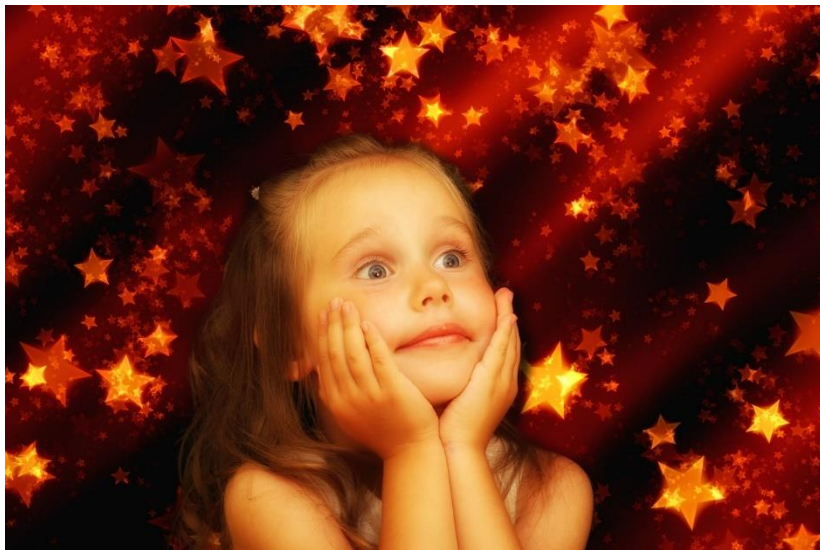


Celebrating Advent with Children in Worship



**From a webinar presented by Debbie Kolacki of
PRC – Practical Resources for Churches**

Advent is a time to welcome children in worship

There are some wonderful websites available to help in planning Advent worship with children. One of the best websites for planning worship to include children is Carolyn Brown's [Worshiping with Children](#). She includes ideas for every Sunday in the three lectionary years as well as additional information about children and worship in general. In the [topical index](#) on the website, there are suggestions for planning worship for Advent and Christmas for each of the lectionary years, along with some articles related to Advent worship with children. Brown notes that

...many children join the congregation in the sanctuary for the first time during the Advent Christmas season. Some come with families who are trying out church for the first time or are visiting church-going friends or family. Some are brought from the nurseries by their worshiping parents who think maybe they are ready to share the traditions that are so precious to their parents.

You may also find families bringing their children to your church as a way of showing them that there is more to the holiday season than shopping and parties. Thoughtful parents know that the emphasis on materialism and "getting stuff" isn't healthy but may not know how to share the deeper meaning of Advent and Christmas with their children.

Including children in worship during Advent lets them see that Advent is a time of preparation and waiting for the birth of Jesus, a message which is rapidly becoming non-existent in the secular celebration prior to Christmas.

Another reason why Advent is such a good time to have children in worship is that it's a multi-sensory time of year, from the visuals of the Advent wreath and Christmas tree to the scents of the evergreen decorations. Advent has its own special music and special foods.

Since Advent is limited to a time of around four weeks, it's a great time to experiment with doing something a little different in your worship service, such as making it more intergenerational. Those who might grumble at the introduction of something new can take solace in the idea that the changes will be gone in a few weeks. And who knows? Maybe if those folks see intergenerational worship in action, they'll actually like it!



Children love traditions

No matter what kind of worship you have in your church and how much children are involved in it, almost all churches participate in Advent traditions. And that's great because children love traditions! When my own children were young we had a family Advent wreath and we would light the candles, read some scripture, and sing each Sunday evening in Advent. My husband and I never had to worry about forgetting to do this ritual; our children wouldn't let us.

You can make Advent worship special for children by doing the things you usually do but making sure to include the children. Some churches have families with children light the Advent wreath in services, but you could also have a different Sunday school class do it each week or have a group of children of varying ages.

The Hanging of the Greens, when the sanctuary is decorated for Christmas, is a fun and meaningful service; it is wonderful for both children and adults to learn the spiritual meaning of familiar Christmas symbols. Children love to decorate so be sure to include them in this service by having them read, sing, and help to hang up wreaths, garlands, etc. There are many Hanging of the Greens services available online, such as [one from The Voice website](#). (As with any resource you find online, be sure to adapt it to fit your church's theology.)

Children can be involved in a worship service as they hang **Chrismons** on a tree. Chrismons are decorations with Christian symbols from the Bible which represent Christ; they are traditionally white and gold. You can find a description of one such service at [MartinSingley.com](#). Children and youth can also make the Chrismons for the tree in Sunday school, youth group, or at an intergenerational event early in Advent. The [Why Christmas?](#) website has information, patterns, and directions for making Chrismons.

Instead of Chrismons, children and others can make decorations for a **Jesse Tree**, which is a tree branch with decorations that represent stories and people related to Jesus' family tree. The [Reformed Church of America's website](#) has information about making Jesse Tree decorations. There is also a [Jesse Tree intergenerational event](#) which includes an Order for Worship based on the Jesse Tree.



The **pageant** is a big part of Advent worship in many churches, often presented on the 4th Sunday of Advent. With the busy schedules of families, it can be difficult to find a time for rehearsals. Some churches have the children practice during the Sunday school hour, but this can mean that children aren't getting important lessons in the classroom about Advent and Christmas.

If you'd still like to have a pageant without the hassle of rehearsals, consider an instant pageant. These can involve the whole congregation and can be a lot of fun. The brown bag or paper bag pageant is one where each person is given a paper bag with a simple costume for one of the characters in the pageant. After people put on their costumes, the pageant begins with someone reading a script and letting participants know when it's their turn to come up to the front of the church.

You might also consider an On-the-Spot Christmas Pageant such as the one described on the [Building Faith website](#). In this pageant, volunteer child or adult participants act out the Christmas story as it's read. The pageant has simple costumes and props. The script for the pageant includes readings from the Gospel of Luke along with Christmas carols.

Carolyn Brown of the [Worshiping with Children website](#) states that "Children have fewer opportunities to hear the biblical Christmas stories than they once did." She suggests displaying a large, unbreakable **crèche** in the sanctuary during Advent as a visual reminder of the story; it also offers an opportunity to tell the Christmas story in Advent. While noting that we shouldn't rush the season, she states that it's possible to tell the story in a way that ties it to Advent worship themes using the crèche figures. She offers a way to do this for the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas Eve. You can find them [here](#).



Brown also suggests that churches might want to consider using **Christmas carols** in Advent worship. She notes that schools no longer teach them to children and that we may need to include them in Advent worship in order to save our heritage of Christmas carols. Those planning worship should "choose Advent-Christmas hymns carefully and plan to do more than just sing them." She includes some [tips](#), such as explaining the words and meaning of a carol before singing it and referring to carols during the sermon.

Another post on Brown's Worshiping with Children blog refers to a [small church which had their children learn Christmas carols in Sunday school](#) and then teach one of them to the congregation each week.

Brown also suggests that congregations may want to go [off lectionary](#) because of the need to spend more time with the Christmas stories than the early Advent texts.

I understand Brown's suggestions to bring the Christmas story into Advent worship to benefit children and those who don't attend church on a regular basis, but I would hate to lose some of the themes of Advent such as darkness and the Second Coming.

Children's messages

There are plenty of options for children's messages in Advent. I've already mentioned that Carolyn Brown suggests a number of ways to use the figures in the crèche to talk to the children.

You could also use this time in the service to light the Advent candles with the children and offer a child-friendly explanation of what you and the children are doing. The website On the Chancel Steps offers a way to light the Advent candles with the children using the [traditional names of the candles](#) as well as a message using some [more unusual names](#).

You can also use a short children's Advent or Christmas storybook or an excerpt from a longer book as the basis of your message. The Worshiping with Children website has a list of [Advent stories for children](#) as well as [Christmas story books for worship](#).

[Sermons4Kids](#) offers several children's sermon ideas for each Sunday in the lectionary, including the Sundays in Advent.

Do something different

As I mentioned earlier, the four Sundays in Advent offer an opportunity to try something a little bit different in worship. If your church has Sunday school during worship, how about having an **intergenerational service** instead of Sunday school classes for one or more of the Sundays? You can use your usual service outline but make it child-friendly/multisensory or you can adapt intergenerational services such as these rather unusual ones which come from the [Presbyterian Church of New Zealand](#).

Having more than one person **read the Scriptures** for the day can make them more interesting not just for the children in your congregation, but for the adults as well. You

can alternate lines or sections between two readers or between a reader and the congregation. If the Scripture passage has different voices, then you can have different people read those as well. You can also divide the congregation into left and right and have them alternate lines with or without another speaker.

If you're not already doing so, why not use Advent to introduce **children as worship leaders**? Many older children are just as good readers as adults and children can also serve as ushers and greeters; you may want to partner up younger children with adults to serve in these areas.

Children love Santa – why not let the children and adults in your congregation know more about the person he is based on – **St. Nicholas**? December 6 is St. Nicholas Day, so you might want to explore his life on the Sunday closest to that day. [The Reformed Church of America's website](#) offers information about St. Nicholas as well as ways to celebrate his day at home and in church.

[The Worshiping with Children website](#) also offers ideas for churches to celebrate St. Nicholas Day.

It's important for children to learn that Christmas is about giving; churches can do this by inviting them to participate in a special **service project** and then celebrating the project during worship. Operation Christmas Child is a popular service project for churches but a number of churches are reconsidering their participation in this mission. If you are considering collecting for Operation Christmas Child, you might want to read these articles:

[10 Alternatives to Operation Christmas Child](#) (There are links in the article to other articles)

[7 Reasons Not to Participate in Operation Christmas Child](#)

Christmas Eve

This year (2018) the 4th Sunday of Advent falls on December 23, the day before Christmas Eve, so you may want to consider what this will mean for your congregation. Will people attend both services or only opt for one of them? Will people who will be traveling for Christmas leave before Sunday?



On the [Worshiping with Children](#) blog, there's an [article with reasons why it's important for children to get to church](#) on Christmas Eve. You might want to share it with the families in your church. These include:

- To hear the story read or told in an important way on the “night it happened”
- To go to church at night
- To be with a crowd telling the story

- To sing the carols at least one more time
- To create a context in which to discover the truth about Santa
- To create memories

What would you add?

Many churches, even small ones, have more than one service on Christmas Eve. This allows one service to be designated a children's or family service. Since people have other options for Christmas Eve worship, the family service can be one where parents can relax if their children are a bit exuberant with all the excitement of the Christmas holiday. It also offers an opportunity to make the service very family-friendly. You can find plenty of resources online by searching for "family friendly Christmas Eve service" or "intergenerational Christmas Eve service." Here are a few you might consider:

[A Family-Friendly Christmas Eve Worship](#)

[A Family Friendly Christmas Eve Service of Lessons and Carols](#)

[Children's Christmas Eve Service](#)

[The ABCs of Christmas: A Worship Service](#)

Children in an adult-centered service

If you are in a church which isn't interested in making their worship service child-friendly, there are still things you can do to help the children engage in worship.

Worship bags are being used in many churches and you can add items to these which relate to Advent. You can purchase inexpensive canvas bags from Amazon or craft stores. Besides pencils and colored pencils, you can include Advent themed coloring sheets, activity sheets, Advent and Christmas storybooks, Advent crafts, a sticker Nativity scene, etc. These items will help children to focus on God and the Advent season.

Children's bulletins, worship notes, and sermons notes can help children focus on what is going on in the service. These can be adapted for Advent worship and can be customized for what is going on in the worship service that day. The Reformed Church of America offers [free downloadable children's bulletins](#) for the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas Eve. PRC has a [free downloadable Worship Notes for Kids booklet](#).

Praygrounds are designated spaces in the sanctuary for young children to experience worship with age-appropriate worship materials; parents or other adults are there to supervise activities.

If you have parents in your congregation who prefer to worship without the distraction of their children, consider setting up **worship buddies**. There are probably adults in your congregation who would enjoy having a child sit with them in worship and they

can help the child follow along in the bulletin, find hymns in the hymnal, etc. Of course, these adults will need to follow your Safe Sanctuaries or Safe Church requirements.

Children can worship in Sunday school

When we think of worship, we tend to think of the congregation praying and singing together in the sanctuary. But, of course, worship can take place anywhere. If your children aren't regularly in worship or are in the service for a short time, you might want to introduce a time of worship as part of Sunday school. This can be done with the whole Sunday school together or in individual classrooms. You can use a simple litany to light the candles of an Advent wreath or have a simple prayer and song. Although we sometimes think Sunday school activities have to be high energy, children are very responsive to the introduction of spiritual practices, such as guided meditations, Praying in Coloring, walking a labyrinth, etc. Perhaps Advent in Sunday school might be a time to prepare for the coming of the Christ Child by focusing on spiritual practices and worship.

We can help children be more responsive to Advent worship by teaching them about the season and preparing them to hear the Scripture readings and sing the songs of the Advent season and Christmas. Children can also contribute to Advent worship by creating items in Sunday school for use in the sanctuary such as Chrismons, Jesse Tree decorations, or an Advent banner.

Children can worship at home

Research shows that the number one influence on children's faith in later life is not attending worship or Sunday school. It is their parents. This means that part of our job as pastors or children's ministry leaders is encouraging and equipping families to be their children's primary faith formation teachers.

Perhaps this Advent a special effort can be made to help families practice faith formation at home. There are various ways to do this. Having families make Advent wreaths at an intergenerational event (or having children make them in Sunday school) and providing [simple family worship services](#) is one way.

Another option is to create Family Advent bags filled with material to help families worship together at home. You can find plenty of suggestions for what to put in these bags online:

[Vanessa Myers: Faith, Family, and Ministry](#)

[Flame: Creative Children's Ministry](#)

A Family Advent calendar can be included in the Family Advent bags or you can send them home if you're not making Family Advent bags. Traci Smith, author of Faithful Families, is offering a [free downloadable Advent Family Faith Practices Calendar](#) on her website.



Contact information

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Facebook group: "The Changing 21st Century
Sunday School"
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