

The Real Thing This Christmas!

Hope, peace, joy, love—the symbols of the season. Or are they? Sometimes it seems the symbols are more like stress, greed, waste, and hurry! As Christians we celebrate and rejoice in many ways, and that often includes being busy and buying gifts. When Christmas becomes just an economy booster, when long shop hours and heavy traffic become the order of the day, when the anticipation of material goods replaces the anticipation of the Messiah —we need to step back and find the real thing!



This **Mission and Service Fund** Advent resource offers some alternative activities for adults and children (see inside), individuals and congregations, to discern the real thing this Christmas and to help others. United Church congregations are invited to photocopy and use it as they wish for their Advent celebrations.

Advent Week 1

...you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...the night is far gone, the day is near. (Romans 13:11–12)

1. Get a clearer picture of today's consumer culture. Chris Jordan is a photographer and artist whose show *Intolerable Beauty* captures the essence of mass consumption. You can see the show at www.chrisjordan.com. Then go to your local stores or mall and—with your mind's eye or a digital camera—capture images of Christmas mass consumption. If you take photos, you might like to share your favourite image on our **Mission and Service Fund** online community MaST. Here's how:
 - Go to <http://communities.united-church.ca/mast> and, if you are not already a member, join our community.
 - Click MSinformation on the left.
 - Under Folders in the middle column, choose Getting Started on MaST.
 - Now choose Easy Way To Post Photos and follow the instructions there.
2. Use those flyers! Starting this week collect the Christmas flyers and ads that cross your path (if you don't get newspapers or junk mail, ask your neighbours for theirs.) Let the flyers build up in a prominent place. Take time occasionally to look through the pile and think about or discuss with others the ads' "Christmas" messages. Which advertised items are really wasteful, useless, and disposable?
3. Think about the activities and symbols of Advent that are in your home, in the malls, in your church. List them under two headings: Holiday-related and Christ-centred. How can you reshape the many holiday items to be more Christ-centred?
4. Spend a few minutes each week reading Advent reflections at: www.united-church.ca

Reality Check

Prayer for Advent Week 1

We know what time it is, God.
We await your coming with impatience,
but also with apprehension.
We are eager to relive a powerful Christmas encounter with you.
But there seems to be so much to do and to plan,
so many places to go and things to buy.
We regret the excess, waste, and foolishness all around us.
Remind us that while the day is near, the time is now—
time to be open and thankful,
time to enjoy the anticipation,
time to welcome Christ into our lives again. Amen.

Advent Week 2

Start with You

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another... (Romans 15:5)

1. Begin this week by listing reasons why "buying less" is a good way to celebrate this Advent.
2. Do you have a Christmas wish list for yourself? Choose one item and do some research: Where is it made? By whom? What is its environmental impact? Is there a better alternative? Find the brand's website and look for "social responsibility." Also check out these sites: www.cbc.ca/news/background/fair-trade <http://100milediet.org/category/about> www.freethechildren.com or Google "sweatshops."
3. Look at the same wish list and choose one of your items. On a jar or container, paste a picture of it or a label with its name. You might have an iPod jar, a DVD jar, or a gold bracelet jar. Ask your family to put money in the jar instead of buying you that item. Contribute that money to the **Mission and Service Fund**, knowing that it will contribute to bringing the joy of Advent to many around the world.

Prayer for Advent Week 2

We offer, O God, a gift for your church,
a gift for your people and your creation.
As we await with wonder the birth of Christ,
we know that others wait with hope
for us to reach out to them.
Accept the goodwill of our hearts,
our best intentions and efforts
to serve others, to care for the world,
to seek justice, and to love you. Amen.

Advent 3 Small Steps Take Patience

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. (James 5:7–8)

We do not expect to change consumer habits overnight. Christmas is still a time to buy and give gifts. We can do our small part to change our own patterns and to influence those around us. Taking gentle, small steps takes patience—but can bring great rewards.

1. Are there children in your life? Help them understand that the size of the Christmas stash under the tree is not a measure of your love. Give them the gift of your time. Give them the gift of generosity and Christmas memories. Spend time sharing the Advent calendar on the reverse.
2. Think of Advent as a time of preparing for the birth of Christ. Try to tune out the Christmas music and shows that begin after Hallowe'en. Relieve some of the stress by planning your Advent activities to begin on December 2, and space them throughout the season to Epiphany.
3. As a church, consider posting ads in your local paper that invite people to celebrate the real thing with you. Sample ads are available on MaST at <http://communities.united-church.ca/mast>.

Prayer for Advent Week 3

Creator God, we are seldom patient.
In a world of haste and instant reaction,
we are unused to being still.
Fire our imaginations so that we wait with delight,
savouring the expected birth of Christ.
And as we wait,
may we think more of the baby born in Bethlehem,
more of others and less of things.
Help us to clearly see the demands of this season,
so we may choose carefully and act wisely. Amen.

Advent 4

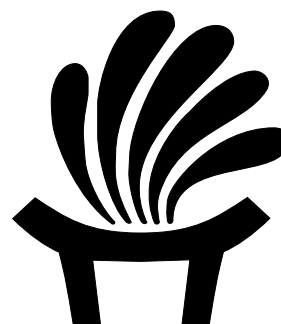
Signs of the Times

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God. (Isaiah 7:10–11)

1. Read about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke 1—2. What were the signs of the times? You might create a collage display of the signs. Ask youth and children in your church to create the symbols to use in it.
2. Go for a walk in the mall or in the shopping district, and purposely buy nothing. Enjoy the atmosphere and look for signs of the times. What messages do today's signs convey? You can also look for signs in the media. Perhaps these signs would make a companion collage for the one suggested above.
3. Make a list of personal signs that will take you into the new year. Could they include "Stop Shopping," "Don't Yield to Ad Pressure," or "Earth Has Right-of-Way"?

Prayer for Advent Week 4

Loving God,
the time is almost here.
While the signs of the season are all around us,
we look for signs of your Advent in the world.
Those signs, we confess, are sometimes hard to see.
We seek them in carols and bright lights,
in decorations and store windows;
in buying, buying, buying—
forgetting that your real signs are a manger,
a star,
a quiet meadow watched by shepherds.
Open our eyes and hearts to your presence. Amen.



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Advent Colouring Calendar

On each day in Advent, find the numbered shape in the picture.
Start with number 1 on December 1 and end with 24 on Christmas Eve.
Do the activity for the day, and colour the shape according to its letter code.

Legend

Y = yellow
B = blue

O = orange
R = red

P = purple
G = green

1. Prepare a container for your **M&S** Advent calendar gifts. **P**
2. If you have heard Christmas music already, add 50 cents to your container. **P**
3. Make a handmade gift for a friend. **O**
4. If you will have a Christmas tree this season, add \$1 to your **M&S** container. **Y**
5. Make Christmas cards for special people in your life. **R**
6. If you have outdoor Christmas lights, add 50 cents to your container. **G**
7. If you will be going to a Christmas concert this season, add \$1 for **M&S**. **G**
8. Bake Christmas cookies and share some with a friend or neighbour. **G**
9. Contribute to your White Gift service. **Y**
10. On your own or by drawing names in your family, be someone's secret Santa. **B**
11. Do a good deed for a neighbour. **Y**
12. If you have a creche, add \$1 to your **M&S** gifts. **G**
13. Make your own Christmas gift tags. **O**
14. Take a toy to a local toy drive or shelter. **O**
15. Look up Christmas traditions in an area where **M&S** is at work: Asia, Caribbean, Africa. **B**
16. If you were able to attend worship today, add \$1 for **M&S**. **R**
17. Think about Christmas memories. Look at old photos. **O**
18. Include animals in your Christmas list: put out bird food, take a gift to an animal shelter, or make a contribution for an endangered species. **B**
19. Celebrate the season by singing a carol out loud and adding 50 cents to your **M&S** gifts. **Y**
20. Take food to your local food bank or needed supplies to a shelter. **Y**
21. If you will share a special meal with loved ones this season, add \$1 to your **M&S** container. **B**
22. At a meal with family or friends, have each person finish this sentence: To me Christmas means... **B**
23. Either in your Advent container or at worship today, make a special **M&S** Advent gift for the work of the church in the coming year. **B**
24. Take quiet time today to reflect the real things of Christmas. Offer your Advent **M&S** gifts when you next attend worship. **G**

