

Christmas

MEETING AIM

To celebrate together God's most special gift for all the people: his Son, Jesus.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:1-20

KEY VERSE

"The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people'" (Luke 2:10).

10 PRAYER AND WORSHIP

OPTION 1

You will need: a microphone

As you gather together, invite members of the congregation to share their one-liner 'good news' stories from the past week, either by coming to the front or by sending a roving microphone around the room.

Encourage all ages to share their stories, whether simple or profound, about things they have found to be 'good news' in their own lives this week. Draw together in prayer, thanking God for the way this community has been blessed.

OPTION 2

You will need: paper chains; pens

Before the session, prepare or purchase ready-made paper chains. Give every member of the congregation a short length of chain and encourage them to write or draw their own prayer or word of praise about who Jesus is to them. Gather these together and form a large paper chain from everyone's individual prayers, hanging them up somewhere on display as a shared, creative act of prayer.

10 STORY

You will need: a selection of Bible character (nativity) costumes and simple props (you could invite members of your congregation to come dressed up ready for this service)

Begin by asking: did you ever get to play a part in a nativity play? Who has starred as Mary? Who was given the part of second sheep? Today, you are all welcome to take part in our nativity play, whether you have a costume or not. It doesn't matter if we end up with 19 Marys and only one sheep. You are welcome to play a part.

Allow some time for people to select an appropriate costume or prop if they so wish, and explain that as you tell this very well-known story each participant should ad-lib, coming up to join in at the appropriate point in the narrative. Encourage participants

to join you at the appropriate points, and pause to allow them time to do so, but try to maintain the flow. Tell this story:

Long, long, long ago, God promised that one day he would send a special gift that would be for all the people. Long, long ago, that gift was given.

There was at that time a young girl called Mary, who was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter, who was the great, great, great, great (well, lots of greats) grandson of King David. Close to the time when Mary's baby was due to be born the Roman rulers called a census, so everyone had to return to their home town to be registered. Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem, Joseph's family home.

While they were there, the baby was born! But not in a lovely clean hospital, not even in a fancy hotel with a beautiful new crib from Mothercare. There was no room for the family with all the other visiting guests, so poor Mary had to use an animals' feeding trough as a bed for her newborn baby son.

That very night on the hills nearby some shepherds were out, perhaps sitting around the fire, guarding their sheep. Suddenly, an angel appeared in the skies above them, saying: "Do not be afraid. I bring good news that will be a great joy for all the people." *As you say these words, point to members of the cast, and also to other members of the congregation.* "Today, your Saviour has been born."

The angel told the shepherds, who were probably finding this pretty hard to take in, where they should go to find the newborn baby. Then a large group of angels surrounded them, singing praises to God in heaven: "Glory to God in heaven and peace to all people on earth."

The shepherds did exactly as the angels told them. They ran down to Bethlehem, where they found the baby Jesus lying in the manger, just as they had said. Everyone was amazed at the shepherd's story, but Mary listened quietly, keeping all these things in her heart.

10 REFLECTIVE RESPONSE

OPTION 1

You will need: a large box wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper; gift tags; pens

Ask the congregation to think about what gift they would give the baby Jesus. What gift can they give him today? Distribute the gift tags and pens and ask everyone to write or draw a short prayer, or perhaps just a few words as a response, before attaching their gift tag to the large box. Together, without reading any particular prayers aloud, pray over this box, commit-

ting yourselves in worship to Jesus.

OPTION 2

You will need: small, round pebbles; acrylic paint and paintbrushes; cover-up and clean-up facilities

The angels told the shepherds this baby was good news for all the people. Encourage members of the congregation to paint a pebble as the baby Jesus – a simple baby wrapped in white swaddling cloths – using the acrylic paints provided. You could also use a marker pen to add a verse, the church's name or a message on the underside. Encourage the congregation to take their pebbles away with them and place them somewhere in the local community, literally taking the gift of Jesus out to all the people.

10 GROUP DISCUSSION

Divide into mixed-age groups and discuss these questions:

- Why do you think we celebrate this story?
- What would you like to ask Mary about the night Jesus was born?
- Why do you think Jesus' birth took place in this way?
- What does it mean for Jesus to be a gift for all the people?
- What does it mean for Jesus to be a gift for you?

BECKY MAY

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Stefan and the self-assembly scramble

"Take the panel marked 'F' and slot it into grooves 'K', 'P' and 'Y', with blue side uppermost."

Stefan stared at the blue panel and tried to imagine what it would look like. "I think I know what that means," he said. "Right, next step."

"Oh, kill me now!" cried his brother Pavel. "Can't we just start building the things? I've been listening to you reading out those stupid instructions for days." Pavel flipped the paper instructions out of his brother's hands. A train rumbled past their house, shaking the windows as it went.

"No! You know what Dad said. We've got to make sure we know what we're doing before we start." Pavel groaned and put his head in his hands as Stefan picked up the instructions again. "Besides, we've only got one step left. Now, slide drawers 'M', 'G' and 'B3' into place. Congratulations! You now have a complete Agrajag Halffront chest of drawers!"

Stefan turned back to the first instruction and looked at all the pieces of wood, screws, wooden pegs and Allen keys that made up the two sets of drawers for his and Pavel's bedrooms.

"So, we start with this piece here and then—"

"Oh, I've had enough of you and your 36-step plan. I'm just going to put everything together myself. It can't be that hard."

"You can't do that!" shouted Stefan. His brother was seriously getting on his nerves.

"Watch me. You do your drawers and I'll do mine. Then we'll see who needs instructions..."

After an hour or so, the two sets of drawers stood side by side in Stefan's bedroom. They looked the same, with the same blue panels, the same three drawers and the same shiny top. Stefan rolled his empty drawers back and forth and was pleased with his handiwork. Pavel did the same. The drawers came out, but he had to push them quite hard to get them back in again. "Just a teething problem. It'll be OK once I've put some clothes in."

Suddenly, the whole house shook as the 9:34 from Bristol Parkway careered past the window. It was so close, so fast and

so loud that Stefan didn't initially hear the crash. He looked around to see what had happened. His own chest of drawers was standing proud and perfect. His brother's, on the other hand, was lying among a pile of screws, panels and wonky drawers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are you more like Stefan or Pavel? Why?
- How do you approach guidelines for more important things, such as being at school?
- When you hear someone give you instructions, do you put them into action? Why? Why not?

This story is based on Matthew 7:24-27. Read the passage to the group and compare Jesus' story to this one. Discuss what Jesus might have been saying through his story, encouraging the young people to think about the parable in a new way.

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

Going it alone

I've done something really stupid. I entered myself into an Ironman triathlon next July: a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run. It will be a massive challenge, but the even greater challenge will be the commitment from my family who will have to support (put up with) me through the next nine months. They will have to cope with me being out training instead of at home, encourage me when I feel like quitting, allow me to spend our money on ugly kit, weird vegetables and unnecessary gadgets and put up with moody behaviour when I'm tired. Suffice to say, I would not be able to do it without their support.

I have always (wrongly) prided myself on being self-sufficient and am having to learn that not only is it quite good to get help from others, but it is God's best for us to do so. Relying on others is a risk – an act of faith – and therefore a prophetic act of worship and discipleship. It's not wise to try to be self-sufficient, no matter how brave or noble it may seem. Modern life emphasises the ability to cope with hard times and to defend ourselves without help from others, but this is a lie. We need each other. Even God is a

community – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and he made humans in his image.

Sadly, two incidents of student suicide have occurred at my kids' secondary school this year. Teenage suicide is rising across the UK and is more prevalent among boys. Depression and hopelessness can be difficult to spot. It's vital that we all have long-term, significant, safe relationships in which we can be honest about our thoughts and feelings. Having people around you is not just about achieving dreams, it is also about sharing burdens and coping with mental health issues.

Ask yourself these questions, then explore them with your mentee:

- In which areas are you troubled and trying to cope alone?
- What dreams are you trying to achieve that you need others' involvement in?
- How can you share your burdens and dreams in your key relationships?
- What words spring to mind when you say 'self-sufficient'? What about 'dependent'?
- Is it weak to be dependent on others? Or strong? How? Consider what the Bible says (eg Jesus' command to the 72 to go and preach in pairs, see Luke 10:1-24).

LIFE MAPPING

Write your name at the centre of a blank page. Jot down any hobbies, challenges or aims you are excited about.

In another colour, write about any areas you feel negative, worried or scared about (eg school, exams, parental expectations, relationships, illness...). Out of ten, how stressed are you about them?

List the names of key people in your life down one side. Draw lines from each name to the excitements and stresses in which they are of help or support to you. Does every excitement and stress have at least one name connected to it? If not, what can you do about this?

Who do you pray with regarding each of these areas?

If helpful, write Jesus' name and draw a line to every item on the page!

JOEL TOOMBS

has an MA in Christian mentoring and wrote the Grove booklet, *Mentoring and Young People*. He is a volunteer youth worker.

Christmas games

With all the parties, events and services taking place over the festive season you might just need a few extra games ideas. Here is a range of easy games you can play in between eating all that party food.



MULTIPLE PASS THE PARCEL

You will need: eight small prizes; newspaper and / or Christmas wrapping paper; sticky tape; music and the means to play it
Prepare the parcel before the session. Wrap each of the prizes in newspaper or wrapping paper, then group the prizes into four pairs and wrap those pairs up (you should end up with four parcels). Do the same again, wrapping pairs of parcels together, giving you two larger parcels. Finally, wrap those two parcels together to make one. You can include extra layers of wrapping at any point in the process to make the game longer. You could also include forfeits or tasks in between each layer.

Start the game in the normal way, playing and then stopping the music as the children or young people pass the parcel around a circle. When the parcel splits in two, pass the two parcels in opposite directions. Continue to do this until eight players have unwrapped prizes.



PIN THE TAIL ON THE REINDEER

You will need: a large picture of a reindeer with no tail; a cutout reindeer tail; Blu Tack; a blindfold; a marker pen
Stick your picture of a tailless reindeer to the wall. Stick a blob of Blu Tack to the top of the reindeer tail. Blindfold a player and give them the tail. Spin them around a couple of times, then challenge them to stick the tail in the correct place on the picture. Mark the position on the picture where they stuck the tail, then let another player have a go.

Play until everyone who wants to has had a go. Bear in mind that some children or young people will not want to be blindfolded. Look at the marks on the picture. The closest mark to the correct position is the winner!



WHAT'S IN THE STOCKING?

You will need: a large Christmas stocking (available from card and gift shops); a range of mystery Christmas objects such as a tangerine, a cracker or a candy cane

Before the session, gather together a range of mystery objects. Include some obvious ones and some that are more obscure.

Place one of the objects in the stocking and invite a player to try and work out what it is just by putting their hand inside. You could have two stockings and two sets of items and play in two teams. Each team sends a player to the front to identify an object. When they are successful they return to their team, a new item is put inside the stocking and another player comes forward to identify it.



PRESENT WRAPPING

You will need: a range of items that are difficult to wrap; wrapping paper; scissors; sticky tape; bows and ribbon; prizes (optional)
Give out the items (one per player) and challenge the group to wrap their item as beautifully as possible. Give them all the wrapping equipment you have brought and set a time limit. At the end of this limit display the presents and judge together which is the best. Award a prize if you have one. You could also award prizes for best concealed (the present that most successfully disguises what's inside), least sticky tape used or neatest bow.



PERSON WRAPPING

You will need: wrapping paper; scissors; sticky tape; bows and ribbon
Split the group into teams and ask each team to choose a volunteer who is happy to be wrapped up. Challenge the teams to wrap their volunteer as best they can within a set time limit. At the end of the game, judge which person is wrapped most professionally.
Don't forget to recycle the paper from both wrapping games.



SANTA LIMBO

You will need: a Santa suit; padding (such as cushions and pillows); a long garden cane, thick rope or similar
Set up a limbo with two leaders holding a cane, broomstick or rope pulled taut. Dress a volunteer up as Santa, complete with padding, then challenge them to limbo under the stick or rope. If they are successful, keep going until the stick or rope is too low for them to limbo underneath. Make a note of their lowest successful limbo.
Play with different volunteers until you have a winner. If you have two Santa suits you could have two players limboing against each other.



CHRISTMAS MEMORY GAME

Sit in a circle and start the game by saying: "Last Christmas, I was given..." and then say a gift (for example "a box of chocolates"). The next person says the whole sentence and adds on another gift: "Last Christmas, I was given a box of chocolates and...a giant teddy bear." Continue around the circle until someone gets stuck. Then start the game again with the next player.

You could challenge the group to follow the alphabet with their gifts: "Last Christmas, I was given an angel for the Christmas tree, some Brussels sprouts, a Christmas pudding..." Or you could do a version of the 'Twelve days of Christmas': "On the fourth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me four pairs of socks, three tangerines, two tennis racquets and one Xbox One."

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

Christmas

BACKGROUND

Christmas inspires a whole range of craft and construction ideas, but these activities should help you dig a little deeper into the story with children and help them meet with God through the tinsel and the tradition.

EPIPHANY KING CAKE



You will need: 320g puff pastry; 200g golden syrup; 50g white breadcrumbs; egg or milk to glaze; a ceramic baking bean wrapped in foil; people-shaped cookie cutters; greaseproof paper; a baking tray; an oven

This baking craft went down very well when we did it at church last year! It's an adaptation of a traditional French cake baked to celebrate the visit of the wise men at Epiphany, and involves a foil-wrapped bean 'Jesus' to find.

Preheat the oven to 170°C / 340°F / gas mark 4. Roll or open out the pastry sheet and cut off a section from the end for decorations. Cut what is left into rough halves and place on a baking tray that has been lined with greaseproof paper. Mix the breadcrumbs and golden syrup together. Spread the golden syrup mixture onto one half of the pastry sheet, leaving wide margins around the edges. Wrap the ceramic bean in foil so it is a good size and unlikely to be swallowed accidentally. Place the foil-packaged 'Jesus' on the mixture.

Lay the second half of the pastry sheet on top of the golden syrup sheet. Press the sides together with a fork and decorate with the spare section of pastry you cut off earlier. You might want to show people following a star, for example. Make a hole in the top of the pie for steam to escape. Brush the top of the pastry with a beaten egg or milk, then bake the king cake for 30 minutes. Cut into slices and serve.

Remember to let people know that one of the pieces will contain the foil-wrapped ceramic 'Jesus'! Traditionally, whoever finds Jesus is pronounced 'king' for the rest of the day.

SHEPHERDS PLAYDOUGH MATS



You will need: playdough mats from youthandchildrens.work/links/; playdough

Explore the experience of the shepherds in a very hands-on way!

Before the session, print off copies of the playdough mat and laminate them. This will allow for easy clean-up and repeated use of the mat. Let the children use playdough to fill in the angel shapes.

As they create, use the time to chat about what the shepherds saw, and what 'glory' and 'peace' mean.

ADVENT JOURNEY SPIRALS



You will need: air-drying clay; small candles (Christingle candles are ideal)

This craft explores the idea of a journey toward the birth of Jesus, echoing the journey Mary and Joseph take to Bethlehem and our own waiting for Jesus to come again. It might be helpful to do a test run before the session to see roughly how much clay each person will need.

Roll the clay into a long, thick sausage shape and slightly flatten out the top. Make a spiral with the clay. Take your candle and, starting at the centre of the spiral, make 25 indentations that are deep enough to let the candle stand up securely. Leave the spiral to dry. Every day during Advent move the candle one place along the spiral and light it, ending at the centre on Christmas day.

NATIVITY STONE PAINTING



You will need: stones; paint or paint pens; varnish (optional)

This craft helps children think about the characters of the Nativity story and also gives an opportunity to retell the story using the stones.

Paint each stone with a character or item from the Nativity story. Each child might like to make their own set, or you could make a

group collection with each person painting part of it. Possibilities include: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angel, star, manger, wise men, shepherds, sheep, gold, frankincense, myrrh and anything else the children can think of. When the paint is dry, varnish the stones to preserve the colours.

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Olaf's Frozen Adventure

CLIP: 00:06:30 – 00:10:30

RATING: U

SYNOPSIS

Olaf teams up with Sven on a merry mission in *Olaf's Frozen Adventure*. It's the first holiday season since the gates reopened, and Anna and Elsa host a celebration for all of Arendelle. When the townspeople unexpectedly leave early to enjoy their individual holiday customs, the sisters realise they have no family traditions of their own. So Olaf combs the kingdom to bring home the best traditions and save this first Christmas for his friends.

It's time to admit it...I think Christmas films are a bit rubbish. There are one or two 'classics' that have slipped through the cracks over the years, but the majority are a total cheese overload. Thankfully, I was rescued briefly by my daughter's current obsession with *Frozen*, so this resource focuses on the completely tolerable short film *Olaf's Frozen Adventure*. As it's under 20 minutes you could get away with showing

the whole film, but if time is short just focus on the timings above.

Olaf's Frozen Adventure sees Olaf (a walking, talking snowman, obviously) travel around the kingdom of Arendelle in search of the perfect Christmas tradition for Anna and Elsa to incorporate into their Christmas season. After spending their childhoods apart, Anna and Elsa are concerned that they haven't built up any family traditions or memories. As it's Olaf who is trying to help out, things don't quite go as planned, and he soon finds himself lost in the woods, running away from wolves and trying to protect a fruit cake...

In the clip we are focusing on, we see Olaf go door to door singing a catchy tune and researching the various traditions that are upheld in Arendelle.

DISCUSS

After showing the clip as a stimulus, break into small discussion groups (you may wish to have a designated discussion leader in each group) and consider the following questions:

- Do you have any Christmas traditions (you may need to explain this word for young groups) in your family?

- What is the most important part of Christmas for you and your family?
- What is the most exciting thing about Christmas?
- Which tradition was the best one for Olaf to choose?

After discussing the first set of questions, read through Luke 2:1-20 together (you may want to have a simplified version for your group) and return to your groups to discuss the next batch:

- Did you learn anything new from this story?
- What is the most important part of the story?
- Why do you think the shepherds were scared of the angels?
- Why was the baby in the story special?

You could turn the session into a Christmas movie party with snacks, decorations and games, as well as these discussions about the film.

TOM WADE

is head of humanities at Leventhorpe School in Sawbridgeworth.

Christmas number ones

ARTIST: Various

SUITABLE FOR: All ages

INTRODUCTION

It's time for the most coveted title in the UK singles chart to be announced. Who will be the Christmas number one? The reality is, the source of our festive celebrations rarely gets a look in at this time of year. Or does he? This session explores what it means to acknowledge and celebrate Immanuel, God with us.

Before the session you'll need to collect together a selection of recent Christmas number one singles and print out the lyrics.

THE SESSION

Gather the children or young people together and begin the session by asking them who they think will win the number-one single spot this year. You could discuss (or perhaps debate) the most likely title grabbers, as well as asking your group if they can remember any of the winners from the last few years.

You could even challenge them to a sing-off to see how many they can remember.

Explain to the group that while these songs sometimes feature jingle bells and fluffy coats, the lyrics often seem to have little to do with the many different ways Christmas is celebrated, let alone acknowledging the birth of Jesus! But is that really the case? What if we look a little more closely?

Provide a Bible and ask someone to read Matthew 1:22-23. Explain that this verse reminds us of the words in Isaiah when the prophet told of the time when Jesus would come to his people. Check that the group understands the meaning of the name 'Immanuel' and explain that this name reminds us of God's presence in every circumstance and aspect of our lives.

Many of the songwriters will not have deliberately pointed to Jesus, but he is present in the world today, even when people don't recognise him. Human beings, made in the image of God, cannot help but point to him in some way through the creative gifts he has given to us.

Allow time for the young people to play a selection of recent number ones and take a look at the lyrics. As they do so, challenge them to go looking for the evidence of

Immanuel, God with us. Ask the group to consider the following questions:

- Do these lyrics refute the existence of God?
- Do they somehow point to Immanuel?
- What glimpses do you see of humans created in the image of God?
- How might Jesus respond to the questions being asked of, or about, him in this song?

Remind the group that not all songs speak to us in this way, and we shouldn't try to find links that are so tenuous they are barely there. Yet there are ways God can speak to us even through songs that were not intentionally written about him.

As you draw the session to a close, challenge your young people to spend some time in the week ahead looking for signs of Immanuel, God with us, even in the most unlikely of places.

BECKY MAY

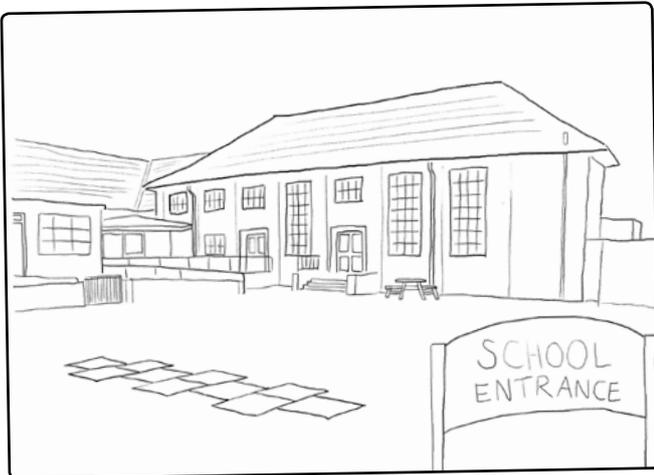
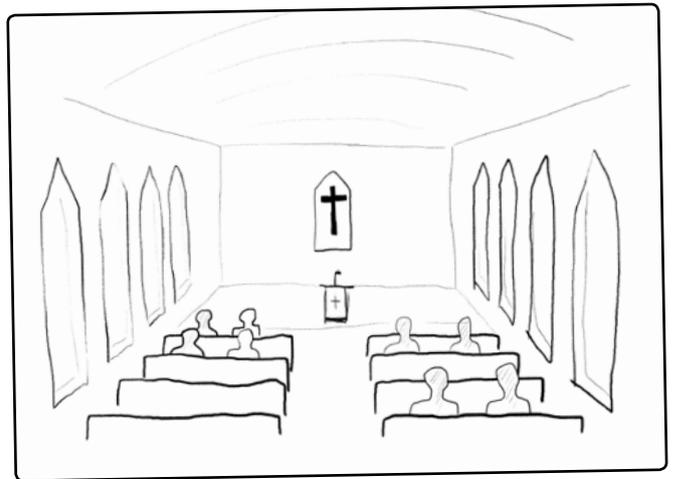
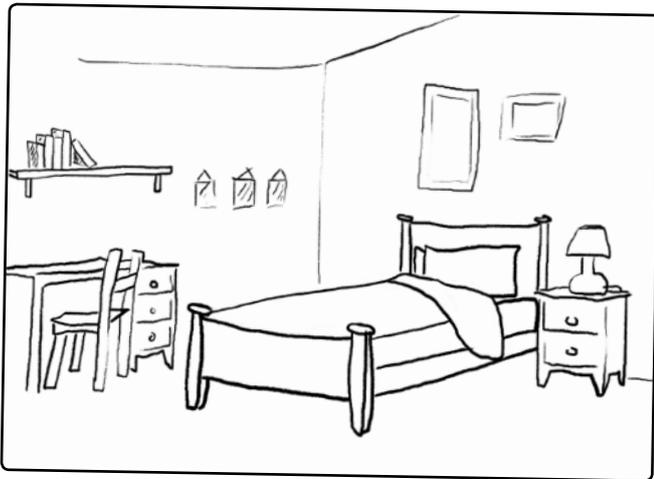
is a freelance writer and experienced children's and youth leader. She can be found at theresourcescupboard.co.uk.

GOD WITH US

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"

John 1:14.

At Christmas time we remember God coming to earth as a human: Jesus, the word, becoming flesh. Imagine Jesus being physically present in the places where you find yourself. Draw, doodle or write in the pictures below.



What difference does Jesus' presence make in these places?

Doodle your prayers around the pictures of how you want Jesus to change situations by being 'God with us'.