

Getting Ready for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany



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Last week I visited the Herzog family. I was awed by the commitments and activity of this family with their two young children.

This week I visited Margaret. She was off to a community breakfast, then to a three-hour shift in a palliative care unit. In the afternoon, there was a senior's hike, she explained, and a church meeting in the evening.

People are busy. Not all people, but many people. Some are lonely and sad.

Yesterday I chatted with my neighbour, Kate, as we unloaded groceries from the trunk of our cars. Her only son and granddaughter will spend Christmas skiing in Colorado. Kate will spend Christmas with an elderly cousin.

The Season of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

four weeks of Advent
(December 2-23)

Christmas Eve
(December 24)

Christmas Day and the
12 days of Christmas
(December 25-January 5)

Epiphany
(January 6)

As your congregation prepares for this season, use principles like these to guide your planning.

1. Plan special studies, worship and service projects within the context of already established time periods in your congregation.
2. Unless you have a large congregation, it is better to do one good special event for the season rather than several.
3. Plan events so they can include people of all ages, especially single people or people who live alone.
4. Consider doing a special event after Christmas during the 12 days of Christmas and Epiphany when schedules are less hectic.
5. 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.

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 (1-800-619-7301; 416-441-1111)
- 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. (see pattern on page 9)

Suggestions for Advent

- 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 candle-light 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.

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

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.

Ideas based on work by Dorothy Henderson (PCC) and Tom Malone (PCUSA).