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15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700

Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk

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Messy Christmas

**3 complete sessions and a treasure trove of
craft ideas for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany**

**Lucy Moore
and Jane Leadbetter**



(LM) For the joyful, ticklish, huggable and faith-filled Jack, Molly and Joshua.

(JL) For L19: Messy Church team, with thanks for all of the Saturdays they give as God's faithful servants.



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Introduction

Christmas! What a time of contrasts! It's a time of huge strain and stress for many families as we try to afford unaffordable presents, food and drink, as well as coping with a break in routine, the grim expectation that we 'have to be happy' and the presence of incompatible family members under one roof with no escape route except arguments, over-consumption and end-to-end immersion in TV...

But it's also a time of great celebration, when God gives us the present of his own self. The story can never be retold often enough of a single mother and a husband suspicious of his wife's unfaithfulness; of the birth of a baby and the hope for outsiders everywhere when outcasts and aliens come to visit him; of wicked kings and joyful angels, flights in the dark and light in the darkness. It's a time for excited children and magical moments, for generosity, hospitality and parties (and particularly good TV). Christmas is a meeting between heaven and earth.

Through these three Messy Church sessions, a local church can help 21st-century families own the eternal messages of Christmas for themselves, so that seasonal tensions, sentimentality and material pleasures have a chance to fall into a better perspective. The three sessions are planned to run once a month on three consecutive months between November and January, to encourage families to keep coming back for the next thrilling instalment, offering churches the chance to reinforce the learning and provide echoes that will deepen the worship experience over the period. Two of the craft activities deliberately repeat themselves with variations over the three months so that there is a sense of building on the past. You might also like to consider the three sessions as an opportunity to do crafts that take longer, especially for adults and teenagers who might complete a craft activity over three sessions—a chance to 'leave things to dry', for example.

We've included a section on extra Christmas craft ideas: 'Christmas allsorts'. These crafts don't have detailed explanations but are there to suggest ideas for Christian themes at Christmas time, and you'll easily find instructions on the web. You could use them as alternative crafts at your Messy Church or as a way of extending the usefulness of this book over more than one Christmas season.

The creative prayer ideas encourage families to enjoy praying together and to learn about happiness as they do so.

Our Christian responsibility to look after the world we live in is given practical outworking in the 'recycling' sections and in the global action/justice ideas.

Everyone learns in different ways, so there are sections of ideas for really messy learners and ‘activity’-based learning. This means that there is something for all to enjoy and a challenge for everyone.

Finally, the ‘Messy Moments’ and take-home ideas encourage families to continue their spiritual care for each other at home as well as at gathered church.

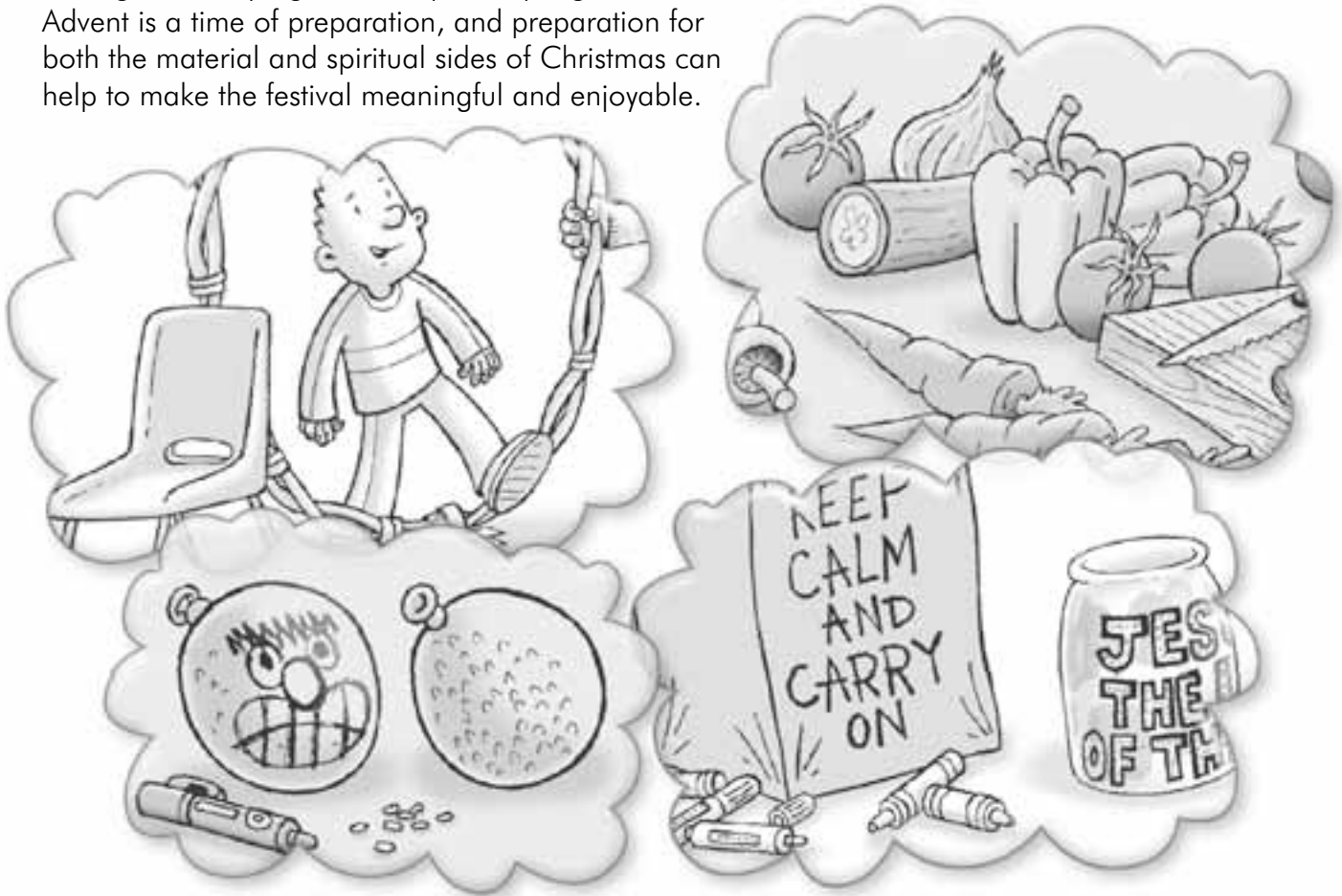
Making things together—even simply making a mess together—can be one way in which God’s kingdom explodes into life in a church, a community, an individual or a family. We’re not just gluing and sticking: we’re reflecting the God who creates and recreates and gives us the chance to be more fully human as we mirror his actions. Just as God wasn’t afraid to get his hands into the stuff of the earth—touch swaddling clothes, skin and straw, smell frankincense and myrrh, taste milk and bread—the act of making things gives people a chance to get their hands too into the stuff of the earth, to give their senses a feast, to savour what is good and to feel real things in a screen-based world. Craft time makes a space for adults and children to have time together, to enjoy being a family, to marvel at each other’s skills and to help each other, and it gives something to do while conversations with friends, as well as family, flourish. Alongside the sheer joy of learning new skills, difficult biblical themes and stories can be explored in a non-confrontational way through drawing, splatting, building and experimenting.

We hope your Messy Church will be a huge and happy gift to your community this Christmas.

Advent Messy Church

1

- **Theme:** preparing for Christmas
- **Biblical story:** Mary and Joseph being put under immense stress as they prepare for the journey to Bethlehem
- **Equipping today's families:** accepting that Christmas is a stressful time for families but that Jesus is at the heart of the celebrations and preparations and he is ultimately all that matters. Strategies for coping with and pre-empting the stress: Advent is a time of preparation, and preparation for both the material and spiritual sides of Christmas can help to make the festival meaningful and enjoyable.



Crafts

Christmas 'to do' list

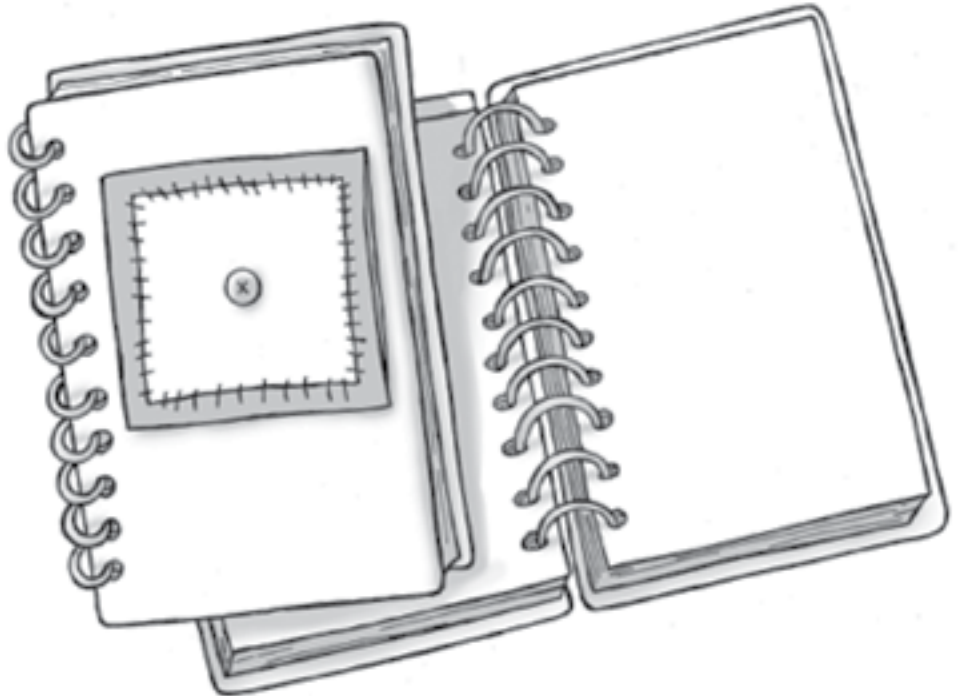
You will need:

Notebook; attractive paper or card for covering; stickers, sequins and paper shapes for decoration; a printout of the following words on a piece of paper the same size as the notebook cover:

Jesus said, 'Do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" ... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'
(Matthew 6:31, 33, NIV)

How to

Decorate a notebook to make lists to help you prepare for Christmas and stay in control of all the busyness. You could write dates of school and social events, 'to do' lists, lists of gifts to source, addresses, recipes and so on.



Talk about how busy we all are in the run-up to Christmas, but how it can help us to stay unstressed if we remember that the only things that really matter are loving God and loving the people round us. Everything else is just icing on the cake. You might offer to pray for anyone who has real worries about making ends meet this Christmas.

Bath bombs

You will need:

A bath bomb-making kit or ingredients (including citric acid, bicarbonate of soda, cornflour, witch hazel, colourings and fragrances) as listed in one of the many internet recipes. The kits cost around £25 to make about 20 bombs.

How to

Mix everything up well and spritz the dry ingredients with witch hazel as per the instructions in the kit. You can use moulds or just make 'rough and ready' shapes in your hands. The bombs take a few hours to dry so you could invite people back to pick them up next month. You may also be able to hire a soap-making kit: contact your Regional Coordinator for details.



Talk about taking time to relax in a bath during the busyness of the run-up to Christmas. You could mention that Advent is a time of preparation and lots of Christians take time out to think about God, life, the universe and everything during Advent (though baths as such are not well-documented in the history of early church discipleship).

Whopping Wreath No. 1

This is the first of three wreaths to be made during the three Messy Church sessions and included in the celebrations.

You will need:

The basis for a wreath that's about 2 metres in diameter—big enough for people to walk through. Suggestions are a length of hosepipe twisted into a circle, corrugated cardboard pieces taped together, three beanpoles (this will make a 'doorway' rather than a wreath, but that's OK), or, for those who have woodworkers on the team, a beautiful hollow plywood circle. (Remember, you'll need two more for the next two sessions.)

You will also need old Christmas 'tat'—Christmas decorations, tinsel, paper chains, pixies, reindeer, Santas, gift boxes and so on; empty 'notices' to write on, fat felt-tip pens.



How to

The wreath or doorway can be strung up from beams, strapped upright to a couple of chairs or held up by volunteers. Be aware of the need for wheelchair / pushchair / walking frame access.

Decorate this first wreath with secular Christmas 'tat' on one side. The idea is that these things are fine in themselves but that God wants us to enjoy them and step through them into what Christmas is really all about. You could cover the wreath in sticky-backed plastic with the sticky side outwards so that it's very easy even for toddlers to stick shapes on to it; you can tie or tape on the heavier items.

On the other side will go our worries, preoccupations, jobs to do before Christmas, concerts, fairs and plays that will take up our time. These can be written on the notice cards and taped on to the wreath.

Talk about

the things that you're looking forward to about Christmas and the things that are stressing you out already. Say that God's interested in making these things easier for you, and that's what today's Messy Church is all about.

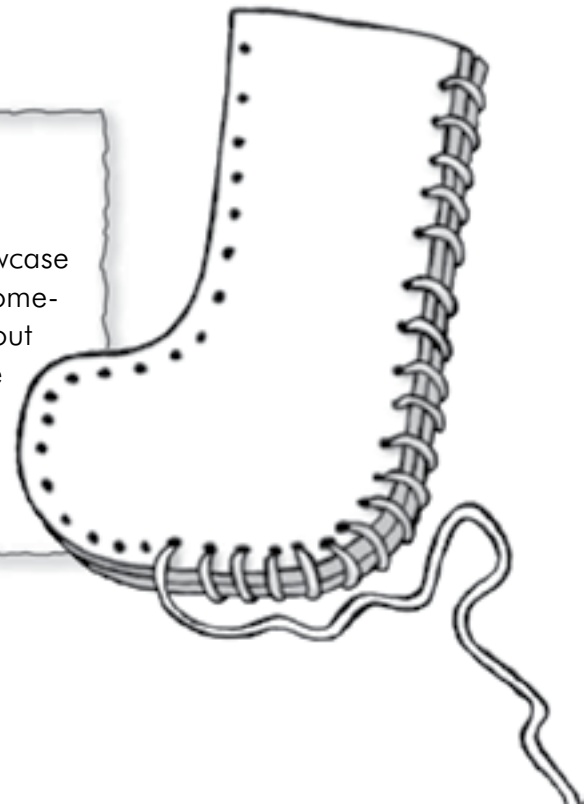
Pillowcases/stockings

You will need:

Cheap pillowcases and fabric pens, or stocking shapes cut from felt with holes punched along the sides and wool to thread through in contrasting colours

How to

As part of getting ready for Christmas, decorate a pillowcase or stocking for yourself or someone in your family to leave out on Christmas Eve. If you are using felt shapes, sew up the stocking by threading the wool through the holes.



Talk about the anticipation of the run-up to Christmas and how Mary might have felt, waiting for her baby to be born.

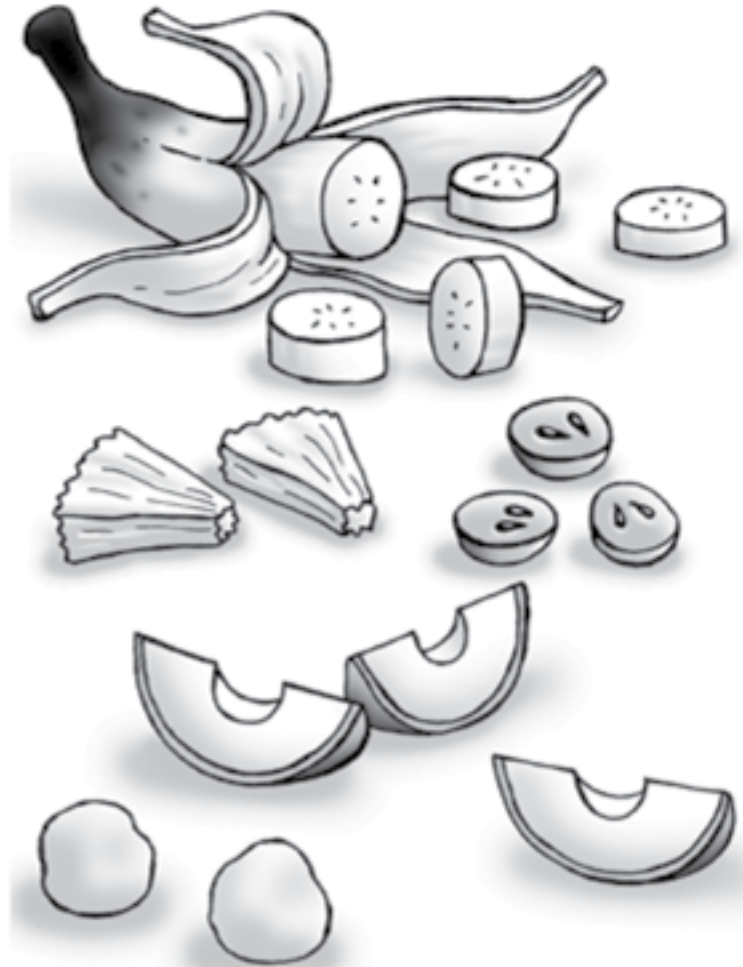
Chocolate-covered treats

You will need:

Fairtrade chocolate; non-choking foods in small chunks (for example, pineapple chunks, apple slices, ginger chunks, balls of fondant icing, halved grapes, banana slices, sweets); cocktail sticks; greaseproof paper; icepack placed under the greaseproof paper to help the items set quickly

How to

Melt the chocolate in a microwave or over hot water (away from children) and dip a piece of food into the chocolate using the cocktail stick. Place it on the greaseproof paper to set, then eat.



Talk about how, just like these treats, the outside parts of Christmas are great fun—presents and stockings and parties and plays. But what's hidden on the inside is even better. What do you think is at the heart of Christmas?

Stir-fry vegetable chopping

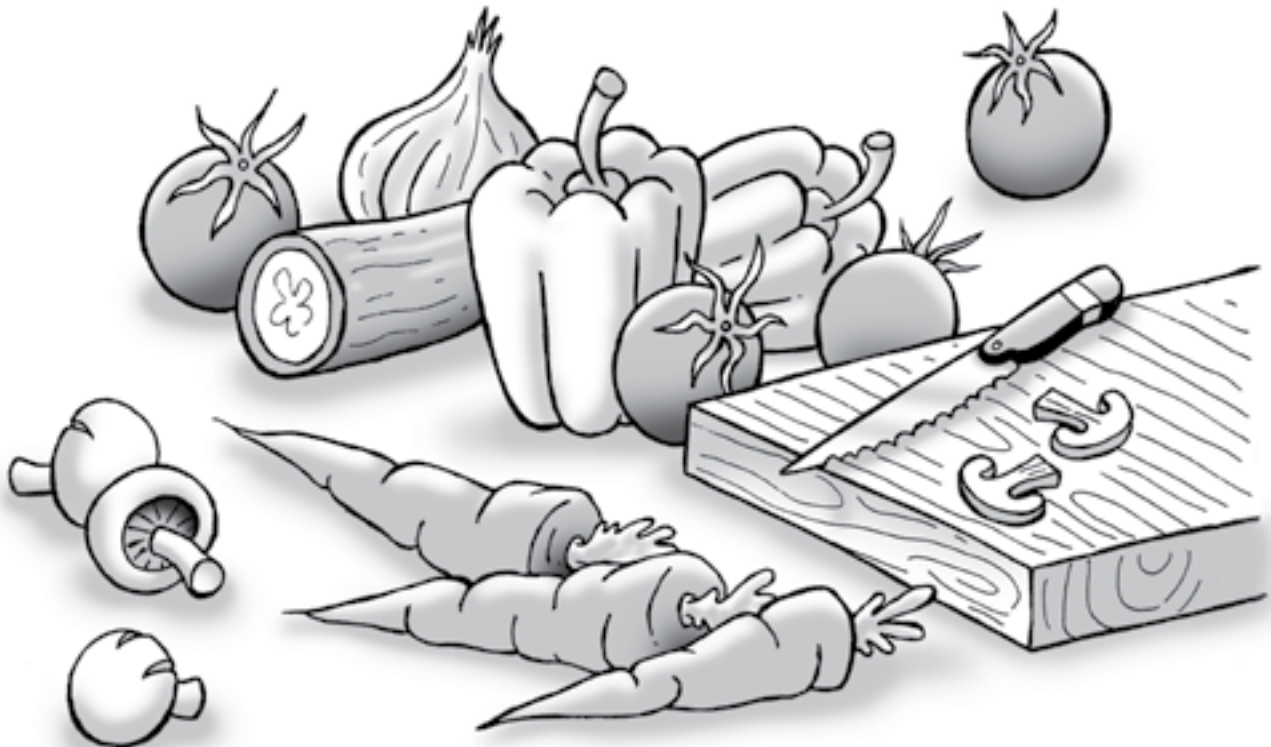
You will need:

A trained chef, lots of raw vegetables, chopping boards, different sorts of knives, adult supervision

How to

Learn to chop properly from your chef and use the chopped vegetables to make a big stir-fry for the meal afterwards.

Talk about the way, in stir-fry meals, it takes ages to prepare the food so that the meal tastes great. Christmas is a bit like that: it takes a lot of getting ready, but the getting ready is hugely important to make sure the festival itself is as meaningful as it can be.



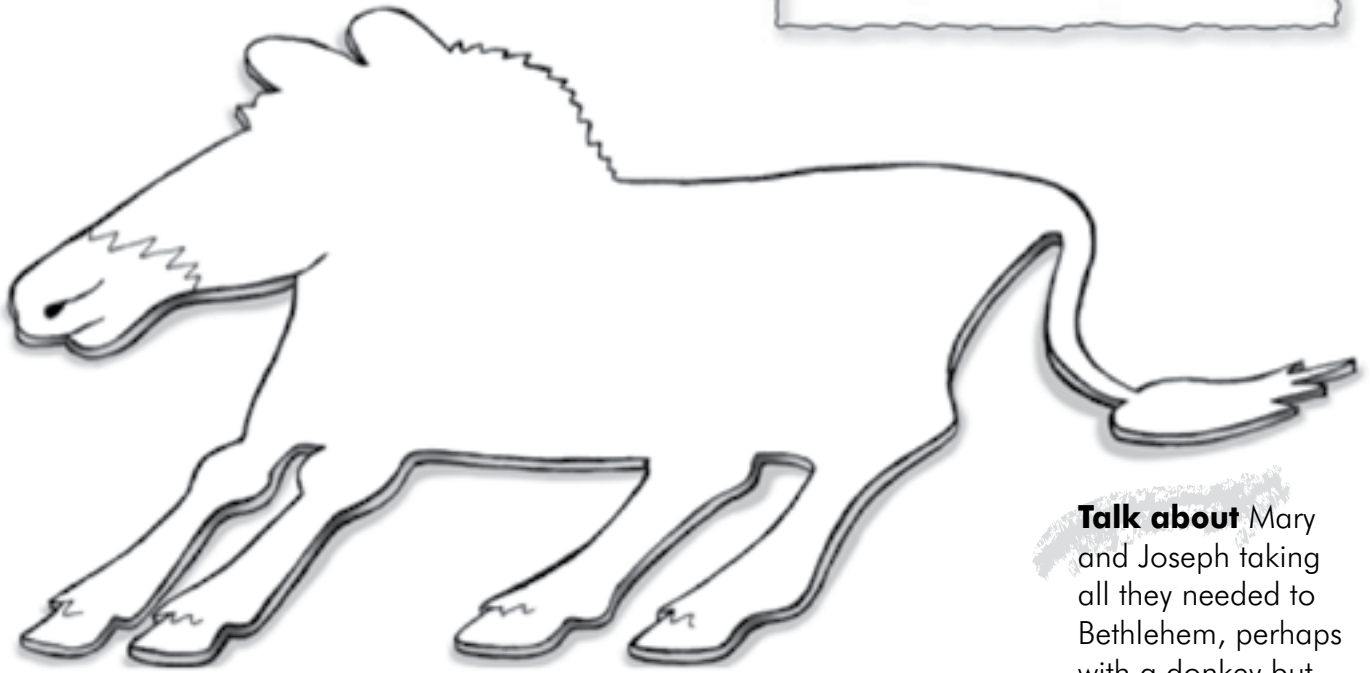
Competition: how many people fit on a donkey?

You will need:

Suitcases; a flat cut-out of a donkey, roughly life-size made out of a material that won't rip easily, or (with plenty of supervision) a 3D 'donkey' made of two or three spacehoppers or gym balls strapped together

How to

Put the donkey shape flat on the floor and challenge families to fit as many people and suitcases as they can on to the shape. No part of anyone's body may touch the floor: they have to be completely on the donkey. Watch out for the safety of smaller people!



Talk about Mary and Joseph taking all they needed to Bethlehem, perhaps with a donkey but perhaps on foot.

Wall display/noticeboard

This display continues over two sessions.

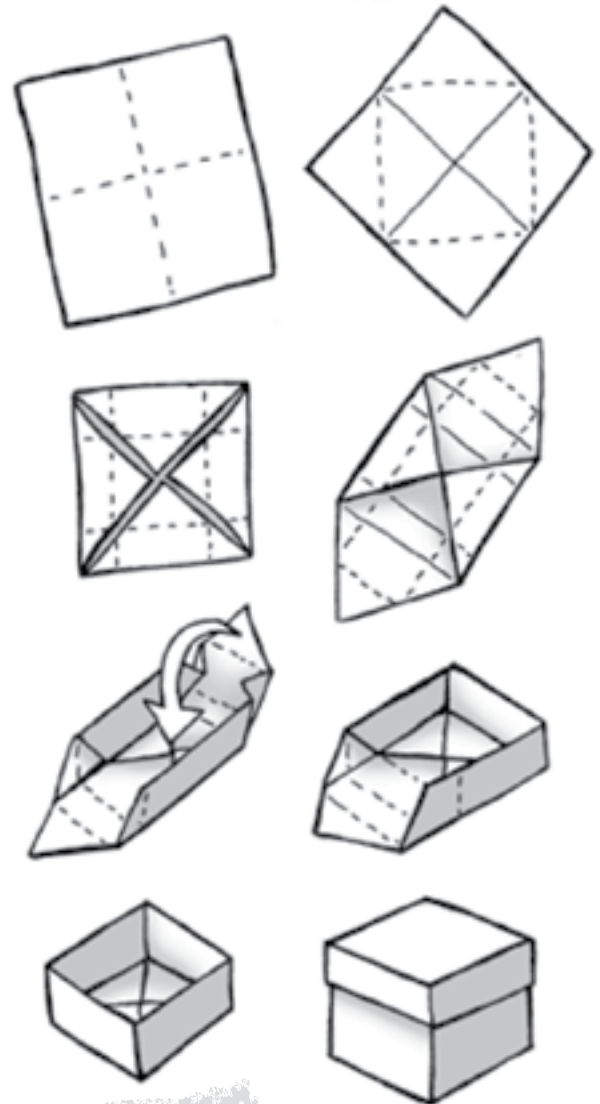
You will need:

A gold or silver gel pen; a pattern for simple origami boxes (see opposite); paper of different colours in sizes to make a box and a lid (squares of wrapping paper work well); gift ribbon; glue dots; drawing pins or double-sided tape

How to

Invite people to write on one of the smaller pieces of paper a prayer to God: something they're worried about, something they're thankful for, someone they want God to look after and something private to them. Make this paper into the base of the box using the origami folding, and make a second, larger piece of paper into the lid, using the same pattern. Fit them together so that the prayer is hidden both in the folds of the paper and under the lid. Write your name over the lid of the box in silver or gold gel pen. Tie it up in ribbon and add it to the wall display, using a drawing-pin or double-sided tape.

Make a new box at this session and the next, and attach them to the wall display.



Talk about how much can change over two months. At the end of two months, people can take their box sets home and see what they've been talking to God about over that time.

Upcycle wooden items

This activity could continue over three sessions.



Talk about the care Joseph would have taken in making things out of wood, and how Jesus would have learned from him as he grew up.

You will need:

A selection of old wooden chairs, tea trays, boxes and so on; fine-grade sandpaper; washing-up liquid and brush or cloth; either acrylic paints or pictures to cut out of comics and magazines for découpage; PVA glue; varnish

How to

Sand down the wooden object and clean it with diluted washing-up liquid. Allow to dry. Paint, if this is the only finish you want.

Cut out a selection of pictures, if using découpage. Arrange the cut-outs over the object, then glue them down and smooth off thoroughly to avoid air bubbles.

When dry, varnish with matt varnish and a medium-sized brush, using appropriate safety precautions and adult supervision.

Professional varnishing, on an item like a chair, needs 15–20 coats; you may suggest fewer.

Rough log slab stools

You will need:

Sawn-off 'slices' of tree trunk about 5–8cm thick; small wooden blocks or chunks; strong wood glue; sandpaper

How to

Clean up the slab of wood with a damp cloth and some diluted washing-up liquid. Sand down its flat upper surface if it is really rough or splintery. (Leave the bark on.)

Sand down three small chunks of wood, roughly equal in size. On the underside of the slab, glue on the three chunks of wood to be the legs of the stool and leave to dry.



Talk about how rough Joseph's hands would have been from all that woodwork.

Quiet space

Listen to classical music

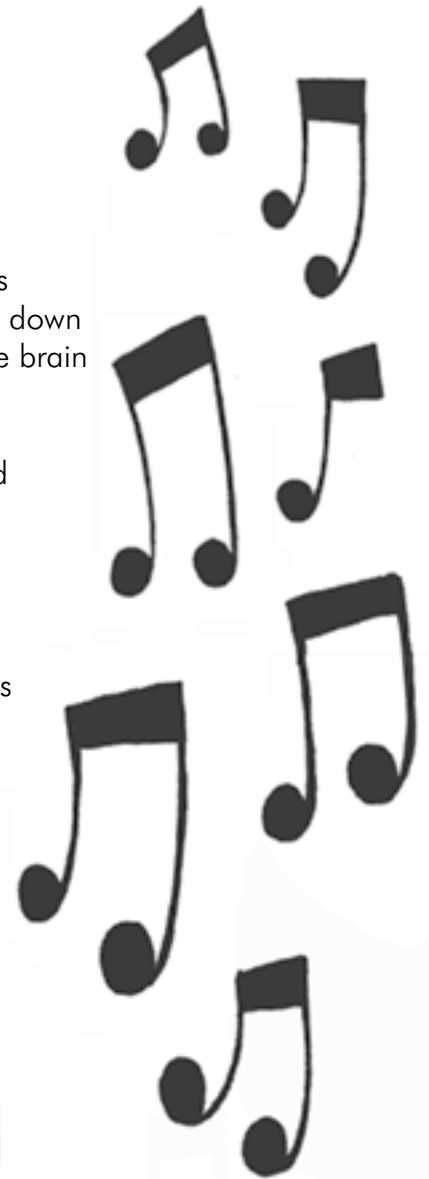
Research from the Science University of Tokyo shows that classical music is helpful for reducing levels of anxiety and stress. It has been shown to slow down the heartbeat, which helps people to relax, and it stimulates the part of the brain connected with emotional activity and sleep.

Create a comfortable corner or other space with chairs, cushions and beanbags. Play some quiet classical music (using a CD player or iPod and headphones).

Provide sheets with instructions for easy breathing exercises:

- Sit in a relaxed position.
- Slowly inhale through your nose, counting to five in your head.
- Let the air out of your mouth, counting to eight in your head as it leaves your lungs.
- Repeat several times.

Make some simple drawing equipment or a sandpit available to occupy small children, at least for a little while, so that stressed parents can relax.



Celebration

As people come in, play or sing your own version of 'Prepare ye' from *Godspell* (Stephen Schwartz).

Place the wreath at the doorway so that everyone walks through the wreath to come in. As you talk about the crafts and activities you've just been doing, keep reminding everyone that it's been all about preparations—getting ready. It's a very busy time of year. Look at all the busy things we've stuck on our wreath! But we get busy now so that we can really enjoy the fantastic present that God gives us all at Christmas time.

Storyteller: There was one family who had a huge amount to do.

Joseph: Hello. I'm Joseph and I've got lots to do: I've got to build a house for me and my girlfriend to live in when we get married. She's beautiful! She's gorgeous! I love her so much! *(Ad lib here: invite people to come and help build the imaginary house. Then see Mary coming and send them back to their seats so that you can be alone with Mary.)*

Mary: Joseph, God's told me I'm going to have a baby.

Joseph: But... it's not my baby.

Mary: No, it's God's baby.

Joseph: I need to sleep on this. *(Lies down)*

Storyteller: In those days, this was a really big deal. Mary could be stoned to death for having someone else's baby. So Joseph decided to split up from Mary but to do it quietly so that she wouldn't be killed and people wouldn't talk too much about her. But God needed Joseph as part of his plans. He sent an angel. We need the sound of an angel arriving in the night! Can you make it for me? *(All make a whooshing sound)*

Angel: Joseph! God needs you to look after Mary and her baby. So get married to her, just as you were planning to. The baby really is God's baby!

Storyteller: The angel went away, with the same sound. *(All make whooshing sound)* Joseph woke up.

Joseph: I suppose I'd better build a bigger house for all three of us.

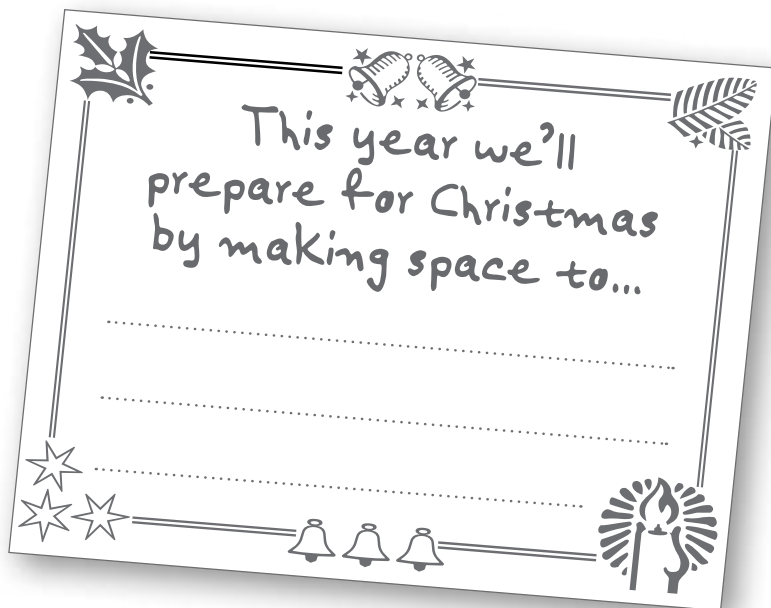
- Storyteller: It was very tough for them both, as people did talk about Mary. And it got even tougher. The Romans made a proclamation. We need some Roman soldiers to march in!
- Roman: (*Mustering some volunteer soldiers and lining them up to march in*) Left, right, left, right, left, right... HALT! Listen, you horrible bunch of Nazareth people! We're here to tell you you've got to go and fill in your census forms in the town where you were born. Or you'll be in big trouble, won't they, boys?
- Soldiers: Yeah!
- Roman: Attention! Left, right, left, right, left, right! (*Marches them off*)
- Joseph: Mary, we'll need to get ready to go to Bethlehem. That's 80 miles away!
- Mary: Oh God, I feel so stressed and so tired, and there's so much to do to get ready for this journey. How will I cope with it all?

We call the start of December 'Advent'. It's a special time of year for getting ready for Christmas. There are things to clear out of our lives and things to make. It's a very busy time for all of us, just as Mary and Joseph had so much to do to get ready for Jesus' birth. So how about showing God how special you think he is, by making space for him in all the busyness this year?

Response

Give everyone a nicely designed card, ideally with a magnetised strip on the back so it can be stuck to the fridge at home, with these words on it:

This year we'll prepare for Christmas by making space to...



On the display at the front, show some suggestions for ideas to help people live happily as a family, to help them remember Jesus, and to help them to 'love our neighbours'. Choose suggestions from the list below that you think are most appropriate for the families who come to your Messy Church.

- Help each other to say 'sorry' when we get stressed.
- Say 'I love you' to people in our family once a day.
- Get rid of one bad habit that annoys other people in our family.
- Light a candle once a day to remember what's really important.
- Get an Advent calendar with Jesus on it.
- When we're shopping for food, say 'thank you' to Jesus for all that he gives us.
- Buy an Advent book with one 'thought' for each day.
- Read the Christmas story together.
- Give a present to children who really need it through a charity.
- Give something to our local foodbank.
- Sell some toys and belongings at a car boot sale and give ten per cent of the money to church or another charity.

Invite families to talk about which one thing they want to do, as a family, to make space for Jesus this year, and to write it on their own card. Then invite families to hold the cards together while you pray for them:

Dear God, November and December can be very stressful and exciting months, with so much to do: the school concerts, the plays, the shopping and the preparations. Please join us in all the busyness. Help us to get everything done and to remember you are the most important part of Christmas. Amen

When we ask God for something, he always answers us, so let's watch out for how he helps us this year.

Sing the African song 'Come all you people, come and praise your Maker' (*Uyai Mose*) with oodles of percussion and oomph. There are numerous YouTube versions of it, so you could sing along to one of those if you have the technology.

Finish with the Messy Grace:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (*Hold out your hands as if expecting a present*)
And the love of God (*Put your hands on your heart*)
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (*Hold hands*)
Be with us all now and for ever. Amen! (*Raise hands together on the word 'Amen'*)

As families go out through the wreath together, give them a booklet about Christmas or Advent to take home and read.

Cards to put on the meal table

- Which craft did you enjoy most today?
- Who gets more of your sympathy, Mary or Joseph?
- What stresses you out most about the run-up to Christmas?
- What gives you most hope for the world?
- Which event in your life were you best prepared for?

Take-home ideas

Festive fragrances

To make a stress-relief gift, glue a printed sheet on to the paper bag. Decorate the bag and place inside one clementine, a tealight and a small piece of pine. Create a calm and comfortable environment with these fragrances in your home, or give the bag as an Advent gift to someone.



You will need:

Paper bags; printed sheets of paper saying 'Keep Calm and Carry On' (with the Messy Church logo instead of the crown that appears on the old war-time poster); decorating materials (crayons, pens, stickers and so on); clementines (not oranges); pine wood (real Christmas tree branches); spicy scented tealights



Other ideas

- **Stress balls:** Buy stress balls or make them by wrapping dried rice in clingfilm to make a ball shape. Stretch a balloon over the clingfilm, and cut off the neck. Stretch another balloon over, covering the neck hole. Alternatively, stretch a balloon over a ball of playdough and draw an emotional face on it with a permanent marker.
- **Cup of tea:** Enjoy the delights of chamomile tea with family and friends for a soothing few minutes, or discover the fragrances and flavours of other tea types. You could make it doubly special by making tea 'properly'—taking time to choose the right blend of tea leaves, warm the pot and allow it to brew for exactly the right length of time. Serve in your best cups or mugs with a single perfect biscuit—a real 'slowing-down' exercise.



- **Chill-out jigsaw:** Clear the busy table to make a large jigsaw space and invite everyone to place pieces.



- **Chocolate:** Think of others who become more stressed than you. Buy them a bar of chocolate.
- **Family happy hour:** Ask all the family to decide when you could join in with a happy hour together. What would you choose to do to relax—watch a DVD, have a good laugh, cook a meal, share a meal, walk the dog?



- **Messy Nativity:** Take part in a Posada journey that leads you to Christmas: choose a nativity set to pass around the households of your Messy Church during Advent, allowing Jesus and his family to journey through your community and homes. Arrange an event or service for the final day of the journey (such as a Christingle or Christmas crib service). See *Messy Nativity* by Jane Leadbetter (BRF/Barnabas, 2012) for ideas on how to do this.
- **Read Philippians 4:6–7:** Don't fret or worry but share your concerns with God, who will come to settle you down.
- **Give up on perfection:** Be content and smile about the things you can achieve, even if they are unfinished or rushed.

Messy messages for Advent

Give these messages to your family, post them on your Facebook page during Advent, tweet to your group members each day, or print off and use in Advent calendars.

1. Happy Advent! When you get to school or the shops or work today, stop for a second and say 'thank you' to God for something good.
2. Tell someone you love them.
3. Nine months of waiting... how did Mary cope?
4. Joseph stuck by Mary with God's help. Ask for God's help with someone you're finding difficult.
5. How long ago did God decide to come to earth as a baby, do you think?
6. The angel said to Mary, 'You are truly blessed!' Blessings come in funny packaging. What is your messiest blessing?
7. Mary's cousin Elizabeth no doubt prayed with her and cheered her up. Talk to a friend today. See if they want a prayer said for them.
8. Give someone a hug today.
9. Zechariah said of Jesus, 'This light will shine to guide us into a life of peace' (Luke 1:79). Pray for peace in a country you're concerned about.
10. Sort out one bit of mess in your home that's bothering you.
11. Eat something delicious today and take the time to enjoy it properly.
12. Give some money to someone who needs it more than you.
13. Mary and Joseph had to go to fill in the census, but your name is already written in God's book of life.
14. Tell everyone in your family one thing you like about them.

15. Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. Pray for an engaged couple you know, that they will stick together even when it's tough.
16. Take a long hot bath and relax.
17. Zechariah said, 'God's love and kindness will shine upon us like the sun that rises in the sky' (Luke 1:78). You might not be able to see the sun for rain clouds, but it's still there.
18. Jesus started small. Commit one of your small hopes to God today.
19. Make something—a meal, a picture, a present—and delight in how good you are at making things.
20. God needed Mary and Joseph to work with him. Look out for one way you can be God's hands in the world today.
21. Watch out for God at work today.
22. Touch something wooden. Jesus was placed in a wooden manger, sailed in a wooden ship, ate from a wooden table and died on a wooden cross.
23. The angel said to Mary, 'Nothing is impossible for God!' (Luke 1:37). Trust him with something that is impossible for you.
24. 'How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.' Look round and see what God's given you.
25. Happy Christmas! May you catch up on sleep after an early start and may you find a moment to enjoy God with you.