

Exploring Advent Adult Studies

By Debbie Kolacki of
PRC – Practical Resources for Churches
www.prcli.org



Introduction

Advent is a busy time of year and some churches may not want to offer an Advent study for that reason. However, in the church Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ as a baby and a time to think about the Second coming of Christ, so it's important to offer people some ways to join in this preparation. Many of us are frustrated by all the focus on materialism in the season and longing for a way to ponder the true meaning of Advent and Christmas. An Advent study is a perfect opportunity to join with others and explore the deeper aspects of this time of year.

Be flexible

Offering an Advent study doesn't mean that folks have to commit to four or more sessions. Most sessions of Advent studies can stand on their own so you can decide only to offer one or two or, if you have a study with four or more sessions, you can let people know they don't need to attend all the sessions.

For young families, the time before Christmas can not only be hectic but also can take a toll on the family budget. Offering child care will help those with young children attend your study without incurring additional expenses. For safety reasons you will need to provide at least two adults but you might also be able to get your youth involved. You can use the time in child care to have the children make Christmas cards or presents for loved ones. It also might be easier for families if you offer your study at a convenient time for them, such as Sunday after the worship service.

Offering attendees a simple supper before your study can also make the experience more convenient for them. Don't try to do a pot luck supper; this can create a burden for people who work all day or are busy with their children's activities. Pizza or sandwiches can be ordered and you can ask for donations. Or perhaps there's someone in the church who would enjoy making soup or stew for your supper.

Another possibility is to offer your study online or give people the option of attending in person or online or both.

Many people will hesitate to attend a study if there is "homework" involved so keep that in mind when selecting your materials.



Traditional or video-based?

You'll need to decide if you want to do a traditional study or a video-based one. For traditional studies, you will probably need a leader guide and perhaps need to order student books. Video-based studies will require either a DVD or a way to stream video from the internet.

One advantage of a traditional study is that there's no need for special equipment such as a TV, DVD player, or internet connection. Traditional studies are also usually less expensive; some even consist of just one book which can be used by the leader and students. Video studies will include the cost of a DVD or payment for streaming video.

Video studies are good because the video gives everyone an even playing field without having to do reading ahead of time. They also work well for visual learners. You usually get to see the author of the study and get to know them a little better.

Choosing a study

There are lots of options for Advent studies. I have done some of these studies but not most of them so I'll be sharing basic information about the studies rather than giving you my evaluation of them. Many of these studies come from denominational publishers but most of them can be used by churches of any denomination or nondenominational churches. Some of these studies were published some time ago, but their themes are timeless. However, it's best to take a good look at older studies to see if any of their content would be too dated for your group.

I've grouped the studies we'll be talking about into a number of categories. However there are some studies which may fall into more than one of these categories and others which don't fall easily into any category. However, I hope you'll find the categories helpful.

Biblical/historical

These studies stick close to the Biblical accounts around the birth of Jesus; they may also emphasize Old Testament passages which refer to the coming of the Messiah.

By the way, if you are looking to put together your own study, you can do this by using selected Scripture passages and either prepare some discussion questions or use a spiritual practice such as Lectio Divina which involves four steps: reading, meditating,

praying, and contemplating. You can also supplement your reading with resources from websites such as [The Bible Project](#).

[A Clear View of the Birth of Jesus](#) consists of four half-hour lectures by Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, a Presbyterian minister and Middle Eastern scholar, which provides fresh understandings of the well-known Biblical stories of Christmas. It is available to stream at no cost from Bailey's website along with a downloadable [study guide](#).

[Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent](#) is a four-session DVD study by biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine which comes from Abingdon Press, the United Methodist publisher. It looks at connections of the gospel stories to the Old Testament, the role of women in first-century Jewish culture, the revolutionary implications of Mary's Magnificat, and more.

[The Light Will Shine – A Study for Advent](#) is a Kerygma study for 4 or 5 sessions which looks to discover new light in traditional texts and seasonal themes. It consists of a leader's guide and resource book for students.

[Names for the Messiah: An Advent Study](#)

This book by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann looks at each of the four royal titles mentioned in Isaiah 9:6 - Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace - and how the people understood it then, how Jesus did or did not fulfill the title, and how Christians interpret Jesus as representative of that title.

Other studies in this category include:

- [The Census and the Star](#)
- [Christmas from the Back Side](#)
- [Christmas: Light Splits the Night](#)
- [The Greatest Gift](#)

Weekly themes

The studies in this category look at the traditional Advent themes of love, hope, peace, joy, and love.

[Almost Christmas: A Wesleyan Christmas Experience](#) is a DVD study from Abingdon Press. Its four sessions connect John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) and the Wesleyan heritage with the traditional Advent themes of love, hope, joy, and peace.

[Illuminating Advent](#) is a six-session study which comes from the Presbyterian Church PC(USA) publisher and looks at four themes connected with Advent wreaths: hope,

peace, joy, and love. It also includes sessions on Christmas and Epiphany. A leader's guide and participant's book are available.

These two studies are ones which come from denominational publishers and may not be of much interest for those from other denominations. *Almost Christian* is best for those from a Methodist or Wesleyan tradition. *Illuminating Advent* comes from a series where "each study addresses its subject from a Reformed theological perspective."

Music

[*Mary Had a Baby*](#) has four sessions which include Scripture, song lyrics, devotional and contextual information, and discussion questions. The four spirituals featured are "Mary Had a Baby," "Rise Up Shepherd and Follow," "Children, Go Where I Send Thee," and "Go, Tell It on the Mountain." An mp3 file of the four songs is available free with purchase of the study which consists of a book with leader helps.

[*The Scriptures Sing of Christmas*](#)

This four-week study examines songs of praise found in the Scriptures as well as the lyric quality of the Scriptures found at the beginning of the Gospel of John. The study consists of a book with Scripture, reflections, study/discussion questions, prayer, and a focus for the coming week.

Literature

[*Advent in Narnia: Reflections for the Season*](#) is available in hardcover or paperback from Westminster John Knox Press, a PC(USA) publisher. It includes 28 devotions with Scripture and excerpts from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* along with questions for reflections. There are four sessions for small group discussion as well as information on creating a Narnia Night for families.

[*The Redemption of Scrooge*](#) is a DVD study from Abingdon Press. It has four sessions and considers whether redemption is possible for Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*.

[*A Christmas Carol Bible Study*](#) also features Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Popular culture

[*The Gift of the Nutcracker*](#) is a four-session DVD study from Abingdon Press. It explores the classic story of “The Nutcracker” to help people understand God’s greatest gift of the Christ child and the kingdom Christ came to establish.

[*The Nativity Story*](#) was a popular movie made in 2007 which is available on DVD. There are discussion guides for the movie which you can find by searching online.

[*Bethlehem Year Zero*](#) uses a BBC/CNN news approach to relate the events surrounding Christ’s birth.

Popular authors

You might want to do an Advent study by a popular author.

Adam Hamilton is the pastor of the largest United Methodist congregation in the world and his studies are very popular with United Methodists and those from other denominations. He has three Advent DVD studies:

- [*Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph*](#)
- [*Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas*](#)
- [*The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*](#)
- [*Not a Silent Night: Mary Looks Back to Bethlehem*](#)
- [*Prepare the Way for the Lord*](#)

Liz Curtis Higgs is the author of the popular *Bad Girls of the Bible* series. She has a book called [*The Women of Christmas*](#). The book includes a [study guide](#).

Max Lucado is a prolific author popular with evangelicals. His four-session DVD study called [*Because of Bethlehem*](#) includes discussion questions, Bible exploration, and personal study and reflection materials.

Rick Warren was the founder and senior pastor of Saddleback Church, an evangelical megachurch. His DVD Advent study, [*The Purpose of Christmas*](#), features three sessions on why we celebrate Christmas and how it can change our lives forever. Besides the DVD, a study guide is also available.

Anti-materialism

[*The Advent Conspiracy*](#) book and four-session DVD study shows you how to substitute consumption with compassion by practicing four simple concepts: worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all.

[*Unplug the Christmas Machine*](#) is a guide to creating a joyful, stress-free holiday season. A [free study guide](#) to the book is available online.

Meditations/devotionals

There are a number of Advent devotional books which can also be used for group study. One series is the [*Book of Faith Advent Reflections*](#). These come from Augsburg Fortress, one of the publishers for the Lutheran Church (ELCA). There are currently four books in the series.

Another devotional book which can be used for individual or group study is [*Simply Wait: Cultivating Stillness in the Season of Advent*](#).

Downloadable studies

Downloadable Advent studies are available; these are sometimes free although the quality of the studies varies and the theology may not be a good fit for your church.

The Thoughtful Christian is connected with the PC(USA) and offers downloadable studies for adults and youth on a wide range of topics. You can purchase individual studies or study packs. You can also pay an annual license fee of \$125 which gives you access to almost 600 downloadable studies.

Purchasing a downloadable study saves you the expense of purchasing individual student books for each person in your study. You can print out as many copies as you like or email people the study guide.

There are a number of [Advent study packs](#) available.

Online studies

You can also do an Advent study online, either as an individual or with others from your church.

BeADisciple is a website connected with Southwestern College, a United Methodist affiliated university which offers courses for CEU credits on a wide variety of topics. Their website states that students from any Protestant mainline denomination “ought to feel at home in most of our courses, and students from any Christian tradition will be able to learn and grow in their faith.” They offer several [courses related to Advent](#).

The Upper Room is connected with the United Methodist Church and provides resources for spiritual formation. They offer elearning courses, including some [Advent ones](#).