

2020 Christmas Planning Pack



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2020 Christmas Planning Pack is a Church Talk Publication designed to help stateside General Baptist leaders cope with the “new normal”.



Abstract: **2020 Christmas Planning Pack**—offers timely assistance to church leaders organized in several independent units. **We Need A Little Christmas** provides helpful assistance on planning with a theme and communicating it thoroughly. **Cancel Christmas/Celebrate Advent** guides the process of preparing for Christmas by planning for Advent Sundays leading up to Christmas. **Big Day Planning** adapts this important concept to Christmas 2020. **Christmas Eve Planning Tips** identifies a series of questions that when answered will provide the skeleton of a Christmas Eve plan. A planning tool of a sample Christmas Eve service is also included.

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I. We Need A Little Christmas!

Way back in 1966 Jerry Herman introduced the words to a now classic Christmas tune. It was first performed in the musical “Mame” by Angela Lansbury and was later made into a movie featuring Lucille Ball (1974). Since then the song has been recorded by dozens of major artists who have taken up the clarion call that we need a little Christmas.

The musical was set in 1929 just after Mame lost her fortune in the Wall Street crash of that year. In the face of this bad news Mame insists we need a little Christmas. When I looked back to the lyrics I noticed a couple of things included in some of the lines that have been updated across the years. For example, in the original Thanksgiving is still a week away and everyone back then apparently knew that a spinet was a downsized piano.

Now that 2020 is finally coming to a close we certainly need a little Christmas—right this very minute!

As paternal grandparents we share grandkids with the maternal grandparents. This means that every year we revisit the schedule of who visits with whom on what day. This often means that Christmas for us will be on Christmas Eve or even an earlier day depending on travel schedules and the other complications of life in an imperfect world. Christmas then is not just a date on the calendar but an event to be celebrated.

If Mame needed a little Christmas in 1929 with the stock market crash surely we need a lot of Christmas with the Pandemic of 2020! The lyrics say it so well:

*For I've grown a little leaner,
Grown a little colder,
Grown a little sadder,
Grown a little older,*

*And I need a little angel,
Sitting on my shoulder,
I need a little Christmas now.*

While many Christmas plans for local churches will already be set, here's a couple of observations that can either help speed up or refine those plans.

First, with social distance measures still in place and with hot spots of Covid infection, everyone must ask the question about Christmas that has been asked about every other ministry this year. “Can we safely, responsibly do what we have always done to celebrate Christmas?”

Making a list and checking it twice must become a planning tool for the church calendar just as it is for the ‘visitor’ who is coming to town on Christmas Eve. Some important questions we need to ask include:

- What have we always done?
- Who has always done it?
- Is it appropriate this year?
- Do we need to suspend some activity for the year or do we need to dispense with traditions that are no longer meaningful or engaging?

Second we need to give some attention to some important plans. We need a plan for our theme and we need a plan for our communication.

A plan for our theme needs to look both at sermon titles and worship themes as well as other ways we communicate the Christmas message. In this troubled year we particularly need to communicate a message of hope. Since folks are longing for the good old days we also need to be nostalgic without being trapped in the traditional. One church consultant defined nostalgic as what was fun that brings back pleasant memories. Traditional, on the other hand, often harkens back to methods or styles that are now archaic and thus not as meaningful as they once were.

For example, the traditional event of caroling where a group would travel around the neighborhood singing Christmas carols to friends and neighbors was once a popular activity. Back then most everyone knew the words and tunes to the 6-8 most popular carols because that was the sum total of the Christmas music included in church hymnals. Now with the explosion of Christmas titles and with the absence of printed music it’s hard to do that once-upon-a-time-fun-event of caroling.

So an important question to ask is: “What plan do we have for Christmas content?” Sometimes this can easily be driven by a Christmas graphic that captures the message in a timely way. However it is developed, it is very, very important that this year’s content have a healthy portion of HOPE because we need a little Christmas now.

We also need a plan for our communication. How and when will we share our content? Weekly worship is obvious but are there other ways we need to communicate our Hope-Filled Message of Christmas? Social media posts, newsletters, cards, banners, video greetings...and other communication avenues available to us need to be used.

Communication can be driven by the graphic or logo used to promote the Christmas message. This simple act of branding—using the logo with everything we do—links our efforts into a unified expression. This means selecting a graphic that is easily adapted to the video projector and the photo copier is very important.

Communication also needs to be customized to various constituencies and age groups.

Only rarely does a church over-communicate. Most often churches under-communicate.

One piece of advice that seems unusual may be very helpful this year. After being stuck at home for months of shut down many people do not react well to the “home” theme so often part of Christmas. For the home for Christmas may not be a time of reunion and may instead bring up too many negative images of the pandemic and its lockdowns.

Developing the content and a plan to communicate it echoes the work of the angels that first Christmas when they announced to the shepherds, “Unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord.”



Cancel Christmas/Celebrate Advent

Long before Christmas became a commercial event that began appearing in retail outlets alongside Halloween, the church developed an approach to Christmas that made it a season of anticipation and preparation in the weeks before the holiday.

As a young pastor I remember struggling with how to fit all the favored carols and all the special programs of Christmas into the one Sunday before December 25. That was what I remembered of the Christmas celebrations in my rural home church. Then I stumbled onto Advent and learned not only the joy of anticipation and celebration, but also the beauty of preparing a congregation for that special time of the year.

Advent is the season marked by the four Sundays prior to December 25, climaxing with Christmas Day and the wonderful good news, “unto you is born a Savior which is Christ the Lord.”

Many churches mark Advent by using an Advent Wreath composed of greenery and five candles. Artificial greenery is much to be preferred over live greenery, which may present a fire hazard in the later weeks of Advent. Pillar-type candles provide the safest use of candles, as only rarely do they drip or spill.

Lighting the candles one each Sunday allows children to excitedly count the Sundays before Christmas as one candle burns on the First Sunday of Advent, two on the Second Sunday of Advent, three on the Third Sunday of Advent, and four on the Fourth Sunday of Advent to remind everyone that Christmas is almost here!

Many churches will use traditional themes of Advent, but I always enjoyed using Advent to tell the Christmas story in small parts. **The four traditional advent themes for:**

- The Candle of **Hope**.
- The Candle of **Love**.
- The Candle of **Joy**.
- The Candle of **Peace**.

As a Baptist pastor I always found telling the story of Christmas leading up to the birth of Jesus was well-received by the congregation and a special treat for the children who hurried to the Advent Wreath for the Children’s Message. Because I used a nativity set with a variety of figurines, the children could help place one or two figures in the scene each week as we explored the Christmas story.



Advent could be organized around elements of the Christmas Story:



Nov. 29	First Sunday of Advent	
	Prophets and Bethlehem	
Dec. 6	Second Sunday of Advent	Angels
Dec. 13	Third Sunday of Advent	Shepherds
Dec. 20	Fourth Sunday of Advent	
	Mary and Joseph	

Friday, December 24, Christmas Eve, will be a good time to light the Christ Candle since very few churches have services on Christmas Day. If a Christmas week service will not be held you might consider lighting the Christ Candle at the conclusion of the worship service on December 20.

While Baptist churches do not generally celebrate Epiphany and the arrival of the Wise Men, it is easy to introduce them as a kind of epilogue on the Sunday following Christmas which will be December 26, 2020.

Even if you are not using Advent in your church it is worth using the Sundays of Advent to mention some aspect of the Christmas story. The more often Christmas is connected with the church the more often we are able to develop and reinforce a Christian world view.

Even worship plans and sermon themes that are unrelated to Advent can be given an Advent flavor by adjusting an illustration or changing a song title. While some church leaders do not believe Christmas deserves 1/12 of the annual emphasis in a church, others who recognize the overwhelming significance of the Incarnation believe the message of Advent cannot be restricted to just one month of the year.

Big Day Planning for Christmas 2020



The principles described here are designed around planning for a Big Day. The Big Day concept has been utilized for some time now as a means to focus the energy of a congregation around a specific day. By planning at least two but no more than four of these days in a “normal” year the evangelistic efforts of the church may be channeled into specific, intentional outreach. As the church re-configures outreach in the new normal efforts must be made to re-connect to our communities in a safe, effective fashion.

1. *Start Early!*

Thanksgiving comes on Thursday, November 26 and Christmas will arrive on, December 25, 2020.

How long will it take to prepare for the worship events you will schedule around Christmas?

Advent will begin Sunday, November 29, 2020. Three Sundays in December will precede Christmas. What will you do on December 6? December 13? December 20?

When do you need to start gathering resources?

When will Christmas decor show up on stage and around the building?

Should we plan our Big Day early in December so we might gain return visits later in the month?

November 2020						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

December 2020						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

2. Add a Special Feature or a Special Service

How many people are usually involved in leading worship on a given Sunday? Add a special feature where more people can be involved in meaningful participation and watch the visitors arrive...especially if you use the Children's Choir and its members rehearse for a few weeks in advance!

Children's programming is especially popular at Christmas, but even adults can master simple drama and pantomime.

Other special services might be scheduled on Christmas Eve.

Many churches find that Christmas Eve-Eve (i.e.—December 23) works well for them.

Customize your schedule to your local context.

3. Develop specialized promotion. How will everyone know of the special day if you don't tell them? How will they realize what's going on if they only hear it once?

Newspaper ads and yellow pages listings do little to attract the unchurched. Consider a saturation mailing. You can develop your own material, but you may want to bring in the professionals for the first time or two. Check out www.outreach.com or thumb through Outreach Magazine for suggestions. If you use this plan be sure to include the cost of both the promotion package and the postage to send the cards. The good folks at Stinson Press can also help you with similar services to blanket your area with special invitations.

Equip your folks with an Invite Card that carries your theme graphic and an invitation to your services. Be sure service times, locations and other pertinent information is included. Emphasize throughout that everything will be done with safety in mind.

Keep in mind, however, that if you invite them you'll want to be able to offer what you've promised. Make it a special day. Clean off the coat rack. Pick up the clutter. Dust the corners. Company's comin'! Make your worship service user friendly: keep the prayer list short and focused, eliminate any announcement that does not directly impact at least half of the people present (remember small group promotion needs to be done in the small group not in the large group setting), start on time, eliminate the dead time in the service, preach a positive message of hope and resurrection!

4. Use the power of focus. Concentrate your effort.

Focus on the family connection. Research continues to show that the most effective network we have to reach people is in the family arena (see Thom Rainer's **Surprising Insights from the Unchurched**). Develop a list of family members who should be part of your church with the rest of their family. Then be sure someone from the family invites them!

Focus on recent visitors. What has happened to those visitor cards? What has already been done with and to the folks who have visited in the last six months? Who are they? Where are they attending church now? What do you need to do to get them to attend this Easter? Mother's Day? 4th of July Weekend? Now you're getting the picture.

Focus on the larger congregation. If your church has an average attendance of 50 you probably have at least 100 people who are part of your larger congregation. The larger your church becomes the broader is its larger congregation of folks who attend infrequently but who do attend some. Keep a list for 6-12 weeks of all the folks who attend at least one of your services. Focus on increasing the frequency of attendance. If they attend once in 12 weeks, work with them until they attend twice. The unchurched population in America who become church attend church several times in the year before they come to faith in Christ and become part of His Church!

5. Pastors set the pace; but everyone needs to get involved! If you don't invite then your people will not invite. If you don't share your faith then your people won't share their faith. The unchurched who are seeking the church want brief but meaningful contact from the pastor. Develop a system that works in your location.

6. Be user friendly! How do we create an environment where people will want to come and hang out in this Covid infected world?

- Focus on safety. Remind people of social distance measures that are expected and take extra precautions to insure safety.
- If Communion is included use the pre-packaged elements to reduce person to person contact.
- Get ready for company! Encourage your people to "Park in the back. Sit in the front. Move to the middle. Speak to those around you."





II. Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve services have become one of the most popular means of reaching unchurched and dechurched families in our communities. Here are a few general suggestions for these special Christmas Eve Worship Services. By answering these simple questions a Christmas Eve service customized to your local church can be developed.

8 Christmas Eve Planning Questions

1. When will the Christmas Eve service be scheduled? When Christmas Eve falls on a weekday, Christmas Eve services are generally scheduled in late afternoon, early evening or late night. Late afternoon schedules may begin as early as 4 p.m. in some communities. The earlier service allows folks the opportunity to attend a 4 p.m. or 6 p.m. service prior to family events. A later service at 9 p.m. or 11 p.m. allows them to attend following other events. Many churches will choose an earlier service and a later service to accommodate as many folks as possible.

In those years when Christmas comes on Sunday and Christmas Eve on Saturday it may be realistic for many churches to offer similar services on both days with the hope that members will attend at least one of the services.

2. Will the church print a special bulletin or program? A brightly colored bulletin or program cover lends a festive air to the service. Some will prefer a more utilitarian approach of a simple handout that guides the worshipper. Others will opt for verbal instructions or the use of a projection system to guide the worshippers. A good case can be made for a brightly colored program that carries the Christmas theme graphic and that has some take home value especially if special elements like Scripture portions are included. Be sure church contact information is included.

3. How will Invite Cards be distributed? The special rules that guide the production of any Invite Cards apply here: proof—proof—proof, include contact information, include service times and add a map. Invite Cards should be distributed to the congregation on the two Sundays prior to Christmas Eve. If these cards can coordinate with the bulletin cover and other themes the worshipper is more likely to enter into the spirit of the worship theme. Be sure to plan adequate time for your printer of choice or your church copier to produce and deliver adequate numbers of your Invite Cards. A saturation mailing might be used here. See www.USPS.com to learn more about the Every Door Direct Mail service provided by the post office.

4. How will information from guests be gathered? A Communication Card that is completed by all in attendance is one of the most non-threatening means of gathering guest information. Once again standard rules of operation apply: keep the card simple but be sure there is adequate space to fill in the blanks, do not leave the date line blank, explain the card with some version of “complete as much information as you

are comfortable sharing.” Consider a coordinated theme for your Invite Card and Bulletin/Program.

5. Will an offering be received? If Christmas Eve is treated as a special or an “extra” service then an offering may or may not be received. Many churches identify a Christmas Eve offering as a means of providing emergency services to needy families in the winter months while others designate a particular mission project or even treat it as a general fund gift. If large numbers of guests are expected please remember that these Christmas guests may be very generous if they know the specific needs being addressed by the special Christmas offering. Giving, after all, is a required part of a secular Christmas celebration too!

6. Will Communion or the Lord’s Supper be served? Many Christmas Eve services feature a Candlelight Communion as the climax of the service. If Communion is served be sure to offer clear instructions since guests may come from a variety of church and non-churched backgrounds. Will worshippers come forward to receive the elements? Will everyone hold their elements and partake together? In General Baptist churches the Lord’s Supper is always prefaced with a general invitation for all believers to participate since the Lord’s people are one at His table. If servers are limited, then invite the worshippers to come forward where a more ‘self-service’ approach can be taken if needed.



7. Will candle lighting be part of the service?

The lighting of candles at the conclusion of a Christmas Eve service is a moving experience especially as one person lights another person’s candle with the declaration “Jesus Christ is the Light of my life!” Then to sing Silent Night as the benediction becomes a powerful statement of faith and worship. Remember that candles must be prepared early. To protect furniture and carpet and fingers from hot wax the little candle-shield drip protectors must be in place. Candle lighting supplies are readily available from Christian bookstores and suppliers

but be sure to order yours in advance so they will be on hand for your special event.

8. Will creative elements be used? Drama, readings, special music and other creative elements may be provided by members of the congregation or by friends from the community. Other creative elements are available for purchase on-line or from many bookstores. For example, www.SkitGuys.com offers several Christmas themed video productions of their generally well thought out scripts. They could be your special guests! A quick visit to www.hymncharts.com will acquaint the shopper with the possibility of purchasing music scores for an entire service including special background music for Scripture readers. And of course www.YouTube.com remains an ever popular site for video elements. Just type in “Christmas Worship Songs” and view 735,000 possibilities!



The following outline of a Christmas Eve Service uses Scripture readings interspersed with carols, praise choruses and/or special music to tell the Christmas story. Musical selections can be adapted to selected stanzas and any available music can be easily inserted in the flow as worshippers alternately read and sing the Christmas story. This particular guide uses traditional carols but other music may be easily substituted to meet the preferences of the worship leader.

People who read the selected passages can be recruited in advance. A microphone set up on floor level might aid them in their presentation. Be sure to provide advance notice, a copy of the portion to be read, and instructions about arriving early for a short sound check prior to the arrival of worshippers.

Consider selecting older children, teens and senior adults who are often overlooked for these kinds of readings. Of course you may rely on the few people who are always willing but why not save them for last minute substitutes in case someone can't make it?

Carols and Candles: A Christmas Celebration

Opening Carol—"O Come All Ye Faithful" (If used on Christmas Eve omit stanza 3 but if used on Christmas Day be sure to include it!)

Welcome

The Lord's Prayer (Traditional)

Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.

A Reading from the Prophets: Isaiah 9:2, 7; Micah 5:2

Song: "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

Christmas Eve Offering

Readings from the Gospel [adapt songs and reading to fit your local setting]

Luke 1:26-35 Song: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Matthew 1:18-25 Song: "Away in a Manger"

Luke 2:1-7 Song: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Luke 2:8-14 Song: "Angels We Have Heard on High"

Luke 2:15-20 Song: "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks"

A Reading from the Epistles

Galatians 4:4-5; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Song: "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

Message: Three Types of Candles

Song: "Joy To The World"

The Lord's Supper

An Affirmation of our Faith: The Apostle's Creed (Modern English Version)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord who was

Conceived by the Holy Spirit
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died and was buried;
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
He ascended into heaven,
He is seated at the right hand of the Father,
And he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in
the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian church,
the communion of the saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen

A Prayer of Consecration

We Remember Together

Candlelighting

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-14

As you light the candle of the person next to you do so by declaring "Jesus Christ is the Light of my life."

Benediction

Choral Benediction: "Silent Night, Holy Night"

A Christmas Eve Message: Three Types of Candles

(Note: The beginning thoughts for this message come from a renowned preacher of yesteryear. The observations and applications come from another voice. Your personal illustrations and explanations can make this a powerful message customized to your local setting.)

Robert G. Lee, long time pastor of the Bellvue Baptist Church, told once of visiting a candle shop and finding there three different types of candles. As you look around our auditorium you will find that we too have three different types of candles. There are several different colors and shapes but beyond the color and shape there are three different styles of “candle-life” being lived before us.

The Unlit Candle

Some of our candles remain unlit. They are fresh and new. Some of them are waiting to share their lights at a special moment. It’s not their time yet but it soon will be.

Others remain unlit because the purpose for their existence has been transformed from that of being a light bearing candle to that of being a colorful decoration.

As long as candles remain unlit they cannot dispel any darkness. Jesus reminded us of the folly of candles that do not provide light when he shared his observation about candles and baskets: “Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:15-16)

The Partly Burned Candle

Most of our candles are partly consumed. Some under the heat and stress of burning have become slightly bent and twisted. Others have been disfigured as a cascade of wax has streamed down their sides. Some partly consumed candles have shone a little but not much. Some have burned as misers give—sparingly. Some meet the bare requirements of shining for minutes when the necessity is to shine for hours.

The Prodigal burned brightly in his youth but the rigors of life in the far country caused his flame to sputter and nearly die.

Jesus illustrated these partly burned candles in his story of seeds that grew in a field. Some never took root like a candle with a faulty wick that never burns. Others grew rapidly but as quickly stopped when the rocky soil did not provide the environment for growing just as the partly burned candle that functions for a short period of time. Most partly burned candles can be packed away and brought out again next year for another few minutes of life. Much like the old adage about atheists and foxholes so the crisis comes and the candle burns but only in crisis moments.

The Burned-to-the-Socket Candle

Some candles burn until they are all burned away. They become mere remnants of themselves. For the glory of giving light to those in darkness they have given their all. But that's what candles do! They are to be used, not displayed. They are to give light, not to sit in the darkness.

Many people today are like those burned-to-the-socket candles as they burn out to give light to others.

Not until we are burned-to-the-socket can we say we have fulfilled our mission and finished the work God has given us to do on this earth. Yet to be burned-to-the-socket in doing the will of God is to shine forever as stars that will never go out (Philippians 2:14-16), as a light that never fails (Matthew 5:14-16), as a lamp whose oil never diminishes (Matthew 25:1-13).

As we think of our three types of candles there is really only one that reminds us of Jesus, the Christ. His is not the unlit candle though many only know him as the Babe of Bethlehem who has sweet potential but has not achieved the reality of Calvary.

His is not the partly-consumed, half-burned candle though many only know him as teacher and miracle worker rather than the final sacrifice for the sins of many.

The Lord Jesus was not partly consumed, half-burned candle. Rather his existence was one of burned-to-the-socket obedience to the Father as described by the apostle.

Who, being in very nature^a God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^b of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11

Tonight we celebrate his birth and remember his death. We find here in Jesus that example of burned-to-the-socket obedience that motivates us to copy, pattern after and give ourselves to that One who gave himself for us.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no vertical margin lines or other markings present. The paper appears to be a standard piece of stationery used for writing or drawing.



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Maximizing Kingdom impact by planting, equipping and inspiring local churches to accomplish the Great Commission