

With dragons, talking carrots, and even a surprise comeback for ET all vying for centre stage in the annual festive advertising bonanza, the Church of England is putting real-life stars at the heart of its campaign to invite more people to church this Christmas.

The video and digital campaign for 2019 (#FollowTheStar) which launches today tells the story of Christmas preparations at St Peter's Church, Stockton-on-Tees – a church with a special ministry. The advert is backed by singers from a London Gospel Choir, with this year's Christmas Single, a new arrangement of the favourite carol *We Three Kings*.

Featuring in the advert are refugees and asylum seekers who attend St Peter's, together with Stockton residents of all ages.

Last year, the Church of England's #FollowTheStar campaign reached more than eight million people through social media as well as engaging many millions more through print and broadcast coverage. At the heart is a simple message: come to church to discover the joy of Christmas, with a range of free resources and reflections to help people along the way.

And the 2019 campaign is set to reach more people than ever, with churches and cathedrals up and down the country taking part by displaying stars, handing out special reflection booklets, and inviting new people to services and events via AChurchNearYou.com – the CofE's 'church-finder' which has attracted nearly 40 million page views in the past 12 months.

At the launch of the #FollowTheStar campaign at Lambeth Palace **The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby**, said:

"Christmas is rightly a time for celebration, bringing joy and comfort to the lives of others. The reason we do this is that we are each offered the most extraordinary gift at Christmas in the birth of Jesus.

"I hope that everyone who sees this campaign, whether or not they know anything about Jesus, will feel moved – like the Magi – to follow the star to church and to ask the questions: 'why am I here, what am I for, and why I am loved?'

"It doesn't matter who you are – whether you're a regular church-goer, or you never go to church, there is something in #FollowTheStar and in Jesus for everyone."

Viewers of the 2019 advert will see members of the congregation of all ages speaking lines of *We Three Kings* in turn. One line is spoken in the Farsi (Persian) language by Michael, an asylum seeker who fled his native Iran. Other members of the church's English Language Class, which serves people from more than 30 countries, also feature, together with pensioners Edwin and Ruth who hang a large star from the church tower, and a trio of 'wise men' (Lily, Kari, and Jasper) in the finest nativity tradition.

Situated in a Government dispersal area for asylum seekers and migrants whose claims are being considered, St Peter's Church seeks to serve all those in the parish and undertakes a wide range of social action work.

The Parish Priest, Rev Bill Braviner said:

"Jesus was a refugee, and the themes of displacement and journeying are at the heart of the Christmas story."

"Nowadays journeys are not made by donkey or camel but as in the time of Jesus they can be perilous – especially for those fleeing oppression and war."

"The star on our church shows Jesus as the destination for all who travel to Christmas, from near and far, wherever they are in the world, and the best bit is that the story doesn't end after the Christmas lights have come down."

Michael, a Christian from Iran who speaks in Farsi (Persian) in the advert said:

"In Iran, it is not always easy to be a Christian, but Jesus helped me, and I want to follow him at Christmas and all year round."

"I have found peace at this church and have been embraced by the congregation. Christmas can be a time of new life and hope for all who have had sadness and turmoil in their life."

The music for the advertisement is sung by the Soul Sanctuary Gospel Choir, who are based at St James's Church, Piccadilly, in London. The choir is a charity with a mission: to help spread contemporary gospel music into Anglican and Catholic churches. This year's single 'We Three Kings' was arranged by choir member and composer Peter Yarde Martin.

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The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby

New technology for 2019

This year's campaign features three technological firsts, with the launch today of the Church's Google Home smart speaker app, enabling people to #FollowTheStar and find their nearest church using Google and Android devices. The app has been developed following the success of the Church's Alexa skill, which has attracted more than 130,000 questions in just 18 months.

Also new is the first ever use of Augmented Reality (AR) by the Church of England. Anyone downloading the #FollowTheStar app on Android or iOS will be able to unlock additional content from Christmas Day by pointing their phone at the #FollowTheStar Church House Publishing booklet, given to people attending church over Advent and Christmas.

Watch a short video showing how the Augmented Reality works

And for the first time, churches will be able to create their own #FollowTheStar adverts using a newly-developed video generator, exclusive to editors of AChurchNearYou.com. The videos can be shared on churches' own social media channels, websites and A Church Near You pages, with personalised messages and event details.

A programme of specially-written reflections by Rev Mina Munns with daily family craft activities begins on Christmas Day, and runs through until 5th January. Download the free app and sign up for the daily Christmas reflections from Christmas Day at [churchofengland.org/FollowTheStar](https://www.churchofengland.org/FollowTheStar).

Notes to editors

- The video may be [watched on our YouTube channel](#)
- Stills from the video are [available online and free to use](#) with credit to *The Church of England*
- Find Christmas services and events near you at [AChurchNearYou.com](https://www.achurchnearyou.com)
- Resources for Churches and those wishing to sign up for email reflections may be found at [churchofengland.org/Christmas](https://www.churchofengland.org/Christmas)
- The App 'Follow The Star' is available for iOS, Android, Alexa and Google Home
- The Google Home app and #FollowTheStar app were developed in partnership with Aimer Media, a leading UK app developer
- The *We Three Kings* track is [available via Soundcloud](#)
- Rev Mina Munns – author of the reflections – is a Pioneer Minister in the Diocese of Newcastle. Formerly a children's worker, she runs the popular Flame Creative Children's Ministry website

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/church-england-features-real-life-stars-christmas-advert>