Parts of Canada may still be under COVID-19 restrictions this Advent and Christmas and services may be quite different this year for many of us. Some congregations will be worshipping online at Christmas for the first time. Others might be planning small, outdoor events in place of having services. Still others might be having multiple services with strong COVID-19 health protocols in place.

Planning for Christmas this year will require flexibility as we adapt to changing circumstances, creativity as we learn new ways of celebrating the birth of Christ, and care as we take responsibility for ensuring the health and safety of those in our communities.

Below you will find ideas to ponder and questions to ask as you plan Christmas worship this year.

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**Health and Safety is the First Priority**

The health and safety of those in your community must be the top priority for those planning Christmas worship services this year. Congregations are required to follow the advice of federal, provincial and municipal health authorities and make decisions about Christmas services accordingly. This is the minimum requirement, but it is the first place to go in decision making about how to best respond to the evolving situation.

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**Grief**

While we will have lived with coronavirus as part of our lives for a while now, the grief it has brought with it continues to affect many people’s wellbeing. We’ve had to change the way we worship, work, gather, educate, exercise, eat and so many other things. Along with these changes has come a loss of sense of predictability, safety, comfort, control and security. With the amount of individual and communal grief and lament we’ve experienced this year it is more important than ever that we acknowledge these losses in Advent and Christmas.
worship services. Our grief connects us to the reason for Christ’s incarnation—God’s presence with us, even in the darkest times.

- What ways could you acknowledge and honour the losses and grief of 2020 in your Advent and Christmas services? Consider explicitly naming some of the losses your congregation has experienced, lighting candles in recognition of those who grieve, or including a prayer of lament in one of the services leading up to Christmas.

- Consider having a Blue Christmas (also called Longest Night of the Year) service this year. The longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere is December 21st; however, this type of service can be done at any time during Advent. Here are a few examples of Blue Christmas services that can be adapted to suit your context:
  - Presbyterian Church USA: https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/blue-christmas-service-wholeness-and-healing
  - Building Faith: https://buildfaith.org/a-blue-christmas-service

Remember the Manger

Many Christmas traditions in our churches and homes emphasize comfort and joy with decorations, feasting, and extravagant celebrations. Yet, the first Christmas was far from extravagant. God kept the birth of Jesus simple: a baby born in a manger to two regular people. The hope and wonder on that first Christmas did not come from organizing the perfect worship service or cooking the best Christmas dinner; it came from the miracle of God becoming flesh. This year, as the pandemic prevents us from engaging in certain traditions and forces us to adapt others, it is a great time to invite those in our communities to focus on simplicity in their celebrations of Jesus’ birth.

- Strive to balance the hope and wonder of the incarnation with the reality of the messy and unpredictable situation of Jesus’ birth this Christmas.
  - This video from The Bible Project telling Luke’s version of the nativity maintains this balance well: https://bibleproject.com/blog/luke-chapter-1-2-birth-jesus

- Plan to do a Christmas pageant this year in a new way. This resource from Building Faith contains ideas for doing an outdoor nativity, a recorded nativity, or a live Zoom pageant: https://buildfaith.org/christmas-pageants-2020

- Encourage congregation members to engage in simple Christmas practices at home. Here are some simple and practical ideas to share with households in your congregation:
  - https://goodfaithmedia.org/family-practices-to-make-advent-sacred
What Does Your Community Love about Your Christmas Services?

Knowing what your community loves about your church’s Christmas services will help you plan worship for this year. Is it singing “Silent Night” in the dark holding candles? Is it the lighting of the Advent candles each week with the Christ candle at the center being lit on Christmas eve? Is it children performing the nativity story? Is it the reading of scripture in the lessons & carols service? The different traditions of each congregation are often beloved by those who attend. People will happily share what they love about the Christmas services at your church if you ask.

- Use whatever medium works best for your congregation (e.g. social media, your church newsletter, an announcement during the service) to invite people to tell you what they love about Christmas services at your church. To make this even more engaging, invite people to submit photos from past Christmas services and events in your congregation.
- Make a list of all the things that people love and then choose a few that are possible for you to do in an adapted way this year.
- Brainstorm about how you could incorporate beloved aspects of the service into whatever format your services will be taking this year. This will take some creativity and energy, so if you have people with creative gifts in your congregation be sure to invite them to the table. Here are some examples of adaptations to the beloved parts of Christmas services mentioned above:
  - Ask each household to send in a video of them lighting their little white candle, then splice that together to make a Silent Night video to accompany the music.
  - Send advent wreaths or wreath-making kits out to each household. Provide them with a candle lighting prayer to do in their homes. Invite them to submit videos of them lighting the candles beforehand so that you can include it in the online service.
    - Inexpensive Advent Wreath: [https://buildfaith.org/99-cent-advent-wreath](https://buildfaith.org/99-cent-advent-wreath)
    - Advent Wreath Prayers for Home: [https://buildfaith.org/advent-wreath-prayers-home](https://buildfaith.org/advent-wreath-prayers-home)
  - Set up a walk-through nativity with prayer stations throughout the church and have households sign up for a time slot to walk through, or do a walk-through or drive-through live nativity outdoors and invite people to sign up for times to enjoy it.
  - Send different households the readings for the lessons and carols service and invite them to record themselves doing the reading. Welcome creativity with costumes, decorations or any other props they think might help them tell the story. Invite musicians to record themselves playing the carols. Put the service together ahead of time and host a “watch party” to watch it together online.
    - Visit the Presbyterian Church in Canada worship page for Lessons and Carols services that can be adapted to do virtually (scroll down to “seasonal resources” and look under “Christmas”): [https://presbyterian.ca/worship](https://presbyterian.ca/worship)
Flexibility

With COVID-19 restrictions changing as the pandemic unfolds, it is important that leaders are ready to be flexible when it comes to Christmas services. It is wise to have a backup plan for any events or services you are planning to do in person.

- If you were planning to do a service indoors, would you be able to move it outdoors? The weather could be an issue in the middle of a Canadian winter, but with a few adaptations (e.g. shorter service, in the middle of sunny afternoon, inviting people to dress warmly) would it be possible?

- If you were planning on having an in-person service, could you plan to livestream it as well? That way the people who are not comfortable coming could still join in. Or, if there is a COVID-19 outbreak in your area and churches are required to close, you are all ready to do it digitally.

- Could you deliver worship packages to households ahead of time that include the liturgy, candles and suggested songs for people to be able to engage in Christmas worship in their homes? Here are a few suggestions for things to include in Advent worship packages for home:
  - Advent at Home Kits: https://christinevhides.com/2020/10/11/advent-during-a-pandemic
  - Advent in a Box: https://buildfaith.org/advent-in-a-box

Welcome

Christmas is a time when many people who do not regularly participate in church life come to worship God: pews get filled faster than normal, new people sit amongst church regulars, and old friends joyously greet one another. Congregations with strong welcoming practices see Christmas as an opportunity to show the love of Christ to others by providing all who enter the doors of the church with a warm welcome. Welcoming will be different this year: no handshakes or hugs, 6-feet between each person, limited amount of people allowed in the building at once (if at all). Whether your Christmas services are happening in-person or online, it is important that leaders think about how to welcome people to worship during COVID-19.
How will you get the message out this year about your Christmas services? It is important to include safety protocols in your invitations. If you are having people sign up for Christmas services ahead of time, be sure that those in your community know that they are still welcome and how to sign up to come to worship.

If your congregation usually provides something special on Christmas to welcome people, such as a craft for kids, hot chocolate and cookies, or candles, consider delivering them to people’s houses ahead of the services. If possible, incorporate the item that you’ve given into the online gathering. For example, have everyone light their candles at the same time, have the children do the craft “together” during children’s time, or invite everyone to stay after the service for a time of fellowship while you drink your hot chocolate.

Welcoming in online spaces is different than in person. Oftentimes, we treat online gatherings as if they were sad and secondary alternatives to in-person gatherings. When we do this, we are turning away from the wonderful possibilities that God has for us in gathering online. As leaders, treat the online worship space created with the same regard as you would if the gathering were happening in person. Open worship with the same level of enthusiasm and welcome you would at the beginning of a meeting in person.

Adopt a posture of honesty and humility. Even after several months of virtual church, there is a certain amount of awkwardness to online worship. Treat this with light-heartedness. Admit that certain things are awkward and model what it means to worship God wholeheartedly in the online space.

**Ambiance**

Christmas services often engage all 5 senses with good smells, beautiful sights, comforting sounds, and the taste and feel of communion wine and bread. The candlelight, evergreens, manger scene, special decorations and favourite music all contribute to that special Christmas ambiance that draws people together to worship the newborn king. While those meeting in sanctuaries may be able to recreate this ambiance in the way that it has been done in the past, those livestreaming worship or engaging in smaller or outdoor events will have to rethink how to create a special Christmas ambiance.

Strong visuals: What visuals will enhance the message you are delivering this Christmas? Be creative and consider using visuals as an opportunity for community building. For example: use art submitted by congregation members on a particular theme (hope, joy, peace or love), ask people to submit photos of their favourite manger scenes or ask congregation members to create luminaries out of paper bags and flameless LED lights to light a path around the church.
Sounds: We are no longer able to sing in church because of Covid-19 and music has proven to be a challenge in virtual church services. If meeting in person or online, draw on well-known Christmas music. This will allow people to easily sing along in their heads or, if meeting online, put themselves on mute to sing along. For online worship, spend time ensuring that you will have high-quality music for your Christmas services. This may mean recording church musicians ahead of time or practicing with the technology well in advance to ensure that music can be heard and enjoyed easily.

Touch & Smell: People have strong sensory and olfactory memories. One technique to draw on these memories is to use words to evoke the feel and smell of Christmas. For example, as a word of welcome, you might say, “Welcome to our virtual church service this evening. As the temperature drops outside, you’ve probably felt the cold against your cheeks. Imagine that cold. Now imagine what it is like to step into a house filled with light and warmth. For the next hour, let us gather around the light of Christ and feel the warmth of Christ’s love together.”

Community

People come to Christmas worship to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with others. Worshipping in community is the highlight of Christmas for many people. Think about how you will cultivate this sense of community when not meeting in person or meeting under COVID restrictions.

Do not ignore the reality that we are in the middle of a pandemic. A “business as usual” approach with Christmas services risks alienating those who are feeling alone, grieving or just not having the Christmas they had hoped for.

While we are used to people appreciating longer Christmas services, you may want to consider making your Christmas service shorter this year with a simple, clear message. Use the extra time for a virtual Christmas coffee time, when you meet online for informal conversation.

If you are leading worship online, consider a personable approach: make sure those viewing can see the faces of those leading, speak directly to the online congregation in a friendly and warm way, practice ahead of time so that there aren’t any frustrating technical glitches during the service.

*Many of the ideas included in this resource were provided by or sparked by Kelly Fitzgerald’s webinar “Christmas Eve 2020” (Sept. 29, 2020, Practical Resources for Churches): https://www.prcli.org/webinars-2