

New Ways of Doing the Christmas Pageant

By Debbie Kolacki of

PRC

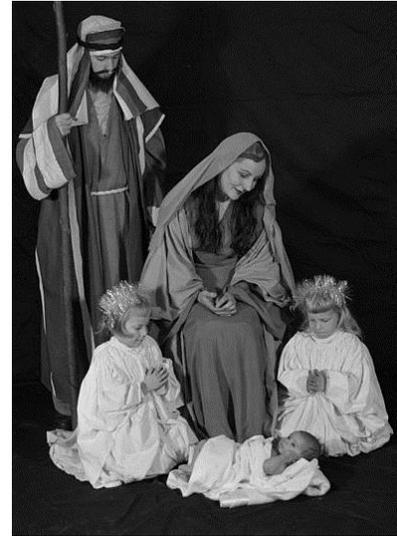
Practical Resources for Churches

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History of the Christmas Pageant

The Christmas pageant has been around for a long time in various forms. Some credit St. Francis of Assisi with the first Christmas pageant (or Nativity play) when he celebrated Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve 1223 in front of a full-size manger scene with live animals. Others date the first Christmas pageants back to the medieval mystery plays, where the story of Jesus' birth was included in dramas about the life of Jesus.



Christmas pageants are found all over the world, but it's not clear when children became involved in them. In England, it's a tradition for children to put on Christmas pageants in their schools, although now these plays are becoming more secular since there is more religious diversity among the students.

However it came about, we now find the Christmas pageant in most Sunday schools, with the children and youth of the church acting out the story of the birth of Jesus from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The pageant is often presented in a worship service, either on the last Sunday of Advent or on Christmas Eve, and usually includes traditional Christmas carols or original music.

[An article on the Religion & Ethics page](#) of the PBS.org website includes statements of those involved in the Christmas pageant of the First United Methodist Church of Pasadena who said that "embodying the characters helps... 'burn the story' into the children's brains" and "Remarkably enough it comes together... there are times when it's been a greater miracle than others, but it's always a miracle ... that somehow, wow, they told the story again."

The Broadway-Style Pageant

There are some churches which put on a big, Broadway-style production each year. In the same article from the PBS.org website that was quoted above, it's noted that the Evangel Cathedral in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, does their pageant up big.

The church calls this a Broadway-style production that includes the modern day, the Victorian era, and biblical times. There are live animals such as sheep, donkeys, alpacas, and yes—camels in the sanctuary, too. This year's twentieth annual pageant has a cast of over 200, including some of the biggest names in Gospel music like gold record artist Marvin Sapp and Grammy-award-winning superstars Yolanda Adams and Donnie McClurkin.

The congregation members see their Christmas pageant as an “opportunity to reach out to the community and share their faith, and that’s why these artists wanted to be part of the project.”

If you want to know more about large scale pageants, there’s an article on the Building Faith website titled [“In Defense of the ‘Big’ Christmas Pageant”](#) which talks about the experience of a church which has “been doing a full-scale pageant for years, including dozens of actors and lots of preparation.”

Although most churches don’t offer a Broadway-style production, many of them are still trying to put on the same sort of pageant that was done in the past when there were more children in Sunday school, more time for rehearsals, and more resources. Pageants that require a lot of rehearsal time put pressure on busy families and make those unable to be there for the actual pageant feel left out. They can also take away from teaching time, although this can be remedied by making an effort to turn rehearsals into teaching experiences. One way to do this is to ask wondering questions while rehearsing scenes, such as “How do you think Mary and Joseph felt when they were told there was no room for them in the inn?”

Other negatives of a large pageant which requires a lot of rehearsal time is that there may be competition for the bigger parts which leads to bad feelings among children. There’s also the problem of last minute no-shows. It’s not unusual for pageant directors to find themselves rehearsing with one set of children only to find a different set of children who show up for the actual pageant.

Simplifying the Christmas Pageant

There are steps you can take to simplify your Christmas pageant so it’s more enjoyable for yourself as well as the children and congregation.

- Have a simple script. You can take the words directly out of the Bible. The passages from Matthew and Luke are beautiful and meaningful to adults and it’s wonderful for children to hear the actual passages from scripture.
- Use short lines and don’t make the children memorize their lines. This can take a lot of the stress out of rehearsals and the performance. Children can read off of index cards or hold a black folder with their script.
- Consider having no speaking parts and have participants act out the scenes read by narrators.

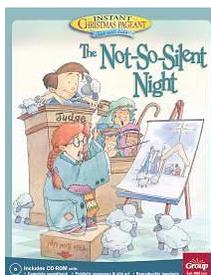
- Stick with familiar carols and have the congregation sing along. That way if the children don't know all the words of the songs it won't be noticeable and your audience will probably enjoy being a part of the pageant.
- Keep the costumes and props simple. Pinterest has lots of ideas for simple and no-sew costumes such as a shepherd's costume made from a striped towel and angel wings made from paper plates or coffee filters. For animal costumes, children can dress in solid colors like brown and grey. You can use a hat or headband to attach ears, noses, and whiskers. Don't forget the old favorite – bathrobes. You can also use fabric or old sheets with a hole cut out for the head. You don't need to sew up the sides if you use a piece of rope tied around the waist. You can also purchase costumes ready-made: [Oriental Trading](#) sells them for a reasonable price.
- Another way to simplify your pageant rehearsals is to have a walk through with adults before you rehearse with the children. This way you can plan ahead of time things like cues, where the children will stand, etc.
- By simplifying your Christmas pageant, you may be able to get away with just one rehearsal, which might even be held right before the actual pageant or even have a pageant without any rehearsals at all.

Simple Pageants

There are a number of books of Christmas pageants which are advertised as being instant, simple, or only requiring one rehearsal, yet many people find these names somewhat misleading and that the plays actually require more than one rehearsal. So if you're going with one of these so-called simple pageants take a good look and make sure it really is something that you can put on easily.



One book with an enticing name is [One Rehearsal Christmas Plays](#) which has 10 plays to choose from including one called "Footprints to the Manger" and another which is a version of "T'was the Night Before Christmas."



Group Publishing put out a series of what they called "Instant Christmas Pageants." They're out of print now and the only one that seems to be available at a reasonable price (on Amazon) is [The Not-So-Silent Night](#). The book includes a CD which provides all voices, music, and sound effects so that the children can simply pantomime their parts. There are also publicity helps and simple costume patterns.

Instant Pageants

Instant pageants can actually be done with no rehearsals and may involve the whole congregation. They can also be a lot of fun. One type of instant pageant is the brown bag or paper bag pageant where each person in worship is given a paper bag which contains a costume for one of the parts in the pageant. No one knows what's in their bag. After a signal is given, everyone opens their bags and puts their costumes on, which are usually quite simple. A narrator reads the script and instructs characters when they are to come up to the front of the church. When the [paper bag pageant](#) was done at the First Congregational Church in Poughkeepsie, NY, "Joseph ended up being a grandmother from Kenya who knows practically no English, the Christ Child was a female librarian, and the Pastor ended up being the Angel Gabriel." The pastor stated that the message of the pageant was that we are all part of God's story.

The Building Faith website offers an [On-The-Spot Christmas Pageant](#) where volunteer participants, either children or children and adults, act out the movements of the Christmas story as it's read. Simple costumes and props are available. The script for the pageant includes readings from the Gospel of Luke interspersed with Christmas carols.

A variation of this pageant is seen in the [No Stress, No Fuss Christmas Pageant](#) where, each time a narrator reading the Christmas story mentions a new part, children and adults are invited to come forward to assume the character they want to be. Those involved in the pageant have said:

This means that in our program we might have only a few or many animals, angels, and shepherds, or several Marys and Josephs. It really doesn't matter. Volunteer helpers secure to each child's head the tie-on mask of his or her choice, or give them the other appropriate props. They also guide the children to the places they are to stand or sit.

Another [Instant Christmas Pageant](#) divides the congregation into various parts. For instance all the choir members are "the City" and, when prompted, they stand and make Bible city sounds like yelling, donkey sounds, and trumpets. As the narrator reads a script, there is a pause when each part is mentioned so that those with that part can stand and do a hand motion or say a certain word or phrase.



Traditional or Nontraditional

It's important to know your congregation when planning your Christmas pageant. Some of the instant ones I just mentioned might be perceived by some people as irreverent. I've heard of Christmas pageant directors who decided to go with a contemporary, humorous theme instead of the usual traditional one and many members of the congregation didn't get it. So if your church has always had a traditional pageant, carefully consider before deciding to try something different. You might want to start with a pageant which has a contemporary story but then concludes with the retelling of the traditional story of Jesus' birth.

The traditional Christmas pageant, which sticks to the Christmas story as told in the Bible, has a lot going for it. The story is dramatic and, with Christmas becoming more secular and materialistic each year, it's a wonderful opportunity to remind the children what Christmas is all about. The traditional story also resonates with older people who may have memories of their own childhood when they participated in a traditional Christmas pageant. There are plenty of scripts for traditional pageants and many of them are free to download online. You can also use the readings from the gospels just as they are, but try to use a translation which is easy to understand yet still retains some of the familiar wording.

For instance, the New Revised Standard Version of Luke 2:7 states:

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

In the International Children's Bible the same passage reads:

"She gave birth to her first son. There were no rooms left in the inn. So she wrapped the baby with cloths and laid him in a box where animals are fed."

Nontraditional Christmas pageants may focus on the traditional story but tell it from a particular character's perspective such as a shepherd boy, animal, or even the Christmas star. A nontraditional pageant may also be set in modern times and retell the Christmas story using modern characters that relate to those in the traditional story, such as one that has [Mary and Joseph arriving at the Holyday Inn](#) and finding the only room left is the janitors' closet.

A nontraditional pageant might also focus on a group of children putting on a traditional Christmas pageant, such as one based on the children's book [The Best Christmas Pageant Ever](#). It tells the story of the ill-behaved Herdman kids who have parts in a church's Christmas pageant. Everyone expects the pageant to be a disaster, but the

performance ends up giving those who watch it a new understanding of the Christmas story.

If you've been doing a traditional Christmas pageant for a long time and find that it's getting stale, then you might want to try a nontraditional Christmas pageant for a change.

Pageants Based on Children's Christmas Books

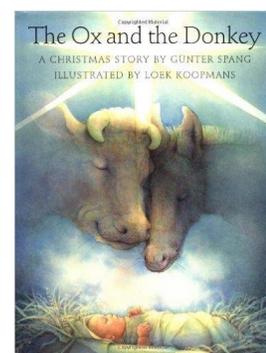
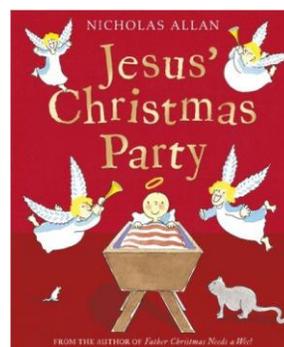
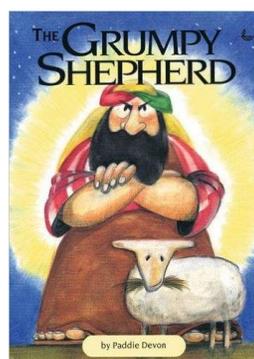
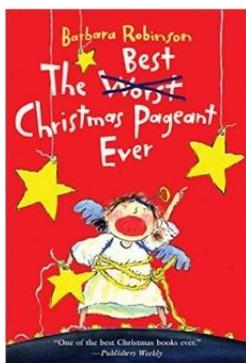
If you're looking for a nontraditional Christmas pageant script, there are some based on popular children's Christmas books or you can write your own script based on any children's Christmas book.

I've already mentioned that there are [scripts based on *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*](#).

Pageant [scripts](#) have also been written based on the book [The Grumpy Shepherd](#) which tells the story of Joram the shepherd. He's grumpy and disagreeable until the night the archangel Gabriel appears to tell the shepherds to go into town to find a special baby lying in a manger.

[Pageants](#) have also been based on [Jesus' Christmas Party](#) which retells the nativity story "through the eyes of the cross innkeeper whose sleep is disturbed by unexpected visitors, a shining light and loud singing in the sky..."

[The Ox and the Donkey](#) also can be used as the basis of a Christmas pageant. It tells the story of an ox and donkey who lived together in a stable in the town of Bethlehem. The ox bullies the donkey but after a child is born in their stable, the ox is transformed into a kind and generous animal. Children's author Lucy Davey has used this book as a Christmas pageant with young children by narrating most of the story from the book while the children mime the actions. She has put together a [list of songs](#) to be used and when to sing them in the text of the book.



Pageants from the Animals' Perspective

Children have a special affinity for animals and there are many pageants which tell the story of Jesus' birth from the perspective of the animals. Often children relate more easily to animals' emotions in a play than they relate to the emotions of adult characters.

Besides *The Ox and the Donkey*, there are animal scripts available at no cost online such as ["Animal Nativity"](#) and ["Animal Nativity – Born in the Stable."](#) The church-skits.com website offers a free script for nonprofit use called ["Animals at the Christmas Scene."](#) You can find other free scripts from the animals' perspective online; most of them are humorous and provide an opportunity to dress the kids up in adorable animal costumes.

How About an Epiphany Play?

If Christmas time is just too hectic for your families or many of them are away when you hold your Christmas pageant, you might want to consider instead having an Epiphany pageant. Rehearsals might be easier to schedule after Christmas when most schools have a winter break.

Although many traditional Christmas pageants include the visit of the magi to the stable at Bethlehem, most historians believe this event happened months or even years after Jesus' birth. In the church the visit of the magi is celebrated on January 6th and most churches celebrate it on the Sunday before or after January 6th.

There are not as many Epiphany pageants available as Christmas pageants but you can find free ones online, such as [one which is from the perspective of the camels](#) the wise men rode on. You can also write your own script based on Matthew 2:1-12 or just read the scripture and have the children act it out.

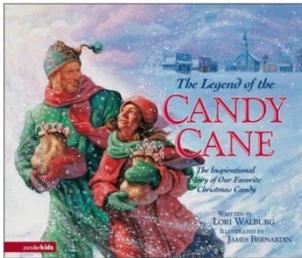
You can also download an Epiphany pageant script from Skiturgies for \$5.95 called ["How the Magi Truly Became Wise"](#) which has the typical cast for an annual Christmas pageant, including a tableau with the Holy Family. It tells the story of the birth of Christ from the vantage point of the Magi.

Epiphany is also called Three Kings Day and is celebrated in Spain and Latin America with many wonderful traditions which can be celebrated after your Epiphany pageant, such as serving the traditional kings' cake or providing an opportunity for children to have their picture taken with the Three Kings. [The Huffington Post](#) and [Ministry with Children](#) websites have information and activities related to Three Kings Day.

Children's Christmas Programs

You might want to have a children's program instead of, or in addition to, a Christmas pageant. This is more like a party with food and activities such as crafts, music, games, etc. Perhaps your youth might want to be part of the planning for the program and lead the activities.

One fun idea is to have a birthday party for Jesus. You can find lots of resources for this online. The website Christian Tools of Affirmation has a number of [free downloadable resources](#) on this topic including an event timeline, coloring pages, sheet music, placemats, and a banner. You can also purchase a related activity book and other related items from them. They also have a number of other resources for free or for purchase based on [other themes](#) on the website.



You can also create your own program. One way to do this is to pick a Christmas children's book as the focus, such as [The Legend of the Candy Cane](#). You can read the book to the children and then have activities related to the book. Just do a general search on Google for ["Legend of the Candy Cane activities"](#) or check out [Pinterest](#).

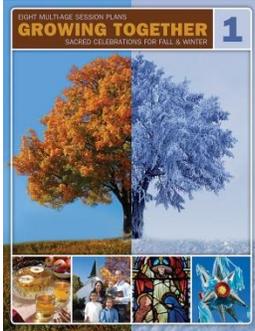
Intergenerational/Family Programs

Rather than having a program just for your children, consider a family program or intergenerational program. Again, there are plenty of free downloads of these online.

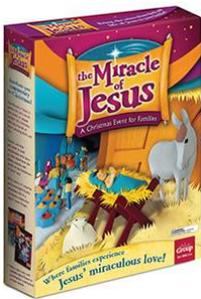
The Lifelong Faith website offers [two free Advent intergenerational programs](#) to download. One is called "The Messiah Is Coming" and the other is titled "Our Faith Calls Us to Serve." There are activity ideas, handouts, and home activities.

One church offers a [Christmas Family Experience](#) with a different theme each year. One year the theme was Whoville with Cindy Lou and the Grinch making an appearance. Families eat together, watch a show, and then visit interactive booths which include face painting, creating Christmas cards together, a family photo, and a nativity scene. Church families are encouraged to invite unchurched neighbors and friends. The [script and other resources](#) are available online.

You can also create your own program from a theme of your choosing. Perhaps the congregation can work together to make Chrismons, ornaments using ancient symbols for Christ, made from white and gold material. The theme can also be service or mission oriented.



You can also purchase intergenerational and family Christmas programs. Church Publishing offers a downloadable resource called [Growing Together Volume 1: Sacred Celebrations for Fall & Winter](#) for \$16.95. There are eight intergenerational celebrations including ones on Los Posadas, Christmas, and Epiphany. Included for each celebration are background material, key ideas, a checklist, and session plans with activities and descriptions.



Group Publishing sells two event kits for families with Christmas themes. One is called [The Miracle of Jesus](#). According to the publicity “Families will see, hear, taste, touch, and smell the Bible-times town of Bethlehem. Through hands-on activities, games, stories, and more, they’ll experience firsthand the amazing impact of the miracles of Jesus’ birth – and life.”



The second event kit is [Twas the Light Before Christmas](#). Group states that it is a fun, instant Christmas play and that in one night, kids and their families will “create props, rehearse, and present a full-fledged Christmas production with a captivating script and original music.”

Both kits sell for \$59.99.

Las Posadas

A fun intergenerational program could be based on Las Posadas, which is a traditional Mexican drama at Christmas time where children and adults go from house to house and sing about Mary and Joseph looking for shelter. Two children are dressed up as Mary and Joseph. They are refused at every house until they finally reach a destination called the posada (inn) where they are welcomed and allowed in. There is then a celebration party with food and a piñata. Las Posadas teaches us that when we welcome the poor and needy, we are welcoming Jesus. The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina offers a downloadable booklet called [“How to Celebrate a Mexican Posada: A Packet for Lay Leaders, Musicians, and Clergy”](#) which has tips on adapting the posada to a church setting. [Another booklet online](#) has extensive directions for putting together a posada with suggestions for food at the fiesta as well as sheet music of traditional songs.

Additional Resources for Christmas pageants

Costume Ideas

[Christianity Cove](#)

Free Pageant Scripts

[Children's Ministry Deals](#)

[KidsFriendly](#)

[Ministry to Children](#)

[re:Worship](#)

General Resources

[Building Faith](#) - This excellent website includes articles about pageants, tips, and pageant scripts.

Paper Bag Pageant

[Article: "Christmas Pageant Comes in a Bag"](#)

Simple Christmas Pageants

[Simple Family Wellness](#) - This website includes an article with tips about having a simple Christmas pageant as well as a script and a sign-up sheet.

[The No-Rehearsal Christmas Pageant](#)

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