

# Helping Families Celebrate a Holy Advent



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## What is a holy Advent?

Christmas has been hijacked. What should be the celebration of the birth of a baby who would be the Savior of our world has turned into a materialistic holiday with a focus on spending money. The season of Advent has been traded in for a time to work ourselves into a frenzy trying to create a picture perfect Christmas. Many who participate in this craziness have an awareness that Christmas should be something different but may not know how to do things differently. Those of us in the church who minister to others, especially to children and families, can help show them a better way.



To reclaim Advent and Christmas, we need to start with some information about these seasons of the church year. We can share this in worship services, Sunday school classrooms, and other gatherings, as well as providing written information or posting information on our church's website or Facebook page.

Some basic information about Advent includes that it begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. Traditionally, the color for Advent has been purple which symbolizes repentance, but more and more churches are now using blue for Advent, as it symbolizes hope. Both colors also symbolize royalty.

The word "Advent" is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "arrival" or "coming," which includes both Jesus coming to earth as a baby as well as the Second Coming of Jesus. It's a time of waiting and preparation for God to come not only into our world but into our hearts. It is a time of asking ourselves what we can do as believers in Jesus Christ to share the gift of love that was given to us on that first Christmas. Advent should be a time of hopeful longing, joyful expectation, and spiritual preparation.

## Advent worship and programs

Many churches have the lighting of the Advent wreath candles each Sunday and have families involved in this. There are many liturgies available in books and online, such as [this one](#).

Another worship service which is appealing to both children and adults is the Hanging of the Greens. As the sanctuary is decorated, the history and symbolism of the various

decorations is explained. Here is a [link to a service](#) from the Discipleship Ministries website of the United Methodist Church.

The Worshiping with Children website also has ideas for [worship in Advent](#) when children are present.

You could also offer intergenerational programs which focus on Advent. Lifelong Faith Associates has a page of [Intergenerational Faith Formation Programs for the Church Year](#). There are two programs for Advent with suggested activities. 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.

Traditionally, Christmas carols weren't sung in church during Advent, but with the Christmas music we hear becoming increasingly secular, it seems like a good idea to set aside this tradition. Children can learn the meaning and history of the songs as they learn to sing them. The Worshiping with Children website has an article called [Singing Christmas Carols in Worship with the Children](#). It's also a nice idea to schedule caroling in your community or perhaps at a nursing home or hospital.

Offering service and mission projects gives families an easy way to teach children about giving at this time of year.

Having a Fair Trade Fair at your church gives the congregation an opportunity to shop for meaningful gifts while supporting those in developing countries. Two organizations that offer fair trade items are [SERRV](#) and [Equal Exchange](#).



## Sunday school connects to home

Instead of an Advent calendar decorated with Santa and filled with chocolate, how about one with meaningful activities for each day? [This calendar](#) is from 2015, but the activities listed can inspire you if you want to create your own calendar.

There are things you can make in Sunday school to help families have a holy Advent. One of them is to have the children make an Advent wreath to bring home. You can make a [simple one of paper](#) or make a more elaborate one using a [purchased base](#). Don't forget to send home a simple litany for when the family lights the candles; if possible, model this for the children in class. You can find one on the [Crosswalk website](#).

As churches realize that children's faith formation is most impacted by what happens in the home, they are partnering with parents by sending home materials which will help families to talk about and live their faith when together.

One of these tools is an Advent take home box. An article on the [Building Faith website](#) has suggestions for what to include in the take home box and notes that the items are "reflective and active, silent and silly, individual and group-oriented." The article includes links to directions for making an item or a link to a website where the item can be purchased. Some of the items are a paper Advent calendar, paper Advent wreath, magnetic Advent wreath, Christmas story cubes, flat Saint Michael, and prayer bookmarks.

## Family devotional time

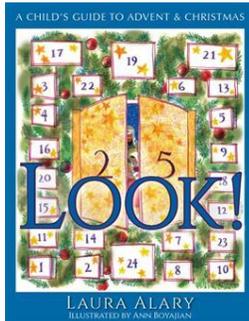
Advent might be a good time for families to start having regular devotional times, if they don't already. It's easier to commit to this for a short amount of time, such as the four weeks of Advent. Churches may want to provide families with devotional materials or provide information about where to purchase them.

[Creative Communications for the Parish](#) is a company which sells Advent devotionals and resources for both children and adults. [Christ to All](#) sells seasonal resources for children and families, as well as gifts to show appreciation to ministry volunteers.

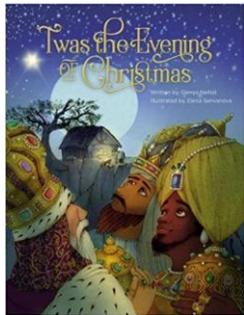
[FAITH5](#), which stand for Faith Acts In The Home, is a simple practice which can be done at bedtime for 5-15 minutes each night. The FAITH5 website has instructions on using the five steps which are: sharing highs and lows, reading a Bible verse or story, talking about how the Bible reading might relate to your highs and lows, praying for one another, and blessing one another.

## Advent and Christmas storybooks

There are so many wonderful Advent and Christmas storybooks. You might want to put together a list to share with the families in your church or perhaps you have a number of them which you could loan out to families during Advent.



There are two new books which I'd like to focus on. One is called [\*Look! A Child's Guide to Advent and Christmas\*](#) and is written by Laura Alary. It takes us from the people of the Bible who waited for redemption to the people of the church today who are still waiting. It introduces children to the powerful symbolism of Advent, such as light and darkness, and talks about Advent as a time for spiritual practices such as journaling, painting, using prayer beads, and serving others.



The other book is [\*'Twas the Evening of Christmas\*](#) written by Glenys Nellist. It focuses on the true meaning of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, but uses the familiar rhythms and phrasing of Clement C. Moore's "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." I can envision a family on Christmas Eve reading Moore's poem and following that with a reading of *'Twas the Evening of Christmas*.

## Other Advent resources to share with families

Some other resources you might want to suggest for families who want to celebrate a Holy Advent include Sybil MacBeth's book [\*The Season of the Nativity\*](#). This is a visually beautiful book with lots of suggestions to make Advent a meaningful time of year. MacBeth is the author of *Praying in Color* and suggests using this spiritual practice in Advent; she also offers [free resources for Praying in Color during](#) Advent on her website.

[\*The Hundred Dollar Holiday\*](#) offers "suggestions on how to rethink Christmastime, so that our current obsession with present-buying becomes less important than the dozens of other possible traditions and celebrations."

[\*Ideas for Reclaiming Advent and Christmas\*](#) is a free downloadable booklet from the Presbyterian Mission Agency with tips to help people have a "life-giving, simple, and Christ-centered holiday season." It includes a suggestion to use outside decorations

which are edible, such as pinecones coated with peanut butter and seeds, as well as garlands made out of popcorn. Children can watch the birds and other wildlife enjoying the decorations. There are also ideas for meaningful gifts and a list of resources for further study.

## Family Advent activities

Decorate the dinner table for Advent with your Advent wreath or a small manger scene. Use purple or blue napkins for the season of Advent. Find a place nearby for a box that the kids decorate and use it to collect food or other items for those in need. Help children simplify by going through clothes and toys and donating unused ones.

How about having Advent Angels instead of Secret Santas? Each family member picks the name of another family members and becomes his or her Advent Angel who prays and does little acts of kindness for them.

Families can make simple [Advent prayer beads](#) using directions provided online by Faith United Methodist Church of North Canton, Ohio. There are also devotions for both adults and children to use with the beads.

The [Star from Afar](#) can be used instead of, or along with the Elf on the Shelf. It's a game which includes a hardcover book and full wooden nativity set. The Star is hidden every day and the children play hide-and-seek to find it. Once they have found it, they move all Three Wise Men to its location. The Wise Men reach the stable with the baby Jesus on Christmas morning. The activity book also includes scripture to use throughout the month. The kit is available in two skin tones and in Spanish.

Many families have a Christmas crèche or manger scene which they put up each year. You can purchase ones which children can play with; we had one made of fabric when our children were small; there are a number of them on [Amazon's website](#), including one made by Fisher-Price. A variation on the manger scene is a [Manger of Love](#), which you can make in Sunday school and send 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.

You can hang a stocking for Jesus. When someone in the family does a good deed, it is written on a piece of paper and put in the stocking. These add up each day as birthday presents for the newborn baby Jesus. You can take out the pieces of paper and read them on Christmas Day or save them and read them on the first day of Advent next year.

We can remind children of the true meaning of Christmas by using prayers and blessings when doing various Advent activities, such as decorating the Christmas tree. You can [find one](#) on the Loyola Press website or make up your own.

Advent Prayer Cards can be created for the 24 days leading up to Christmas. At the beginning of Advent, take 24 index cards and write down the names of people, countries, and other prayer concerns on each one. Choose a different card each day and pray for the person or need on the card. You can also create an Advent prayer chain by taking pieces of colored construction paper and writing three prayer concerns on three pieces of paper each day. You can choose someone you know, someone you don't know (a child in a foreign country), and a goal you have, such as being kind to others. You put all the pieces of paper together to form a chain and by the time Christmas comes, you have a chain to wrap your tree in prayer.



## Connecting Santa with St. Nicholas

Santa Claus is an important Christmas figure for children, but many of them don't know about his origins in St. Nicholas. The [Saint Nicholas Center website](#) has lots of information about the precursor to Santa along with activities, crafts, handouts, scripts, recipes, a section for teachers, and a section for children.

The website lists reasons to celebrate St. Nicholas Day on December 6 including "to learn about the true Santa Claus...St. Nicholas, a man of faith who lived his life in devotion to Christ," and "to focus on giving more than receiving: St. Nicholas cared for the needy."

There's an article about reconciling Santa Claus with St. Nicholas called [Can Jesus and Santa Get Along?](#) which states that "Jesus and Santa can get along. We can see Santa, in

his red robe, beard, and hat as a person that teaches about the St. Nicholas story and who embodies the message of Jesus Christ: selfless love.”

You’ll also find a skit called [“Santa Meets God--Again”](#) which is a dialogue between Santa and God; it tells the story of how Santa started out as St. Nicholas and encourages people to celebrate the true reason for the season.

There are some books about St. Nicholas, including [St. Nicholas and the Mouse of Myra](#), which is a graphic novel about St. Nicholas, and [The Legend of St. Nicholas](#).

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