



Liturgical Notes on Advent, Christmas & Epiphany

Prepared by the Bishop's Liturgical Advisory Panel
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These notes are part of a series of “evergreen” documents prepared by the Bishop's Liturgical Advisory Panel. The notes address the seasons of: 1) Advent, Christmas and Epiphany; 2) Lent and Holy Week; 3) Easter to Pentecost; 4) Sundays after Pentecost (including the Season of Creation).

All notes have been approved by our Bishop and are intended to assist parish clergy and worship planners by providing a blend of directives (indicated in bold italic print), suggested guidelines, and encouragement to exercise appropriate creativity as we mark time as a diocesan church.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Collects & Eucharistic Prayers Advent to Epiphany

Familiarity with the weekly lections can help the presider decide whether to select a Collect of the Day from the Alternative Collects (see: <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/Alternative-RCL-Collects-2019-updated-2024-03.pdf>). Each week in Advent, the Christmas season, and throughout the season after Epiphany there are at least two alternative Collects in addition to the one in the BAS. All Collects and other proper prayers are to be said by the presider, with the congregation joining in on the ‘Amen’.

Be careful to ensure there is a fitting conclusion to any alternative Collect you choose as some do not include one (“through Jesus Christ, our Lord etc.”). Sample conclusions can be found on pages 159-160 of the General Synod document.

Eucharistic Prayer #3 has proper prefaces specifically designed for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. The ‘Incarnation’ preface is apt for when the First Chapter of John is the gospel reading, a reading often chosen for Christmas Day.

It is recommended that the season after Epiphany end with the readings and prayers of the Last Sunday after Epiphany (i.e. the Sunday before Ash Wednesday). Sometimes this day is called Transfiguration Sunday.

ADVENT

Advent has its own integrity as a liturgical season, blending awareness of the ways that Jesus Christ comes to our world. Most powerfully, the liturgy is designed to nurture and express our longing for the coming of Christ at the end of time, the *Parousia*, the fulfillment of our hope and desire. During November the Scripture readings speak of that time when Christ's kingdom will stand in judgement over the injustices and heartaches of our world. In effect, the lectionary has been leading us into an Advent mode well before we arrive at the first Sunday of the season. Together we wait for the Lord who is to come.

On the last Sunday of Advent our attention shifts to the incarnation and nativity at Bethlehem. Thus Advent, rightly celebrated, is much more than simply a time of preparation for the nativity as it assures the faithful that Christ will someday come again.

Liturgically, the focus of Advent can be expressed in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, the following: the change to blue or purple hangings and vestments; the singing of hymns focussed on the varied spiritual and theological themes of Advent; the omission of the 'Glory to God', using either the Kyrie or the Trisagion; the use of the Advent preface when using Eucharistic Prayer #3; and the Advent form of the Prayers of the People found on page 119 of the *Book of Alternative Services (BAS)*. This litany is best sung to the chant on page 917. Petitions may be added prior to the litany using the familiar bidding formula 'I ask your prayers for...'

Some of these suggestions can be found in *McCausland's Order of Divine Service* as well as elsewhere, including the *BAS*. It is important to note that *McCausland's* itself has no authoritative status in the Anglican Church of Canada. Its essays and comments reflect the opinion of that year's author and editor, which can at times conflict with accepted Anglican custom. The resource should be used selectively, guided by a detailed familiarity with the essays, explanatory notes, and rubrics of the *BAS* as well as an understanding of Anglican liturgy as a whole.

The Primacy of Sunday versus Theme Days

Given that Advent is such a short liturgical season, it is particularly important for parishes to keep the focus on its unique theological and spiritual concerns when planning Sunday worship. ***The readings and prayers of the day must always be used.*** Themes such as World AIDS Day, the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women as well as Human Rights Day should be addressed in the context of Christ's coming kingdom of justice and healing.

Sermons, the Prayers of the People, and explanatory material in a Sunday bulletin can bring a uniquely Advent perspective to any social issue that a parish is concerned with. Assurance that we worship a God of justice can inspire parish members to continue to work and pray for the well-being of all as we live in the 'now and not yet' reality of the Kingdom.

Advent Wreaths - Optional

It is not required that a congregation display an Advent wreath. If it does have one, ***the wreath must not dominate or obscure the altar***. Instead, it can be placed near the lectern or in some other visible place.

Ideally, the appropriate number of candles are lit prior to the start of the liturgy, without special readings and/or prayers being said. When the Service of Light is used at Evening Prayer during Advent, the wreath may be the symbolic focus of the service as described on page 60 of the *BAS*.

Some parishes have a robust custom of Advent wreath candle-lighting during the Sunday liturgy, with people eager to participate. If this is the case, remember it is the light shed by the candles that is the liturgical symbol, not the colour of the candles. A simple sentence read at the time of candle-lighting avoids allegorizing a particular colour scheme while highlighting an appropriate seasonal theme.

Done simply, ***wreath-lighting can make an appropriate contribution to the liturgy as long as it does not overshadow either the Gathering of the Community or the Proclamation of the Word.***

It can be desirable to highlight the domestic origins of the Advent Wreath, providing online links to where a wreath can be purchased for use at home. Alternately, a notice in the bulletin in mid-November might inspire people to mark the season at home in a simple way:

*Consider making an Advent Wreath for your home to mark the weeks of Advent to the feast of the Epiphany. All you need are five candles of any colour - four arranged in a circle and the fifth in the centre. Light one candle during the first week of Advent, two during the second week, et cetera. Light just the centre candle from Christmas Eve until January 6.
Note: It is perfectly acceptable to replace candles if they burn out.*

Many parishioners would welcome receiving a leaflet and/or a link to Advent Wreath prayers designed around the Home Prayers found on page 686 of the *BAS*.

Advent Lessons & Carols Service

An Advent Lessons & Carols Service can become a beloved parish custom, whether offered occasionally or on an annual basis. Consult the *Book of Occasional Celebrations* for further information (www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/Occasional_Celebrations.pdf). Be sure to read the prefatory notes and directions that offer modifications depending on whether the service is offered in the afternoon or evening. It can also be an option for a Sunday morning Service of the Word when a Licensed Lay Reader is the officiant.

Avoiding ‘Christmas Creep’ In Advent

Most clergy know this is easier said than done. It is important for clergy to exercise judicious restraint in imposing significant changes to longstanding parish customs.

That being said, the gift of Advent is its sense of quiet anticipation and spiritual longing that is distinct from our culture’s focus on material goods and stimulating experiences. In the midst of competing values, it is important to use one’s best pastoral judgement. Be aware that complex church decorating schemes can be simplified or even cease when key lay leaders are no longer available to ensure they are carried out.

Having a Christmas tree in the worship space throughout Advent is not ideal. When Christmas decorations in this season are deemed to be unavoidable, the use of natural rather than artificial greenery and perhaps handmade ornaments are preferable. *Christmas decorations of any kind must never obscure or dominate the altar.*

If the Feast of St. Nicholas is observed on a Sunday, the Advent readings of the day shall be used, along with the proper prayers.

In order to accommodate the scheduling needs of young families, sometimes a Christmas pageant is held in advance of December 24. If that is the case, it does not thereby give license to introduce Christmas carols during subsequent liturgies, even if carols are sung during the pageant.

It is important to note that a Christmas pageant is not a substitute for a homily, although clearly such homilies need to be brief and child-friendly.

CHRISTMAS, EPIPHANY & THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

The Baptism of the Lord must be held on the first Sunday after January 6. When planning the Sundays between Christmas and January 6, be sure to review the guidance provided on pages 15-17 and 276-280 of the *BAS*.

In the season of Christmas we celebrate the truth of the Incarnation, how God assumed human flesh as a vulnerable infant, revealing the value of humanity and its earthly realities. The Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the whole world, inspiring parish communities to take their part in sharing the Good News with those who long for it. The Baptism of the Lord celebrates the start of Lord’s earthly ministry and is an appropriate time for baptisms or the renewal of baptismal promises.

White hangings and vestments highlight the celebratory nature of the time from Christmas to the Baptism of the Lord. Fittingly, the “Glory to God” returns after its absence during Advent. Simple metrical versions such as #365 in *Common Praise (1998)* sung to the familiar tune *Darwall* can be manageable even by parishes with limited musical resources.

Some parishes assemble a creche or manger scene at Christmas, either outside or within the church. This or a similar blessing could be used:

God of every nation and people, from the beginning of creation you have made manifest your love: when our need for a Saviour was great you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary. To our lives he brings joy and peace, justice, mercy and love. Bless this manger and all who look upon it; may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus, and raise our thoughts to him, who is God-with-us and Saviour of all, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Many parishes have a long-standing custom of reading the nativity story from Luke on Christmas Eve and the first chapter of John on Christmas Day. The Incarnation litany uses images that give a seasonal flavour. If additional petitions are desirable, they may be added prior to the litany using the familiar bidding formula 'I ask your prayers for...'. .

Christmas Lessons & Carols Service

Instead of or in addition to an Advent Lessons & Carols Service, a Christmas-themed carol service may be offered during the twelve days of Christmas. It can also be an option for a Sunday morning Service of the Word when a Licensed Lay Reader is the officiant. Consult the *Book of Occasional Services* for guidance and inspiration: <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/OccasionalCelebrations.pdf>. Be sure to read the prefatory notes and directions which suggest modifications depending whether the service is offered in daylight or in the evening.

Thanksgiving over the Water - Baptism of the Lord

As mentioned, the Baptism of the Lord must be held on the first Sunday after January 6. It is fitting to celebrate baptisms or the renewal of baptismal vows on this day. A newly authorized "Thanksgiving Over the Water" specifically designed for the Baptism of the Lord can found here: www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/Thanksgiving-Over-the-Water-Baptism-of-the-Lord.pdf. It can replace either of the two prayers found in the *BAS* baptismal service on pages 156-158.

If there are no candidates for baptism, the Thanksgiving can replace the one on page 330 for the Renewal of Baptismal Vows if the following sentence is omitted: "Breathe your Spirit, O God, upon this water that your servants who are washed and anointed may share with your Christ in his death and resurrection." Also omit "... that our Lenten observances is ended," when addressing the congregation as per page 330.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Many congregations mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on the Sunday between January 18-25 although it can also be observed at other times of the year. Whenever it occurs, it is appropriate to acknowledge the theme of the week during the Prayers of the People. Liturgical and study material is available each year from the Canadian Council of Christian Churches: <https://www.weekofprayer.ca/>.

The Presentation of the Lord - Candlemas

In 2025 the Presentation of the Lord falls on Sunday, February 2. Because this feast takes precedence over a Sunday, 2025 is a rare chance for a parish to celebrate it, apart from parishes that have frequent midweek eucharists.

Some parishes will want to begin the celebration with a candlelit procession. If it is desirable to bless candles for use at home, it is appropriate to do this either before the procession or at the time of the Prayers of the People. If a procession within the church is desired, see the *Book of Occasional Services (2018)* from The Episcopal Church at: https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/lm_book_of_occasional_services_2018.pdf.

The Primacy of Sunday versus Theme Days

Increasingly, parishes in our diocese are observing Black History Month during one or more of the Sunday liturgies in the month of February. ***The readings and prayers of the day must be used***, and any special music should support these themes. ***All preachers must be licensed by the Bishop of Ottawa or have episcopal permission to preach.***

Recently General Synod has encouraged parishes to choose the Sunday closest to February 22 as a time to address human trafficking, labour exploitation, and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls as well as 2SLGBTQI+ persons. This can also be done on other Sundays. See www.anglican.ca/issues/human-trafficking/freedom-sunday/. If a parish decides to mark these themes, ***the usual name of the Sunday must be used as well as the readings and prayers of that day.*** In 2025 February 23 will be the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany.

Relevant themes addressed in the sermon and thoughtfully chosen hymns and images can inspire Christian worship as well as lives committed to the gospel values of justice and compassion. Be careful that special intentions in the Prayers of the People do not overshadow the people's need to pray for a variety of concerns.