



Be a Star

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION DAY & LUNCH

A collection of ideas, resources and guidance
for planning a Christmas Celebration Day
& Community Christmas Lunch



Christmas
Appeal

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INTRODUCTION

This year's Christmas Celebration Meal Resource is based around the theme Love Came Down at Christmas. With this in mind, this resource focuses on how we are all neighbours, no matter who we are, where we have come from, whether we belong to The Salvation Army or are attending for the first time.

A service outline gives a basis for how you might lead the worship/carol service through before the celebration meal, but this can be split into three sections if you wanted to use a section before each part of a three-course meal.

The scripts are monologues featuring Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. These can be simply read, but if your selected volunteers for each monologue wanted to dress for the part that would be amazing!

For further support in how to use this resource, please contact the Older People's Ministries Team at olderpeoplesministries@salvationarmy.org.uk

God bless you in your continued ministry throughout this Christmastime.

The Older People's Ministries Team

GUIDANCE FOR RUNNING A CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION LUNCH

Christmas is a very beautiful time, but also challenging for many. These tips and suggestions are simply to help us think about how we can make it a good experience for all.

This 'To Do' checklist below can be used as reference for before you begin organising the event, and on the day.

TO DO CHECKLIST

Before the event:

- ☐ Book venue and run checks (Wi-fi availability to play videos, speakers for music etc)
- ☐ Edit and print/email out invitations (see editable template)
- ☐ Print/distribute Guest Information forms (available with invitation template)
- ☐ Edit timetables (for printing and display)
- ☐ Purchase Christmas cards (Christian-themed cards recommended)
- ☐ Organise/collect donations for gifts
- ☐ Purchase gift-wrap: brown paper bags / wrapping paper, gifts tags/ribbons (optional)
- ☐ Teatime treats such as packaged sandwiches, cakes etc
- ☐ Wrap gifts and write personalised Christmas cards
- ☐ Create seating plan (optional)
- ☐ Recruit and delegate volunteers (welcomers, befrienders, Nativity narrators, servers, cleaners etc)
- ☐ Print and provide menus (ensure these are easy to read)

For the service:

- ☐ Advent candle wreath/candles (optional)
- ☐ Nativity set with individual character pieces and stable
- ☐ Extra table
- ☐ Christmas present bag
- ☐ Star decoration / handmade silver star

For the lunch:

- ☐ Tablecloths
- ☐ Napkins
- ☐ Name place cards
- ☐ Cutlery
- ☐ Plates
- ☐ Cups
- ☐ Self-contained candles
- ☐ Small vases / recycled jam jars
- ☐ Fresh flowers (divide up a bouquet)
- ☐ Bottled drinks (Shloer, juices, water etc)
- ☐ Gravy boats

For the games (optional):

- ☐ Pass the parcel (wrapped gift with small packets of treats tucked in between each layer)
- ☐ Soft ball

GUESTS

Take a moment to imagine you are a guest attending the Christmas celebration lunch on your own. Think about the feelings that a guest might have, such as concerns and struggles with socialising, unfamiliarity with the building and other guests, previous negative church experiences or difficult Christmas memories. This will help you to be a mindful host and get the right people in suitable volunteering roles so everyone feels safe and secure.

Things to consider when thinking about who to invite and getting word out:

- ask corps members to invite neighbours
- liaise with local external agencies, eg health and social workers, Housing Department, schools, local community groups, local Lifehouses etc
- identify local members of Enabled (Fellowship of Endeavour) by contacting our Community Services Team -communityservices@salvationarmy.org.uk

PRAY

Gather staff and volunteers for prayer in the weeks leading up to the lunch and before guests arrive on the day. Those using this resource throughout the UKI Territory will have access to the United Prayer so the whole event is underpinned by prayer, which is powerful and acknowledges our need of God's help.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers come in all ages and there is always a part someone can play. Here are some ways volunteers can take part ahead of the event:

- invite potential guests
- buy and donate gifts, eg chocolates, unisex gloves/scarves/hats etc
- ask people to write cards and wrap gifts
- children could decorate brown paper bags for 'teatime treats' for guests to take home
- help create little menus for the tables
- offer to provide transport for guests/decorations/food needed on the day

Volunteers on the day can:

- help decorate and set up the venue
- welcome and befriend guests
- share short prayers during the service
- provide general assistance to guests
- cook and/or serve food
- help wash up and clean up

The list is endless, so don't do it all yourself - get the whole church family involved.

Tip: If you can create a team of volunteers, ensure that people know they can do 'come and go volunteering', meaning they don't have to be around all day and can leave once they have done their part. People are likely to volunteer if they are only required to help for a limited time rather than a full day.

For those who volunteer who would normally be the ones invited to the meal, let them know they are needed and ask them to take on a befriending role (see next section). Visit OurHub for more advice on volunteering or contact the Community Team.

WELCOMERS AND BEFRIENDERS

Ensure welcomers and befrienders have been well briefed and know what they are doing before guests arrive. See the 'Be a Star Befriender' supporting resource.

Allow time and space to let befrienders introduce themselves to the guests they will be sat next to for the meal. Remember that it can be daunting going into a new place, with new faces and not knowing who you will sit with. Give each guest a 'specific befriending volunteer' who they can go to throughout the day should they need any help or support, eg letting them know where the toilets are.

Print and display a running order of the day for everyone to see. For guests who may not be able to read, however, please have befrienders explain the timetable to them at the start. People generally feel more comfortable if they know what is happening and when it will happen.

Tip: Create a seating plan and name place cards so that people know they have an assigned seat for the meal.

BE A STAR BEFRIENDER

We are looking for volunteers to come alongside our guests at Christmas, to sit with them, eat Christmas lunch together and simply be a friend.

This is a very important volunteer role as it takes someone with good listening skills, a heart for other's wellbeing and the desire to help someone enjoy their day at what can be a difficult time for many.

Some key guidelines for 'Be a Star Befrienders':

- Ask about your friend's day. How are they?
- We have two ears and one mouth, so remember to listen twice as much as talking!
- Give plenty of time for your friend to talk. You may be the only person they have spoken to in a long time, especially if they live alone.
- Share something from your own day, especially if you have encountered some unexpected kindness.
- If you're struggling to get a conversation going, you could ask 'Which character do you think you'd have liked to be in the Christmas story?' and other open-ended Christmas-themed questions.
- Listen to any concerns or questions your friend may have - no concern is too small, and it can be helpful to share something even if there is no immediate solution.
- Offer encouragement where possible and try not to speculate.
- Encourage them to keep in contact with other friends and family as we start a new year. This may be a sensitive topic, so carefully ask about friends and family beforehand.
- Treat your friend with respect, politeness, kindness and honesty.
- Respect your friend's right to confidentiality.

Be a star and be aware...

- Your friend may not have good past experiences of Christmas.
- They may want to share stories of Christmas, but they may not if this is painful.
- They may be bereaved of a partner, family member or loved one and they may find Christmas difficult.
- They may not be used to eating in a group setting, so a gentle encouragement along the way may be needed, guidance to where they need to be seated. Offer some assistance if needed etc.

DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

We have all been uniquely created. Some of us love to chat, others not so much. Some of us enjoy playing games (see supporting Be A Star fun and games resource), while others participate by spectating rather than doing. That's all OK - it's human nature to have personal preferences and boundaries! Accept that everyone is different but try to facilitate opportunities for befrienders to chat and encourage guests to take part if they wish to or not.

SETTING THE SPACE

The aim is to create an inviting, comfortable, and safe atmosphere. Here are some suggestions:

- move chairs into small clusters so that no one feels left out
- have welcome coffee and tea ready for people arriving
- play festive music in the background to avoid an awkward silence and calm any nerves
- have a screen with the lyrics for people to read and follow carols being played

Tip: Be aware of those who are sensitive to loud noises; could there be a designated quieter space in the room? If you are expecting families, consider creating a play area for toys/books. See section on including people with disability.

SETTING THE TABLE

Lay out tablecloths, napkins, cutlery, printed menus, sauces, cups and bottles of drinks on tables. Ensure that gravy boats are provided rather than pouring it on someone's meal for them.

It may be the only time some people are joined with others around a table, so let's make it special. If safe to do so, place self-contained candles as table centrepieces alongside small vases or recycled jam jars filled with fresh flowers.

Tip: The flowerpots could be given as gifts at the end of the day to those volunteering as a thank you.

FOOD ALLERGIES / MEDICAL ISSUES

It is important to make note of any dietary requirements and food allergies (gluten, nut, dairy free etc) as all can be relatively easy to accommodate. Check Guest Information Forms carefully and consider gifts being offered, including chocolate which may contain unwelcome ingredients.

Tip: Highlight allergens in the menus provided, eg GF = gluten free, NF = nut free, contains egg/dairy etc. You can also make a note of allergies inside or behind name place cards for servers to see when serving food.

We recommend that you read and ensure you are implementing the correct Safe Mission procedures (requires access to OurHub).

(New legislation as of October 2021 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland requires all food businesses to list all ingredients on pre-packaged food including allergen labelling on foods packaged for sale on the premises. This does not apply to open food.)

GIFTS AND CARDS

Gifts could be confectionary, gloves, scarves etc. Perhaps ask for donations from the corps in the weeks leading up to the lunch and ask people to buy something they would be willing to wear themselves.

Volunteers can help wrap up the presents / write the tags and personalised Christmas cards if you have the names of guests in advance. This small gesture could mean so much to many.

Tip: Choose Christian-themed cards as this may be the only card some guests may receive.

TIME FOR TEA!

Have teatime goody bags ready for people to take home containing packaged food such as sandwiches and cakes. It would be helpful if this bag was big enough to also hold their gift, so they aren't worrying about how to carry everything.

Tip: Try to keep away from supermarket plastic bags and go more with a festive theme or brown paper bags decorated by children at the corps in advance.

TRANSPORT

Before offering transport to guests, consider seriously whether this is feasible, whether you have the resources to offer the provision and whether guests and volunteers would feel safe to share a vehicle. It may be that guests will need to find their own transport, but you could provide the contact details of any free local bus services, for example.

If you plan to use your corps minibus, then you should follow the guidance already in place in relation to:

- the training needed for the driver
- maintenance of the vehicle
- Risk Assessment for Use of Minibuses
- Guidance for Drivers checklist

All documents can be found on [OurHub Safe Mission Folder](#).

If you are asking volunteers to transport guests to the event, you will need to check whether they:

- have a valid driving licence and that their insurance will cover the activity
- have considered the need for a second volunteer in the vehicle
- are an established volunteer and have done relevant volunteer checks
- are clear about expectations around picking up and dropping off guests

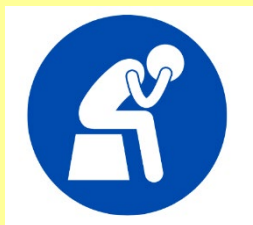
Tip: Offer a secondary contact at the corps in case any issues arise, as you may be busy hosting and welcoming other guests.

Be clear as to whether their mileage will be reimbursed, what the rate will be (45p pm) and let them know about the expenses form to complete.

SAFE MISSION RISK ASSESSMENTS

All risk assessment files can be accessed on OurHub.

Including people with disabilities in Christmas activities



Christmas can be a very difficult and lonely time for people living with a disability. Research by the Office for National Statistics shows that 13.9% of people with a disability often or always feel lonely compared to 3.4% of people without a disability.



Below are some tips that you can use to help ensure that your Christmas event is as inclusive as possible.

Participation and engagement

Ask people:



- what activities they would like to see included and consider offering a mixture of different types of activities
- if they know anyone with a disability who may benefit from coming along
- what support they require on the day and how you can help.



Use different methods for inviting people and for advertising your events. This will help reach a diverse range of people in your community - for example emails, cards, letters, social media. If possible, follow up invitations with a telephone call or visit.



Include the planned programme of the day with the invitation so that people are aware of what to expect.

Accessibility and space



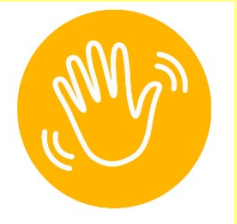
Provide information about transport to and from the venue.



Arrange accessible parking spaces or drop-off/pick-up points.



Ensure the building entrance, activity rooms and toilets are accessible to those who use wheelchairs and walking aids.



Allocate a volunteer at the entrance to welcome people and offer support when required.



Ensure there is space to allow easy movement for wheelchair users and those with guide dogs and mobility aids.

Remove clutter and trip hazards from rooms and aisles.



Provide clear signage that is easy to read and placed at a height that everyone can see.

Communication



Ask people what their preferred method of communication is.



Provide materials in alternative formats such as large print or Braille.

Use Arial or Comic Sans fonts with a minimum size of 16.

Ensure there is a good contrast between the colour of the font and the colour of the background (eg a yellow font on a blue background).



Provide both verbal and written instructions using short and simple words with symbols and images.



Avoid overlaying text on images as this can make it harder to read.



Provide support to those that may need verbal prompts and sign language.

Food and drink



Consider asking people to let you know in advance if they have food allergies or dietary needs, such as on the invitation/form. This will help you to better prepare.

Include some options for different dietary requirements such as vegetarian, gluten free, soft diet, allergies.



Offer a variety of foods such as savoury, snacks, fruit, treats, crisps, and cakes.



Offer a variety of drink options such as hot/cold, caffeine free, fizzy, squash / diluting juice, water.

Noise and sensory awareness



Be mindful that too many people in a place can cause sensory overload for some people living with a disability. People with anxiety, those who are neuro diverse or individuals who have hearing loss may find the event overwhelming and struggle with overcrowded room noise.



Offer breaks between activities.



Reduce visual distractions, noise and sound, and ensure that lighting is suitable for people that are autistic.



Consider holding activities in smaller groups.



Consider using a buddy/befriender or having a support volunteer during activities.



Provide a quiet room or space for people who wish to take some time away from the noise.



SUGGESTED WORDING FOR INVITING GUESTS

Dear *(insert name here)*

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION LUNCH

You are invited to join us for Christmas celebrations and lunch on:

(Insert date here)

Christmas is a time when we remember that people gathered to celebrate the birth of Jesus long ago, and so we warmly invite you to join with us. We know it can be difficult for those who haven't joined us before, so if it is your first Christmas with us please don't worry - it was our first time once too, so we do understand and hope you will be able to come and celebrate.

You are invited to join us for coffee between 10 am - 10.30 am and our short morning celebration service starts at 11 am. Lunch will be served at 12 noon and the afternoon will finish at 2 pm. (There will be some teatime treats for you to take home.)

Should you require transport please make your request on the attached form.

Christmas blessings from

(Insert first name and corps name to personalise this)

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION LUNCH

Guest Details Information Form

Name:

Date of Birth:

Address:

Telephone Number:

Preferred name to be called by:

1. Do you require transport to attend the Christmas Celebration?
Yes / No (Please circle)

(Remove if you as a corps are not able to provide transport)

2. Any dietary requirements?

3. Is this your first time coming along to the Christmas Lunch Celebration with us? Yes / No (Please circle)

4. Is there anything you wish to tell us to help make your visit more comfortable for you?

5. In case of an emergency please provide details of someone we can contact and please state their relationship to you:

(If you prefer us to not contact anyone, please leave this blank)

6. In case of an emergency and a situation arising where we need to seek medical help on your behalf, please share any medication that an attending medical person would benefit from knowing:

7. Would you like us to keep you informed of any future events that may be happening? Yes / No (Please circle)

Signed _____ Date _____

PRINT NAME HERE PLEASE

The personal details you provide will only be used for this event unless you have indicated that you would like us to keep in touch with you in the future. We will keep your data safe. All your details will therefore be carefully disposed of after the event. Please see the privacy statement for further information: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/privacy-statement

SUGGESTED TIMETABLE OF THE DAY

(FOUR HOURS MAXIMUM)

Time	What's happening	Further Information
9.30 am	Gather volunteers/staff for United Prayer	See United Prayer provided. Explain how this will be used throughout the UKI Territory to pray for guests joining the lunch.
10.00 am	Guests start arriving	Have coffee/tea ready and a nice welcoming seating area. Have music playing or a screen with words of Christmas hymns or pictures playing.
10.30 am	Coffee and gift opening	Have a small gift wrapped and tagged personally for each guest and a hand-written Christmas card with a Christian theme to ensure that if this is the only card someone receives, it is a reminder of the true meaning of Christmas.
11.00 am	Christmas Service	See service plan and sermon outline provided.
11.45 am	Comfort break and time to 'Meet your neighbour'.	Befrienders to guide people to meet who they will be sitting next to for the meal.
12.00 pm	Christmas Lunch	See guidance for set up, tips and suggestions.

Time	What's happening	Further Information
1.15 pm	Christmas fun and games 'Time to watch and play'	Remind volunteers/staff that it's OK for those who don't want to join in, as many find enjoyment in watching others taking part.
2.00 pm	Home time	Packed tea / goody bag ready to be given to each guest. If possible, avoid using plastic bags and use paper bags that look special. Perhaps the children of the corps could decorate brown bags for people and personalise them.

UNITED PRAYER

for volunteers and staff to pray prior to the Christmas Celebration

Dear Father God,

We pray for those who will share this day with us.

Give courage to those who are nervous and anxious.

Comfort those who are grieving.

Bring joy to all who will share this day with us.

Strengthen our hands and calm our anxious thoughts.

Lord, hear our prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

CHRISTMAS SERVICE OUTLINE

THEME: COMFORT AND JOY

Bible reading contained within the 'Sermon Outline' - Luke 2:4-16 (NIV)

Handy music tip: Music to accompany the carols can be easily downloaded from:

<https://samusicindex.com/celebrating-christmas-at-home/carol-accompaniments>

Handy monologue tip: These are intended to help build the story as you go through the service and are light-hearted. Download and print copies of the scripts for each character and use simple costumes or headwear or accessories to help build the character. If possible, choose readers of different ages who can bring a sense of joy and wonder to the reading. Give the readers plenty of advance notice, rather than asking them just before the service, as this will allow them time to make sure they are happy with what is expected of them as they take on these character roles.

For something different: If you are serving a three-course meal, you might want to break up the service into three sections, eg Parts 1 to 5 outlined below and then have the starter, continue then with Parts 6 to 8 before having the main course, followed by the final Parts 9 to 12 and serve dessert. This would break up the meal, giving time for people to clear tables and offer a slightly different type of Christmas meal experience with the service running through each part of it. You may find this is quite an interactive way of leading a meal celebration service for a change.

1. Opening video clip while people are settling into their spaces - 'Angels from the Realms of Glory' by the Piano Guys with over 1,000 people coming together

<https://youtu.be/PrLoWt2tfqg>

2. Carol - 'Hark the herald angels sing' (SASB 108)

3. Prayers (*If appropriate, ask children with parents/adults and older people to come and light the Advent wreath*)

4. Carol - 'O little town of Bethlehem' (SASB 118)

5. Monologue - 'Mary: Donkeys and Stables'

6. Carol - 'Once in royal David's city' (SASB 121)

7. Monologue - 'Shepherd: Sheep and Stones'

8. Carol - 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night' (SASB 132)

9. Monologue - 'Innkeeper: Overbooked but Overjoyed'
10. Short Thought Outline - 'Comfort and Joy'
11. Carol - 'Joy to the World' (SASB 113)
12. Benediction and Closing Music - 'Merry Christmas Everyone' by Rend Collective

www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3jn0LnxS5c

JOSEPH'S MONOLOGUE - 'THEY WERE MY NEIGHBOURS'

I remember the moment I knew we were in trouble. Mary, my wife, pregnant to the point of popping, declared that the pain was beginning. I knew we didn't have long, so I kept knocking on all the doors that had a glimmer of light peeping through the windows. Door after door the answer was 'No, sorry - no room here' or 'Not tonight - but come back tomorrow'. Come back tomorrow? That's not how it works when you've got a wife that's about to give birth! And not only that, this is a huge responsibility. The baby isn't mine you see. The baby is God's, so I have an even greater responsibility to ensure that this baby enters the world safely! We needed a place to stay. We needed love in that moment. But just as I was about to give in, take Mary off the donkey and make soft place for her to sit down an alleyway, I saw a house with an attached barn where I could hear gentle animal noises wafting into the night air.

'Wait there,' I said to Mary. She simply nodded and kept breathing just like her cousin Elizabeth had told her to.

'I'll be back,' I said. I knocked on the large timber door and heard some scurrying behind the door and talking. Please come, I thought, please come quickly - I need help, I need a neighbour!

The door opened, and there peering round were the blurry eyes of two kind faces. Quickly I told my story, and when they heard they ushered Mary and me into their barn. They had no room in their inn - it was the census after all, the woman had explained. 'Oh yes, I know!' I wanted to shout. But instead, I just gave my grateful thanks, as I felt we were safe again. We had a roof - albeit a cattle shed over our heads - clean cloths and fresh water provided by the kind couple, and a gentle touch on my shoulder by a large hand and a knowing look. He'd been there before, he understood what was happening, and he just smiled telling me everything would be OK.

You know - it was OK - more than OK! My fear vanished as soon as Jesus entered the world. That kind couple became our neighbours. We were quite different - different backgrounds, different upbringing, different way of life - but love had brought us together. You see, I have a feeling that Jesus is going to bring love wherever he goes. In that barn, love came down. Love made an entrance, and that love cemented love between neighbours. I will never forget it.



MARY'S MONOLOGUE - 'THEY ARE MY NEIGHBOURS'

I didn't want to tell Joseph I was getting frightened, but I truly was. I was sore from riding on the donkey, my back was aching - and then I felt the pain starting and I knew we didn't have long. I needed to find shelter, quickly, so I could give birth to Jesus. But every time Joseph knocked on a door we got the same answer. 'No room,' they kept saying. I could see Joseph's distress, the feeling of responsibility weighing heavy on his shoulders, and no one seemed to be able to help us. I was starting to lose hope when Joseph saw a glimmer of light coming from an open window. He looked at me and simply said, 'Let's hope it's a friendly face.' He knocked, I waited. Then the door opened and two faces peered round the door. As soon as they saw I was pregnant they quickly ushered us to their cattle shed at the side of their house. The woman beckoned us over, and Joseph led the donkey and me into the animals' shed. OK - it wasn't quite what I was expecting, but the kindness that shone from the eyes of this couple made it all right. The woman said she'd bring water and fresh cloths, and in a few minutes Joseph had settled me on the hay with fresh blankets around me, and I knew all would be well.

I looked at the faces of the animals and they looked back at me. I wanted to say 'Hello, neighbours!' but I realised that sounded a little strange. Especially as the pain was growing and I knew it wouldn't be long before the baby came. I simply couldn't wait. The couple left then, to give us some privacy, but they said we could call them if we need anything at all. Joseph waved thankfully and I smiled my best smile despite the pain. I was truly grateful.

Well, baby Jesus arrived. Joseph went to tell the couple and they quickly hurried back. They looked into the face of Jesus like they'd never seen a baby before! But to be honest, I knew he was very special even though I say so myself. The man stroked the top of my head gently and whispered, 'Well done, Mary - you're a mother now.' The lady smiled, not taking her eyes from Jesus. She simply touched Joseph's hand and said, 'You came as strangers, but you leave as friends.'



Shortly afterwards there was a knock at the shed door. In came three men, one carrying a sheep. They explained that they didn't want to intrude, and yes it did sound strange, but when they had been looking after their sheep on a local hillside they had been visited by an angel! I suppose they were surprised when we seemed to accept this as normal, I have to say. They asked if they could see the baby. They'd been told he was going to be a Saviour. I explained that I too had met an angel and I understood a little of what they were feeling. The shepherds were so grateful to have met Jesus that we asked them to stay just a little longer. We had begun that night feeling all alone, but we ended up making new friends! The shepherds promised to watch out for Jesus as he grew, and I believe one of them in particular kept a close eye on Jesus. You see, that's what friends do, that's what neighbours do, and that's what the love of our boy Jesus brought into the world.

God has given us precious people to support us over the years as we have tried to be good parents to Jesus. But I've never forgotten that couple who gave us a safe place to bring him into the world. Us in the cattle shed, them next door - neighbours in every sense of the word. We came as strangers, but the love Jesus brought definitely meant that we left as friends.



SHEPHERD'S MONOLOGUE - 'THEY BECAME MY NEIGHBOUR'

My heart was pounding as I ran down the hillside. Something very special was happening, and I wanted to get to this newborn baby as fast as I could. As I ran, my mind was filled with the sound of the angels singing. I'd never heard anything so beautiful in all my life! It made me feel as though I had been transported to another world. But that would make sense, I guess, seeing as the angels came from Heaven!

I've seen new babies before and I've gazed in wonder at them, but when I walked through the wooden doors of that shed I knew there was something very different about this baby. I felt rather out of place - I'd been with the sheep all night and not had a chance to wash or change. But the mother looked up and beckoned us over. I took a tentative step forward, and then the father beckoned for us to get a better look at the baby. My friends were following so closely I could feel their breath on the back of my neck. We gazed in wonder at the baby Jesus.

'Then the mother said, 'Thank you.'

'Thank you?' What was she saying thank you to me for? It was me that should be thanking her for allowing three unknown farmhands enter their private space like that. I didn't understand.

But then the father repeated: 'Thank you.'

It must have been obvious I didn't understand. The father - Joseph was his name - continued:

'Thank you for sharing this moment with us. We wanted to share Jesus with friends, but we don't have family or friends nearby - we're only here for the census. So thank you for sharing Jesus with us. These moments are precious.'

Nobody has ever made me feel so welcome. Me, a shepherd, generally looked down upon by many. Some feel we are a worthless lot. Yet this man Joseph, and his wife Mary, they saw me as their friend, their neighbour. And in that moment I knew this baby could change the world. No crown for a newborn king, no silk wrappings for his tiny body - just a feeding trough where the cows had been fed, hay to keep him warm, some cloth that they said had been given by a new friend -



and love. Love in the purest sense. Yes, that's what was different - the love I felt with people I'd never met before. Something joined us that night that changed my life for ever, and my friends too.

In that moment I knew that love had come down from Heaven. I don't know how it worked, I had no idea what the life of that baby Jesus was going to look like. What I did know was that love had come down from Heaven - the angels had sung as much. I followed his life you know. I'm older and greyer than when I first met Jesus in that cattle shed, but I followed him and I remember his teaching. Jesus had lots of followers, he taught about being blessed, how to be happy on this earth. One of the things I'll never forget is that he said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' (*Shepherd nods*)

I've seen God in him you know - in Jesus, that baby born to be King. I've tried to keep pure in heart - not easy for someone like me, but I'm trying. And another thing: I also heard that Jesus had said, 'Love one another and love your neighbour as yourself.' I learned about love that night in the cattle shed, and I learned it from Mary and Joseph. I learnt about being welcomed as a friend and neighbour. I have so much to thank Jesus for.



SHORT TALK OUTLINE

JESUS STEPPED INTO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Introduction

We are so pleased that you have chosen to join us for this Christmas Service and Celebration Meal. We want you to know that you are part of this community, this neighbourhood, and you have a place. In essence, celebrating the birth of Jesus reminds us that you belong to me and I belong to you. We are friends, neighbours in Christ Jesus.

There is a version of the Bible called *The Message*, and in John's Gospel, Chapter 1 verse 14 we hear these words about Jesus coming as a baby into the world.

'The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood' (John 1:14 MSG).

'The Word' is a name we use for Jesus, and this verse reminds us that Jesus came to earth to live as man but also to become the Saviour of the world. Christmas is a joyous celebration, a time when we remember that Jesus literally moved into our neighbourhood, here on earth.

Who is my neighbour?

Here are some words you may have heard before, words of Jesus: 'Love one another as I have loved you, and love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39). So, who is your neighbour? When we hear that question we might imagine the people who live next door. But actually the word neighbour is much bigger than just the people next door, or round the corner. A neighbour is someone with whom we share a connection. Today we want you to know that you share a connection with us. That's why we are all here to celebrate Christmas. Jesus is the one who has connected us and brought us together. You are my neighbour and I am yours. We may look different from one another. We may have a different cultural background. We may even believe different things. But today we are found here as neighbours together, and our connection is Jesus. Today we are celebrating the love and joy that Jesus brought when he 'moved into the neighbourhood' as a tiny baby.

The first Nativity neighbours

In our scripts/monologues we heard how the innkeeper and his wife became neighbours to Mary and Joseph, and then how the shepherds also brought their friendship and love, realising Jesus had moved into the earthly neighbourhood. I wonder what those stories have made us think about? Perhaps it's the idea that Jesus came to bring love to everyone in this world, no matter who they are, where they live, what they do as a job, whether they work or not, whether they are young or old, rich or poor – Jesus moved into the earthly neighbourhood for everyone. Or perhaps it made you think about what kind of neighbour you are to others, or what kind of neighbour other people are to you? Maybe you felt a little sad because you don't know your neighbours very well, or you feel a little alone at times? Well, we have some good news for you – you are welcome here at The Salvation Army! There are people here who want to be your neighbours, who are happy to become your friends, and we value you and are thankful for you. You are not alone, you are part of this neighbourhood that we call church, and we want you to



know you are welcome here any time! That's the Christmas gift we offer you because we want you to be part of this neighbourhood.

Love came down and moved into the neighbourhood

As Christians we understand that the name of Jesus to us means love, and this reminds us again that love – Jesus – moved into the neighbourhood on that first Christmas morning. There is a popular newer Christian song called 'I Speak Jesus' by Charity Gayle. It's not a Christmas song but it reminds us of how important it is to know the love of Jesus at Christmas. The words talk about the name of Jesus and say, 'Your name is power, your name is healing, your name is life. Break every stronghold, shine through the shadows, burn like a fire.' The name of Jesus is still as important today on this day of celebration as it was to the shepherds on the first Christmas Day. Jesus is not just relevant in our lives and our neighbourhoods only on Christmas Day, he is relevant every day and every year, because he moved into the neighbourhood to bring us love, power, healing and life.

Conclusion

We hope you have felt the welcoming love of Jesus today in this celebration. If you want to know more about Jesus, then please do speak to us and we can tell you about how Jesus grew up and lived a life as a man and then died as our Saviour on the cross, and now lives to be our friend. We are your neighbours, and we want to share the story of Jesus with you. The name of Jesus is powerful, and even simply saying the name of Jesus can bring a peace like no other into our lives. Let's use the words of the song 'I Speak Jesus' again as a closing prayer for all of us as we share this day as friends and neighbours.

'I just want to speak the name of Jesus (in our neighbourhood)
Over every heart and every mind (and that includes you)
Because I know there is peace within your presence (Jesus)
I speak Jesus. Amen'

('I Speak Jesus' by Charity Gayle)

God bless you, friends and neighbours. Let's celebrate Jesus together – he moved into the neighbourhood for each one of us and his love is available for each one of us. You are included in the neighbourhood of Jesus.



FUN AND GAMES

Games are a great way of breaking the ice with people and making sure that people keep entertained and feel part of something. Remember that not everyone will want to take part in games. Often people enjoy watching others having fun, and this becomes their own way of joining in and being part of the activity.

Whatever games you play, ensure that they are suitable for all ages and abilities. Try not to do games that require people to read things out loud as this can be daunting for many. With any games that you do play, ensure that clear instructions are given so that no one is left feeling embarrassed or left out.

Some people love quizzes, while others hate them. If you decided to engage people in a quiz, ensure that everyone is either in pairs or small teams (up to three people), so that no one is embarrassed if they don't know an answer.

The main thing to remember is, this is about having fun - so getting people laughing and enjoying the game, or even laughing and watching those playing, is the goal. Often people love to play games but don't get the opportunity if they live alone, so give permission to play and have some fun. And one last thing: get the volunteers playing too. This makes everyone feel they are on the same level playing ground and that everyone is equal.

Suggestions for Christmas Celebrations Games

Pass the Parcel

Choose an inexpensive gift such as a box of chocolates to wrap up for the traditional game of Pass the parcel. Try to include enough layers, but not too many that it becomes tiresome. Between each layer or wrapping add a bag of chocolate 'Milky Way Stars', and each time tell everyone that they are all superstars because God loves them. Explain that if they win the chocolate stars, they can either keep them to take home or give them away to other guests. The choice is theirs!

Christmas Pass the Ball

Gather the guests into a circle, each with a chair to sit on, and have a 'leader' in the middle of the circle with a large soft ball. The leader throws the ball to different guests at random, ensuring that everyone has a turn without just going round the group one by one. When someone catches the ball, they have to shout out something related to the Christmas theme, eg baubles, kings, Mary, presents, turkey etc.

Have fun!



Written by
Older People's Ministries Team in collaboration with
Community Services.

For more information on how to use this resources, please email:
olderpeoplesministries@salvationarmy.org.uk



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