

Countdown to Christmas

Combining the secular and sacred during December

Our journey through the secular year

The lead up to Christmas

Carols, food, lights, food, cards, food, decorations, food, pantomimes, food, family, food, food, food!

For many of us during the 'festive season' this is the mental list that plays on a loop in our minds. The trimmings and trappings of Christmas, the expectations of the season with its gifts and decorations, and all the special food required can dominate the cultural mind set. Of course, much of this is great fun. Finding the perfect present for a loved one can be exhilarating. The vision we have of their face as they unwrap the gift, when we hand over the cash at the till, might make us laugh in anticipation. Many of us look forward to particular

foods that appear in December, love the relentless carols played on Classic FM, and relish the moment when the Christmas box comes out of the attic.

The month of December is now defined by the countdown to Christmas, and the season of Advent is often overlooked. Advent marks the start of the church year and is characterised by expectant waiting for the nativity of Jesus at Christmas. In the sacred calendar, Advent is quite separate from Christmas: one follows the other. Indeed Christmas doesn't start until 24 December – not an idea that would be welcomed by the retail industry! There is a sense that our secular Christmas activities

have submerged Advent, meaning the rhythm of expectant waiting is lost beneath an extended period of spending and excess.

The question for Christians is: How much of Advent can be seen and felt in our Christmas planning and activities? As the people of God and his kingdom here on earth, we are privileged to understand the gospel story that stands in the centre of the busy festive fun. Can we turn our secular activities into something sacred, using the rituals and events as vehicles for reflection and action that turn us back to waiting expectantly for the incarnation of Christ?

Ideas for Advent

Here are some suggestions for ways to engage and connect with your congregation and community during Advent. The Countdown to Christmas 'to do list' opposite encourages individuals and families to weave the sacred into the secular during December. Download a pdf from the [WEB](#) to print copies, email it, or put it on your church website.

Support and engage the local community

- If your church is near a shopping area, consider how you could offer 'time out' for shoppers – a chance to sit down in the quiet, or a place to leave prayer petitions.
- Acknowledge that for many people this period of busyness and excitement can be an especially painful or difficult time. Affirm and support them by holding a 'blue Christmas service'. Find ideas on the [WEB](#).
- Read the ROOTS article on *Spiritual styles during Advent and Christmas* to find different ways of engaging the church and local community [WEB](#).
- Pray for different members of the local community throughout Advent, asking God to give them space and peace

during this busy time. You could invite members of the community to speak to the congregation about how the Christmas period affects their work, e.g. PCSOs, local shop owners, A&E doctors/nurses, and estate agents.

- Hold a 'Light in the darkness' service at the start of Advent. Look for *Christ the light of the world*, and *The beginning and the end*, two services in the Advent section of *Seasons and festivals* [WEB](#).
- Engage with Advent traditions from other parts of the world, e.g. the Swedish celebration of St Lucia [WEB](#), or celebrate Advent with the Mexican 'Posada' journey, with figures from the manger scene travelling around the parish/local community [WEB](#).

Consider and respond to world issues

- Invite the congregation to stop and think about the world and its problems. Use lesser-known carols such as *Sad and troubled Bethlehem, God bless us and disturb us*. Words and music are available on the internet.
- Prepare an activity for the congregation to engage with before, during or after each service in Advent, such as writing Amnesty International Christmas cards to prisoners of conscience; preparing

gifts for families of prisoners in the UK (www.prisonfellowship.org.uk); supporting the local food bank with Christmas food; or making gingerbread nativities, e.g. *The Gingerbread Nativity*, by Renita Boyle [WEB](#).

- Look out for seasonal programmes and put links on your church website or in email newsletters, and encourage people to take a few minutes out of their week to pause and watch or listen. See the [WEB](#) for links to TV, media, and podcast points.

Offer variety in your worship

- Create a Jesse tree in your worship space and build it up each week with different parts of the Christmas story. Find an explanation and instructions in the Advent section of *Seasons and festivals* [WEB](#).
- Build the crib scene week by week during Advent. This will enable people to consider and reflect on the journey taken by each of the key characters in the nativity story.
- Make use of some alternative readings and reflections during Advent, e.g. *Cloth for the cradle* (from the Iona Wild Goose Worship Group). There is also a range of Advent resources in the *Seasons and festivals* section [WEB](#).

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With Christmas preparations starting ever earlier each year, it's hard to find space for Advent and its sense of patient waiting, preparing ourselves for the birth of Christ. However, our involvement in Christmas events can provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on our kingdom culture and the gospel story.

Try this **Countdown to Christmas** 'to do list', to weave a Christian response into the festivities and rituals in the run up to 25 December.

Instructions: As you take part in and experience the activities in the red (secular) boxes, try to balance them with the paired purple prayer, reflection and action suggestions. Do it as a family or on your own. Tick the activities as you do them ☑.

Giving and receiving



Christmas shopping

Make a charitable contribution or buy a 'Good Gift'.

Panic purchases

Pause to accept 'enough is enough'.

Wrapping presents

Play for those who don't receive gifts.

Buying gifts for yourself

Instead of self-gifting try self-giving – offer to help someone out with their preparations.

Writing Christmas cards

Pray for the recipients of your cards.

Round robin letters

Write an email or letter for Amnesty International. (<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/get-involved>)

Signs and symbols



Town centre Christmas lights switch-on

Imagine the multiple lights represent churches all around the world. Pray for the church throughout the world.

Decorating the tree

Give thanks for the gift of creation.

Outdoor lights and decorations on houses

Light a candle in a dark room and pray for those who find this a difficult time of year.

Snowy scenes on cards and in adverts

Pray for the stewardship of the earth and the issue of climate change.

Holly

Read through or sing the words to 'The Holly and the Ivy'.

Sights and sounds



School nativity/end of term play

Give the teacher a small present to thank them for their work producing the play. Pray for those who took part.

Christmas concerts

Invite someone to attend a carol service or Christmas service with you.

Visiting Santa/Father Christmas

Visit someone who is lonely or housebound.

Pantomime/Christmas shows

Reflect on the roles of the heroes and heroines of the Christmas story.

Christmas TV, Strictly/X Factor finals, Christmas specials of soap operas

What are the 'Christmas specials' in your life? Thank God for them.

Christmas pop songs

Spend a few moments reflecting on what your favourite carols convey about faith at Christmas time.

Christmas crackers

Reflect on the surprises we encounter in our walk with Jesus.

Meeting and eating



Christmas cooking

Try to support small/local producers when buying your festive foods.

Food shopping

Contribute to your local food bank.

Family/friends coming to stay or going to stay with family/friends

Entertain someone outside your regular circle of family and friends.

Busy houses

Find just a few minutes to be un-busy.

Cleaning the house – getting it ready

Ponder on whether you are ready to greet Jesus.

Christmas parties

Offer hospitality at church after a service.

Mulled wine

Consciously spread warmth and good cheer.

Party outfits

Think about how we can look our best on the inside as well as the outside.