

Ideas for Reclaiming Advent and Christmas

During Advent we anticipate and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. In modern-day culture, Christmas has become a season of consumption. As Christmas approaches we face many choices regarding shopping, schedules and more. In addition to consumer dilemmas we are faced with spiritual dilemmas. On one hand we want to observe Advent and wait for the Christ child; on the other we want to shop and wrap and bake and run ourselves ragged with all the trimmings.

Ideas for Reclaiming Advent and Christmas is designed to help Presbyterians celebrate the birth of Christ in more meaningful ways than mainstream culture provides. Regardless of how you choose to celebrate Christmas this year, we hope you will have a life-giving, simple, and Christ-centered holiday season.



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Living in the Season

Society places many expectations on us (and we place expectations on ourselves) to create “the best Christmas” by outdoing each other and what we did last year. Avoid becoming exhausted by deciding early in the season what will be meaningful for you. Then be intentional about choices throughout the season.

Be Intentional: If you feel called to celebrate differently this year, talk with loved ones and explain why you have made the switch. Be gentle in your explanations and invite others to journey with you through the process. We need God and the people around us to assist on the journey.

Pray and Renew: Holidays can be a great time to teach, learn and write new prayers. Encourage visitors to pray and give thanks. Consider your family’s everyday prayer life, too. Rotate who prays before each meal from person to person, year to year, so everyone has an opportunity to pray. Consider these prayers from the PC(USA) Advent site: www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/prayers-advent/.

Advent Daily Calendar: Using the hymn “People, Look East,” this simple daily calendar from PC(USA) Environmental Ministries encourages daily caring for God’s creation as a way to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Savior of the world: www.presbyterianmission.org/environment/.

Share the Work: The holidays are times of sharing, so encourage everyone to help with preparation. Decide as a family how you want to celebrate; let go of nonessentials to make room for more quality time. Invite others to contribute a dish, table decoration, prayer or other contribution, creating a table filled with the gifts of friends and family.

Slow Down, Make It Memorable: When we get caught up in shopping and preparations, it is easy to forget about Christ. Relax. Savor both the season and Christmas Day. Christmas is a holy day and the focus should be on God, not on materialism.

Share Traditional Stories: Share your heritage through stories. Encourage questions and dialogue about holiday traditions past and present. Discuss the origin of traditions as you engage in them. Retell the story of the birth of Christ as you set a Nativity scene.

Remember: Take time to remember loved ones who have passed on. Recall stories to honor each one. If you have experienced a recent loss, allow time to grieve and care for yourself. The holidays are particularly difficult for those who are mourning. Cherish the joys of life amidst the bustle of the season. Reach out to those you know are mourning or missing someone special this season.

Serve Someone: Volunteer at a local shelter, food bank, community center or church. Other forms of service and outreach

you can embrace this Christmas include food donations, meal delivery, and opening your home to newcomers. Contact the Presbyterian church near you or search opportunities by zip code at www.serve.gov or www.volunteermatch.org.

Share the Wealth: Take up a collection at your meal to support local efforts to alleviate hunger, or have your guests bring nonperishable items to donate. Support the ministry of the Presbyterian Hunger Program by getting involved in campaigns, practicing lifestyle integrity, and providing financial support: www.presbyterianmission.org/hunger.

Retreat and Rest: Plan to go on retreat for an overnight or weekend in December. Treat yourself to quiet time and a change of pace. Incorporate prayer, views of nature, art – whatever feeds your soul and engenders holy rest in this holy season. At minimum make sure you honor your body as God’s holy temple by getting plenty of rest this season.

Greenery as Life, Creation, and Renewal

We celebrate the birth of our Savior during Christmas. With the onset of winter, there are fewer signs of life, which can make it difficult to celebrate birth and renewal. The church has traditionally remembered Christ’s birth through the introduction of signs of life during the season of Advent:

Advent Wreaths: Rather than purchasing a fresh or artificial Advent wreath, you can make one. The lower branches of a Christmas tree that were cut to fit it into a stand make excellent wreath material. Find local and organic options for greenery by visiting a local farm or farmers’ market. Use beeswax candles in your wreath. They are organic and biodegradable.

“O Christmas Tree”: While there may not be a Biblical basis for having a Christmas tree, bringing greens and signs of life into our homes has become a standard part of Christmas tradition. If you have an artificial tree, it is best to use it as long as you can. If you purchase a live tree, go local. Visit a tree farm for a memorable outing with family or friends. After the holidays, treecycle!

Plant Indoors: Plant winter bulbs such as amaryllis and paper whites for dramatic, fragrant blooms. These plants are exciting for kids to watch because they grow quickly. Decorate a living tree or large houseplant inside your home instead of cutting down a tree.

Edible Decorations: Attract wildlife outside with edible decorations. Coat pinecones with organic nut butter and roll them in seeds. Make garlands out of air-popped corn or chunks of stale bread. If a tree is close to a window in your home, keep watch for visiting animals. Make it educational and try to identify as many species as you can.

Holiday Gifts

The Magi traveled a long distance to bring gifts to Jesus. Their gifts honored the child and provided for the family. Today, gift giving can be a tricky topic. Like the Magi, we should find simple gifts that honor our loved ones while honoring Christ and remembering why we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

Hundred Dollar Holiday: Read the book *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas*, by Bill McKibben, and talk with loved ones about how together you can reign in spending and tap your creativity to honor each other in faith-filled ways.

Skills: If you are gifted with crafts, music, dance, or other talents, give the gift of knowledge. Gifting a series of lessons empowers the people you love with new skills and abilities while passing on traditions and heritage.

Games: You can give board games or a deck of cards along with a promise to play with those who receive them. Teaching a new card game to a child or adult is a lasting gift they can share with others.

Meals: Give the promise of food and meals to people on your list. Promising to eat lunch with loved ones at their workplace or school once a month is a great way to spend more time together.

Homemade Gifts: Knitted items, framed photos, handcrafted toys, works of art, and other personally made gifts show care and concern for the recipients because they require time and thought to create.

Commitment: Make a commitment to someone this season. Find ways to serve the people on your list by committing to care for them. You might shovel snow, prepare meals, plan events, or schedule a vacation.

Gifts of Giving: Donating to a cause that is dear to a loved one honors God by supporting local, national or international ministries. Consider supporting the Presbyterian Hunger Program by donating online: www.presbyterianmission.org/givelhunger.

Fair Trade Items: Selecting fair trade answers God's call to liberate the oppressed and set the captives free. Coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate, and snacks from the Presbyterian Coffee Project make great gift baskets or stocking stuffers, and fair trade handicrafts support the self-development of people worldwide: www.presbyterianmission.org/fairtrade.

Just Gifts: Find listings for green and/or justly made gifts at www.greenamerica.org/green-business-index.

Trees, Plants, and Landscaping: Providing seeds or cuttings from your own garden, teaching someone to garden, helping someone plan a garden, or planting a tree together are all great gifts.

CFLs or LEDs: It can be expensive to fit a whole house with Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs) or Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs), but the electricity savings quickly offset the initial cost. Give them CFLs or LEDs, and each month your loved ones will thank you as they pay lower electric bills.

Reusable Gift Wrapping: Minimize the impact your gifts have on local landfills by packaging them in reusable or biodegradable materials. Use a gift bag or basket. Wrapping gifts in blankets or table linens creates practical and reusable packaging options. Search online for tutorials on using fabric as gift wrap.

Gift Exemption: Consider giving loved ones a Holiday Gift Exemption Voucher, such as the one offered at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/One-Less-Gift-postcard.pdf>

Holiday Foods

Food plays an important role in holiday gatherings. Many Bible stories tell of God providing food for the weary. As Christians we can be conscientious about where our food comes from and how it is produced, so that our food choices sustain life rather than injustice. Here are some ways to embody the life of Christ through your eating and food preparation this season.

Cook and Bake Responsibly: Many baking items such as sugar, cocoa, vanilla, and spices are harvested under grueling conditions. The people who bear the brunt of hard work and low pay are the most vulnerable: women and children. Purchasing fair trade baking goods, as well as snacks, chocolate and beverages helps prevent child labor and oppressive working conditions and ensures workers a fair wage. Natural food stores in your area should sell products with the Fair Trade seal; if you don't find what you need ask the store manager to stock it.

Select Organic Foods: Organic foods are made without pesticides, hormones and other potentially harmful chemicals. Buying organic helps prevent such chemicals from polluting water systems, soil and air. Organic farming reduces farm workers' and consumers' exposure to potentially harmful chemicals.

Keep It Local: Local foods require less energy to transport to your table and help minimize your environmental impact. Visit www.localharvest.org for markets and farms in your area. Purchase locally sourced meats from free-range, organic producers. For help choosing foods that suit your needs visit www.sustainabletable.org. Consider creating a vegetarian or vegan feast from local farm goods.

Minimize Waste and Packaging: While recycling is far better than adding waste to landfills, buying items with no packaging or reusable packaging is the best option. Compost raw food scraps as a way to enhance your or a neighbor's garden soil.

Resources for Further Study

We hope the information in this guide will assist you as you consider ideas for reclaiming Advent and Christmas. However, there are many other resources that can assist us as we strive to live responsibly in the world. We have compiled a brief list of some resources that provide excellent information for further study and reflection.

- ★ **Just Living Web site:** Access other seasonal and holiday materials. Explore how individuals, couples and families can practice faith in daily life at www.presbyterianmission.org/justliving.
- ★ **Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas:** by Bill McKibben. A delightful road map to spending less and celebrating more. Learn more at www.billmckibben.com/hundred-dollar-holiday.html
- ★ **Local Harvest:** Search by zip code to find markets and farms in your area: www.localharvest.org.
- ★ **Sustainable Table:** Find information on how to select locally raised foods at www.sustainabletable.org.
- ★ **Simplify the Holidays:** A program of the Center for a New American Dream at <https://newdream.org/simplify-the-holidays>.

Enough for Everyone

Our scripture and tradition call us to care for the natural world so that all may live abundantly. God cares deeply for all of creation and seeks to preserve the diversity of life. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to live in accord with the call to economic and environmental justice, and the Presbyterian Hunger Program aims to assist individuals in living a just life that honors God.

At the heart of the Presbyterian Hunger Program is a deep concern for global economic justice and a commitment to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with integrity. We are called by God in Christ to bring good news and to proclaim release to those held captive by human structures and injustices. Living as global disciples means evaluating our lifestyle choices. Adopting changes for individual and congregational lifestyle integrity witnesses to our faith and God's creation.

Join us for a Fair Trade Delegation to visit the producers behind our fair trade gifts and products. Visit www.presbyterianmission.org/delegations for more information on upcoming opportunities.

Just Living is produced by the Presbyterian Hunger Program. Your financial support enables PHP to witness to the healing love of Christ and to bring hope to communities and individuals struggling with hunger. Give online at www.presbyterianmission.org/givelhunger. Or mail your check, made out to PC(USA) with "H999999 Hunger" on the memo line, to PC(USA), Box 643700, Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3700. Thank you!

Download this resource at www.presbyterianmission.org/justliving. Or order by calling Presbyterian Distribution Service at (800) 524-2612 and request PDS #25432-08-373.



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