

Bags of Blessings! – Through Advent to Epiphany

'Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents,' is the opening line of the novel, 'Little Women', a well-loved classic. If we were to believe some parts of the media, Christmas 2020 is already spoiled or even cancelled – but that simply isn't true. Christmas will be different, but it will still be Christmas!

This little resource is a gift to you from a number of ordained women in Baptist ministry, throughout the UK, who have shared their ideas about how we can make Advent, Christmas and Epiphany really special for our churches, families and neighbours. The central idea is simple – to fill and deliver/post 'Goody Bags' to every household in our church, or our street, village or town. They could also be given to workers in care homes, health care settings, or to hostels and shelters.

We also offer some other ideas for multi-voiced/multi-participant Community Advent 'calendars' online, on your church notice board, in your church/home window, or indeed all of these!

Lastly, we have identified some books that we have found helpful in the past, and which offer a variety of resources from daily prayer, to liturgy, to crafts.

We hope you will enjoy choosing from the suggestions to bless others this Advent and Christmas season.

Getting Started

First of all, take a moment to think about what is realistically achievable.

For example:

Gift Bags

- Who do you want to give bags to?
- When do you want to gift the bags – for Advent or for Christmas?
- How many bags will you need to fill?
- How many items do you want to put in each bag?
 - For Advent, we suggest a minimum of five, one for each Sunday and one for Christmas Day
 - For Christmas we suggest twelve, one for each day, up to, and including, Epiphany
 - For the really adventurous, you have as many as twenty-five for Advent (or twenty-seven if you start on Advent Sunday, which this year is 29th November)
- How much can you afford to spend on items to fill them? Be careful – it soon mounts up!
- How will they be delivered – if you are posting, you need to factor in packing and postage costs.

Community Advent Calendars

- Who is it for?
- How many participants can you recruit?
- How will you share it?
- How will you sustain it for the whole of Advent and/or the Christmas Season to Epiphany

Using This Resource

This resource lists oodles of suggestions, so we are sure you will find something to inspire you. Whilst ideas have been grouped together, and some possible themes identified, the important thing is to have fun. Perhaps the key question to keep in mind is 'can I find things that are affordable and enjoyable, that will be meaningful for those to whom they are given?' Anything beyond that is a bonus!

We have included some photos, and whilst the ideas aren't copyright, the images are, so please don't steal them! Where possible we have credited the donor of the images.

To help with patterns and templates, we have included links to websites. Please be aware that links to websites and videos are indicative only, and their inclusion does not constitute endorsement of the site/organisation. We have also added some suggestions of places, on the high street and online, where you may be able to find items you would like to include.

Lastly, we need to be aware of the impact of Covid-19 on what we can and cannot do. Please be wise as serpents as well as innocent as doves. Please adhere to current laws and guidelines as implemented locally, as well as the advice from your Baptist Union (BUGB, BUS, BUW as appropriate). Stay safe, help keep others safe, and be Good News!

Finding a Theme

Advent as a season offers all sorts of opportunities for creativity, whether we follow one of the 'traditional' Advent themes or create something of our own. Sometimes it's helpful to have some ideas to get our creative juices working, so here are a few to start off with...

- Love, Joy, Peace, Hope, Christmas
- Symbols from the story, e.g. star, angel, sheep, gifts, Jesus
- Blessings and prayers
- Laughter – gifts chosen for their comic value
- Treats – gifts chosen to be a little bit indulgent

Of course, these can be mixed and matched just as you like, to bring a little bit of 'sparkle' to those who receive the Bags of Blessing, to create a fantastic Community Advent Calendar, or even a combination of the two.

Bags of Blessing

The Gift Bag

Choosing the bag is quite important as it is the first thing the recipient will see.

It needs to be large enough to comfortably hold the items you have chosen, but not so large they seem lost inside it.

If possible, choose a bag that is beautiful or fun. Some suggestions include:

- Organza gift bags
- Party bags
- Patterned paper bags or gift bags
- Brown paper 'lunch' bags customised with glitter, paint or marker pens

If you will need to post your bags out, keep in mind the thickness as well as the weight, if you can keep within the 'large letter' size that is ideal as costs can soon become huge!

The Gifts

Angels

Angel cut-out from card or paper, which can be decorated and hung on a tree

Angel shape in plywood

A small piece of tinsel, to symbolise a halo

Knitted or crocheted angels.

<http://www.christmasangel.net/>

<https://www.anneclarkhandmade.co.uk/christmas-angels/>

<https://northpolechristmas.com/angel-template.html>

<https://coloringhome.com/printable-angels>



Photo: Catriona Gorton

Sheep

Make sheep using pom-poms, corks or decorated pebbles

Cut a sheep shape from card and decorate with wool or cotton wool

A small length of yarn to symbolise the wool of the sheep

<https://craftinvaders.co.uk/cute-cork-sheep/>

<https://onelittleproject.com/pom-pom-sheep/>

<https://coloringhome.com/sheep-template-printable>

<https://www.redtedart.com/30-cute-lamb-sheep-crafts/>

Stars

Sheet of gold – or coloured - star stickers

Large star sticker

Star shape in plywood

Star shape gift tag

Star shape cut from card or paper

Doves

Dove shape in plywood/wood

Origami peace dove/crane

Dove shape with concertina wings to thread through

Dove cut from paper or card

Dove brand toiletries (travel size)

<https://www.instructables.com/id/Origami-Peace-Crane/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEXWFOA5Kdw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9okDup2dBNl>



Photo: Jo Regan

Magi/Wise Ones

Paper crown of the kind found in a cracker

Crown shape cut from card or paper

Golden chocolate coin

Star-themed item

Frankincense and myrrh scented candle/tealight

Potpourri/lavender/roses petals in a small organza bag

Drawer liners/sachets

'Gold' chocolate bar

Baby Jesus

Pebble painted to look like baby Jesus

Printed nativity scene to colour

Nativity scene stickers

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/anderson9134/baby-jesus-pebbles/>

Candles

Single Advent Candle with days 1 – 25 marked

Hanukkah/Chanukah candle(s) – beeswax colourful candles that typically burn for about 20 minutes

Mini Advent Wreath set with birthday cake candles:

four red/pink birthday cake candles and one white;

three purple/blue, one pink and one white

Tealight – actual or electronic

Votive candle with a message added such as ‘the light of the world’ or ‘the light shines in the darkness’

Candle shape cut from paper or card

The Journey

A footprint, cut from paper

A bookmark with footprints design

A sheet of paper to fold as a tent: ‘God pitched his tent among us’

Tissues – to wipe away tears



Photo: Ali Taylor

Edible Treats

Heart shaped chocolate

Chocolate coins

Mini pack of Love Heart sweets

Chocolate tree decoration

Sachet of Fairtrade hot chocolate

Sachet of instant Fairtrade coffee

Individual Fairtrade teabag

Sachet of cuppa-soup – a hug in a mug

Baby Bel cheese (or individual cheese portion) – baby Cheeses (Jesus)

Prewrapped slice of cake e.g. Mr Kipling - piece (peace) to all

Recipe card – for biscuits, sweets or other treats

Sour sweets – to symbolise that Christmas isn't all sweetness and light; Herod (if including Epiphany)

<https://www.clipper-teas.com/>

<https://ukshop.divinechocolate.com/uk/shop/products/divine-chocolate/divine-milk-chocolate-coins/>



Photo: Catriona Gorton

Pamper Treats

Travel size toiletries

Sachet of hand lotion

Scented tealight

Potpourri/lavender/roses petals in a small organza bag

Drawer liners/sachets

Festive Fun

Baubles – small, plastic ones!

Cut out bauble

Ply-wood bauble shape

Christmas tree chocolates

Paper chains (3 or 4 strips per bag)

Fir cones

Bubbles solution

Bells – cut out from paper or card

‘Cat’ bells

Party popper - **do not send by post (explosive)**



Photo: Catriona Gorton

Craft Starters

Small pot of playdough

Single (wrapped) strip of plasticene

Stickers, shapes, Pritt stick (or similar) and card blank

Googly eyes, scraps of fabric and glue to make sock puppets or finger puppets

Small pack of crayons

Recipe and/or bag of dry ingredients for ‘pray-dough’

<https://www.familyeducation.com/fun/playdough/play-doh-recipes>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/706431891542440729/>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/581668108095655033/>

Cards and Stationery

Pen, pencil,

Marker pen – to mark the moment

Highlighter pen – to highlight the good things

Notebook

Diary

Calendar Tab (often available in packs of 50)

Calendar – design your own using your computer, or templates readily available on-line

Postcard or Christmas Card

Prayer and Blessing

Print a blessing on a card – or do two, one to keep and one to give away

Beads and thread – make your own prayer beads

Knotted thread – each knot to represent a prayer

Teaspoon – real or cut-out! TSP – Thank you, Sorry, Please

Bookmark with a text, prayer or blessing, bought or make your own

Holding cross, or cross-shaped card

Finger labyrinth – these are expensive to buy, but can simply be drawn or printed on card

<https://www.labyrinthociety.org/download-a-labyrinth>

<http://www.wellfedspirit.org/welcome/spiritual-practices/labyrinths/ewExternalFiles/Finger%20Labryinth%20Guide02.pdf>

Five Smooth Stones

A set of five pebbles, would make a lovely complete gift, or could be the gift for 'week 1'.

Love

Joy

Hope

Peace

Jesus

'Love' Themed Gifts

Any of the items from the 'Treats' sections

Heart shape cut from plywood

Heart shape cut from card or paper

Heart shape gift tag

Pebble with 'love' and/or a heart painted onto it

Card or colouring incorporating the word 'love'

Bible text about love on a bookmark, card, keyring, pencil etc.

'Hope' Themed Gifts

Candles

Packet of seeds to plant (flowers or vegetables)

Packet of wildflower seeds (many websites supply packs with customisable messages)

Flower bulb to plant (check planting times!)

Fir cone

Ear of wheat (real or cut-out)

Pebble with 'hope' and/or a 'pray' emoji painted onto it

Card or colouring incorporating the word 'hope'

Bible text about hope on a bookmark, card, keyring, pencil etc.

'Joy' Themed Gifts

Any of the treats, or anything that is a bit of fun

Bubble mix

Balloons

Words of a Christmas Carol

Pebble with 'joy' and/or a smiley face painted onto it

Card or colouring incorporating the word 'joy'

Bible text about joy on a bookmark, card, keyring, pencil etc.

'Peace' Themed Gifts

Any of the dove ideas

Pebble with 'peace' and/or a dove painted onto it

A few dried peas (peace) in a clear bag

Card or colouring incorporating the word 'peace'

Bible text about peace on a bookmark, card, keyring, pencil etc.

Community Advent Calendars

All children, and many adults, love the excitement of opening the door on an Advent calendar to reveal the next image, text or small gift. The ideas here are a bit different, as they are intended to be created by, and used in, community – whether that is the local church or the wider community. They range from ideas to be used in the home, to ideas to share online or on the church noticeboard, and of course to bless those around us.

Pradvent Calendar (Prayers)

This is one that can be made and delivered/posted to people's homes, or as a download for them to make themselves. It can also be done 'virtually' as a daily post on a church website, Facebook page or blog.

For the physical calendar...

There are lots of advent calendar 'blanks' available online, which you can simply print off and add a prayer request for each day, or you could design your own, simply dividing a sheet of A4 card into 25 boxes. You can have an 'open' calendar, or you could print a second sheet of 'doors' which can be opened. Do think about who you are sending this too – it can be quite fiddly if you have actual 'doors' or 'flaps'.

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/155303887213280376/>

Some ideas for prayer include...

Children	Lonely people
Teenagers	Homeless people
Local schools/colleges	People we find it hard to like
Teachers	The person next door/across the street
Parents	Work colleagues
Unmarried people	Local businesses
Married couples	People in [name of village/town/city]
Doctors & nurses	People affected by Covid19
MPs and those in leadership	People working for a vaccine
Those who work in retail	People in [name of country]
Those who work in hospitality	

A Photo a Day / A Text a Day / A Poem a Day / A Reflection a Day

This is a real opportunity for collaboration to produce something that can be shared online.

Set a theme for each day (or week) and invite people to contribute their items. Be alert to the potential for gaps, and or duplicates, and be gentle and kind to yourselves. Allow for artistic license, and be careful of copyright with music, video and printed word. These can be shared on your church website or Facebook page, or via a daily 'all church' email.

Some examples of themes include:

Love	Birth	Gold	Emmanuel	People of God
Joy	Waiting	Gift	Winter	Priests
Peace	Longing	Star	Cold	Pilgrims
Hope	Darkness	Angel	Sorrow	Mary/Mother
Journey	Light	Sheep	Prophets	Joseph/Father

Church Noticeboard/Window – Four Weeks, Four Ideas.

Who passes your church? Are there four lovely messages you would like to speak to them this Advent? Invite people to create a large poster or collage which can be displayed on your noticeboard or in a large window. Change them each Sunday and on Christmas Day itself.

Themes for the daily online Advent Calendar could be used, or you could have a bit of fun... what would make you smile on a dark, dreich, dull day as you trudged past the church?

Reverse Advent Calendar

This idea is now well known and often used, but worth thinking about...

It is best begun early, so that the gift can be delivered in good time to those we seek to bless (no-one wants mince pies or a chocolate Santa in the middle of January!).

Check with local foodbanks, homeless charities, women's refuges, asylum seeker networks, animal shelters etc., to see what they need. Collect 24/25 items, one per day of Advent, and put them in a nice box, which you can deliver no later than 20th December.

Useful Books

The books in the list reflect a variety of styles and theological understandings, and it is by no means exhaustive – they are books on our shelves! We delight in this diversity, and hope that within it you will find something helpful. Some may be out of print, but can often be obtained second hand.

Craft Ideas

Celebrations Sorted, Scripture Union 2007

Christmas Wrapped Up, Scripture Union 2003

Here's One I Made Earlier, Scripture Union 1995, reprinted 2002

Here's Another One I Made Earlier, Scripture Union 2000, reprinted 2003

The website <https://www.pinterest.com/> is great, though you need to register to access resources.

Liturgies and Prayers

Gathering up the Crumbs, Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2020

This book includes an excellent selection of reflections, prayers and meditations for Advent and Christmas, available from BUGB only.

https://www.baptist.org.uk/Shop/Products/500444/Gathering_up_the.aspx

Candles and Conifers – Resources for All Saints and Advent, ed. Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications, 2005

Doing December Differently – An Alternative Christmas Handbook, Nicola Slee & Rosie Miles, Wild Goose Publications, 2006

Hay and Stardust – Resources for Christmas to Candlemas, ed. Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications, 2005

Shine on Star of Bethlehem – A Worship Resource for Advent Christmas and Epiphany, ed. Geoffrey Duncan, Canterbury Press 2004

To Nativity and Beyond – Worship Resources for Advent Christmas and Epiphany, David Sinclair, St Andrew Press, 2016

Advent Guides

Blue Christmas: Devotions of Light in a Season of Darkness, Todd Outcalt, Upper Room Books, 2018

Celtic Advent – 40 Days of Devotions to Christmas, David Cole, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2018

Haphazard by Starlight – A Poem a Day from Advent to Epiphany, ed Janet Morley, SPCK 2013

Fiction

Jesus' Christmas Party, Nicholas Allan, various editions available.

The Christmas Mystery, Jostein Gaarder, Orion Children's Books 1999 (but it's great for adults too)

The Night Before Christmas - various – this well-loved tale is always worth sharing!

Where Can I Obtain Things?

We want to stress that you should think very carefully how much you want to spend before you start buying! One packet of four soup sachets may cost £1-£2 but if you need to buy a dozen packets, it starts to get expensive very quickly.

In these times, the importance of shopping local, supporting independent traders, choosing Fairtrade and other ethical choices are hugely significant. Whilst almost anything can be bought from Amazon or eBay, do see if things can be found on your local high street.

If you are fortunate enough to have a Christian book shop, Fairtrade store, Traidcraft rep, or Oxfam shop, see if they can help – many can order in stock for you if you ask.

These suggestions are not exhaustive, and are not endorsements of any outlet or brand.

On the High Street (and online)

Card Factory (budget) <https://www.cardfactory.co.uk/>

Hobby Craft (extensive and expensive) <https://www.hobbycraft.co.uk/>

Paper Chase (expensive) https://www.paperchase.com/en_gb/

Pound Land (budget) <https://www.poundland.co.uk/>

Pound Stretcher (budget) <https://www.poundstretcher.co.uk/>

The Works (budget) <https://www.theworks.co.uk/>

Wilkinsons/Wilko (budget) <https://www.wilko.com/>

On the Web

Baker Ross (craft) <https://www.bakerross.co.uk/>

Craft Shops Directory <https://www.craftshops.co.uk/>

Eden Books <https://www.eden.co.uk/>

Scripture Union <https://scriptureunion.org/>

SPCK <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/>

Amazon UK <https://www.amazon.co.uk> registration needed

eBay UK <https://www.ebay.co.uk> registration needed

Contributors

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