Make an Advent or Christmas banner to use in the worship area.

Four weeks of Advent

Presbyterians recognize Advent as starting on the fourth Sunday before December 25, which is the Sunday between November 27 and December 3 inclusive.

Christmas Eve – December 24

Christmas Day and the 12 days of Christmas – December 25 – January 5

Epiphany – January 6

- Plan special studies, worship and service projects within the context of already established time periods in your congregation.

- Unless you have a large congregation, it is better to do one good special event for the season rather than several.
- Plan events so they can include people of all ages, especially single people or people who live alone.
- Consider doing a special event after Christmas during the 12 days of Christmas and Epiphany when schedules are less hectic.
- Include in the weekly bulletin suggestions for at-home rituals, readings and alternative Christmas suggestions. Not all special Christmas activities need to be done at church.
- Learn a new Advent hymn each Sunday (Advent hymns are often not well known.)
- If you do not do so already, have a 10-minute pre-worship hymn sing where people may suggest their favourite Advent or Christmas hymns.
- Use the children's time in worship to talk about some of our Advent and Christmas customs—the Advent wreath, the colours of the season, symbols association with Christmas such as stars, coloured lights, Christmas trees.
- Host a book and video fair. Encourage people to add Christmas stories to their home libraries. Alternately, host a lending Christmas Fair. Lend books and videos.
- Do a Christmas exchange. Exchange extra ornaments, surplus Christmas tree stands, extra wreaths. Alternately, donate these items for your community centre or a women's shelter.
- Have a potluck church night dinner and a program on celebrating an alternative Christmas. Focus on ways to make the holiday less commercial. Invite people to try economical recipes from other countries. (The cookbook, *Extending the Table*, Joetta Handrich Schlabach, Herald Press, 1991, has many fine choices.)
- Create a display of service projects and encourage groups of people or families to choose one to do during the season.
- Encourage people to recycle last year's Christmas cards by making gift tags or Christmas collages.

- Ask community agencies to make a presentation in your congregation, telling how the Christmas season affects the people with whom they work.
- Provide time in the weekly worship service for quiet personal reflection and prayer. Play soft, meditative music in the background.
- Host a gift-making workshop where people can make inexpensive, special gifts for others. These might include poetry, art, or gift coupons.
- Provide copies of the legend of St. Nicholas so parents can explain Santa Claus to young children.
- Create and sign a giant Christmas card at church so people can sign it rather than send Christmas cards to church members. Encourage people to donate the money saved to their favourite agency or charity.

Suggestions for the Twelve Days of Christmas

- Have a Christmas carol party after Christmas.
- Provide a worship resource so people can have devotions on each of the twelve days of Christmas. Focus on the meaning of the coming of the Christ-child.
- Use the church bulletin to suggest a special prayer concern for each of the twelve days of Christmas.
- Encourage people to pack boxes of leftover Christmas cookies and donate them to a community agency.
- If you live in a city, organize a tour to an art museum to observe how the birth of Christ has been portrayed in great art around the world.
- If you live in a farming area, organize a tour of a stable. Reflect on what it meant that Jesus began in such humble beginnings. Sing some of the Christmas stable carols and hymns.
- If you live in a village or town, organize a candlelight carol sing, walking through streets where people may be alone after Christmas.
- Prepare a Christmas program and take it to a nursing home, group home, or prison. People in such places are often forgotten after Christmas.

- Invite people to learn about Christmas customs in a particular country or to present customs from the land of their ancestry. Then, have a party to celebrate the variety of Christmas customs.
- Host an undecorate-the-church coffee and donut party on a Saturday morning toward the end of Christmastide.
- Host a New Year's Eve dinner or party. Play games. Invite individuals or families to plan a worship service for midnight.
- Host a potluck dinner. Ask participants to tell one story about past Christmases and what it means to them.
- Plan a two- or four-day winter Vacation Bible School while children are on vacation.
- Plan a gathering of college and university students who are home for the holidays.

CHRISTMAS IN YOUR CONGREGATION

If you're the type of person who buys Christmas gifts in July, you have your Christmas plans in place for your congregation.

If you're the type of person who is dashing out on Christmas Eve, you may enjoy these quick-pick ideas to make Christmas meaningful in your congregation.

- Make a communal fruit cake. Ask everyone to bring an item (pass out slips the week previously) for a Christmas fruit cake. Invite the children/youth or adult group to mix them together and bake it. Share the cake on Christmas Sunday.
- Make something for nursing home tables. Nursing homes can be glum places on holidays. (My mother-in-law is in one... and I see lots of glum faces on holidays.) Although it does not replace having a family to visit, a small, cheery centerpiece on nursing home tables for Christmas Eve and Christmas day says that someone cares.
- Do an intergenerational Christmas pageant. This need not be a big production. Simply ask people of all ages to "walk through" a reading of Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 2:1-12. People can provide their own simple costumes.

- Do “a cookie-for-you; a cookie-for me” project. Ask everyone to bring a dozen cookies. Take home a variety of six (from other people) to share with friends at Christmas and give six to homeless shelters, group homes, food pantries, and out-of-the-cold programs.
- Make sponge-printed wrapping paper at coffee hour. If your congregation enjoys coffee and juice after church, set up a side table with large sheets of newsprint, pieces of sponge in Christmas shapes or in squares, and bowls of various colours of tempera paint. Invite everyone to make a piece of wrapping paper and carefully (it may be damp) take it home for use with family and friends.
- Have a Christmas storytelling time. Invite adults or youth from your congregation who have a dramatic or meaningful Christmas story (especially about growing up in another country) to share it with the congregation.
- Prepare children’s Christmas worship bulletins. If you are not in the habit of providing children’s worship bulletins, prepare some for the season of Advent. Need ideas? E-mail
- Make a contemporary shopping cart cradle display for a food bank. Ask a supermarket to lend you a shopping cart. Make a crèche scene (with doll) in the small basket section and fill the rest of the cart with items for a local food bank.

Suggestions for Epiphany

- Learn a new Epiphany hymn before worship on January 6.
- Use the children’s time in worship to explain the significance of Epiphany and the Epiphany season. Prepare a church year calendar and continue explaining the church year in subsequent Sundays.
- Invite comments and feedback on the seasonal celebrations you have provided in your congregation. Ask for volunteers to organize activities and worship services for next year.

NO CHRISTMAS PROGRAM PLANNED YET?

Don't panic. Here are some last-minute ideas.

Do a mimed pageant

Purchase a prepared Christmas pageant done entirely with mime/acting. The dialogue is on CD or cassette. The leaders and children prepare a few simple props, then, following the actions indicated in the leader's book, they "walk through" the pageant with the CD or cassette providing the lines. Group Publishing advertizes them as an "Instant Christmas Pageant—Just add kids!" Three themes are available: *The Not-So-Silent Night* (CD); *Wee Three Kings* (CD); *The Mouse's Tale* (cassette). These kits are somewhat expensive (about \$42) but may be worth it if you want a program at the last moment.

Host a Congregational Christmas Potluck

Many people are preparing special foods for Christmas. Invite each household to bring to a pot-luck dinner something special that is served at their Christmas dinner. What happens if everyone brings desserts? Guess what! It's a dessert party.

Host an Impromptu Community Carol Sing

Many people complain that there are few opportunities to sing favourite carols. Invite friends and neighbours to come together to sing for an hour. All you need is a meeting place, carol sheets and a good pianist or song leader. Provide an informal atmosphere by greeting each person with a steaming cup of hot apple cider as they enter.

Serve Royal Plum Pudding after Worship on a Sunday in Advent

Engage the children and youth in your congregation to make plum pudding prior to worship. Serve it with a sweet sauce. Here's a plum pudding recipe that even children enjoy:

- 1 can purple plums (about 2 cups) or chopped prunes
- 1 pkg. gingerbread mix
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 c. light raisins
- ½ c. chopped walnuts (optional)

Drain plums. If there are pits, remove them. Cut plums in pieces. Prepare gingerbread mix according to directions on package, adding salt and plum pieces. Stir and add raisins and walnuts. Pour into well greased molds (empty coffee tins work well). Bake uncovered at 350 degrees about 1 hour. To unmold, invert cooled tins, cut out bottom with can opener and gently push out pudding. Recycle the tins.

Plum Puddings originated in England where prunes or raisins were used. During the Puritan reign in England, plum pudding was outlawed as “sinfully rich.” Traditionally in England, small silver charms or coins were baked into the pudding. Finding the coin was a sign of good luck in the year ahead. It is also traditional for everyone who lives in the household to simultaneously hold onto the wooden spoon, help stir the batter for the pudding, and make a wish. “Royal” in this recipe refers, of course, to the royal baby, Jesus Christ.