



# The heart of Christmas – giving and receiving

Clare Williams offers a Christmas-themed resource reflecting on the heart of Christmas – adaptable for a youth session, school assembly or church service.

## Gather

Ask the young people to play a game where you give some lyrics from a Christmas song or carol and they have to complete them, e.g.

- I don't want a lot for Christmas, there is just one thing I need,  
I don't care about the...

Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a...

Finish with the carol 'In the bleak midwinter' and one of the verses:

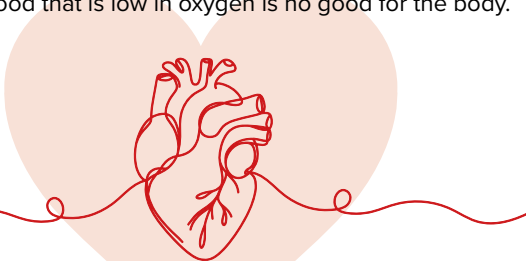
- 'What can I give him, poor as I am, if I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb, if I were a wise man, I would do my part, but what I can I give him...'

## Introduction

The carol 'In the bleak midwinter' talks about being able to give Jesus our heart, as a gift. This session focuses on the idea of the heart as a gift we can give, but also as a gift to ourselves.

Watch the video exploring how the heart works <https://bbc.in/43GHcgl> (or the first 2 minutes)

The most important thing to note here is about blood flowing into and out of the heart: blood that comes in needs to be filled up with oxygen before it can be passed back out around the body. Blood that is low in oxygen is no good for the body.



This gives us an important image about our giving and receiving, we may want to give and do and share (as we are encouraged to do particularly at Christmas time) but we can't do that without first receiving ourselves, refilling and refuelling with what we need. The heart gives us a beautiful image of the importance of **giving** – blood would also be no good if it wasn't pumped out again and around the body – but also **receiving first** (it would also be no good if it was not oxygenated), giving to others but also giving to ourselves.

What happens if we just take in and don't give out to others?

What do we need to receive from God to be able to give to others?

## Share the Word

**Focus Bible verse: Proverbs 4.23**

*Guard your heart because it is the wellspring of life.*

This might be a helpful image and phrase to return to during the season of Christmas as there may be many pressures on us to want things – and the message that that is the only way we can be happy – to give things, to have the best and most magical time and to be generous; often focusing on generosity based primarily on money.

### 'Guard your heart' reminder

- Invite the young people to create a paper heart chain by folding and cutting paper (see video for instructions [WEB](#)). Do this so that you have eight hearts joined together. On one side write out the verse, one word on each heart with 'because it is' on just one heart. On the other side write your name at one end and then various ways in which you might feel under pressure in these ways over Christmas, or even people who you might need to give to. This can serve as a reminder to guard your own heart, not as a selfish act, but as a way which makes you able to give to others and be what you need to be for others.

**Focus Bible passage: Luke 2:1-20, but specifically verse 19**

*But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*

Mary gave much of herself at the first Christmas, travelling to Bethlehem, giving birth, caring for her newborn son Jesus. But we are told she also took time to ponder and treasure the words, presence, gifts and actions going on around her.



Ask: What you are giving out and what you are bringing into your heart and treasuring this Christmas?

## Explore & respond

A range of activities to explore the theme.

### Six litre game

The heart pumps around six litres of blood per minute. Fill one large container with six litres of water and then invite a young person to try and transfer the water from the large container into another, using a small cup or scoop. See how much they can achieve in one minute. You can try this in teams as well as a race. Discuss afterwards how hard it was, and explain that your heart does this without you even noticing, every minute.

### Flowing in and flowing out

Play a video/audio of a heartbeat and invite the young people to lie down or get comfortable in some way and close their eyes, if they feel happy to do so. Invite everyone to begin by visualising their heart beating and to feel it in their chest. Then ask them to imagine what they want to be flowing in and flowing out over the Christmas season, i.e. *flowing in* – what do they need to be healthy, to take time to receive from God? *Flowing out* – how do they want to treat others, what sort of generosity do they want to show?

Invite the young people to share afterwards if they wish to. Discuss together different ways of giving 'oxygen' to yourself and how you might give to others in a healthy way, and, how that might look different if you've looked after yourself first.

### Calm your heart

Talk together about what happens in your body when you are under stress. The young people might come up with all sorts of physical symptoms. Focus in on the heart and the fact that this tends to beat faster. This is often referred to as the 'fight or flight' response – your heart is pumping faster in order to give you the energy and oxygen to run away from or to fight, whatever it is that is causing you stress.

There are various things which might help calm this, slow our heart back down and de-stress. Again, together, discuss some ideas. There is a system within our body called the parasympathetic nervous system which we can activate ourselves, if we need to, in order to help regulate ourselves and become calm in stressful situations. This will bring our heart rate down and help us to feel better.



Set up some simple activities which could be used like **prayer stations** to help the young people to try some of these things out. At each one have the words from Proverbs written out and the relevant instructions (see below) at each station.

1. **Lip balm** – running clean fingers over your lips activates parasympathetic nerve fibres. Reflect here about slowing down and guarding your heart before choosing what to say or which words to use.
2. **Nature** – *provide an outdoor space or a large indoor plant*. Being in nature helps to activate our parasympathetic nervous system. Reflect here about guarding your heart when you might respond in a certain way and taking yourself out of the situation.
3. **Breathing** – we've thought a lot about the heart and its function of pumping oxygen around the body. Reflect here about guarding your heart in order to give to others. Think about someone you want to give to or share with this Christmas and, as you do, practise 'box breathing', where you close your eyes and count as you breathe – some people find it helpful to visualise a box as they do. Begin by breathing in for four, then hold for a count of four, breathe out for a count of four and then pause. Regulating your breathing in this way also helps to activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
4. **Self-care** – there are also parasympathetic nerve fibres running all the way down our upper arms. Wrap your arms around yourself and give yourself a hug, running your hands gently up and down the upper arms. As you do this, ponder and treasure ways God is at work in your life, think again about how to guard your heart and practice ways to look after yourself as you give to others.

### Braided hearts

Make Danish braided hearts [WEB](#). These are paper hearts of two halves which reflect what we've been talking about in this session – receiving from God and taking care of ourselves, in order to give to others.


Invite the young people to write or draw on one half of the heart what we can receive from God/how to look after yourself and guard your heart. Then write or draw on the other half who they want to give to/share with and how they can go about this.

Say: The finished decoration can go on your Christmas tree, or you can even fill it with sweet treats or something else to give as a gift to someone – or perhaps to yourself!



## Go with God

At Christmas, we remember the gift of Jesus, giving us salvation, hope, peace and relationship with God. As we receive from God, we are filled to give ourselves back to God and others.

 Finish by singing, listening to or praying the words of the carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter' [WEB](#).

