

Creative Ideas For Engaging With Your Community This Christmas And Advent



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

a unique challenge; a unique opportunity

The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture (University of York) is working with the Church of England to explore the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on churches and communities. This is happening through a national survey of over 2,500 people, including clergy, church members, and the general public, as well as in depth interviews with individuals from all three groups across the country.

COVID-19 has been hugely challenging for churches, with our resources in terms of people and finance often depleted, while at the same time we face many new demands on time and energy. However, the pandemic has also stimulated enormous creativity. Never in most of our lifetimes have people been so aware of their need for comfort and hope, and churches around the country have been devising and adapting simple, safe, affordable ways to reach out and show care to those who are grieving, anxious and afraid. Here we share some of the brilliant, easy-to-use, Advent and Christmas ideas we have heard – along with others that we have collected from dioceses and other sources across the country.

Advent, Christmas and New Year offer us chances to let people catch up with what has been happening to them, process their grief, and realise the relevance of the Christian message and its power to bring light into darkness. We can't put on big events this year but small, personal opportunities to experience beauty and comfort, feel connected to others, and create some positive memories, are probably what are needed most. Small can be very beautiful this year and we can create 'a Christmas like no other.'

All these ideas have been shared by churches and individuals based on their particular contexts. In every case taking up these ideas needs careful planning and delivery, thinking about physical distancing, good hygiene (such as regular opportunities for hand-sanitising) and wearing face coverings if inside, plus any additional guidelines operating in your area.



the tree of memories

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

We'll be standing outside the shops and church on several occasions with Christmas baubles that people can write the name of a loved one on. Those baubles will then be placed on the Tree of Memories in church and referred to at the services and seen in the online footage. The names will be read out at midnight mass - which we will stream online - and referred to at the other Christmas Services. There will also be an opportunity leading up to Christmas to come to the drop in, with simple prayer stations available for two hours each evening, and light a candle (all in socially distanced, safe ways). We'll give out chocolate at the same time and just bless people with goodwill and Christmas cheer.





festive porches

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, we created displays in the porch of our village church in order to celebrate festivals throughout the year with the community, even when people weren't allowed into the buildings.



advent storytime

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: £

The Church Junior school are planning on videoing the children reading a chapter each day from "The Cat's Advent Calendar", a book produced by the Iona Community (available for £2.65). These will then be uploaded to our church Facebook page.

Link: <https://www.ionabooks.com/product/the-cats-advent-calendar-pl10069/>



Christmas drop-in

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

We are going to open the Church each evening the week before Christmas (2hrs max) and fill the Church with candle light and soft instrumental worship music (iPad and speaker). We will create some simple prayer stations to help people pray, reflect and enjoy the sacred space. This will be all socially distanced, and a drop in rather than service so that we can manage numbers.





nativity procession

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: ££

This Christmas, we are planning to dramatise the Christmas story outdoors around our village, including a procession and sketches from socially-distanced members of the church, the Nativity on a trailer, and even wise men on motorbikes! We'll also be singing one-verse carols as a part of the event.



knitted sheep trail

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

We decided against doing our usual Poseda this year, so instead we have encouraged our congregation to knit sheep for a window trail around the village, ending up with around 100.



Advent angel trail

The Diocese of Bristol

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

Inspired by summer "Scarecrow Trails", the Diocese of Bristol has suggested holding "Angel Trails" throughout Advent in local communities. Here, members of the community are encouraged to create and decorate 3D Angels to be displayed in front gardens or windows. A map could be created directing people around the participating households, and entrants could donate money for a specified charity in order to enter - with a prize for the winning entry.

Link: <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1604595334.pdf>





doorstep singalong

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

We're encouraging everybody in the village to sing "Away in a Manger" one night in December, on their doorstep.



Advent window trail

Centre for Christianity and Culture Team

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

Invite 24 members of your church community to host a different decoration in their front window, with one "revealed" each morning of Advent. These can then be discovered by local children and members of the community every day, though you may decide to provide a map to help people out on their hunt! You may want to make the churchyard or porch the final stop on Christmas morning for a special display.



Christmas crib adventure

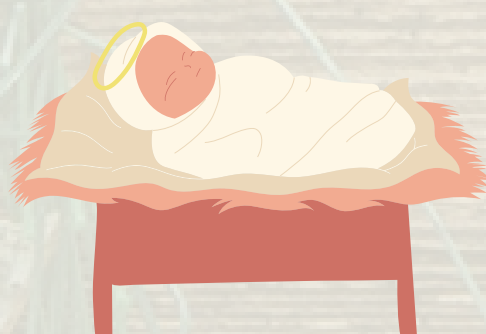
The Diocese of Bristol


On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: ££

Many churches engage with children and families through their Crib services each Christmas, and while this may not be possible as usual this year, the Diocese of Bristol have come up with a way of creating a Crib experience around your community. They suggest: "The Christmas Crib adventure begins at church on a particular day and time (e.g. 3-5pm on Saturday 19 December). Families are given a map explaining the adventure they are embarking on. The map also provides directions to the places, gardens, windows etc. that retell the Nativity, finishing back up at the church. To make the experience more interactive, church members can welcome families at each part of the story and give treats like individually wrapped chocolates (e.g. Celebrations). How about giving families as they return to church an activity pack to do at home?"

Link: <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1604595334.pdf>





candles of hope and light


The Diocese of Bristol

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: ££

At the end of a difficult year, the Diocese of Bristol are encouraging churches to offer "Candles of Hope and Light" to people in their community. They suggest the following: "Purchase a large quantity of candles/tealights and print a message small enough that can be attached to the candle/tealight with string or an elastic band. Place them around your neighbourhood for people to pick up and take home. Remember to wash hands before assembling the candles and wearing gloves when placing them around your village or town. Think about how you can get all ages of your congregation involved in preparing and distributing the candles. Also use this as an opportunity to invite people to join in with the Christmas services (online or otherwise) but make sure you include a message about light and hope."

Link: <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1604595334.pdf>



outdoor Christmas prayer space

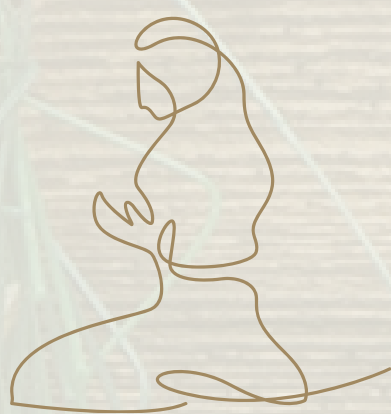
The Diocese of Bristol

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: ££

The churchyard can be a great space in which to engage with your local community and could be especially valuable this year. The Diocese of Bristol have suggested a way that we can use churchyard spaces to invite the wider community into prayer during the Christmas season: "Set up a gazebo or sheltered space in your churchyard - make the area look festive with lights, decorations etc., play Christmas music/carols, and have a nativity scene set up to encourage people from the community to make the journey there. If you support a local foodbank encourage people to bring donations along - you need to be careful that any items collected can be kept safe and dry and are not left out for too long. When people arrive, inspire them to spend some time reflecting on the reason for the season. Create a reflective space with simple creative prayers (check out the creative prayer ideas in this resource) and have some battery operated tealights available for people to light as they leave, encouraging them to say a prayer to Jesus, Light of the World."

Link: <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1604595334.pdf>





walkabout nativity

Faith in Kids

On/Offline: Either

Affordability: ££

Described by Faith in Kids as an "immersive walking tour through scenes of the nativity", with church members playing nativity characters across different "zones" that can be walked around by visitors. This approach offers the opportunity for children and families to "experience the nativity characters as flesh and blood from the authentic Gospel accounts (rather than caricatures in school nativity plays)". For 2020, this could be carried out in a very carefully managed distanced way - for example in different gazebos in the churchyard - or alternatively as a pre-recorded video. Faith in Kids have provided a full guide and script for five different zones, including ideas for participant response and engagement, as well as a risk assessment.

Link: https://faithinkids.org/download-resource/173_God-with-us.zip



prayer stations for user groups

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: ££

We have a nursery that uses the church hall and has to have the church open for access to it, so there's a big crowd of people who course through the church three times a day, parents, nannies, babies, toddlers and we've been really engaging them over this period. The whole church is full of prayer stations of different kinds, some that are really geared to little people, some that are geared to grownups. We've got a couple of prayer stations especially for them and we assembled a Christmas tree early in the beginning of November, as a symbol of light in the darkness and hope for those going through.



Christmas tree prayer chains


Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

By our tree we've got a prayer chain so you can write a little prayer or draw something on it and add your link to the chain. Hopefully the chain will be long enough that it's going to go all the way up to the top of the Christmas tree, and lots of the local kids and families have been engaging with that as they pass through to the nursery in the church hall.






nativity trail around local shops

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: ££

We can't have our normal children's crib service on Christmas Eve with everybody crowded in, so we're doing a Christmas trail around our suburb with the help of our local shops instead. We will be putting the Nativity figures, 3-D models of Mary and Joseph and the angels and so on, into five different shop windows. The idea is that families will get a map and go and visit each shop window in turn, and there will also be a QR code in each window that you can scan on your phone which will take you to a little video telling a part of the Christmas story. We're getting our local children to record parts of the story and sing carols. The final window will take them to the church, and they'll be able to go inside and see our large wooden stable and all the Nativity figures gathered around the crib. The church will be decorated as normal with a big Christmas tree and Christmas decorations. It'll run from the Monday before Christmas to Christmas Eve, and they can do the trail at any time, however the church will be opened from 10am till 2pm each day for people to visit the final Nativity scene. We will make sure there are people in the church to welcome visitors, make sure the numbers are controlled, and make sure hand sanitizers are accessible.



nativity treasure hunt

The Diocese of Peterborough

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: £

This document from the Diocese of Peterborough provides all the necessary information, guidance, and resources for running a Nativity Treasure Hunt around your community, encouraging "households to visit scenes taken from the Nativity story that are displayed in windows, front gardens, the school yard, businesses, the library or shop windows in their village, market town or local area."

Link: <https://www.peterborough-diocese.org.uk/downloads/nativity-trail.pdf>





staggered Christmas fair

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

We normally have a big Christmas fair which is really popular with local crafts people as well as church members who run businesses selling little trinkets as Christmas presents. As we can't do that this year, we are instead doing a Christmas fair over a week in our church cafe, with a different person setting up a stall each day. Hopefully this way we can still have some form of Christmas Fair, without having too many people at once.



tips for evangelism at Christmas


The Diocese of Rochester

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

Not a creative idea in itself, but a useful resource for anyone. The Evangelism works team of the Diocese of Rochester's "Called Together" vision has collated "10 simple – and hassle free - ideas for approaching evangelism over Christmas", to help churches to manage evangelism over what could be a tough period.

Link: <https://www.rochester.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1605473916.pdf>



want more?

This file gives just a glimpse into the huge range of creative ideas that are emerging across the church this year as we approach Christmas. If you are looking for more, we will be providing three more PDFs - with ideas for families, Christmas services, and discipleship - while the Church Support Hub also has a growing collection of ideas for Christmas 2020 (<https://churchsupporthub.org/baptisms/occasions-for-follow-up/christmas-2020/>). As seen here, many dioceses have also curated some brilliant ideas and resources on their own websites - we'd encourage you to look outside of your own diocese and see what's happening around the country!

