

Creative Discipleship Ideas For 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.



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.





24-hour Advent prayer

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

In the 24 hours prior to our Pentecost Sunday service, we opened a Zoom meeting that people could join at any time for prayer as a community. A designated member of the congregation would volunteer for each hour, but others could join whatever time of the day they liked, for however long they wanted. This culminated in the Pentecost service, and we're going to do it again in the lead up to our Advent Sunday services. If some in the congregation don't have access to the internet, you can still arrange a dedicated day and a schedule for people to pray in their own homes over a 24-hour period to share in this communal prayer time.



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>





Advent photo challenge

The Diocese of Bristol

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

This idea from the Diocese of Bristol is great in particular for churches looking to utilise their online communities over Advent. Each day, invite members of your community to take a photo and share it on the page - you may want to suggest a Bible verse or key word (such as 'Light', 'Patience', 'Journey', or 'Trust') to inspire their images, or perhaps just leave it to their creativity. These will keep people engaged with the community beyond the Sunday services, and you could create a montage for your Christmas service(s).

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



Christmas carol countdown

The Diocese of Bristol

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

If you have a church Facebook page or email mailing list, send out a video of a different carol each day with some reflections about the Advent season. Encourage your parishioners to listen (and perhaps sing along with) the carol as a prompt for their prayers each day. For those who don't have access to the internet you could copy the tracks onto a CD and post it to them prior to Advent, along with the reflections in a booklet. The Diocese of Bristol also suggests that this could be a starting point for sharing their own thoughts and prayers that have emerged from the songs, as well as their favourite lyrics.

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



daily hope freephone line

The Church of England

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

As a part of their Comfort and Joy resources, the Church of England will be providing reflections, services, and music every day through their free Daily Hope phone line. This could be a particularly valuable resources for those who struggle with digital or written communications, or for church leaders who feel drained but still want to offer something to their congregations.

Link: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/preparing-advent-christmas-2020-comfort-and-joy>





Advent reflection booklet

Survey Respondent

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

I'm writing up a booklet at the moment using the Advent themes across the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas Day, and I'm using arts and poetry as the wraparound for that. The booklet is a reflection on each of the Advent themes - Patriarchs, Prophets, John the Baptist, the Blessed Virgin Mary - but also the sub themes of Faith, Hope, Joy, and Love. Each week there's going to be some sort of "perhaps you might like to try doing..." activity - for instance, on the first Sunday because we're looking at Patriarchs and those who laid the foundations of our faith, people might like to reflect on their own faith journey and do a timeline, which is something that we did in the run up to discernment for ordination. So you get a piece of leftover wallpaper or something, do a long timeline, and reflect on your faith, how your faith has come and gone or developed during your lifetime. It's just interesting to look back and then mark in the people who have influenced you and guided you. I am hoping to distribute the booklet both online and physically if people would rather have it as a document.



Advent Jesse tree


The Diocese of York

On/Offline: Both

Affordability: £

Jesse Trees are a Christmas tradition dating back to the Medieval times, and The Diocese of York have created a set of resources that are enabling churches, schools, and households to carry on the activity in 2020. While they were originally often stained glass windows or carvings, they are now more often used as a form of advent calendar tracing the story of the Bible from Creation to the Birth of Christ. You can here order sticker sets and download resources for each day, which will also be available online at <https://advent-calendar.online/york>.

Link: <https://dioceseofyork.org.uk/schools-and-youth/children-young-people-churches/advent-and-christmas-in-a-pandemic/advent-jesse-tree-for-homes/>



at home Advent reflections

The Diocese of Rochester

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

Canon Gordon Giles has recorded free video reflections for each week during Advent, each taken from his book "At Home in Advent". Each video consists of reflections, prayers, and questions to consider around 4 themes of the Advent season.

Link: <https://www.rochester.anglican.org/resources/seasonal/advent-and-christmas/#Advent%20at%20Home>



Advent online calendar

Advent Online

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

Built from a Facebook group ('Church, Christmas, and Covid') that has been collecting ideas and resources from churches around the world, this Advent Online will be providing "an offering of music, visual, written, and scriptural content that will cover the themes of hope, peace, love, and joy; but equally not shying away from the themes of lament and waiting" each day of Advent. These can be shared with congregations or used as personal points of reflection.

Link: <https://adventonline.faith/>



faith at home in Advent

The Diocese of St Alban's

On/Offline: Offline

Affordability: Free

The Diocese of St Albans have created a free printable resource for families to journey through Advent together, incorporating readings, reflections, discussions, and activities for every day through the month.

Link: <https://www.stalbans.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/faith-at-home-for-advent-2020.pdf>



living Advent calendar

The Diocese of St Alban's

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

This is a different form of Advent calendar from the Diocese of St Alban's! They've suggested that churches could film a series of videos, each day visiting a different person in the parish opening up their doors and giving either a short section of the nativity story or holding up a word/theme (Hope, Joy etc) and saying what it means for them. This could be incorporated into a form of narrative with a central character on a mission to find out more about Christmas, or could be more simply an introduction to the story and the congregation.

Link: <https://www.stalbans.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Advent-Service-1-1.pdf>





Advent reflections

The Diocese of Norwich

On/Offline: Either

Affordability: Free

The Revd Canon Susanna Gunner has created a series of Sunday reflections throughout Advent, as "a painting, a short reflection and a prayer are offered to make connections between aspects of our waiting in Advent and the global pandemic which, this year, is inescapably our context for that anticipation". They are all downloadable for free, and can be easily printed off for those who don't have access to a computer.

Link: <https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/resource/advent-reflections/>



digital Advent calendar

The Diocese of Norwich

On/Offline: Online

Affordability: Free

With contributions from 26 different individuals from across the Diocese of Norwich (including a teacher, prison chaplain, and even a real shepherd), this project is "a way to reflect and engage with Advent differently through a selection of images, music, and more". These promise to "by turns challenge, inspire, console and nourish", with each door leaving us with "something rich to turn over prayerfully throughout the day in question".

Link: <https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/news/subscribe-to-our-new-digital-advent-calendar/>



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 community engagement, 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!

