

CHRISTMAS NOTES

ADVENT

We naturally want Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services to be extra special, but how much planning do we put into the Sundays of Advent? Do we try to put a real sense of expectation and anticipation into the services, and into our work with children over this period? And is the expectation of a kind that is appropriate to the deeper meanings of the season?

The physical environment of the church can help in this. Perhaps the advent candles are lit as the Sundays pass, and a special moment is given to this at the beginning of the service, but why not move the candles each week – start by lighting the first one by the west door, then move them further down the nave each week until the final one is lit right in the heart of the church to show that God has come to his people? There could also be focal displays for each week, illustrating the theme of the week and set up in a different corner of the building – on Christmas Day the crib could be set up in the centre of them all.

There are traditional themes for each of the four weeks, but you can produce your own – and again the children can help with this as you wonder together about the different significances of the 'journey' of Advent – the different journeys that the characters in the Christmas story have to make, and the journeys we have to make in our own lives.

SOME RESOURCES:

ADVENT ANGELS, Sue Doggett, BRF 1999

ALONG THE ADVENT ROAD, Nick Harding, Kevin Mayhew 2004

SHARING LIFE THROUGH ADVENT, Jenny Hyson & David Winter, BRF 2004

THE ADVENT ALPHABET, Anne Faulkner, BRF 1997

T H E N A T I V I T Y

For many of people at Christmas, 'The Nativity' doesn't mean the miracle of Emmanuel – 'God with us' – so much as the miracle of small children in dressing gowns and tea towels managing, more or less, to get through a given set of movements, words, actions and songs, without descending into complete chaos!

Our job is to make sure that something of the mystery of the original miracle communicates to the children, and to those who watch 'The Nativity', whilst not killing the real fun there is in putting together a presentation. Schools which still put on a 'Nativity' often feel under pressure to offer a 'production', showcasing the performing talents of their children. In the church context 'The Nativity' can be much smaller in scale as it will often be making a contribution to an act of worship. 'Small is beautiful' and can also leave more space for reflection – a series of tableaux with a brief reflective commentary for each scene is relatively easy to put together and can make an effective contribution to worship at Christmas time. Alternatively, brief mimes to a read commentary can be quickly prepared – often scripts for puppet shows can be adapted for this kind of use.

Of course, it doesn't always have to be children who put themselves on display at Christmas time. Why not think of asking some adults to dress up and act out the story? 'Godly Play' can be used to provide a lesson on the Christmas story in which children watch narrative being 'played' out using small figures on a story cloth and are then asked to wonder about each character. A way of doing this in a larger group, or even in an act of worship might be to increase the scale of the materials – instead of wooden figures, adults can form tableaux, as directed by the script. They do have to be able to keep still though, whilst people gaze at them and wonder!

There are many published scripts, of course (some far too wordy, unfortunately – but you can always edit). However, it might be more meaningful for the children to make up their own or at least have a hand in putting a script together. They can come up with the basic ideas and scenarios, and improvise some of the kind of dialogue that might be used, then the adults can act as editors, collating and shaping the material.

SOME RESOURCES:

CHRISTMAS WRAPPED UP, Scripture Union 2003

EASY WAYS TO CHRISTMAS PLAYS, Vicki Howie, BRF 1998

NOT ANOTHER CAROL SERVICE, Susan Sayers, Kevin Mayhew 1996

NURSERY RHYME NATIVITIES, Brian Ogden, BRF 2002

THE COMPLETE GODLY PLAY Vol 3, Jerome Berryman, Living the Good News, Denver

THE GRUMPY SHEPHERD AND OTHER CHRISTMAS PLAYS, Heather Butler & Elspeth Jackman, Scripture Union 1996

C R A F T

Christmas is a great time for making things – decorations, presents, wrapping paper, fancy boxes, calendars, cards, tableaux and other display items – and it's good to have fun in this way. However, can we use these creative activities as a way of exploring either the Christmas story itself, or the messages that lie behind it?

Creative activities can sometimes be seen as 'the jam on the pill' when it comes to Christian teaching. This gives the impression that they are not really relevant to 'the message' but just a way of 'getting the message down'. We should be looking at ways of making the creative activities we offer to our children into part of the message itself, not just attractive packaging. Can we take activities that might be familiar and ask how they could help the children explore feelings – theirs and other people's – and engage in reflection and wonder?

Talking is important in all of this. Children are often better at listening when their hands are busy, so talking with children whilst they are at work on a craft activity can sometimes be a helpful way of exploring some of the ideas embodied in whatever it is you are making.

Figures and images from the Christmas story can be a good stimulus to thinking about how different characters are feeling at different times. Signs, symbols and colours can open a world of wondering – 'I wonder why that symbol is used'; 'I wonder what you would use as a symbol for that'. Making and wrapping presents helps us to think about what we convey through the presents we give, how we choose them, and how God chooses the presents he sends to us.

SOME RESOURCES:

101 THINGS TO DO FOR CHRISTMAS, Debbie Trafton O'Neal, Hunt & Thorpe 1995
CHRISTMAS MAKE AND DO, Gillian Chapman, BRF 2004
CHRISTMAS WRAPPED UP, Scripture Union 2003
STEP BY STEP CHRISTMAS CRIB, Leena Lane & Gillian Chapman 2004

S T O R I E S

From the earliest times that stories were told, winter has been a time for gathering round the fire and sharing tales. For Christians, the Christmas Story clearly has pride of place as the greatest story of light in the midst of darkness, but there are plenty of other stories, ancient and modern, which explore the Christmas message. Why not do some investigation and see what other Christian Christmastide tales you can come up with to share with your children. Perhaps you, and they can make up some of your own.

What better time to look at storytelling skills? Are there members of your congregation – or some of the children and young people themselves – who are renowned as storytellers? Why not ask them to tell a yarn or two, and spend some time working out why they are so successful. How do they use their body language, their hands, their eyes and facial expression? How do they adapt their language to the situation and the subject matter? How do they construct a story – do they start 'Once upon a time' or do they plunge you straight into the midst of some exciting or mysterious event? Do you feel as if you are 'there in the story' when they are speaking? how do they achieve that? Do they make you feel as if you can see, hear, smell, touch or even taste the things in the story?

SOME RESOURCES:

SPARKLING STORIES, Brian Ogden et al, Scripture Union 2004
STORIES, STORIES EVERYWHERE, Sandra Pollerman, BRF 2001
THE LION CHRISTMAS BOOK, Mary Batchelor, Lion 1984
THE STORYTELLER CHRISTMAS BOOK, Bob Hartman, Lion 2003

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