

Planning a Children's Christmas Program

So, you want to put on a Children's Christmas Program! God bless you! What a servant's heart you must have! I want you to know that I am praying for you as I write these words!!

My prayer for you is that you will stay well, that you will have the energy and drive you will need to complete the project, and that God will provide you with the skills and talents that you need to do the job. But most of all I pray that, through the power of His Holy Spirit, God will bring many people to Christ through the telling of His love in the Christmas story. Amen.

Bless you!

How wonderful you are to even consider taking on such an endeavor!

What a blessing you will be to others!

My hope is that this article will help you prepare for this event!

Whenever you're going to take on a big project, it's important to sit down at the start of it and get an idea of the BIG PICTURE.

You need to ask yourself these questions: What's it going to take? Who's it going to involve? What do you need to do first? And... When do you need to start?

The Bible calls this "counting the cost."

We will assume that you are planning to organize a Children's Christmas Program at your church. And that you will be including with it a Christmas Skit, some Christmas Carols, and Refreshments for the participants and their families afterwards.

This checklist will help you as you plan an event of this sort!

Now, let's get started!

First, you will want to pray and ask God to bless the entire endeavor. Be sure to ask God to draw people closer to Jesus, His Son, through the simple telling of the Christmas story.

OK, now you have prayed...what do you do next?

Let's find out... shall we?

I. COORDINATE WITH STAFF

If you are working in a church setting, it is necessary to begin by coordinating your efforts with the appropriate staff members.

A.) Make sure it's going to work for the church staff!

Check with the Pastor or your supervisor. Get any guidelines you may need from them, especially regarding the date, the length of the program, and who will be involved. Do you need staff persons there on the day of the performance? If so, let them know NOW!

B.) Check with the church office to make sure that the facilities you wish to use are available on the dates necessary.

Make a list of the rooms you will need and reserve them for the necessary dates. Are you planning to serve refreshments? Do you need the kitchen, or the Fellowship Hall? Will your production include a skit or play? If so, when and where will you practice? Reserve those rooms and dates also! Do this as early as possible!! Remember, on church calendars it is the early bird that gets the worm!

C.) Will you need the support of any staff members for the production?

For instance, will the Music Department be involved with helping provide music, choirs, or accompaniment for singers? Will you need Light and Sound support on the day of the production? Do they need to be present at any of your practices? Who will notify those persons?

Do you need assistance in producing or printing any notices or advertising for the performances or practices? Will the information be included in church publications or the bulletin? Who will develop and print the program for the production? Coordinate these issues with the Church Office Staff.

My experience is that the church administrative assistants can be very helpful if they are approached early enough to plan for your event.

NOTE: I always prefer to write up my own flyers, news releases, and programs and ask the church office staff to print them for me. E-mail is a beautiful thing in these instances.

D.) Who will do the Set-up and Clean-up of the church and rooms?

Churches often have a Maintenance staff that routinely helps set-up and clean up during the week. But, DON'T TAKE IT FOR GRANTED that these same persons will be helping you with set-up or clean-up for your special event! Find out EARLY from the Office, or from the Maintenance Supervisor, what help will or will not be available to you. Do you need chairs or tables set-up or moved for the refreshment time? Do you need items moved on or off the stage area? Will risers be used for the children's choirs? Who will be cleaning up after the event? These questions can be very important to address, especially if there is a Worship Service planned for the next day!

II. CHOOSE SKIT AND CAROLS

A.) Choosing the right skit is important!

Consider the age and maturity of your students, as well as how many students you have in class, and how many can get to rehearsals reliably.

Consider how much time you have to rehearse. Can your students be ready in that amount of time?

Contrast the different types of skits available to you. What are they like? Are they Biblically accurate? Do they teach a message that honors God? Are they difficult? Do they involve a lot of complex stage directions? Can the children in your classes learn the lines and actions in time for the production date?

Once you have found just the right skit, purchase the rights (*or download one of the FREE skits from **Sunday School Center***) and provide copies of the script for the students, teachers and helpers

B.) Selecting Christmas Carols.

When choosing your carols, first you need to determine who will be singing them.

You may have decided to have “choirs of children” sing at various times during the program. In that case, provide songs that are age appropriate for the various groups. (*i.e. Pick songs for the Little Guys that are easy enough for them to sing!*)

Alternatively you may choose to have everyone sing together. If this is the case, my advice is to put all of the words on the screen (or on handouts) and to encourage everyone to participate!

NOTE: Call me old fashioned, but I like the traditional Christmas carols! They tell the story of Christmas very well. And everyone in the audience will know them! (I think we miss the boat sometimes trying to introduce lots of NEW carols and songs at Christmas. We forget that there may be people in the audience who come to church very infrequently. Those folks will be looking for something familiar. And traditional Christmas Carols are very familiar.)

After you have put together a list of potential songs, visit with your Music Director again. He or she may have other suggestions or ideas for you. Also, the Music Director will know what permission you need to use various songs. Often churches already have permits available to use certain websites to download music and lyrics of copyrighted songs. **When in doubt, ask!** Songs in public domain are used as desired, and no further permission is necessary. (*Another argument for using traditional Christmas carols!*)

III. COORDINATE WITH PEERS

Yes, you are in charge! And we KNOW that! But you still have to coordinate with your peers... meaning other lay persons who have responsibilities within the church and who will be working with you on the Children's Christmas Program. They have to know what to expect. And the EARLIER they know... the BETTER!

A.) Notify Everyone!

This means that all Teachers, Sunday School Workers, and any Supervisory Team Members need to be notified of your plans. Be sure to share the date and time of the production, as well as the dates and times of all the practices.

B.) Ask for Help!

Make a list of all responsibilities that teachers or workers may have, and ask them to contact you if they have questions or conflicts. **Make sure they know** what you will want them to do to get ready for and to help with the Children's Christmas Program. Include any work or practices that you would like to accomplish during Sunday School times.

IV. COORDINATE WITH FAMILIES

With families follow this motto: "Write early. Write often." Utilize whatever line of communication has been successful for your church in the past. I recommend e-mail if at all possible. Send permission slips home with the children, if necessary, and have a parent/ guardian sign and put a PHONE NUMBER AND AN E-MAIL ADDRESS! Then communicate with them weekly until the program occurs. This makes everything easier and increases overall participation. If you don't have access to e-mail, then send notes home with the children, or speak to the parents/guardians directly.

A.) Families need to be IN THE KNOW!

Invite the families to be part of the process. Again, the sooner they know your plans, the better! Write up a note listing the production date, plus the rehearsal dates and times. Give as much information as possible about things the children may need to bring from home. (*For example: sandals to go with their costumes.*) In addition, make a list of things that family members might be able to provide. (*Ex: fabric and belts to use for costumes.*) Stress the importance of practices and ask families to supervise line memorization (if indicated) at home.

B.) Families want to HELP!

If you are planning to have refreshments on the night of the performance, tell families ahead of time about requests for cookies, punch items, napkins, etc. Also inform the families of any opportunities to VOLUNTEER! (*See Volunteer Section for specifics.*)

V. COORDINATE WITH VOLUNTEERS

You will need to have GROUPS of volunteers to help. If you don't want to coordinate them yourself, assign someone else to watch over one or more groups. Pick people whom you trust and you know will get the job done. Check back with these organizers regularly to make sure that things are progressing as planned. Intervene as necessary.

A.) Rehearsal Team

This "team" is listed first because, after years of experience, I can assure you that this is the most important one you will organize. It is the one which requires the most thought and prayer and needs the most dedicated and trustworthy persons available to do. I suggest choosing two of your closest friends to do this one; People who will do anything you ask and be there when you need them. Know who they are? Good. Go ask them!

This team consists of two – three persons only. The Rehearsal Team is there for one purpose: **To help YOU during rehearsals.** That's it! Amazing isn't it? They are there to watch over YOU, the Director. These people agree ahead of time to come to every rehearsal where children will be present. Their duties can involve supervising children, helping children with lines, prompting actors on and off the stage, etc. Basically whatever YOU need! During the performances these persons (who are by now VERY familiar with the play) stand backstage with scripts to make sure children get on and off the stage as directed, and to prompt lines as necessary.

The only other thing they do is to contact you on the morning of the performance and ask what they can do for YOU that day. When they show up for the performance, they come and find you and ask you AGAIN "What do you need me to do for YOU?!" Believe me, this is the greatest service anyone can give a director of a skit or play. Set this team up early, explain their "duties", and you will have a wonderful experience directing the skit!

B.) Song Team

I always have to have a Song Team Leader, because music is NOT my gift. Oh, I can sing in the shower, and I often do... But I am NOT the one to teach 50 children how to sing Christmas carols. Someone else can do that! So, I always find a Song Team Leader.

This person organizes rehearsals for the children of their particular songs. There may be several persons involved with this, depending on the number of children involved. If the music has already been chosen, then the leader obtains and distributes copies as necessary, makes sure there is musical accompaniment for rehearsal and for the performances, and oversees music rehearsals. You will want these persons present during dress rehearsals for the play. Coordinate with the Song Team Leader if there are to be platforms or risers on which the children will stand.

C.) Costume/Prop Team

Any church over 2 years old is going to have a manger somewhere. And SOMEONE knows where it is. There is ALSO someone at your church who knows where the costumes are. Believe me! They are there! The manger may be in someone's garage, and the

costumes may be up in someone's attic... but if you are persistent you WILL find them. Keep asking until someone confesses to having them and then offer to pick up the items from their home... it helps.

The Costume/Prop Team is in charge of finding, designing, and creating the costumes and small properties that will be used onstage. If you need a manger, a star, a shepherd's crook, a lamb, or outfits for 3 kings and a host of angels, these are the folks to ask. This team will need access to the children during at least one of your practices, to assign costumes and to make sure that everything fits. Ask the team to group items together for each child (perhaps on hangers) and to mark them somehow with the child's name (tag with a pin). This team should attend both the dress rehearsal and the performance to help the children with their costumes before and after the program. After the performance, costumes owned by the church should be laundered/cleaned and stored. Still need a manger? A clothes basket draped with a blanket will do just fine!

*For ideas on costuming children for a traditional Christmas play see **Appendix A.***

D.) Refreshment Team

This is one of my favorite groups! These folks plan the refreshments for after the skit. They ask others to volunteer to bring items or they purchase the items for the group. (*In that case, ask them to save receipts to turn in for reimbursement.*) They do the set-up for refreshments. Make punch. Set cookies/snacks out on trays/plates. They set the tables and may even design any centerpieces or decorations in the room used. Clean-up as well!

*For Punch ideas see **Appendix B.***

E.) Child Supervisory Team

During performances (and perhaps at dress rehearsals) you will need extra adults available to supervise children before the performance. This may take place in classrooms, or in other areas of the church. Once the children are assembled (and costumed) they need to be supervised and kept occupied until time for the performance. This group of volunteers may be made up of teachers, Sunday School workers, and other qualified adults. It is best if quiet activities are planned for the children during these times. (*For example, quiet games, coloring sheets, or activity pages. Even an easy Christmas craft might be in order.*) This team may also need to supervise children after the performance if they are to return to their rooms.

F.) Light/ Sound/ Slides Team

This is an important team, but it is listed nearly last because these persons are usually already well known and well organized. Churches often have sound teams for worship services, etc. Contact the Music Director to find out who these folks are and when they are available. The Christmas skits from Sunday School Center have sound and light cues included, but you will want to review them with your light team in advance of the performances. If you will use slides for songs or Bible verses during your performance make sure that these are produced and ready to go!

NOTE: The LIGHT/SOUND team needs to practice with your group at LEAST once (*preferably TWICE*) before the actual performance. (*Dress Rehearsal is a MUST!*) It is a common mistake by Directors and Sound/Light crews alike to think that the team can show up on the night of the performance and do the lights and sound correctly. This can have the unfortunate effect of RUINING your performance. (*Believe me... I know!*)

** Just because it is a children's program doesn't mean it's simple to do!*

G.) Ushers

What a fun group! Ushers can be adults, teens or older children. Even children in costume if you like! Ushers stand at the doors to hand out the programs and to assist people to their chairs. Plan to have two ushers at every door. Ask them to arrive at least 30 minutes prior to the performance and to take their positions at various doors to welcome guests. At the end of the performance, the ushers may help direct guests to the refreshment area.

H.) Outreach Team

After your Children's Christmas Program, your church will have an opportunity to reach out to all those who attended on that special night. This team will be in charge of that.

Ask a group of missions minded persons to do follow up contacts or outreach to people who attended your program. This group might be interested in organizing the Family Photos taken during the event. (See OPTIONAL IDEAS on the next page.)

If you collect names and addresses of visitors you can send them a letter from the church or a card thanking them for attending. You may want to include a photo of the event or of their family in the card. These are wonderful keepsakes! Be sure to invite the family to visit you for other upcoming events and for Worship Services. Consider sending them information from the church pertinent to their child's age group.

VI. PERFORMANCE NIGHT

A.) Relax and Encourage!

On the night of the Performance your job is to RELAX and to ENCOURAGE! You will be tempted to be busy and/or frustrated. It is BEST for everyone if you are not! *Look at it this way... you can't change anything at this point, anyway.* That night the children just need to hear you say, "Have fun! I know that you are going to do a great job!" If THEY have questions or concerns, try to answer them calmly and to reassure them.

B.) Use your Resources!

Where is your Rehearsal Team? This is THEIR night to shine! They are there to help YOU remember? Tell them what you need, and ask them to run here or there to get things you need or to handle situations on your behalf. Allow folks to do their jobs!

C.) Pray!

Before the program pray and ask God to bless it and help others learn about Jesus!

OPTIONAL IDEAS:

Family Photos!

It is great fun to make Family Photos before and after the Christmas Program. Face it, everyone looks great, they are all together, they are in their best clothes... it is a perfect picture time! Arrange some picturesque spot in the church foyer and have someone with some photographic ability come in and take photos of folks with their families. You will need to keep accurate records of what groups came to get photos. Make sure to get contact information, such as e-mail and mailing addresses, as well as a phone number. The next week, e-mail everyone a copy of their family's photo, which they may have printed up at their favorite photo shop. Alternatively, print up one photo of each family and mail it to them with a card thanking them for attending and inviting them to return. This is a GREAT outreach idea! The families will LOVE you!

Cast Photos!

Take several photographs of the cast members together in their costumes BEFORE the performance. (*It won't happen afterwards... believe me!*) You may wish to take some candid shots of them getting ready, or waiting around to perform, etc. These are fun to look at in Sunday School class later on. Make sure all the families get an e-mail copy of the best group photo!

Video of the Performance!

It is a fun idea to do a video of the performance! I suggest appointing someone with some expertise to do this. Sound and lighting can be difficult during live performances, so the quality may not be great, but the results are still fun to watch! If you will be offering copies to families afterwards, let the families know ahead of time. They may be more likely to sit back and enjoy the program rather than worrying about recording it themselves.

Programs!

If you can do it at all, I suggest having a printed program for your Children's Christmas Program. These can be done very simply and printed with black ink on colored paper. You may wish to use original artwork or clip-art for decorations. Be sure to put the date and year, the name of the program and skit, and the name of the church. These are important to families when looking at them later, as they often become keepsakes. Include a list of the characters' names and the children who portray them. If singing groups are involved, be sure to have ALL the children's names listed OR to list them as a group. Also put what they are singing. For example: **The 2nd grade class – Silent Night**

You may also want to thank various groups which helped with the production! The program is a great place to do this! Make sure you have one all inclusive statement such as: *We'd like to thank everyone who helped make tonight's performance possible!*

APPENDIX A: Christmas Skit Costuming Ideas

General Costume Notes:

- Costumes for children's programs do not have to be elaborate or realistic. It is much more fun and much easier to costume the child as if they are playing at "dress up".
- Children should dress lightly under their costumes, because they may become too hot otherwise. (short sleeve shirts and shorts)
- Sandals or bare feet work well for Christmas skits.
- Big rectangular pieces of fabric with a hole cut out in the center for the child's head will outfit almost any character. Plain colors for the Shepherds, beautiful colors for Mary, something solid for Joseph, and fancier fabrics for the Kings.
- Additional pieces of fabric can be used to create head coverings. Simply drape them over the actor's head. They can be tied with ribbon or string if you like.

Angel:

- Pieces of white fabric work well for the base costume. Lengths of silver or gold colored garland shaped into a crown make a wonderful halo.
- Get creative! One year I had all the girls wear their "flower girl" dresses – it seems that all of them had been in a wedding in the previous year. It was great!
- Tutu's made of netting are fabulous!
- Plastic tiaras and silk flower laurels work great! And of course a fairy wand with a STAR on the end of it! (These are easily made with cardboard and a wooden dowel.)
- Whether you are having one angel, or a "whole host", these guidelines work well.

Kings:

- Long rectangular pieces of fabric tied at the waist work very well for robes. Colorful is better for the kings.
- 1 gallon plastic milk containers make a great crown! Cut out the bottom and cut off the top just below the handle. Shape with scissors until you have points on the crown. Decorate with gold paint and then use glue or hot glue to put on sequins, buttons, plastic "jewels", etc. *Note: These only work with younger children. For older kids, cut an 8 x 30 inch strip from a paper sack, and shape it into a crown by cutting it and then stapling it to fit the child's head. Then decorate it with crayons or markers, tinsel or garland.*
- Jewelry is great for the Kings! Plastic beads or garlands, fake rings, etc.
- Gifts for Kings to carry. These represent gold, frankincense and myrrh. Be creative!! They may be tiny wrapped boxes or sacks. Gold garland in a basket makes great gold. Imitation leaves in a florist's vase makes nice frankincense. And sheets of blue tissue paper crunched up in a clear plastic container make convincing myrrh.

Soldiers:

- If you have access to one of those plastic "Armor of God" suits, they work GREAT! *I have worn out 3 of these!* Otherwise, I suggest black or gray tunics with sandals.
- For a fun shield, cut out a circular piece of cardboard and paint it gold or silver color. On the back of the circle affix another strip of cardboard to make a handle for it. Cardboard swords covered in tin foil are wonderful as well.

APPENDIX B: Ideas for Refreshments

QUICK CRANBERRY PUNCH

- 1 can (6 ounces) of frozen lemonade – makes 24 ounces
- 1 bottle (32 ounces) of cranberry juice cocktail, chilled
- 2 cans (12 ounces) of ginger ale, chilled – total of 24 ounces

Prepare lemonade as directed on can in a large pitcher (makes 24 ounces). Stir in cranberry juice cocktail and enough ice to chill. Just before serving, stir in ginger ale. Makes 12 servings of about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup each.

I love this recipe!! If I had to do a Children's Christmas Program every year, I would serve it every year! It is sweet, but not too sweet, and the ginger ale gives it a refreshing kick! It is unusual enough for people to repeatedly ask for the recipe!

There's just one problem, the recipe as shown is for 12 servings and it is too much work and too expensive to buy all of those little cans for 100 people!

Since I was always making more than 12 servings I had to adapt the recipe for bigger groups. I searched my grocery store until I found bigger, cheaper quantities to use. The following recipe is close to the original and uses sizes of items that are easy to find and to store ahead of time. The cranberry juice cocktail concentrate can be found in 12 ounce non-refrigerated cans. If not, you can sometimes find cranberry juice cocktail in the frozen foods section of your grocery store.

The proportions for this beverage are 1:1:1 $\frac{1}{3}$, meaning equal parts of lemonade and ginger ale to one and a third parts of cranberry juice cocktail. You can't mix up 72 servings all at once!! So, when mixing them together use a measuring device to put amounts into the punch bowl.

For example: 3 cups of lemonade + 3 cups of ginger ale + 4 cups of cranberry juice cocktail.

BIGGER BATCH (72 SERVINGS)

- 3 cans (12 ounces each) of frozen lemonade
- 4 cans (12 ounces each) of cranberry juice cocktail concentrate, chilled
- 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ bottle (2 Liter) of ginger ale, chilled

Prepare lemonade and cranberry juice cocktail as directed on the cans in several large pitchers. Chill these. Just before serving, in a punch bowl put in equal parts lemonade and ginger ale then mix in one and one-thirds as much cranberry juice cocktail. Add crushed ice to keep it chilled. Makes a total of 72 servings of about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup each.

** For 100 people you need about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ of these BIGGER BATCHES.

*Adapted from Quick Cranberry Punch, p. 143, Betty Crocker's New Christmas Cookbook
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