

WHAT DO YOU BRING TO CHRISTMAS?

...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; ... John 1:14 (RSV)

Statement of Purpose

To realize that Christmas is largely what we bring to it—personal ideas of its meaning, family traditions, experience.

To create a desire to “grow” in what we bring to Christmas.

Pre-Program Planning

Perhaps this is a “mini-Christmas-retreat” rather than a program, for its effectiveness depends on how meaningfully those who participate can involve all present in the experience. Inasmuch as it is also a “Christmas-think-through,” it can be adapted to your group by selecting and developing other “what you bring to Christmas” ideas, based on their needs. See Broadening the Program.

Each person attending should receive (*at a previous meeting or with an invitation*) a large star (*four or five inches across*) with a thread for hanging it on a tree, and these instructions:

1. Write on one side of the star “Something you bring to Christmas.” (*Do not go into detail, leave room for questioning.*)
2. Bring this star and a wrapped package (*value not more than 50 cents, suitable for an exchange*) to the Christmas meeting.
3. Place the gift under the tree before taking your place in the group.

A leader and eight (*more or less, depending on your needs*) participants will need to choose and rehearse material so that it can be presented naturally (*not word for word*), reading only the quoted selections, or developing original material. Especially important is a communicative and adaptable leader. If you do not have eight participants, let individuals do more than one part.

Arrange the room so that all corners sit in a circle composed of as many rows of chairs as needed, and with openings at two opposite sides: one for people to enter and the other having an undecorated Christmas tree with a crèche beneath it. Keep inner row of seats open for planned participants.

You will need hymnals or copies of carols selected and a record player. Worship Resources are incorporated in the program.

Broadening the Program

1. Make a banner or pair of banners; use a joyous theme, such as “For all that has been, thanks! And for all that will be, yes!” Make on clear plastic with ‘contact’ letters, and hang as a mobile. Have a place prepared to hang them.
2. Consult Optional Resources for other ideas to bring to Christmas.

Program Resource

Leader: We have come to prepare for Christmas by taking a look at what we bring to that Festival, that Celebration, that Holy Day—for Christmas is all of these. Many of you asked, “What did they mean for us to write on our star about What Do You Bring to Christmas?” You tried to analyze it and make it hard, or you decided you didn’t understand and wrote nothing. And then I see that some of you have come with a star full. Let’s see what we come up with.

One thing I’m sure most of us bring to Christmas is a love of its music, so let’s sing for a few minutes. (*Choose carols and hymns, ending with “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” If desired, there could be “special” music here.*)

And now, what have you brought to Christmas?

Participant 1 – GREAT EXPECTATIONS (*holds up star with words GREAT EXPECTATIONS printed on it*): I bring great expectations. I always approach the Christmas season with a sense of hope—a feeling that something wonderful not only has happened, but will happen again this year in me and in others who are somehow a part of me. I’m glad we light the advent candles and make advent wreaths at this time of year; for they say to me that this is a time of preparation for what will happen. I’ve been reading Michel Quoist’s book, “Christ is Alive”, as my spiritual preparation for Christmas this year. That takes planning for me. I’m so apt to spend more time on the exterior preparations than the interior ones that I need to set my priorities early. I read this quotation from Michel Quoist as a symbol of the great expectations I bring to Christmas this year:

“Jesus Christ did not choose to use heaven as a podium from which to give man directions for the proper use and development of creation; and he did not choose to hand over a detailed set of instructions. Instead, he came down and entered into creation itself, into human flesh and human life, in order to give roots and sap to the plant which is to bear the fruit of eternity.”

That gave me something to think about.

Participant 2 – JOY (*holds up a star*): I’m not nearly as serious about Christmas as (*who just spoke*). I couldn’t write on that star what I bring to Christmas. Oh, I did write a word—joy. And I know we weren’t supposed to bring a thing, but I can’t think of Christmas without expressing it tangibly, so I bring this new kind of banner I made for our circle this year, as a symbol of the joy I bring to Christmas (*hangs banner*). My favorite Christmas hymn is “Joy to the World,” and one of the best parts of Christmas for me is seeing the joy so many people have at this time, especially people who aren’t usually that joyful. I really don’t go into the reasons very deeply—I’m just one of those who like the idea that the church is “celebrating” so much these days. Maybe letting the youth in on more things did that. And when is a better time to feel joyful than at Christmas?

Participant 3 – NOSTALGIA (*holds up a star*): When I started thinking of what I bring to Christmas, I began reminiscing. I remembered Christmases of the past. I suppose I’m a traditionalist, because I don’t bring much to Christmas except what our families

had. We still hang our stockings—like my family. We open our gifts on Christmas morning—that’s what my husband’s family did. I like this feeling of tradition. In fact, I think Christmas is mostly a time for children. I liked it best when each child in church school spoke a piece or sang a song at the Christmas Eve program. And it was so much fun when Santa gave out sacks of candy and nuts to each one. I suppose, in a way, Jesus will always be a baby to me, because that’s the way I like best to think of Him. It’s such a beautiful story—the baby in the manger, and the star and the shepherds and all that. I just want to keep Christmas beautiful, and as a symbol of that, I wish you’d all sing “Away in the Manger” with me. (*All sing*).

Participant 4 – BUSYNESS (*holds up a star*): I suppose you might say that I bring my good intentions to Christmas. Every year I intend to make Christmas something better, but, before December is half through, I’m honestly so tired with all the shopping and extra meetings and parties and wrapping gifts, to say nothing of the baking and cooking, that I could not care less when December 25th actually gets here. I’m really all mixed up, because I think Christmas means giving, but by the time I’ve helped the kids with their gifts, then ours for them, and we have fixed plates of homemade goodies for the neighbors—not to mention all the Christmas cards—well, about all the giving I have left is just “giving up.” It does bother me sometimes, though, and I wonder if busyness is enough to bring to Christmas? The other day a friend of mine gave me a page from the 1971 Response Magazine for December, and it had a great idea called “Christmas Contact 1971” by Jeanette Struchen. I’ve cut out this one paragraph and just happened to have it in my purse, hoping it would rub off some way. Would you like to hear it?

“No one knows Christmas who has not tried it in the spirit of simplicity. The virtue of the celebration is that it has nothing to do with pressure and exhaustion. It has everything to do with discovery of new vitality and fresh buoyancy. It has nothing to do with unraveling nerves and fraying dispositions over shopping and wrapping. It has everything to do with timelessness which sets into perspective our tangled nerves. Christmas is a season to find one’s bearings.”

I like that.

Participant 5 – QUESTIONS (*holds up a star*): Maybe you will think I’m some kind of a nut, but I bring to Christmas a lot of questions. Would you mind if I read to you the Christmas story from Luke, and then tell you some of my questions? (Read Luke 2:1-20 RSV) It’s really that 14th verse that bothers me most. The angels sang “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.” It’s been almost 2,000 years, and it doesn’t seem to me that “peace on earth” is any closer now that it was then. I brought just a few clippings from magazines and papers I’ve read recently. Listen to these headlines (*substitute timely ones*):

- Booby-trapped Package Kills Israeli Attaché at Embassy in London
- Correspondent Describes Terror of Detention in Uganda
- American Planes Mine Rivers and Canals in South Vietnam

Does that sound much like peace on earth among men with whom he is pleased? Sometimes I wonder why God doesn’t finish what he started. Or haven’t we really understood what it means that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of

grace and truth”? Now please don’t misunderstand me—I do believe in Christmas—it’s just what we’ve done with it that bothers me. And so, I guess I must say that I bring questions to Christmas.

Participant 6 – SORROW (*holds up a star*): I bring sorrow to Christmas, but I think it should have come back there with (*Participant 2 speaker*) when she said she brought joy to Christmas. Because maybe the sorrow I bring has to be related, somehow, to what makes Christmas really joyful. I’ve been thinking of those for whom Christmas isn’t a happy time this year—people who have had great tragedy and pain and problems. What is there for those who bring sorrow to Christmas? I think this letter I received from a dear friend is part of the answer. May I read it?

“Dear (*name of Participant 6*),

Your letter was so sweet and helpful, for it always means much to know friends care when we are left alone. As you said, “time heals,” and I am beginning to find it easier to go to bed at night and know that no warm hand will be there to reach out and touch mine.

But one thing you said I must answer: “I’m so sorry it happened just before Christmas, for I’m sure it will make that holiday always sad for you.”

Christmas has always been a special time for us, as you know, and in one way you are right—it will never be the same. But in another way there’s a new dimension to Christmas this year—one I hadn’t realized before. It’s this: Christmas couldn’t have been, unless Easter were to come. If Jesus had just been born, it wouldn’t have mattered. It was Easter that finished the story. A God who cares that much about us can be trusted with my dearest one.

So don’t sorrow for me this Christmas time. Just say a special thanks to God for all that has been and will yet be. I wish you the most meaningful Christmas ever.

Love, Margaret

Participant 7 – WORDS (*holds up a star*): Perhaps what I am bringing to Christmas doesn’t seem as sentimental and moving as what the rest of you have brought. I bring words. And I hope you won’t think I’m making these words into a lecture just because I’ve written down one of them and what it says to me about Christmas.

I suppose part of this goes back to the Foundation Studies we had a few years ago in our adult class in church school. In the course called “God With Us” I was forced to do some real thinking, and I came up with a term that has added so much to my celebration of Christmas—the word “incarnation.” It was a word I’d never liked, because I didn’t understand it. Leslie Weatherhead, in “A Plain Man Looks at the Cross”, calls it “He wrapped Him in our clay.” Isn’t that a new definition of incarnation?

This is what Weatherhead says about it:

“I believe in Jesus’ real humanity....He is what God meant human nature to be like...Jesus Christ had all the values of God which a human life can express...God became man, and when a Timeless Being enters humanity...no one is excluded from the marvelous and blessed invasion...Christ, the eternal God, entered the human

family...and in spite of man's continual sinning, the human family can never be as though He had not joined it."

Isn't that a great thing to think about at Christmas time? To me it's what we mean when we say and sing "Emmanuel," which means God with us.

Participant 8 – EASTER (*holds up a star*): I wouldn't dare bring Easter to Christmas if it hadn't already been mentioned in the letter (*name of Participant 6*) read. But I've been thinking for a long time that we have to continue the fact of Jesus' birth on through the glory of the resurrection, or it is like an unfinished story. It's like making that beautiful promise, "God is with us," and then He pulls out just when we need Him most—when things get really hard. Christmas without Easter would be like planting a seed and nourishing it until it came through the earth, and then leaving it—never to find out what it was to become. Or like having a baby in your home, but being unwilling to take the responsibility for his growing up. Easter says "God is with us—all the way"; nothing can separate Him from us, even when we try. I hope you follow my reasoning in bringing Easter to Christmas.

(This participation can continue spontaneously if others wish to add what they "bring to Christmas," but the leader must use guidance and be aware of when to stop.)

Leader: Let's reflect a bit on what our friends tell us they are bringing to Christmas this year: music, great expectations, joy, nostalgia, busyness, questions, sorrow, word, Easter. Do you see yourself in here somewhere? Are you satisfied with what you are bringing to Christmas this year? On one side of the star you received, hopefully you wrote something that you brought to Christmas, possibly something that no one mentioned at all. As we listen to some Christmas music, let your mind search and find—and then write on the other side something that you'd like to bring to Christmas, remembering that what we bring is what we take. (*Allow several minutes for this, during the playing of recorded music, such as excerpts from Handel's Messiah.*)

Leader: As we are singing "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," you may, as you wish, hang your star on the tree. Then please pick up the package you left there when you came in and return to your seat with it. Keep it to take home with you, remembering that what you bring is what you take.

(When all have returned to their seats, allow time for spontaneous prayer and close with the following prayer.)

Our Father, we are coming to Christmas. It has become for many of us just a tradition, just a reenacting of an old story. Forgive us. It has the possibility of being a celebration of dynamic dimensions, but so much depends on us. You came, you stayed, you are with us. May we hear that loud and clear this Christmas time. And give us the willingness to bring to our celebration of this great event something we are satisfied to take away from it. Amen.

Action Suggestions

1. Compile and make available a list of good books and articles for Christmas reading.
2. Plan an adult study group on theology for the lay person, including “Christmas Theology.”

Optional Resources

1. Books

- a) Cumbers, Frank, ed. *Daily Readings* from Leslie D. Weatherhead. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1969.
- b) Hartman, Rachel. *Gifts of Christmas*. New York, Hawthorne Books, Inc.
- c) Maus, Cynthia P. *World's Great Madonnas*. New York, Harper & Row, 1947.
- d) Quoist, Michel. *Christ Is Alive*. New York, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1971.
- e) Society of Brothers, eds. *Behold That Star*. New York, The Plough Publishing House, 1966.

2. Magazines

- a) Dunn, Van Bogard. “God with Us,” *Foundation Studies*, 1967.
- b) *Alive Now* (fall 1972)
- c) *Youth magazine* (July 1971).

Frances Blessing Wagner

(Chapter BB's Christmas Program taken from the United Methodist Women's 1974 Program Book)