



BE A STAR!

THIS CHRISTMAS TIME



INTRODUCTION

This year's Christmas Celebration Meal Resource is based around the theme We Are Here, God is Here, Hope is Here. 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 three different characters. These can be read by volunteers, the leader or people from the group.

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):

- ☐ Games and Community Activities document
- ☐ 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.



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GAMES AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

The Christmas games and activities have been created to promote good brain health.

1. The Smell of Christmas

Smell, social and emotional stimulation

Equipment: items for people to pass around and smell. You may choose to put them in small jars.

Items may include:

- Cinnamon
- Coffee
- Chocolate
- Pine
- Orange
- Vanilla
- Peppermint

As the items get passed around, rather than asking people to guess the smell, ask what the smell reminds them of. This activity can be used to stimulate stories and connections to the people around us.

2. Mystery Christmas Stocking

Smell, sound, touch, social and emotional stimulation

Equipment: items inside stockings.



Items may include:

- Tinsel
- Pine cone
- Small teddy bear
- Bell
- Orange
- Bauble
- Cinnamon stick

Ask people to feel inside the stockings without looking and describe what they think they're holding. There are no wrong answers, and it gets people chatting and laughing a lot too.

3. Build a Christmas Table Centre

Smell, touch, movement, social and emotional stimulation

Equipment: items to decorate a table centrepiece.

Items may include:

- Pine cones
- Ribbons
- Battery candles
- Greenery
- Ornaments

Ask everyone to get into groups and create a festive centrepiece. This activity encourages togetherness and competitiveness without requiring lots of movement.



GOD IS HERE

SCRIPT

(In walks the character - Holy Joe)

Props: Bible

I feel a little confused, friends, and I hope you don't mind me getting these thoughts off my chest, so to speak. But I don't know whether I let Jesus down, or whether what I said was enough. Let me explain ...

There I was, sat at a very well-known coffee shop - but I won't mention the name as I'm not on commission. Anyway, there I was when two of my friends from the library came in carrying a stack of books they'd got for the Christmas holiday. One had a couple of crime novels, not really my thing; and the other had two romantic books, both set in a land with sunshine and seashells. Again, not really my thing! Anyway, they looked at me and asked what I was reading. I took up my Bible from the table and said, 'My Bible.' They both laughed! I actually was so taken aback I didn't know what to say at first. Then I asked, 'Why are you laughing?' and they simply said, 'Why would you read the Bible when there are so many other books to read?'

Well, I have to say it took me back and it made me think - why do I read the Bible? Yes, I do like reading fiction, and a good autobiography often gets me gripped - but why do I read the Bible? So I took a deep breath and simply said that the best story ever was in the Bible. They said, 'What's the best story ever?' and I said; 'The story of Jesus!'

They looked a bit surprised. Then I simply asked them if they plan on celebrating Christmas this year, and they both laughed and said 'Of course' in unison. Then I said, 'Well then, you're celebrating the story of Jesus which comes from the Bible'. They both shuffled their feet a bit, and one of them said, 'Latte or macchiato?' And with that they turned and went and sat at another table. Can you believe that? They didn't seem to want to talk about the story of Jesus, but they were still intent on celebrating Christmas. That seems a bit nonsensical to me!

To be honest with you, it sometimes feels like people know that God is part of the story, but they don't realise he really is here. No, we can't see him, but he lives and moves in our



presence and we in his. But how do I get people to understand that? I feel I might have let Jesus down a bit as I didn't continue the conversation. Still, I really hope that maybe, just maybe, they might think about it at some point.

(Joe lifts his phone to his ear) Apologies, friends, someone's calling me - I'll be right back.

Hello? (pause) Oh, no, don't worry. I wasn't offended. It was just that ... (pause) Of course. There's always more space here. And yes, there is enough turkey to go round! Carols? Yes, we'll be singing some carols! Prayers? Yes, we'll be saying a prayer. (Pause) You'd love to come? I'll be at the door waiting for you! See you soon. Bye! (Puts phone down)

Wow, that's amazing! One of my friends that I was telling you about has just got home and seen the invitation for today's meal and asked if they can come along. (Joe lifts his hands to heaven.) Thank you, Jesus!

(Joe exits)

SHORT THOUGHT

Scripture verse: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us') - **Matthew 1:23**

Christmas can be busy. There are presents to buy, meals to prepare, events to attend, messages to send, and endless items on our to-do lists. The season comes with excitement, but it can also leave us feeling tired, stretched, and wondering where the time has gone. In the middle of all the activity, the message of Christmas remains wonderfully simple: God is here.

When God came into the world in Jesus, he did not choose a perfect moment. The first Christmas was far from calm and comfortable. There was a long journey, uncertainty about the future, and no room at the inn. Yet it was there, in the middle of ordinary life and unexpected challenges, that God made his presence known.

The name 'Immanuel' means 'God with us'. It reminds us that God is not distant or unconcerned with our lives. He is present in the everyday moments, not just the extraordinary ones. He is with us in the crowded shops, the family gatherings, the quiet evenings, and even the moments when Christmas feels difficult. Many people spend their lives searching for meaning, belonging and connection. The message of Immanuel speaks directly into that longing. It tells us that we are seen, known and loved. It assures us that even when we feel forgotten or overlooked, God has not abandoned us.

The first Christmas took place during a difficult period in history. Those who heard the news of Jesus' birth lived with political uncertainty, social tensions and personal struggles. Yet into that world came a message of hope and peace. The light of God's presence shone in the darkness and offered a different future. That same message continues to resonate today. Christmas does not promise that every problem will disappear or that life will suddenly become easy. Instead, it offers something deeper - the assurance that God's presence can be found even in the midst of life's challenges. Hope is possible because God is here - Immanuel.

This Advent and Christmas, take a moment to reflect on where you have experienced kindness, comfort, love or unexpected strength. Perhaps these are glimpses of God's presence with us.

The invitation of Immanuel is not simply to look back at an event that happened long ago, but to recognise that God continues to draw near today.

Wherever you find yourself this Christmas, may you experience the peace of not being alone, the comfort of being understood, and the hope that comes from knowing that even in life's busiest and most challenging moments, love, light and grace are close at hand. **God is here. God is with us.**

PRAYER

O come, let us adore him: Heavenly Father,

We are so grateful to be here together today as we celebrate this special Christmas season, and we thank you that you are here with us.

At Christmas we are again reminded of the amazing truth that you came to be with us through Jesus, Immanuel - God with us, entering this world in human form to share in our lives and reveal your love.

Thank you for the truth that we never have to walk through life on our own, because you are always with us. You walk alongside us, sharing in our joys and sustaining us through our struggles. Your presence goes before us and remains with us, surrounding us with your peace and love.

Thank you for being with us, helping us each day, and living in our hearts.

Thank you, Jesus, our Immanuel - God with us.

Amen.



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HOPE IS HERE!

SCRIPT

Joyful Josh

Props: party blower, string of fairy lights and a paper receipt.

(Josh runs round the gathered group tooting his party blower to make people laugh)

Happy Christmas, everyone! Are you having a lovely time? I wondered if you'd seen a couple of friends of mine? One is called Jack and the other Joe. Oh, you have? So, tell me, was Jack still a little grumpy? Bless him! I heard he was waiting for the bus for 27 minutes before he realised the buses weren't running today. And my other friend, Joe - I often call him Holy Joe because he's never without his Bible - not a criticism, just an observation. And to be honest, I wish I was more like him as he just seems to have the right thing to say at the right time. Anyway, if you see them, let me know, as I've got some fantastic news to share with them. *(Looks out of the side of his eye and raises his eyebrow before blowing his party blower one more time.)* Ah, would you like to know my news? Oh, go on then - it's too good not to share!

Drum roll, please ... I've got some new Christmas lights! *(Looks round surprised that people aren't more enamoured with this news.)* Come on, friends, this is big - huge, in fact. I've been saving up for them and I'm going to be able to decorate the whole of the outside of my house in lights. I'm so excited! OK, I can see that you're not understanding why this is so important. You see, my little boy is coming to stay for Christmas. He loves lights and I promised him we would have the best lit house in the street. The only way I can do that is to use these new lights. But thinking about it now, *(short pause)* I don't think I actually do have enough to light the whole house up. I may have got a bit over-excited about what 250 twinkling stringed lights can actually achieve.

Do you know what? I think I may have missed the point. I'm Joyful Josh, so I know what brings joy at Christmas - and it isn't lights on the house or even the most presents under the tree. It's actually knowing the real 'Light of the World'. Jesus is the Light of the World. He came as a baby to bring light into a dark world - and bring light he did. He changed the hearts of the



shepherds, he mesmerised the kings, and he brought so much light that the angels even sang a whole song about him! I think I need to have a rethink about those 250 twinkling lights after all. Perhaps the old Nativity set in the loft with a candle next to it might remind me and my boy about the true light of Christmas - Jesus.

You know what, I'm taking those lights back. I've still got the receipt (*pulls receipt from his pocket and waves it joyfully*) and instead I'm going to buy a little outside Nativity scene that I saw. It might not be huge, and you definitely won't see it from space, but every time me and my boy walk into the house this Christmas, we will remember what it's all about. I hope that it brings hope to my neighbours too. A little light in the darkness, a little lit Nativity - I think my son's going to like that a lot. I'll keep the party blower, though - that just helps get people's attention! (*blows the party blower*)

Happy Christmas!

SHORT THOUGHT

We have been reminded that we are here (look around and give each other a wave!), and God is here. We welcome you, Jesus! And now, just for a moment, we are going to think about how hope is here.

A question for you to think about. What gives you hope? Is it when someone encourages you, or maybe steps in the gap for you when you're struggling? Do you feel more hopeful when you've got people supporting you? Perhaps even the arrival of a new day gives you hope. Perhaps if we think about hope as being light, it might make more sense. You see, when people support us, encourage us and step in the gap for us, it does seem to make our day lighter, doesn't it?

'The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.'
(John 1:9-12 NIV)

Those verses give us visions of real hope. Jesus came as a baby to be the light of the world, and when he grew to be a man, he called himself the Light of the World. There were some who didn't realise that this baby Jesus was the Light of the World; they didn't recognise that he was the Saviour of the world. But the truth is that he was and he still is! What gives us hope is the fact that when we believe in Jesus, we then become children of God. That means that we do have a supportive friend in Jesus, we do have someone who steps in the gap. It's Jesus, and we do have someone to encourage us throughout all the days of our life!

We may not be able to physically see him, but the baby Jesus grew to be our Saviour, died on the cross and came back to life. So that's why hope is here, because Jesus is with us right now!

This Christmas we pray that you will know hope, that you will know Jesus, and that you will know that you have a home here at The Salvation Army.

PRAYER

Loving God,

Thank you for the gift of Christmas and for sending Jesus, the Light of the World and the source of our hope. At Christmas we remember and celebrate that you always keep your promises.

Through the birth of Jesus, you brought hope into the world, a hope that still shines today. When we are unsure about what lies ahead, help us remember that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, guiding us and holding us in your love.

Thank you that, because of Jesus, we can face tomorrow with confidence, trust in your goodness, and hold on to the hope you give us.

Amen.



WE ARE HERE

SCRIPT

(In walks the character 'Grumpy Jack')

Props: Need a Nativity scene in view

Oh, here you all are! Do you know how long I've been waiting at the bus station in town for my bus? 27 minutes! And then someone I know from school recognised me - which is quite something, as I haven't been to school in a long while, as you can tell! Well, he comes along and says, 'No buses today, Jack - it's Christmas!'

No buses? Do you know how long I've been sat in the cold at the bus stop? Honestly! So just because it's Christmas someone decides there's to be no buses! Is that because there were no buses in the first Christmas, or is just because people want yet another day's holiday?! I don't know what's got into me, I honestly don't, but I have to admit to feeling a bit grumpy. I was so looking forward to coming here today - the tinsel, the turkey, the pudding! But now I just feel cold, and all that waiting doesn't seem to have done me any good at all. I'm so sorry, I'm not normally grumpy - well, not often. It's just that I don't like waiting. Waiting takes patience, and to be very honest I don't have a right lot of patience. Never have and I guess I never will.

(Jack silently shakes his head and wipes away a little tear - then he looks over to the Nativity scene)

I've just realised something. There must have been quite a bit of waiting in the story of Jesus' birth. Firstly, Mary - blessed beautiful Mary - she had to wait nine months to meet her baby boy. Then there's Joseph, waiting to see what happens and how the story unfolds. Not sure I would have made a good Joseph, to be honest. Then there's the wise men who travelled a long journey just to meet Jesus. Wow, they must have been patient, all that bobbing up and down on a camel. But more than that, they do say that the people of Israel had waited a long time for Jesus to be born. You see, I've heard it said that he was their Messiah and they waited patiently for him coming. It kind of puts my waiting for a bus into perspective, doesn't it?



And I'm going to tell you something else, now I think about it. It was when I was walking here I felt something I hadn't felt before. It was the feeling that you would all have missed me if I hadn't turned up! That actually made me feel a bit grumpy. I thought I was just being silly, thinking people thought more of me than they really do. So I gave myself a telling off. But come to think of it, that walk felt like I was walking for a purpose. And do you know what, you were that purpose! Now I see it. We have to be here, we have to be together to celebrate today, because that's what joins us together, isn't it? Wow, I'm feeling a lot better now, and you haven't even said a word to cheer me up. It's just the thought of us being here today, celebrating the birth of Jesus. Well, that's all that matters. Not the waiting for a bus that was never going to come! The most important thing is that no matter how we got here today we are here! I get it now! We are part of the story today. And do you know what? I think Jesus is very happy that we are here. Don't you? Thanks for being patient with me, friends, and welcoming me in - I'm so blessed to call you my friends.

(Jack moves into the gathered group and sits down giving people high fives, hugs or waves showing that we are all here together and all welcomed.)

SHORT TALK

'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.' (Isaiah 9:2 NIV)

How many people do you know enjoy waiting? Most of the time nobody enjoys waiting. We wait for all sorts of things: a new opportunity, a fresh start, a holiday, good news, or a change we've been longing for. We wait for health to improve, for relationships to heal, and for a more peaceful and hopeful world. Waiting can feel frustrating, especially when life seems uncertain and progress feels slow.

Advent reminds us that waiting need not be empty or pointless. The Christmas story begins long before Bethlehem, with generations of people holding on to hope that God was at work even when they could not see it. Their story suggests that some of life's most important developments happen quietly, beneath the surface, before they become visible.

'We Are Here' invites us to locate ourselves in the story of God. We are here, between what has been and what is yet to come; between our present challenges and our hopes for the future; between darkness and light. The people of Israel understood this experience well. They lived through uncertainty, hardship, disappointment and long periods of silence, yet they held on to the promise that hope was on its way. Through the words of prophets such as Isaiah came the assurance that a child would be born, a light would dawn, and a new beginning would arrive.

For Christians, Advent and Christmas is more than remembering a birth that happened over two thousand years ago. It is a season that encourages us to look forward with hope. It reminds us that God entered our world in Jesus and continues to be present with us today. In the midst of uncertainty, the Advent and Christmas season offers the reassurance that we are not forgotten and that light can still be found, even in difficult times.

So, where are we this Advent? We are here. Here in the waiting. Here in the hoping. Here in the space between what is and what could be. Whatever we are carrying, we do not walk alone. The

message of Christmas is that God is with us. As we wait, may we find peace, renewed hope, and the confidence to look for signs of light in our lives and in the world around us.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We are just so grateful that we are here today, able to be and share together in this place. Thank you for the people beside us, for the friendships we share, and for the gift of these moments spent together.

As we pause in your presence and take a moment to reflect, help us not to rush past this time of togetherness, but to be fully present with you and with one another.

Lord, we lift to you all those who, for whatever reason, are finding this season difficult: those who are feeling lonely, those carrying anxiety or worry, and those who are grieving the loss of someone they love. May they know that they are seen, known, and completely loved by you. Surround them with your comfort and strengthen them with your peace.

Fill our hearts with gratitude for the gift of today, for the blessing of being here, and for the hope, peace, joy and love that Christmas brings. As we celebrate Christmas, we thank you for the gift of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

Amen.