CAROL SERVICE

Bible readings

Carol services appeal to a broad range of people, including many unaffiliated people, and for some it will be the only church service they attend all year. For this reason, it makes sense to include all the key passages that tell the Christmas story as part of your service.

For example:

- Isaiah 9:2–7
- Luke 1:26–38
- Matthew 1:18–25
- Luke 2:1–7
- Luke 2:8–20
- Matthew 2:1–12
- John 1:1–14

Songs and hymns

Choose carols that are well known, using tunes and words that are likely to be familiar to unaffiliated people. Traditional is good, as this may connect with people's memories of childhood Christmases, and unaffiliated people can get grumpy about messing with tradition!

Ask people in your community – both within and beyond your church – for their requests. For example, you could take a light-hearted straw poll at your toddler group to find out people's favourite carols.

Make a point of asking people who worship Jesus in other languages for carol suggestions from their home culture. You could invite them to sing as part of the carol service. Be sure to offer a genuine and heartfelt welcome – don't treat the singers as a novelty item on your programme.

Background notes

Out of all the services you hold each year, your carol service is the most likely to attract unaffiliated visitors. Lots of unaffiliated people love Christmas and enjoy singing carols. Perhaps it brings back memories of Christmases when they were children. Perhaps they enjoy the familiarity of the traditional words and tunes. Perhaps they simply want to enjoy feeling Christmassy in a candle-lit church. Whatever the reason they've come, we want them to hear a simple, clear message of good news. Ideally this will be no more than 5–10 minutes long, to keep people's attention: it's about quality, not quantity.

Three times in the Christmas story, angels appear and tell people: "Don't be afraid". The angel Gabriel says it to Mary, the mother of Jesus, when he appears to tell her she will become pregnant: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God" (Luke 1:30). An angel says it to Joseph, Mary's fiancé, in a dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from

the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20). An angel says it to the terrified shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth: "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" (Luke 2:10). In fact, "don't be afraid" (or similar wording) appears dozens of times in the Bible.

In the case of the shepherds, it seems that the sudden appearance of an angel frightened them. Luke tells us: "an angel of the Lord stood before [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (Luke 2:9). The presence of God's messenger, reflecting God's glory, is deeply uncomfortable, inspiring profound awe and wonder. This is something quite different from the way angels are pictured on Christmas cards and tree ornaments.

Mary is "much perplexed" by the angel's words; she "pondered what sort of greeting this might be". While this suggests confusion rather than fear, the angel's response is "Do not be afraid". Mary is perhaps struggling to understand the angel's message; why it has been brought to her and how to reconcile it with her previous experience of the world. Perhaps we, too, experience life events that confuse us, that turn our understanding of the world upside down.

In Joseph's case, he had a much more earthly reason to be afraid. He thought that his fiancée had been unfaithful and that he needed to divorce her quietly. Perhaps he was worried about the shame of marrying Mary, while also worried about destroying her reputation. We, too, carry all kinds of fears. We may have very good reasons to be worried, afraid, perhaps terrified. Life can be very hard, and we may be frightened of what the future holds: for ourselves, for those we love, for our communities.

Repetition tells us something here. The refrain *don't be afraid* shows us how God wants to relate to us. God doesn't want us to cower in fear; instead, God comes to us in Jesus. Jesus is referred to as the "saviour", and the name Jesus means "God saves".

Part of the meaning of *don't be afraid* is *don't be afraid – I'm here to help you find your way.* Like the person who sees us struggling and drops everything to lend a hand. And as well as coming to save, Jesus has come to be human with us, a baby "God is with us", as we read in Matthew 1:23. So the meaning of *don't be afraid* is also *don't be afraid – I'm here.* Like the person who comes to sit with us in our fear or pain, because company transforms it.

Questions for reflection

- Think of a time when someone said to you, don't be afraid. How did it feel?
- Who helps you when you're afraid?
- Whose presence comforts you when you're afraid?

Interactive activities

A table offering the following creative activity could help people of all ages engage with the service, and may be particularly appreciated by neurodivergent people. You could provide some simple written instructions so that people can simply move to the table whenever they like, but make sure the instructions are read aloud at least once during the service to allow as many people as possible to participate.

Offer a selection of images of angels – you could cut them out from old Christmas cards and/or wrapping paper. Try to include lots of different images, including angels of different skin tones – royalty-free image sites such as **unsplash.com** and **pexels.com** have some great options. Include some small angel ornaments or tree decorations too for visually impaired people to hold. Have slips of paper with the words "Don't be afraid", and glue sticks, tape, pens, coloured paper (eg sugar paper) and short pieces of ribbon or string available too.

Invite people to choose an angel picture that resonates with them and to write or draw on the back something that is making them fearful. Then have people glue the words "Don't be afraid" on the front. They should make a loop with the ribbon and secure it with tape behind the angel's head, to make a tree decoration. Finally, they should glue sugar paper on the back (covering up their writing, to keep their fears private) and cut around the sugar paper. They now have a tree ornament to take home to remind them of the message: *Don't be afraid*.

Prayer ideas

Have people hold their angel decoration – or an angel ornament if they are visually impaired – and ask God to help us all to hear God's message through the angel: *Don't be afraid*.

You could pray for:

- situations in our world, such as wars, injustices or climate change
- situations in the UK that are causing people fear
- the things people are dealing with in their personal lives that cause worry
- asking God to bring help and healing, and to be with us when we are afraid.

The good news to get across

Jesus is here to save us and to be with us.

Ways people can respond

You could give people the option of making a second angel ornament to give to someone they know who is afraid.

Invite people to consider how they can keep someone company in their fear, whether that's sending someone a text on the morning of a difficult appointment, meeting them for a cup of tea, or listening without judgement.

The Methodist Church

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