THE CHURCH

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Are you thinking of coming to church for the first time, or the first time in a long time, this Christmas? You will be very welcome! Find out the answers to common questions you may have.

When I come to church for the first time, how will I know what to do?

When you arrive at a church service or event, most of the time there will be a welcomer on the door. They will be able to let you know what's happening, for example, where to sit and how to follow the service. Feel free to ask them any questions you have about the service or event and they will be happy to help.

What should I wear?

Feel free to wear whatever you normally wear. Some people wear smart casual when they go to church - but it's totally up to you. For Christmas services and events, some people like to dress a bit smarter, while others like to wear Christmas jumpers!

Will I be asked for money?

Attending any church service is completely free. There is no expectation to give money, although churches will welcome any donation you feel moved to make. During the service, or afterwards, there may be an opportunity to donate to the church or to a nominated charity. If you would like to do this, you might also like to know that as well as cash, increasing numbers of churches offer ways to make contactless or online donations.

Occasionally some music performances or Christmas festival events at churches are ticketed with an entrance fee, but this will be clearly advertised in advance.

What if I have accessibility requirements?

If you have any access requirements do speak to the person who welcomes you at the door, or you can contact the church beforehand to find out more about the local arrangements.

Many churches already list on AChurchNearYou.com whether they have toilets or an accessible toilet, whether they have disabled parking, and whether they have a hearing loop. Just look for 'facilities' on the church's listing.

Guide dogs and Assistance dogs should be welcome at any church. Let the welcomers know where you and your dog need to sit in the building.

If you want to join in from home, you can search online and livestreamed services.

What if I don't know all the words? / How do I follow or join in with a service?

During a service, there may be some music and often songs, hymns and words which are a way of worshipping God and praying. Some churches project song words and parts of the service onto a screen, whilst others hand out hymn/song books and paper copies of any words used in the service.

The person leading the service may invite you to stand if you are able and say some of the responses at certain parts of the service, or these instructions may be written within the service sheets. Join in with as much or as little as you like and if you're unsure just follow others' lead.

Sometimes after or before a service, refreshments are offered, this could be a good opportunity to get to know people, but there is no pressure to stay if you prefer not to.

Are children welcome in church?

Yes! Most definitely. Children are welcome at all services and events. The timing of the service and the type of service can make a real difference to how easy it feels to bring small children to church, and many Christmas services are particularly family-friendly, such as a Christingle service, crib service or nativity play, or carol service.

What is a Christingle service?

Christingle services use a special symbol, a decorated orange (the 'Christingle'), (pictured), to explore the story of God's love for the world at Christmas.

During the service, each person takes a Christingle and the candles are all lit to symbolise the light of Christ.

What is a crib service or nativity play?

Most churches will have a crib scene – a place where the figures of the people in the nativity story (the story of Jesus' birth) have been arranged around a crib for the figure of the baby Jesus.

Many churches also have a service for children and families based on the Christmas story. In some churches this is done using puppets or by gradually bringing the nativity set figures to the crib.

In other churches, children can help act out the Christmas story in a traditional nativity play, singing favourite carols to help tell the story. This may be prepared in advance for people to watch, or everyone may be invited to turn up in any nativity costume and join in on the day - it doesn't matter if there are ten people all dressed as Mary!

What happens at a carol service?

We hear carols so often in the shops and on the radio that they're like a soundtrack for December. It's really special to hear them in church as part of the telling of the Christmas story. Sometimes the words are prayers for ourselves or for the world we live in, like these from 'Away in a manger':

"Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
close by me for ever, and love me, I pray."

As well as including carols, carol services can also include readings from the Bible, prayers and a short talk about the Christmas story.

What are Lessons and Carols?

A service of 'Lessons and Carols' is a particular kind of carol service, like the one that's broadcast each year from King's College, Cambridge on Christmas Eve.

In this context, 'lesson' means a reading from the Bible. The service alternates between Bible readings and carols, gradually explaining who Jesus is and telling the Christmas story in stages.

What is Midnight Mass?

This late-night service starts late on Christmas Eve and can end after midnight, so you're among the first to celebrate Christmas!

The service normally contains carols and a short talk, as well as the celebration of Holy Communion (the blessing and sharing of bread and wine).

'Mass' is another name for 'Holy Communion' or the 'Eucharist' or 'the Lord's Supper'.

What other services and events can I expect?

- *Christmas Day services* – Your local church may hold its crib service on Christmas Day, or Christmas morning may be much more low-key (if most people have been to Midnight Mass), or it may be a big service with lots of music.
- *Space for rest and remembering* – Some churches provide space to come just being quiet or remember people who have died. The joy of Christmas can seem very far away if it's your first Christmas without a special person.
- *Christmas fetes and events* – Many churches hold extra social or fundraising events in the run-up to Christmas, which can be a great place to meet other people from your neighbourhood and pick up some last-minute hand-made gifts and produce or even be a chance for your children to meet Santa. You could also read the story of St Nicholas, the saint behind the Father Christmas legend to your children. Some churches also hold special activities for children, with crafts and singing. There may also be concerts and other events. Your church's website will tell you what's on offer where you are.
- *Festivals* – Many churches have a themed festival in the lead up to Christmas – this might be a 'Christmas tree festival' or a 'Nativity set festival' – usually this is an exhibition that gives local community groups the chance to get involved in decorating the church, and for everyone to come and enjoy seeing the church 'decked out' ready for Christmas.

If you ask around locally, check the church's website, or pop into church for a service during December and ask, you'll get a sense of which

Find a church near you this Christmas!

Local services and events happening near you or online to join in with

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