

The  
**Christmas  
Journey**

An imaginative presentation  
for churches to use with primary schools



**Moira Curry and Gill Morgan**

# Comments on The Christmas Journey experience

*We would particularly like to commend The Christmas Journey experience. It was lovely that in the midst of all the hustle and bustle and glitz of the festival, there was time for a quieter reflection at this time of Christmas.*

HEAD TEACHER

*The Christmas presentation at Main Street was an incredible experience for our infant children and one that they will not forget. I have been taking my Year Two children to The Christmas Journey at Main Street Chapel for three years. I'm always impressed by the excellent team who organize and run the journey and the way, through storytellers, puppets and actors, they bring alive this amazing story.*

YEAR TWO TEACHER

*The children feel part of the journey by singing songs, following the star to distant lands, visiting Mary and hearing her good news, dressing up as shepherds and travelling to the stable to meet some friends. The children are enthralled as they use their senses and become part of this extraordinary journey.*

YEAR TWO TEACHER

*It was magical. I liked the bit where we saw the puppets in the stable and they made us giggle!*

KATIE, AGED 7, YEAR TWO PUPIL

*I loved it! We saw the sky moving and followed the star to see Mary and I got a shock when Angel Gabriel came round the corner!*

OLIVIA, AGED 6, YEAR TWO PUPIL

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# Introduction

The Christmas story is not new. It is at least 2000 years old and, even at the beginning, was probably told in many different forms. The excited shepherds, having been woken from sleep and interrupted by angels on a very ordinary working night, may have run back to their bewildered families with their own versions of the story. Bethlehem would have been buzzing.

As Jesus grew up, Mary and Joseph had an amazing story to tell him about the extraordinary circumstances surrounding his birth. The wise men most certainly would have written their story in their learned astrological documents. The disciples and early church members would no doubt have heard the story as it was passed down the generations, and the Holy Spirit inspired two of the Gospel writers to pass it on for us to read today.

This amazing story—God becoming a human being, a child like us, entering our world as a vulnerable baby—has led to many and various imaginative portrayals as we try to take in the enormity of the event. Artists, playwrights, songwriters and actors have all played their part in bringing us the story that we know today. Enter many of our nation's primary schools at Christmas and you will find a sea of white frilly angels, masked donkeys, tea-towelled shepherds and splendidly robed wise men, putting on that timeless story, watched by proud parents and carers. Many a Christmas carol has painted a picture of the extraordinary story—some more extraordinary than others. It is hard to believe that the young Jesus never cried and was really 'mild and obedient' all the time. Even more difficult to picture is Mary giving birth in a stable surrounded by Italian Renaissance palaces. The events of Christmas were considered so important, however, that they were written into the culture of many generations and even now, centuries later, we still celebrate the birth of this baby.

The Christmas journey portrayed in this book is not original;

it is possibly not much different from many more professional productions, for there is no 'right' way to tell the story. The presentation set out here is offered to local schools and the community as an experience, so that those taking part in the story may enter into the wonder and mystery of the elements of the event. *The Christmas Journey* does not end with Jesus in the manger but is portrayed as God's rescue plan for the world. We hope that, having entered into the experience, both children and adults will understand that Christmas is part of a much bigger story, which is still being played out today.

This book is designed as a tool kit to enable churches to run their own presentation and is supported by *The Christmas Journey* website, [www.christmasjourney.org.uk](http://www.christmasjourney.org.uk), where additional information can be accessed. On the website there are photographs, plans and downloads available.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part describes the background and practical planning needed before the experience. There are hints about team training, enthusing the church family, publicity and links with schools. The second part gives a practical outline of the components of the event. There are lists of props, scenery and characters, together with scripts and suggestions for lighting. The third section develops ideas for follow-up activities once schools have visited the presentation, to help to keep the experience alive. There are ideas for all-age worship, assemblies and class lessons as well as further resources to complement the visit.

## **The outline**

When visiting *The Christmas Journey*, children and adults are led around key elements of the traditional story in a thought-provoking way, by leaders trained to help the participants respond at their own level of understanding. *The Christmas Journey* is multisensory, lasts about three-quarters of an hour and can be adapted to different

buildings and spaces. Essentially, there are six storytelling rooms or scenes, which relate to different parts of the Christmas story. Each room develops part of the story. Groups are led on a journey beginning with an interpretation of the story of creation using visual materials. The story then moves to Mary's kitchen, on to the shepherds' hillside and then to the stable in Bethlehem. A visit to the wise men's palace completes the traditional Christmas story and children are then invited to a modern-day living room to reflect on the experience. Here the story focuses on Jesus' ministry and the final week of his life, leading to the concept that Christmas is only the start of God's rescue plan for the world and that the story goes on.

The presentation is designed primarily for Year Two children, so that schools may be invited annually. Year Two was chosen as the focus on the basis that, by this age, most children are familiar with the basics of the Christmas story and are beginning to develop thinking skills and questioning the world they inhabit. The expectation is that the same children will experience *The Easter Journey* when they reach Year Five. Therefore, *The Christmas Journey* is related to *The Easter Journey*, which is a separate but similar event designed for older children.

*The Christmas Journey* in its original setting, in the Cheshire town of Frodsham, is run as part of a town Christmas festival, so it is open to the general public at the weekend. The leaders are therefore encouraged to adapt their explanation to encompass a wider age group. Children experiencing *The Christmas Journey* during school time frequently return with their families at the weekend, creating an encouraging response. Linking the weekend presentation with invitations to an all-age worship service based on *The Christmas Journey* means that we have an excellent tool for reaching out into the community.

Much of the content of the book is based on the experience of running *The Christmas Journey* in a small church in Frodsham. Anyone reading the book and wanting to run the event themselves will no doubt approach the project from different situations and with

different opportunities. However, it may be useful and encouraging to hear our story of how God blessed this germ of an idea and led us on our own faith journey, both as individuals and as a team, from very small beginnings.

## **The journey begins**

Although we as a church are not part of a recognized denomination, we have links in the area with many different churches. The local Anglican diocese has a regular bulletin of events that may interest others in the area and, on one occasion, we noticed a presentation of the Easter story was due to take place in Crewe. Something about this struck a chord, so we decided to go along and have a look.

In phoning to arrange our visit, we discovered that the organizer was someone we'd met the previous year on the children's work team at Spring Harvest, thus giving us an ideal opportunity to stay afterwards and talk over the presentation with her. The event revealed a happy atmosphere of primary school children alongside keen and willing volunteers portraying the story of that first Easter in a variety of different ways, including drama, language and song. Afterwards we learnt more about the relationship that the church had been building up with local schools, and how they put on not only an Easter journey but also a Christmas event along similar lines.

As we drove back to Frodsham, there was plenty of time to talk over what we had seen. We were part of a team that had been praying for local schools for over 15 years, and we had certainly seen some answers to prayer. Could this be another link in that chain? We both felt that we needed to explore prayerfully what God might be saying—both feeling a mixture of excitement and dread at what was being asked of us. Various members of the Frodsham churches had worked together at events such as holiday clubs, schools' clubs and so on at different times, and we felt that this could be another such venture.

## **Exploring the idea**

We decided that we would start by exploring a way to present the Christmas journey; we felt that Christmas was more readily recognized by schools as a time when they might want to come along to a special event. The previous year, our town had held a Christmas festival—a civic-run event that had involved the whole town in a variety of activities, none of which, though fun to be part of, had any direct link with the events of the first Christmas. We realized that a presentation of the Christmas journey could be a way for local churches to offer something to the festival.

Together we talked over various ways of staging the event. The presentation in Crewe had taken place in a traditional Baptist building, which was large and had lots of available space for a variety of uses. Our church building in Frodsham was much smaller and more modern. However, despite having less room, we felt that the space might be more adaptable. We realized that to use the corners of the main worship area would allow the remaining space in the middle of the room to be used as an additional area. Our initial thought was to arrange for some sort of wooden structures to be built, which would be collapsible and easily put away for future use. The inevitable bulkiness of such a structure, however, caused us to think that this idea might be impractical. Thus began a series of events, which seemed to confirm to us that God was leading us further.

## **The first steps**

A few weeks later, we came upon a shop that had a special offer on gazebos (the sort of structure most often used to accommodate guests at a wet barbecue). The gazebos were square, green, well-made metal structures and were a real bargain. It was time to consider how serious we both were about the *Christmas Journey* idea. Should we invest in four gazebos, as they would be a good,

flexible and easily stored way of using the four corners of our area? We decided that they were worth snapping up: even if nothing came of the plans to develop the idea of a presentation of the Christmas story, there would be plenty of people likely to be hosting barbecues that summer who would be willing to take one off our hands.

About this time (mid-June), the town's Christmas festival planning meetings got under way. We asked if we could be included and were welcomed with open arms: our position as representatives of the churches in the town was recognized as very helpful in the planning of a Christmas festival. This contact proved invaluable, since, at one of the subsequent meetings, the question of funding was being discussed. We threw in the comment that if there were spare funds available, perhaps they could help us with transport costs, so that schools could be offered transport free of charge to and from their visit to *The Christmas Journey*. To our amazement, it was unanimously decided that the town council would pay for the bus, which meant that the church could operate one bus to tour several schools, collecting and delivering the children to fit in with the schedule for their visit to the presentation. Excellent news!

We knew that it was time to bring the leaders of our church up to date with the developments in our plans for *The Christmas Journey*. Although we had done many things involving schools in the past, this was to be our most ambitious project to date. As we expected, our church leaders were very supportive, offering encouragement, prayer, and—just as importantly—church funds to cover costs where necessary.

## **Gathering the team**

Realizing that we could not stage the event alone, it was time to see who would be interested in helping to form a full team to run the project. Like many churches, we have people who are capable of great things but have a natural reserve—a modesty that can hamper

progress. Our church has a strong history of working with other churches in the town, so the plans and ideas were taken along to the *Churches Together* meeting, where they were received with overwhelming support, with many people interested in joining the team. With some encouragement along the way to those with ‘natural reserve’, we had a good attendance at the first *Christmas Journey* team meeting.

This first meeting was held in October to discuss the initial idea and where to go from there. The response was wholly encouraging and afterwards we felt that God was giving us the ‘go-ahead’. The project had turned from an idea with a bit of potential into a feasible proposition and we knew it was time to step out in faith and go ahead and plan the event.

This first meeting was the catalyst, the blue touchpaper which was about to be lit. We had presented the idea to our potential team with full awareness that it was only the germ of an idea; it was to be true teamwork that changed our idea into a working proposition. Among other things we discussed at that initial meeting was the fact that the experience would need to be multisensory. It was suggested that it would be a good idea to use puppets to tell part of the story, and one of our church members mentioned that her brother ran a toy shop and had some animal puppets that might just fit the bill. Further enquiries proved this to be the case: there are more details on the website, [www.christmasjourney.org.uk](http://www.christmasjourney.org.uk).

## **God confirms the plans**

During the development of the initial plans, a Bible verse was repeatedly coming to the fore. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells the parable of the farmer, in which some of his seed falls along the road and is eaten by birds. Other seed falls on thin, rocky ground and is dried up because the soil isn’t very deep. More seeds fall where thorn bushes grow up and choke the plants. But a few seeds fall on good

ground where the plants produce 100 or 60 or 30 times as much as was scattered. As we reflected on this parable and read on, we felt that God was saying, 'This next bit applies to you and what I am asking you to do with *The Christmas Journey*'.

Matthew 13:35 says, 'I will use stories to speak my message and to explain things that have been hidden since the creation of the world.' This verse seemed to be saying that here was an ideal opportunity to spread God's word (the seed) through the retelling of the great story of his plan for humankind. We subsequently used this verse on *The Christmas Journey* prayer cards (see page 38 for further information).

A smaller team planned the storyboard for the event. Each person there made a valuable contribution and the main components of *The Christmas Journey* were soon in place: Mary's kitchen, where the angel would come and give her the amazing news of what would happen to her; the hillside where the shepherds would be told that a baby had been born; the stable where we would hear all about the arrival of that baby; and the wise men's palace, where we would find out all about the journey that these learned people were about to take. However, there were two missing components. The four scenarios just described would be familiar, we hoped, to many of those coming on the journey, but the first Christmas was part of a bigger picture, a wider plan, and it was essential to include both the beginning (creation) and the 'ongoing end' (God's plan of salvation for his world). How could these two elements be put across? We knew that this would have to be done in a special way, so that the event would be more than yet another retelling of the story of the first Christmas.

On the weekend immediately following the planning meeting, there was a reunion with old friends from youth fellowship days. One of these friends had experience of working with schools and churches within the context of the Christian faith. While we were talking together over that weekend, he agreed to help in the planning of the two missing elements: creation and God's plan of salvation.

Experienced in presenting creative storytelling, this friend was able to help to write those two sections of *The Christmas Journey*.

## Moving on

With the main components of *The Christmas Journey* in place, other issues needed to be addressed. Our church at Frodsham is small—fewer than 50 people attend most Sunday mornings—yet talent lay hidden beneath the surface. The scenery was painted by one of the members. A script was written for the stable (reproduced in this book and on the website); a friend from another church just ‘happened’ to know someone with an Indian mother-in-law who was happy to lend a box full of saris to drape in the wise men’s palace.

All these events further confirmed that we were progressing in the right direction. One last thing was needed: we hoped to find a small take-home gift for the children, such as a book that told the Christmas story simply, yet packed enough punch to give the whole picture. Despite visiting local Christian bookshops, asking around among other contacts and trawling websites, nothing seemed suitable. In a completely different context (a meeting with a friend who ran a campaign in Manchester called ‘Real Christmas’), a little book came to light that hit the nail right on the head. Called *Meet the Cast*, it told the story of the first Christmas through the characters involved. These characters were drawn in a simple cartoon style, and we found that the visuals from the booklet could be downloaded from the website of the book suppliers, Lifewords (formerly Scripture Gift Mission: see Resources section for contact details). This was the final piece of the jigsaw. We could use these symbolic characters to ‘brand’ *The Christmas Journey* and give it a logo (something that we considered to be an important component).

From the downloads we developed a logo to appear on our letters to schools, on our prayer cards, and on the T-shirts for the team

to wear. Since there are plain windows at the front of our church, which face on to the main street of the town, a member of the congregation painted a selection of the characters and the logo on to the windows. This served as publicity and an invitation to the public to come and join *The Christmas Journey*.

There was still just one more vital element. Without school children to attend, all the work would be in vain. We were fortunate enough to have an established relationship with the local primary schools, partly because our own children attended two of them and partly because we had both recently finished working in another two. As soon as schools heard about *The Christmas Journey*, they quickly signed up to come.

If you have not yet established a relationship with your local schools, see page 39 for some suggestions on how to do so. Schools nowadays are expected to be part of a cluster, working with other schools in many areas, and head teachers will readily recommend events to other heads.

There were many other affirmations in the inevitable moments of panic as we took on this task, but the support of the churches, the participation of the team members, the faces of the children and the response of the adult visitors have made *The Christmas Journey* a very special event in the life of our church and community. Our tentative small steps have been richly blessed.



# **Part One**





# Framework of the presentation

*The Christmas Journey* is designed so that the whole experience lasts for an hour, suitable for groups of up to 30 children.

When they first arrive, visitors are asked to sit down in a suitable area and are welcomed to *The Christmas Journey*. Once seated, the group is welcomed and pupils are taught the theme song, 'Where are you going, shepherds?' Words and music are available on page 97 and on the website. The children are told to look out for the characters mentioned in the song as they travel round the journey. It may be useful to have a second song to hand, such as 'Christmas Hokey Cokey' (*Christmas Wrapped Up*, SU 2003), in case delaying tactics are needed. Have the words available on a flipchart, OHP or PowerPoint projector. The songs could have guitar or keyboard accompaniment if available.

After this, the leader explains that the children will be split in two groups, one to begin *The Christmas Journey* and the second to remain where they are to take part in a craft activity. It is advisable to ask teachers to divide the group, as they often have firm ideas about which children should be together and which adults should accompany the children.

The first group is then introduced to a guide, who explains to the children that they are going on a wonderful journey. He or she leads the group to the entrance of the presentation area, building up an air of mystery and excitement before they enter the first scene. Guides could hold something for the children to follow, such as a torch or battery-operated star. Soft music playing and appropriate lighting can create an air of anticipation and expectation.

At a signal that all is ready, the first group is taken into the presentation area and *The Christmas Journey* begins.

## Craft activity

Once the first group have left for the journey, the second group are ready to start their craft activity. Children will enjoy having something they have made to take home as a reminder of *The Christmas Journey*. A leader will explain the process to the whole group, who move to tables where team members are waiting to assist the children. Help will be needed beforehand to design the craft, buy and organize materials and prepare tables.

Tables are laid out with materials for the children to use, and helpers can use the time to chat with the children. The craft activity itself needs to take no longer than eight or ten minutes, so it needs to be fairly prescribed and simple. However, it is important that the finished item is pleasing and as individual as possible, offering some choice in the creative process. The craft item can change year-to-year depending on the creativity of the team and availability of materials. A simple Christmas card works well. Provide pre-cut shapes to glue on to the card and some opportunity for colouring or using stickers or glitter pens, which can all produce a pleasing effect. If you do develop a logo, it may be possible to incorporate it into the card.

It is important that each child's work is named, especially if you have more than one school at a session, to ensure that each school receives the correct items on departure. Producing sticky labels on the computer with the school name and *The Christmas Journey* logo takes a little time, but gives a professional appearance.

An important part of this session is also to provide a comfortable waiting area for the school staff who accompany each group, so that they are able to have coffee and tea and look at resources suitable for RE and Citizenship. Teachers are normally responsible for children for the whole of an educational visit, so a short break, in a place where they can still see the children but are being looked after themselves, can be very welcome. This is a useful time for the team leaders or church minister to chat to the visiting staff, explaining *The Christmas Journey* and perhaps offering help with assemblies linked to this or other Christian events if they feel able to.

## The Christmas Journey

It is worth thinking about adding other experiences to *The Christmas Journey*, so that if children finish their craft activity quickly (and some will!) there is something else for them to do. In Frodsham, a display of nativity sets from around the world has provided an added attraction for the helpers to show the children. These are readily available from fair trade organizations such as Tearcraft, Traidcraft, Oxfam and so on, and a plea for the congregation to lend sets can be very productive. Some sets can be fragile and it is important that children are asked to respect this fact. It is worth providing a couple of more robust sets on a separate table for the children to handle and play with. A basket of appropriate children's Christmas storybooks in a cosy corner with rugs and cushions is also useful. The local library can provide books if given enough notice.

Once the second group, with their teachers, have departed on *The Christmas Journey*, the helpers can prepare the tables again with materials for the return of the first group.

For the final scene, the children are led out of the last gazebo into a lounge area outside the main hall. This creates a feeling of travelling forward in time from a darkened area into the light of the present day.

### Sample timetable for one school visit

Ideally, each scene should take about six minutes, but some scenes may take longer than others—particularly those that are interactive. The guides need to make sure that they keep to time because the second group needs to begin the journey when the first group enters the shepherds' scene.

Approximate time	Group 1	Group 2
9.30am	Welcome and song	Welcome and song
9.40am	In the beginning	Crafts/exhibit
9.46am	Mary's kitchen	Crafts/exhibit

## Framework of the presentation

9.52am	A hillside near Bethlehem	In the beginning
9.58am	Stable	Mary's kitchen
10.04am	Palace	A hillside near Bethlehem
10.10am	The new beginning	Stable
10.16am	Crafts/exhibit	Palace
10.22am	Crafts/exhibit	The new beginning

Although this timetable looks very precise, bear in mind that it is just a guide and you need to allow for a little flexibility. Much will depend on the size and responsiveness of the group. However, guides do need to be aware of the time, particularly when using the same storyteller for both groups, so that he or she has time to get in place for the last scene.

Each scene is described in detail on pages 54–95.

### **Suggested daily timetable for several school visits**

As *The Christmas Journey* experience lasts for just one hour, there will be time for up to four school groups to visit per day. The morning sessions will last from 9.30am until 10.30am and 10.45am until 11.45am, which allows for a short changeover slot. Afternoon sessions will run from 12.45pm until 1.45pm, then 1.45pm until 2.45pm, allowing pupils to return to school for home time. At Frodsham, the schools attending the 12.45pm slot would often arrange for the pupils attending to have an early lunch that day. It is also worth considering the proximity of the final school of the day, perhaps giving a warning just in case the event overruns by a few minutes.

## The Christmas Journey

9.00 am	Team meet for prayer and preparation
9.30–10.30 am	School 1
10.45–11.45 am	School 2
12.45–1.45pm	School 3
1.45–2.45pm	School 4

If several schools are visiting in one day, there are several important points to consider, to make sure the day runs smoothly.

- Try to use a one-way system of entrances and exits if your building allows for this, so that if one school arrives as another is leaving, there is no confusion.
- A holding area is useful, so that if a school arrives early, there will be time to sing a familiar song or even watch part of a suitable video without disturbing the previous school.
- The children need a place to remove and store coats. If a one-way system is used for arrival and departure, it is helpful if coats are moved to the exit at an appropriate time during the event.