

# Church and Christmas During COVID-19

By Gillian Doucet Campbell and The Reverend Canon Leslie Gerlofs

This Christmas the Church will need, in the words of St. Paul in Romans 12:15, to 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep'. This article shares some ideas about how we can still meaningfully journey through Advent with our community despite pandemic restrictions. Together we can spread comfort and joy, not germs.

## Community Building & Collaboration



There is no reason to re-invent the wheel. A myriad of resources are within reach from the wealth and diversity of our diocese, fellow churches, and denominations, all waiting to be utilized in our Advent and Christmas services and online gatherings. So, while we may not all be able to gather in person, it's important to provide meaningful ways for our parishioners and beyond to feel welcomed and connected. Let's re-imagine with the ideas and tools already provided by others, incorporating them in a way that will make sense for our parishes.

As we know, this will not be "Christmas as usual". Christmas 2020 will bring new challenges along with opportunities. It will be hard for many parishioners as well as clergy and lay leaders. Recognizing that Christmas during this unsettling time may exacerbate the grief experienced by some we wanted to share the idea of hosting a "Blue Christmas" service or "Longest Night of the Year" service. This service is meant to acknowledge the birth of Christ in sacred simplicity with faith and belief, in a manner that is a bit less jubilant compared to a typical Christmas service, which can be painful for those coping with loss. This time together emphasizes the pain of loss felt by many at this time of year, and offer a somber, gentle space to gather. Symbolically, many of these services are held on or around December 21, the date of the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. Learn more about [Blue Christmas here](#).

Christmas is often a time when people outside the faith, or those unable to attend church regularly, might engage with church services. The family-friendly Christmas Eve service or candle-light service has family traditions built around it. It is a time when family and friends are open to going to church when invited, even if they don't attend regularly. However, this year, we need to prepare for the fact that many will not be able to, or prefer not to, gather with people during the pandemic, so attending an in-person service may not be a draw. This means it will be important to offer online church services that parishioners will want to invite family and friends to.

Here is a great 16-minute podcast called, [Reimagining Christmas – Episode 164 | The Unstuck Church Podcast](#) to get you thinking about how your church can create an online event that parishioners will want to share the link to, inviting friends and family to participate. [This resource too from Missional Commons](#) may also be inspiring and provide ideas for each day or week of Advent.

One tip we appreciate from the podcast is from Amy Anderson, a ministry consultant. She says, "you must include elements of nostalgia. As humans, we love tradition . . . Tradition makes us feel safe, and we're actually mentally healthier when we participate in traditions . . . as you think about Christmas music, you want to remember that kids are in the room, and as you choose songs, I just encourage you to think "Joy to the World," "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful" or "Silent Night," those tried and true traditional Christmas songs. Not the outliers, like "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" or "Angels from the Realms of Glory"."

If offering an online service is not something your parish is capable of, why not collaborate with another parish? For instance, in the Trafalgar region, seven parishes are coming together for Christmas service.

Each parish is responsible for a different aspect of bringing together diverse talents, including a hand bell choir and other special music, different readers, and people capable of video editing so the service can be shared online.



Another excellent idea is to ensure everyone in your parish knows they're invited to the [our diocesan Nine Lessons and Carols service](#) on Sunday, December 20, at 7pm. [Registration is available here](#). To make the event more community-oriented invite parishioners to gather before the service begins on Zoom or another platform. Maybe host an ugly Christmas sweater contest or another fun event with voting and prizes. You might gather to sing a carol, hear a Christmas poem, or simply to chit-chat. Gathering even for 30 minutes with a little agenda may be just the ticket to bring on the Christmas spirit.

You may consider dropping off or mailing Christmas cards signed by the rector and wardens that could include a recipe for mince pies and packages of hot apple cider, hot chocolate, or mulling spices. Then have parishioners join in a Christmas toast before Nine Lessons and Carols. Or maybe offer a Christmas drive-thru blessing during Advent where parishioners will receive a card that includes an invite to Nine Lessons and Carols and a hot drink mix.

If you are offering an online Christmas Eve service, have people register so you can mail or drop-off taper candles – one for each member of the household. How beautiful would it be to see the gallery view on Zoom lit up by candles? Again, offer comfort through tradition during this unsettling time.

When thinking of your Christmas day service, consider keeping it short and simple. If you offer this service online you may be surprised to see more families tune in this year. This is likely because they can attend from the comfort of their own homes rather than trying to get the children dressed and ready on an already full day or perhaps an emotionally hard day due to this unsettling time. With that in mind, why not make the service very family-focused? Maybe encourage Christmas P.J.s and offer the story of Jesus' birth through the telling of a modern story; there are lots of great children's books that have this as their focus. Again, this is the time to re-imagine church. While we do not want to lose sight of the importance and significance of this time, it is okay to be aware of our audience and what they may need to hear.

## **Communication**

This is a time to communicate using all the communication tools you have to ensure parishioners know what's coming up and how to register when needed. Increasing Facebook posts and other social media messages that are both informative and attention-grabbing is encouraged. If your parish Facebook group is private, ensure that event-specific posts are shareable; perhaps even promote a post or two!

This is also a good time to increase the use of the phone tree. Just as you would call those who do not use email or are not online, make sure parishioners who have not been engaging as much during COVID-19 receive a phone call inviting them to various Christmas events.

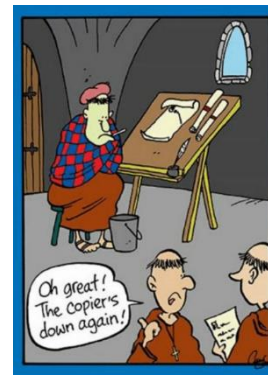
If you have a weekly e-blast you may consider an additional event-specific e-blast that clearly outlines an event or two. Ensure the invite is concise, sharing only the needed information and a graphic that reflects the event, again drawing on the heightened faith of the season. Make sure the subject line is engaging too. For instance, using the word "you" in the subject increases the likelihood of an email being opened. Encourage parishioners to share the event with those they would normally invite to church at Christmas.

Finally, you may consider a special mailing with a calendar of upcoming events for the season.

## Financial Giving

The month of December is a pivotal month for charities and not-for-profits, including churches. In fact, 28% of charities raise upwards of 50% of their donations in December. In the Church, this is the time of year when larger gifts and higher offerings through plate giving – gifts above and beyond pre-authorized, envelope, and other pledged giving – are given. But this year, that will likely not be the case.

The good news is that most charitable giving happens because people are asked, which means, you must ask. Perhaps making phone calls are in order, in addition to the pledge letter or annual campaign ask. These phone calls could be made by the envelope secretary, the wardens, corporation members, the treasurer, a member of the stewardship committee, or the rector.



Cartoon by Inherit the Mirth

Start the call with gratitude – for their financial giving as well as for any volunteering they may have done over the year. Then ask if they have any questions or concerns about the church. Feel free to answer any questions, but do not gossip, dwell on deficits, or make speculations. Simply stick to the facts. For instance, while there may be a deficit, that is not the focus of the call. It is, of course, information you can share if asked what the financial position is of the church to date.

Also, talk about the impact the parish has been able to make during this unsettling time, and for the faith formation that continues despite the pandemic. Then remind them of how an additional gift is welcomed and ways in which they can make that gift to support the parish.

When making an ask for financial donations this season you may consider asking for a specific fund or project. Make sure the area donations will go to is well advertised and understood. Publicize the financial goal and provide regular updates through all communication tools. For more information on small campaigns please review, [“Brainstorming for a Church Fundraising Campaign? Here are some tips and fundraising event ideas” here.](#)

You may consider hosting an event that raises money for the church general fund. Like St. John’s, Burlington you could host a Holiday Soiree, where parishioners can order a wine kit from [13<sup>th</sup> Street Winery](#) and do a wine tasting online. During the event, have a mission moment with a call to action, making an ask to support the parish’s general fund or another fund. Provide a link in the chat for online donations as well as the church mailing address for those that prefer to mail their cheque. Delve deeper with: [“Brainstorming for a Church Fundraising Campaign? Here are some tips and fundraising event ideas”.](#)

## Final Thoughts

During the season of Advent, it is important to share ideas with parishioners for both corporate and personal worship. Check of this article, [“Practical Advent Ideas to Shine the Light of Christ”](#) for some wonderful ideas and [the Primate’s World Relief & Development Fund](#) is a great resource too.

Other ideas for Advent could include a book club. You may want to choose a book and host a weekly gathering via Zoom or another online platform. [Here’s a list of potential books](#), in case you don’t already have one in mind. You could also consider joining a book club. One suggestion is, to delve into Henri Nouwen’s “Life of the Beloved” — an inspirational meditation on living a spiritual life in a stressful and, at times, frightening world. Hosted by the Henri Nouwen Society. [Click here to learn more.](#)

A verse that gives great hope during the Advent season is John 1:5, which says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” We serve a great God who understands troubled times. While we may not always have the words or strength, God is always with us, shining the Light of Christ which brings hope, love, joy, and peace.

Want someone to brainstorm with or work out the details? Connect with Gillian Doucet Campbell, Director of Stewardship and Development at [gillian.dc@niagaraanglican.ca](mailto:gillian.dc@niagaraanglican.ca) or Canon Leslie Gerlofs at [revive@niagaraanglican.ca](mailto:revive@niagaraanglican.ca).

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