BLUE CHRISTMAS

Planning your Blue Christmas service

Christmas can be a very difficult time for people of all faiths and none, for all kinds of reasons. A 'Blue Christmas' service provides a space for painful emotions to be held and acknowledged rather than dismissed or hidden amidst all the jollity. It offers a space in which people can feel what they feel.

We suggest that you plan the service along similar lines to your usual pattern of worship – prayers, hymns, a message – but with a few key differences:

- Expect less of participants than you might at your other services. For example, music may be performed rather than people being expected to sing along.
- Ensure the tone is quiet and reflective rather than loud and celebratory.
- When planning prayers and the message, offer **good news of hope for the future without minimising the pain that is felt now**. There are suggestions for prayers and preaching below.
- Give careful thought to pastoral care. Prayer and/or listening could be offered at the end of the service for people who want this, and signposting to other services, such as counselling, may be helpful. There is lots of guidance on praying for others at **methodist.org.uk/PrayWithOthers**
- We suggest that this service be relatively short – 45 minutes is probably plenty. You could offer people the opportunity to remain in their seats at the end for some quiet contemplation if they wish, or to request prayer.

Songs and hymns

180 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

It Is Well with My Soul

In the Bleak Midwinter (Gustav Holst setting)

Bible readings: Luke 2:8–20

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their
flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone
around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see,
I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the
city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will
find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with
the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the
highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,
“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has
made known to us.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child
lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them
about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and
Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Isaiah 40:28–31; 41:8–10

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

…

8 But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
9 you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,
saying to you, “You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
10 do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you; I will help you;
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Background notes

We focus on Luke 2:10–11: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'" The story of the shepherds and the angels is a central Christmas text: in this service we focus on the words, *do not be afraid.* The sudden appearance of an angel of the Lord was unexpected and, it seems, frightening: Luke tells us that the shepherds were terrified (Luke 2:9). It seems that the presence of God's messenger is deeply uncomfortable, inspiring profound awe and wonder.

This encounter was beyond the shepherds' ordinary experience and outside their control, and they were afraid. Perhaps we, too, have good reasons to be afraid. Life can be very hard, and we may be frightened of what the future holds: for ourselves, for those we love, for our communities. So why shouldn't we be afraid? The shepherds are told that the chosen one, the saviour the people of Israel have been waiting for, is finally here (Luke 2:11) and can be found in a baby asleep in an animal's feeding trough (Luke 2:12). Jesus comes as a frail human baby – God with us, as one of us. The reassurance, it seems, is the presence of Jesus.

This message needs to be handled with great sensitivity. *Don't be afraid* could seem dismissive of people's very valid and perhaps uncontrollable fears. The heart of the matter is this: we are not alone in our fear. Jesus is with us. The complementary text from Isaiah 40–41 may help here: "do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God" (41:10). We are not asking people to switch off their fear, but rather to recognise the presence of God within and alongside that fear. By coming together for a Blue Christmas service, we can keep one another company in our fear; a sign for one another that God keeps us company too.

Questions for reflection

- What does God's presence feel like to you?
- What difference does it make knowing that someone is with us when we're afraid?
- How can we help each other to know we are not alone?
- How can we help each other to notice God's presence?

Interactive activities

Make sure everyone has a feather (ideally two or three feathers), some washi tape or masking tape, a small piece of ribbon or string and a pen.

Draw people's attention to the feather on the ground in the picture of the shepherds and the angel. (You could have copies of the postcard available for people to look at, project the picture on a screen, or both.)

Invite people to hold a feather while you are speaking – this will enable people with visual impairments to participate more fully. Point out that the passage from Isaiah references wings too: "they shall mount up with wings like eagles".

Invite people to think about moments when:

- they have been aware of God's presence
- someone has been with them during a frightening time – a friend, family member, perhaps a stranger.

They should then write a few words to remind them of what happened on a piece of washi tape. If they wish to, they could write a few examples, each one on a different piece of tape. Finally, have them fold the ribbon in half to make a loop and use the tape to attach it to the stalk of the feather, wrapping it around to secure it. If people want the writing to still be visible, they could fold the tape back on itself like a bread-bag closure.

Prayer ideas

Have people hold a feather while the service leader prays, using these prompts:

- Praise God the Father who loves us, declaring "I am with you…
  I am your God;
  I will strengthen you; I will help you" (Isaiah 41:10).
- Praise Jesus who comes to be with us in our fear; who knows what it is to live a human life.
- Praise the Holy Spirit who brings God's presence to us day by day.
- Confess that we often miss the signs of God all around us.
- Ask God to help us in our fear.
- Ask God to make us more aware of God's presence, in big and small ways, every day.

The good news to get across

You are not alone in your fear.

Ways people can respond

The feathers could be used in various ways, depending on how people feel:

- They could take their feather away and hang it on a Christmas tree – a way of raising their awareness of God's presence during the Christmas period.
- They could take a second feather, ribbon and piece of tape so that they can watch for more signs of God's presence, making a second feather when they notice them. They could even layer up the tape, adding a new layer every time they notice something new.
- They could give a feather to someone else who has been for them a sign of God's presence – a way of saying thank you, seeking connection, and encouraging the other person that God is at work through them.