

Focusing on the True Meaning of Christmas with Children

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Introduction

The topic of this booklet is such an important one for those involved in children's ministry. As we all know, the celebration of the birth of Jesus has been hijacked and for many it has become instead a celebration of materialism and consumerism. As followers of Jesus, we can give our children and their families ways to look beyond all the glitter and greed and see what Christmas is really about.

Why was this baby born?

The Advent and Christmas seasons are busy times in our churches and Sunday schools. We may be having special activities or pageant rehearsals during the time we hold Sunday school and sometimes we get so caught up in making crafts, learning songs, and making sure we have costumes for everyone in the pageant that we forget to talk with our children about why Christmas is important and why the birth of this one baby was so amazing.

In order to help children understand why Jesus was born, we have to know ourselves and I think the answers we come up with may vary a bit, depending on our theological outlooks.

Some of the reasons Christians believe Jesus was born include the idea that his birth fulfilled God's promise for a Messiah, a Savior. Different people may see this different ways. Some believe it relates to substitutionary atonement theory, that Jesus had to be born so that he could die for our sins. If this is the belief in your church, you will have to adjust how you communicate this depending on the ages of your children. Others believe that Jesus came to save us by showing us how we should live and how we need to make loving God and our neighbor a priority.

You might want to introduce the concept of "incarnation" to your children, which means that God the Son, the second person of the trinity, took on a human body. Again, how you present this will depend on the ages of your children. The word Immanuel, which is sometimes used to refer to Jesus, literally means "God is with us" and isn't that a wonderful idea to share with your children? God loves us so much that he was willing to become one of us, to share in all the joys and sorrows that are part of human life.

You can also emphasize that Jesus was born in humble surroundings and his first visitors were shepherds, a marginalized group at that time. Jesus came for everyone, rich or poor, small or big.

One way to talk to the children about Jesus' birth is by asking questions, as the Godly Play curriculum does, beginning with the words "I wonder..." So you might say, "I

wonder what it would be like to be born in a stable...” or “I wonder why the angels sang when Jesus was born...”

As you plan activities with your children during Advent and Christmas, ask yourself exactly what the children are learning from each one to make sure they are learning the true meaning of Christmas.

Advent comes first

Advent is about waiting and we can share with our children how celebrating Advent enhances and enriches the Christmas season. We live in a time of, to use a well-worn phrase, instant gratification. Yet, as we all know, there are times in life when we won't be able to get what we want right away or perhaps not at all. Teaching children about Advent can help them learn how to be patient.



There are a lot of traditional Advent practices that can help children count down the days or weeks until Christmas. Advent calendars can be purchased or made. These are sometimes sold with little treats or presents for each day, but if you have the children make their own, they can list something meaningful to do each day such as helping in the house, looking up and reading a scripture verse, or singing a Christmas carol.

[Advent chains](#) can be made out of construction paper and you can write on each link something for the children to do each day. You can do something similar with a decorated jar or other container that contains pieces of paper with activities.

A [Jesse tree](#) shows the ancestors of Jesus. It can be made of a branch with ornaments to hang for each day of Advent.

The [Money Saving Mom website](#) offers a number of free printable Advent activities for children.



Another great way to help children see that it's getting closer to Christmas is by using an Advent wreath. If your church lights an Advent wreath for worship services when the children are there, then they're already be familiar with the concept. If you have a separate opening service in Sunday school, then be sure to include an Advent candle lighting ceremony each week in Advent.

It's also a great idea to have the children make an Advent wreath to bring home. You can include [simple family liturgies](#) for each Sunday in Advent. Some families like to place their Advent wreath in the center of the dining room table and light the appropriate candle(s) every night.

Depending on your preferences and budget, there are plenty of options for Advent wreath making. You can make an artificial evergreen wreath using a special wire base or base made of other material and adding greenery, or you can buy a [ready-made wreath](#) with the greenery already on it. You can use either real candles or flameless ones. You can make advent wreaths out of paper or a material such as felt. I did a search on Pinterest for "[advent wreath crafts for kids](#)" and found all kinds of possibilities.

Partner with families

One of the best things you can do to help children see the true meaning of Christmas is to partner with their families and provide them with tools to help them focus on the spiritual aspect of the holiday. If you've made Advent calendars or Advent wreaths in Sunday school with instructions on how to use them at home, then you've already started this process.



There are also inexpensive devotional booklets and resources that you can send home for families to use. Channing Bete has numerous resources available for purchase on their [Faith Guides website](#). [Creative Communications for the Parish](#) is another company which sells Advent devotionals and resources for both children and adults. [Christian Tools of Affirmation](#) sells seasonal resources for children and families, as well as gifts to show appreciation to ministry volunteers.

A special intergenerational event before Advent can also provide resources for everyone in your church to have a more Christ-centered Advent and Christmas. There are books with suggestions as well as free online resources. Lifelong Faith Associates has a page of [Intergenerational Faith Formation Programs for the Church Year](#). There are two programs for Advent with suggested activities such as prayer services, drama, music, and making Advent wreaths or a Jesse Tree. There are also handouts so you can give each family a home kit which includes such things as daily prayers for Advent, a blessing for a Christmas crèche, a spiritual reflection, and an Advent sharing list.

Loyola Press also offers a free intergenerational Advent program online called [Waiting for Jesus](#).

Jesus is the reason

A few years ago a book came out called *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*. The book, written by Mike Slaughter, urged readers to cut back and focus on the real reason for the season, Jesus. The book was so popular that it led to a series of resources for churches called [A Different Kind of Christmas](#) including studies for children and youth based on the book.

One way to keep the focus on Jesus rather than ourselves is to have a birthday party for Jesus. There are websites with suggestions on how to do this and some companies such as Oriental Trading sell Happy Birthday Jesus [party supplies](#).

Some other Advent and Christmas activities that focus on Jesus include talking with your kids about giving God a gift. Ask them: "What does God want from us?" You can make a stocking and fill it with notes written by your students that answer that question.

We need to emphasize with children that the reason we give gifts at Christmas is because of the joy we feel about having received the greatest gift of all, Jesus. Jesus wants us to love each other and that's why we give gifts to each other.

There is enough of Santa Claus in the world, so I don't think we need to focus on him in Sunday school, but if the subject comes up you can share the story of [St. Nicholas](#), the original Santa Claus, with the children.

Giving not getting

Instead of asking children what they want for Christmas, in Sunday school we should be sharing with them how joyful it is to give to others and how this is what pleases Jesus. I think children naturally enjoy giving to others and get excited about making or buying a present for someone else, wrapping it in pretty paper, and then waiting to see the recipient's expression when the gift is opened. You often hear people bemoan how children are so greedy at Christmas time but I think we adults need to admit that we are often a factor in their greediness.



Service and mission projects help children learn about giving to others. Children love animals so a project that benefits Heifer International could be considered. [Heifer International](#) is an organization that gives out gifts of livestock, seeds, and trees and has helped more than 15.5 million families in over 125 countries. Children can fundraise and then purchase various animals to give as gifts to people in developing countries. Another mission project that involves

animals would be collecting food and other supplies for a local animal rescue organization.

The Salvation Army's [Angel Tree program](#) provides Christmas gifts to disadvantaged children and seniors. A tree is set up with tags that list an angel's age, gender, clothing sizes and gift wishes so that people can take one or more tags and then shop for the angel they selected.

Samaritan's Purse has a Christmas mission project each year called [Operation Christmas Child](#). They collect shoe boxes filled with toys, school supplies, personal items, and other gifts. These boxes are then distributed to children as Christmas gifts, accompanied by Christian literature. Millions of gift boxes have been handed out in more than 130 countries.

For more mission and service ideas see the booklet "Missions and Service in Sunday School" on the [Resources page](#) of PRC's website.

Meaningful Gifts

It's a good idea to help children think about giving meaningful gifts to others. These can include homemade items or gifts of service.



Fair trade items also make meaningful gifts. Fair trade items are crafts, food, etc. made or created by artisans and farmers in developing countries who are paid a fair price for their products. An event or fair where fair trade items are sold gives children as well as adults a chance to purchase an item that benefits not only the recipient but also the person who created or grew the gift.

Two organizations that offer fair trade items are [SERRV](#) and [Equal Exchange](#).

Crafts



When I think of crafts to teach the Christmas story the first thing that comes to mind is a manger scene. This can be done with any age and can be as simple or complicated as you wish. You can make a manger scene out of all sorts of materials; here you see a manger scene made of paper with pipe cleaner figures. Helping the children create a manger scene is a great way to go over all the parts of the Christmas story and talk about each of the people that are part of the scene. Children

can also use the figures to act out the Christmas story, which is a great way for them to learn it.

A variation on the manger scene is a [Manger of Love](#), which the children bring home. The manger is made out of wood or another material; a bowl with straw stands next to the manger. Whenever the child does a good deed or says a prayer, he or she places one straw in the manger. The idea is to create a nice soft place for the baby Jesus by Christmas. You could also give the children small baby figures to place in their mangers on Christmas Day.

[Chrismons](#) are decorations or Christmas tree ornaments based on Christian symbols. They are traditionally white with gold decorations of beads, ribbon, glitter, etc. Sometimes they are other colors such as white with silver. Be sure you explain the meaning of the symbols to the children.

Making crafts that can be given as gifts emphasizes giving rather than getting. If you create gifts out of recycled material then the children are also helping the environment.

Food

As I'm sure you know, you should be aware of any food allergies your children may have before serving food or using food in an activity.

If you're doing an activity that involves food, try to select one that emphasizes the spiritual meaning of Christmas rather than the secular. Instead of a gingerbread house, you can make a [nativity scene using graham crackers](#).

You can have the children decorate prebaked Christmas cookies in star, angel, or other shapes that relate to the nativity story. As they work on their creations you can talk about the cookies and how they relate to the story of Jesus' birth.

Food items can also be made which the children can give as gifts to others. Christmas mugs can be filled with candies or other items and then wrapped in plastic. These can be given to the homebound in your congregation, nursing home residents, or another group. If you do distribute food gifts to an organization or group, be aware of any special dietary restrictions they may have.

You can share with your children the legend of the candy cane. The story goes like this: A candymaker in Indiana wanted to make a candy to teach children who Christmas is about. He started with a stick of pure white, hard candy. The white stood for the purity of Jesus and the hard candy stood for Christ the solid rock. The candy was made in the shape of a "J" to represent the name of Jesus. It also represents the staff of Jesus the Good Shepherd. The red stripes on the candy cane represent the suffering Jesus endured at the end of his life. You might want to print out copies of a [poem](#) about this

legend and attach them to candy canes to give out to your children or to the whole congregation.

Games

Many regular games can be adapted for use in Sunday school by using Advent or Christmas themes.

For instance, you can play [Advent bingo](#) by asking children questions about Advent. When the students answer, they then look for the answer written on one of the squares of their bingo card. For non-readers, Advent and Christmas symbols can be put in the squares of the bingo cards. The game is then played like regular bingo with the first child who gets three in a row on their bingo card winning.

Advent Pictionary is played like regular Pictionary except that the teams have to draw pictures of things related to the Advent season or the Christmas story.

Another game which can be adapted is Jeopardy. You can do this the old fashioned way with paper and cardboard or you can create an Advent Jeopardy game using PowerPoint software.

The game of charades, where participants have to act out something written on a piece of paper without speaking and their teammates have to guess what it is, is also readily adapted using characters from the Christmas story, the names of Christmas carols, and other Christmas symbols or objects.

Music

Your children are already familiar with the secular songs of Christmas like “Santa Claus Is Comin’ to Town” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” but many children don’t know the beautiful Christmas carols that are centered on the birth of Jesus. What a wonderful opportunity we have in Sunday school to teach our children these songs!



Often the Christmas pageant includes traditional carols and as you teach your children these songs take the time to go over the words with them and explain what they mean.

Christmas caroling is a wonderful tradition. Consider organizing a caroling event in your neighborhood or at a nursing home or other organization. Those in your congregation who are homebound might appreciate a visit from your caroling group.

After you are finished caroling, you can return to your church for some Christmas cookies and hot chocolate.

Drama



The Christmas pageant is an annual event for most Sunday schools. In the past these tended to be quite elaborate with numerous rehearsals on Saturday mornings or weekday evenings.

Some Sunday schools still like to do these types of pageants but many are moving to a [simpler type of Christmas pageant](#) which requires minimal preparation and uses a few narrators rather than having many speaking parts. There are even [instant pageants](#) available which require no preparation and may involve the entire congregation. [Brown bag Christmas pageants](#) are becoming popular where everyone in worship is given a brown paper bag which contains costumes for different characters in the pageant. After the bags are opened and the costumes are put on the pageant is narrated and the various characters pantomime to the narration. A brown bag pageant might also be something fun to do with a youth group.

These alternatives can help alleviate the stress of the many rehearsals required for the traditional Christmas pageant for busy families who may find themselves overwhelmed by the many activities of the busy holiday season.

A Christmas pageant isn't the only type of drama you can do during the Advent season. Puppet shows can be fun. You can have adults or youth put on a puppet show for children. You can even have the children be the performers for a puppet show in worship.

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