

Advent/ Christmas in a Pandemic

Southwestern Washington Synod

Updated 11/02/20

Advent and Christmas Eve draw families and congregations together for worship more than almost any other time of the year (except Easter Sunday). Yet it is highly likely that we will continue to be in a time of pandemic through this month of December and into the new year, with the result that the “normal” custom of packing people into our churches to sing carols will not be safe or sensible. How might we respond to that dilemma?

Pastors in our Synod and in other ELCA synods have begun brainstorming ways to celebrate Advent and Christmas in a meaningful, creative and reasonably cautious ways. I am summarizing those ideas below.

Here are ideas to consider. At the very bottom are links to other resources.

Advent

- Make your own advent wreath kits and send them to your households. Pastor Dale Larson, at First Lutheran in South Bend, WA, is mailing out Advent Wreath Kits that cost only 99 cents to his members.
- Do Sunday evening zoom call to all households every Sunday in Advent. During the Zoom gathering, everyone lights the candles on their wreaths and an Advent devotion is done together
- For your Sunday video worship each week -- ask a particular family each week to pre-record as they light the candle on their home Advent wreath and have it as part of the Sunday service
- Children’s Christmas program for Advent – record a talent show of kids
- Los Posadas -- online version of service, coordinated lawn displays, beginning/ending at the church
- Do a Synod-wide, pre-recorded, Lessons and Carols service with participants from all over. Individuals or family groups can provide the singing. Tap into your Synod’s technical and musical talent.
- Create your own Advent calendar and mail it to all households with suggestions for outreach or service-related tasks they can do from home or in the neighborhood. Think about what your partner organizations may need right now. Kids can color in the squares or mark them off each day as they do the service opportunities.
- Do an Advent Calendar by Text. Church members sign up and give you their cell phone number. Each day in Advent, the pastor or church Advent team texts them an Advent message for that day. (Father James Thibodeaux at St. Christopher’s in Olympia is doing this.)
- Reverse Advent Calendar: Each day in Advent, tell church members what to put in an Advent Box at home. (For example, two boxes of Macaroni and Cheese.) Work with a local social agency to distribute these Advent boxes to families in need when Christmas comes. Pastor Mary Sanders at United and Bethlehem, Tacoma, is doing this, as is Father Thibodeaux at St. Christopher’s. St. Christopher’s is distributing their Advent gift boxes on the traditional Boxing Day, celebrated in the United Kingdom on December 26, the Day of St. Stephen.
- Michelle de Beauchamp, pastor of Saron Lutheran in Hoquiam, has assembled a resource on the History of Christmas Carols

Christmas Eve

- Outdoor
 - Create a Manger Scene with people semi-costumed. Tell the story, don’t read it, as people walk or drive-by
 - Have a Christmas or Epiphany bonfire.

- Inside
 - Multiple services, with a video option for people at home
 - Kickoff/celebration of holy communion
- Online
 - A service of Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve has been a tradition out of England for the last 140 years. In some ways, this tradition echoes much older tradition of readings of scripture and sung [Psalm] responses at the Vigil of Easter. For those congregations who will offer online worship opportunities on Christmas Eve, this format could work quite well. Invite individuals or families to read from scripture (or otherwise interpret the readings in a creative way) and offer musical responses.
 - Encourage more singing in the home in these times when we cannot sing together in person. The fact that many beloved Christmas carols are in the public domain and not subject to copyright restriction makes this much easier, including the ability to share musical resources electronically among multiple congregations.

In Homes

- Have a worship-at-home Lessons and Carols resource for family groups.
- Put together packets of items to use in the home for worship and family devotion to supplement or engage in online worship. So, for example, one congregation is delivering bags with a votive candle and other items to mark these special times.
- Another congregation is doing something similar for the Advent/Christmas Season, including the Advent/Christmas cards from Augsburg (see below). It's sort of a bag of "3-D" things to complement the "2-D" worship (online on screens) that many are experiencing right now. In both cases, there will be a group of volunteers who are delivering these bags over the course of a week or so to every household connected with the congregation.

Synod-wide or Conferences

- Have a Synod wide Blue Christmas service on Sunday, December 20, or Winter Solstice, December 21
- Congregations within a conference could join together to do joint services, faith formation activities, etc. especially those close to one another geographically.

Sunday after Christmas

- Synod-wide prerecorded lessons and carols

Here are ideas brainstormed in the Northern Great Lakes Synod

- Gather outside, in cars, using an FM transmitter. Decorate the parking lot with the same vigor as inside the sanctuary. Skip the Pointsettia's (since they'll freeze). Lots of lights.
- Do a "drive by" scenes from the Nativity
- Go caroling. Wear masks (under your scarf).
- Have a Christmas or Epiphany bonfire.
- One church is looking into worship in a barn. Lots of airflow.
- Have a worship at home Lessons and Carols resource for family groups. Send DVD's of Synod wide service to those without internet or at home alone.
- Have a Synod-wide 12 Days of Christmas with people recording themselves being "Ten Lords a Leaping" or "8 maids a milking", kind of a synod wide variety show. Again, your tech person would need to splice everything together.

Here are ideas brainstormed by Bishop Jim Hazelwood of the New England Synod

1) Advent is often called the season of preparation. In an earlier era, it was longer than the four weeks we have now. Can we return to that this year? Let's start Advent in the middle of November, and then, by the time we hit early December, start the Christmas preparations.

2) Since worshipping indoors will be a challenge for most of our congregations, let's move it all outdoors for Dec 24. Don't attempt to recreate your standard Christmas Eve worship outdoors, instead do something altogether different. How about a 3:00 p.m. Manger Scene with people semi-costumed (maybe covering their LL Bean parkas). Tell the story, don't read it. Or maybe have a kind of Stations of the Nativity, similar to a Stations of the Cross. You can do this on your church property, or maybe a walk through your neighborhood if you are in an urban environment. Stations of the Nativity art: <https://www.cdbe.org.uk/pdfs/stations-of-the-nativity-booklet.pdf>

3) You could also consider an online devotional on the Stations of the Nativity. One church used this resource and adopted it for an online devotional. The book is available on Amazon, but [here's the link at Paulist Press and Stations of the Manger](#) How could you adapt this to a digital format? Video reflections, maybe by members of your congregation?

4) If you Google 'Stations of the Nativity', you will find more resources than you know what to do with. In one version, the participants were invited to draw their interpretations of various events. Maybe if it's raining on Christmas eve, you could have a gallery walk through of people's artwork. Just think about proper ventilation, spacing, and masks - maybe even have people sign up for appointment times. You could play pre-recorded Christmas music as people walk through the church witnessing the Stations of the Nativity.

The point of all this is to get you thinking differently about Christmas this year. Don't try to re-create "what we've always done". Use this as a time to experiment. Have fun, enjoy, play and co-create with the Creator.

Links to Other Resources

- General Advent/Christmas worship ideas is being managed by the Wisconsin Council of Churches: <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/10/01/advent-and-christmas/>
- Advent/Christmas family devotions- the Augsburg Fortress Families Celebrate Advent & Christmas cards: <https://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/9781506468730/Families-Celebrate-Advent-Christmas-2020-21>
- Ecumenical Protocols for In-Person Worship <https://sites.google.com/view/worshipsafely>
- Getting ready for Advent and Christmas resources- updated for 2020: <https://godspacelight.com/2015/11/12/getting-ready-for-advent-christmas-resources-for-2015/>

Faith Formation Resources for Advent/Christmas Eve (ELCA/Ecumenical) (More resources may be available from synod faith formation/First Third of Life ministries after the synod ministers meet on November 5th):

[Advent/Christmas Eve Resources](#) by Christine Hides

<https://adventword.org/en/adventword-2020/#AdventWord> by BuildFaith.org

[Advent and Christmas resources for families- updated in 2020](#) by godspace

[Christmas Eve 2020 Ideas](#) by Karen Ware Jackson

[Illustrated Advent for Families](#) by Illustrated Ministry
[Advent/Christmas](#) by Practical Resources for Churches
[Advent](#) by Vibrant Faith
[Advent Resources](#) by Virginia Theological Seminary