

Our journey through the secular year

Embracing past, present and future at New Year

Introduction

New Year has been celebrated in various ways around the British Isles and Ireland for centuries, with Hogmanay being the annual highlight of the Scottish calendar. 1 January is an opportunity to make New Year resolutions, and 'dry January' – which involves giving up alcohol for the month – has become popular recently. New Year celebrations also play an important part in other faith traditions. As New Year's Day falls on a Sunday this year, there is an ideal opportunity for churches to help people acknowledge the passing of the previous year, make commitments for the coming year, and savour the present. We offer a cornucopia of practical ideas for people of all ages to use this significant moment in the secular calendar to reflect on and recommit to their own faith journeys, and reach out to others in their community, sharing fellowship with those in need.

The past: letting go

Church

New Year's resolutions and 'dry January' suggest people want to begin the new year by letting go of old ways, starting afresh and leading a more positive and healthy lifestyle. Prayers of confession, or an act of repentance, can symbolise a turning away from one way of living towards a better way.

Cloud confessions

A symbolic letting go of past mistakes

- Put some large pieces of blue card up at the front to represent the sky. Have white and grey paper cloud shapes in containers at the front, with sticky tac on the back of each one. Play music quietly in the background.
- As you introduce the prayers, encourage people to close their eyes and think of a clear blue sky. Explain that this image is their journey with God. However, clouds often appear in the sky, some small, some big; some white, some grey. Each cloud creates a barrier between us and the blue sky, just as the things we have said or done wrong create barriers between us and God.
- Invite people to bring to mind their own mistakes, and to come forward and symbolically stick a cloud on the blue sky.
- While the music continues, slowly remove the clouds using these words of absolution:

Creator God, in the beginning,
your Spirit hovered over the waters.
Renewing God, in the valley you breathed
the breath of life into those dry bones.
Refreshing God, you created the wind
to blow wherever it pleases.
People of God, begin this new year
in the power of God's Spirit.

Be renewed by the breath of God,
and know that your clouds are blown away
by the wind of God,
today and all your days.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Bring and share

Celebrate the joys and share the griefs of the previous year together

This phrase normally refers to food, but why not invite people to bring a photo, an object, or a short written piece relating to something that has had a big impact on them during the year? It could be a celebration, e.g. birth, family wedding, a wonderful memory, e.g. holiday, retirement party, or a significant loss. Use as a focus for the morning service, or have a time of sharing over coffee and cake afterwards.

- Ask one or two people in advance if they would share with everyone why they brought their item. Give others an opportunity to share too, if they feel comfortable.
- Alternatively, invite people to share in small groups what is significant about what they have brought.
- End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the memories, and seeking God's peace and strength for those who have suffered a loss.

Community outreach

Food for thought

Offer fellowship to lonely people in the community

January can be a difficult and lonely month for many people. It isn't just those living on their own, but SAD (seasonal affective disorder) is now a recognised condition that many suffer from at this time of year.

- Organise a meal at church one Sunday lunchtime or evening in January, and encourage people to bring a neighbour or friend who would appreciate the outing and company.
- Local charities may know of people in need who would value such a meal.
- You could provide some light entertainment afterwards, such as story-telling or a sing-along.

The present: a renewed relationship

Church

In January each year, many Methodist churches share in an annual Covenant Service. The introduction to the service says: 'The emphasis of the whole service is on God's readiness to enfold us in generous love...The covenant is not just a one-to-one transaction between individuals and God, but the act of the whole faith community.'

Promises, promises

Create your own community act of commitment and renewal

- Give everyone a paper figure cut-out and felt tips, and invite them to mark it in a unique way, e.g. yellow arm, red shoes.
- Ask each person to write on their figure one new commitment they can offer to God and to their faith community, e.g. I will sit next to a different person each Sunday for a month, I will help at the next church fund-raising event.
- Join the paper people together in a large circle with sticky tape/pads, place them at the front of church, and offer this prayer of thanksgiving:
Generous God, help us to live as better disciples of Jesus, and bless what we offer in our promises here today. **Amen.**

Conscious contact

Record a moment of closeness with God each day

Step 11 of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step programme talks of 'improving our conscious contact with God'. At the beginning of a new year there is an opportunity to look for, and be enriched by, God's presence in ordinary everyday things.

- Encourage members of the congregation to begin a photo album, blog or use their social media account to upload a photo of where they have found God that day. Phone cameras make a quick snap of a plant, animal or sunset very easy. They can add captions if they wish.
- Organise an exhibition or service later in the year using some of people's photographs.



Community outreach

Traditionally the arrival of the magi is celebrated at the start of the new year. They brought gifts and January gives us a chance to think afresh about gifts, after the mayhem of Christmas.

Gifts galore

Share gifts of all types with others

- Organise an unwanted gift sale with proceeds going to a local charity.
- If your church is on a busy high street, offer people surging to the new year sales the gift of peace and quiet with free tea/coffee and biscuits.
- Organise a talent show or concert where people can share gifts of a different kind. Invite members of the local community and publicise it well.

The future: fit for faith



Church

The journey of life

Read everyone a story

- Dr Seuss' book *Oh, the Places You'll Go* will appeal to children of all ages and even adults! It reflects on how life's journey may take many turns, and can provide opportunities for discussion.

The golden mile

Get fit for faith as individuals and as a community

- Stick a long length of gold wrapping paper on the wall of your church, or in a prominent position, to represent the 'golden mile'.
- Introduce people to the idea that as a church they are going to get 'fit for faith' this new year. There are many ways of getting fit and it works best if it's fun!
- Hand round coloured paper running shoe cut-outs so that everyone gets two pairs of shoes. Invite everyone to prayerfully reflect on how they might get 'fit for faith' and what help they may need from the church, e.g. learn more about the Old Testament. Could church run a short study series on Genesis? Find out about the different roles people play in church. Could church run a 'jobs fair' where people who currently hold office talk about what they do?
- Invite people to write down their fitness idea and question on one pair of shoes and then repeat on the other pair.
- Everyone sticks one pair of shoes on the 'golden mile' and takes the other pair home to reflect and act on.
- Review regularly to see individual and church progress.

The unexpected journey

Make gifts of encouragement for each other

- Divide the children/young people and adults into two groups. Provide slips of paper and pens/felt tips.
- Invite the adults to write on their paper something that they have found helpful in difficult times, e.g. a Scripture verse, a hymn or song lyrics, a prayer or wise saying.
- Invite the children and young people to draw or write something that makes them feel happy. Leaders could facilitate this.
- When finished, place all the papers in envelopes or empty matchboxes. Collect them up, keeping the children/young people's and adults' ones separate. Redistribute them so that everyone gets a different one.
- Suggest that people take their envelope/box home and keep it in a safe place, so that when they have a difficult day or event in the coming year, they can open this gift of encouragement.



Community outreach

Rainbow ribbons

Encourage passers-by to tie a symbol of a New Year's resolution

- In Genesis, the rainbow is a symbol of God's promise. Begin a 'rainbow promise' outside your church or somewhere prominent in the community on 1 January and encourage local people to get involved.
- Cut short lengths of coloured ribbon and display a notice inviting people to tie a piece of ribbon to railings or around a tree, as a symbol of a New Year's resolution or promise.

Final thoughts

As with anything you do, context is key. Think about your church, the community you are in, and what will work for you.

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