

OUR FAMILY MEMORIES OF CHRISTMAS

by Peter Williamson



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Narrator

(as few as one or as many as fourteen)

Musician(s)

Children's Choir

Readers

(Flexible, up to four at the most)

Preschool or kindergarten singers

Mary

Joseph

Innkeeper

Shepherd 1

Shepherd 2

Shepherd 3

Angel

Choral Readers

(kindergartners or first-graders)

PRODUCTION NOTES

Our Family Memories of Christmas isn't really a play in the proper sense, even though there is a script and music and pageantry. It is much more than that. It is really a format for a congregation to share their experiences through their common stories of Christmas. The programs benefits are many:

- Stories are shared across generations.
- Families share with each other.
- The congregation, through the sharing of stories, experiences itself as a large, multigenerational family.
- All members recognize the continuity of the Christmas experience, despite differences in language, time periods, and "gizmos."

Our Family Memories of Christmas is, in a sense, a program about Christmas programs. The skeletal structure of the program, provided in this script, walks us through all of the major landmarks of the Christmas experience. There are visits to Santa Claus and the buying of presents; the special music of Christmas; the baking and decorating; the preparations at church for the telling of the Christmas story; the excitement of Christmas Eve and the feast and celebration on Christmas day. By collecting and sharing the remembered experiences of the older church members, the younger members — especially the children — can more fully understand the continuity of Christmas across generations. Sharing stories brings everyone a little closer together — as a church family, as children of God.

The format involves quite a bit of preparation on the part of the Sunday school. The stories need to be gathered, using the questionnaire provided on page viii. The collected stories then need to be shaped into a working script. The roles in the pageant need to be assigned, and children need to be selected to play some instrumental music. Finally, the program can be carried out as a section of the worship service, or it can serve as the framework for the entire service. If used as a framework for the whole service, then the other elements of the service (e.g., the Scripture lessons, responsive readings, offering, etc.) need to be integrated at strategic points.

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Gathering the Christmas Stories: The Questionnaires

Well before Christmas, children need to be given copies of the questionnaire that is provided in the script. They will probably need quite a bit of coaching, especially the younger children. Kindergartners, first- and second-graders and those who have specific learning disabilities in written language can still take part in the collection of stories. Parents can go along with the children, or the children can tape record the sessions. Some children freeze up whenever they have to do anything on demand — even asking their grandparents some straightforward questions. Then the parents should take over, modeling for the child how to ask the questions and write down the responses. Some interviewees may wish to write their responses themselves. This will save time and prevent inaccurate information. It really doesn't make any difference how the stories are collected as long as: 1) the children are present for the process, and 2) the responses are written down word for word.

The stories should be collected about two months before the program is to be performed. Children should be asked to interview either an older family member or an older member of the congregation. Try to solicit a few volunteers to visit shut-in members or those who are in nursing homes and can no longer attend church on a regular basis. As long-term members, their stories need to be included. Some members of the congregation will remember them, and all will delight in their stories, even if not personally acquainted with them.

Most children will probably need to be taught how to ask questions and gather responses. Start by explaining the purpose of the program, and then show the children the questionnaire. Encourage the children to bring up the questionnaire while visiting. Make sure that the children tell the person being interviewed that it is for a Christmas program and that their responses are to be written down word for word. Make sure that the children get permission before tape recording or writing anything, and remember to use the person's name in the program. Explain to the children that they can only use the information permitted by the person being interviewed. For example, some folks are reluctant to give out their ages and dates of birth. Such wishes should be respected.

Once the purpose has been explained and they have been given permission to record responses, the interview can start. Help the children ask questions in an easy, conversational style. Sometimes it is difficult to write while a person is talking, especially if they start recounting a story at some length. This is why tape recording can be helpful. When children are writing down responses, encourage them to copy them down word for word. This will make it more likely that they will capture the unique phrasing and language of the interviewee.

Shaping the Script: Selecting from the Questionnaires

Once the interview process is complete, the script needs to be shaped. This means that the responses have to be reviewed, selected, and organized into their appropriate places in the script. Only two to four responses should be selected for each of the ten items in order to keep the script manageable. This can be quite a formidable task for the Sunday school teachers or program committee. If twenty children gather responses, then only 10% to 25% of the responses may be used. Try to include responses from as many members as possible.

Once the anecdotes have been selected and organized, it will be necessary to shape some of the “open” places in the script. For example, if none of the interviewees refuses to give his or her age, then it will be necessary to adjust the ending of the script. The director or program coordinator should feel free to “tweak” the script as needed.

After adjusting the script, the rest of the program needs to be worked in. In the script, there are numerous suggestions regarding music. These may be followed or altered at the discretion of the program director. Scripture lessons and other portions of the church service may be integrated into the script. Once the script has been finalized, then it is time to assign roles.

Assigning Roles

There are certainly enough parts in this program to involve many children in a large, multi-grade Sunday school program.

The largest role is that of the program Narrator. This should be assigned to one of the older children — middle school or high school age — who is capable of reading fluently and with expression. If there are many good readers at your disposal, you may use a different person for each section, involving a total of fourteen Narrators.

A nice touch is to have the anecdotes read by the children who collected them. In many cases, these children will be reading the responses of their older relatives — emphasizing the familial nature of the program. The child reads the verbatim response and ends by announcing the interviewee's name.

At the end of the program, there is a passage that may be divided up as best fits the needs of the group. For example, each line may be assigned to a different child, or the whole passage may be read by one or two children. Another approach would be to divide the passage among two or three clusters of children, with each group reading in unison.

The roles in the two pageant scenes also need to be assigned. The program will run more smoothly if these parts can be memorized by the actors. There are seven short roles to be cast: Innkeeper, Mary, Joseph, Angel, and three Shepherds.

Music

Usually there are several children in any congregation who are willing to play their instruments for the congregation. Have one or a few children play selections from Christmas carols during the “music of the season” section of the program. Places to insert other carols and hymns are suggested throughout the script. Two specific songs are strongly recommended: “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” and “The Little Drummer Boy” (after “The

Shepherd Scene”).

“All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” may be found in *The Family Songbook of Young People’s Favorites* published by Warner Brothers Publications, 15800 NW 48th Avenue, Miami FL 33014. Telephone: (305) 620-1500 / 1-800-468-5010. ISBN # 0-897240-01-4.

“The Little Drummer Boy” may be found in *Christmas Treasures: Piano/Vocal/Guitar*, item #27105, or *Seventeen Super Christmas Hits* ISBN# 0-793527-35-X. Both are published by the Hal Leonard Corporation, P.O. Box 13819, Milwaukee WI 53213-0819. Telephone 1-800-524-4425. These songbooks were currently in print when this program went to press. Both songs may also be found in other books of Christmas music.

Staging

The program is meant to be performed in the front of the church, either in or before the chancel. The staging should be as simple as possible. The Narrator may speak either from the pulpit or a lectern. The children reading the anecdotes should simply line up and take turns reading at a microphone, if one is available. The children’s choir, singers, and musicians simply perform in the center of the chancel when it is their time. There are no specific props or costumes for the pageant scenes. If some are available from prior pageants, then use minimal costumes only to stimulate the memories of the viewers:

Mary: Blue robe with hood

Joseph: Brown robe

Innkeeper: Robe or shirt with rolled-up sleeves

Angel: White robe or choir robe (halo optional)

Shepherds: Robes (crooks optional); drum for Shepherd #3

The running time is approximately 25 minutes, depending on the length of the responses and the number of responses included.

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Name of person interviewed:

Date of interview:

Family Member Questionnaire

Directions: Tell the person you are interviewing that you want to know what Christmas was like when he or she was a child. Ask the questions in the order given. Try to write down responses using the person's exact words as best you can. This will help capture his or her unique personal style. If preferred, the interviewee may write out the answers him or herself.

1. Tell me about when and where you were born.
2. What was it like when you were a kid? How was it different from the way things are now?
3. What do you remember about Santa Claus? Did you visit Santa at a department store, or did he come to your school or church?
4. Tell me about the music at Christmas. Did you go caroling? Were there special shows or programs when you were a child?
5. What do you remember about the special foods at Christmas? Did your family bake cookies or make candy? Were there treats at school or church?

6. Did you put up a lot of decorations at Christmas? Who was in charge of decorating in your family?

7. How was the story of Christmas shared in your family?

8. What was it like for you on Christmas Eve? Did you have trouble sleeping? What did your family do on Christmas morning? Did your family have any special traditions?

9. When you were growing up, were any Christmases particularly memorable because of what was going on at the time? (New brothers or sisters? Traveling? Unexpected changes in the family? Historical events?)

10. How did your family share Christmas with others? Did you send cards? Visit relatives? Have Christmas dinner with lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins?

Interviewed by:

1 **NARRATOR:** Christmas.

2 It is the time when we deck the halls, share gifts, go
3 caroling, eat far too much and — of course — go to
4 church.

5 But it is also the time to tell stories and share the
6 memories that bind us together as Christians.

7 There is the story of that first Christmas, of the birth
8 of Jesus — a story we have retold for two thousand
9 years.

10 There are the stories that each of us brings from our
11 own experience of Christmas.

12 Together, our memories form the story of a greater
13 family to which we all belong: the family of Christians,
14 the family of this church.

15 Our memories have much in common. Old or young, in
16 biblical times or modern times, we have always felt the
17 excitement of anticipation, the joy of celebration, the
18 warmth of sharing and reaching out to others. It makes
19 no difference when we were born.

20 *(At this point, three or four children read the responses to the*
21 *first item on the questionnaire from their interviews with older*
22 *members of the congregation. As much as possible, these*
23 *responses should be written using the exact words of the older*
24 *members, in order to capture their unique personal style.*
25 *Example: "I was born on a farm outside of Davenport, Iowa —*
26 *way back in 1913. No, it was 1911 — the same year as the*
27 *blizzard!" Each child should finish by giving the name of the*
28 *church member. If a church member refuses to give his or her*
29 *age [or provides a similar, obstinate response to a different*
30 *question], consider adding them at the end. It provides a warm,*
31 *comic touch.)*

32 **NARRATOR:** Certainly the world was very different long ago.
33 One important aspect of sharing our stories is to help
34 younger people understand how some things have
35 changed.

(Three or four children read selected responses to the second item on the questionnaire from their interviews. Always finish by giving the name of the older members. Try to get a broad sample of experiences when selecting from these memories. Examples: “We didn’t have any electricity until I was fifteen ...” “My mother and I used to do all of the washing by hand ...” “The school I went to burned down in the big fire in 1948. They built a parking ramp ...”)

NARRATOR: But the remarkable thing is that despite these differences, so many of our experiences of Christmas are the same, no matter what the age. For instance, Christmas is the season when we encounter that merry old gent, Santa Claus.

(A couple of children should read memories involving visits to or from Santa Claus — the third item on the questionnaire.)

NARRATOR: Christmas memories are so powerful because they come alive again through each of our five senses. The images, tastes, and aromas of the season have made such a deep impression that they are not easily forgotten. We remember the cold of winter, the feeling of wet snow on our faces and the heat of the fire. We remember the music of the season.

SONG: Have a willing individual, a couple of children together or even a larger group play the opening portion of any well-known Christmas carol. This is a good opportunity for children who have recently taken up an instrument to play in front of an audience.

NARRATOR: And Christmas is the one time of year when everyone is a bit more willing to sing. Even shy people. Even people who can’t carry a tune. As a Christian family, we accept the music of Christmas as a normal part of family business. We learned the songs from our parents and pass them on to our children. As small children we may have been perplexed by phrases like “In eggshells is day-oh,” or why we should sing about

1 someone named “Round John Virgin,” but the carols of
2 Christmas are a part of our common heritage.

3 *(Three or four children can read responses to the fourth*
4 *interview item, which concerns music and caroling.)*

5 **SONG:** A carol sung either by a children’s chorus or the
6 congregation.

7 **NARRATOR:** But before there could by any sort of a family
8 Christmas, there was baking and decorating to be done.
9 Our memories of Christmas are filled with odors of pine
10 and berry-scented candles, of candy and spiced drinks;
11 the aromas from the kitchen, carrying the promise of
12 warmth, love and ... good things to eat.

13 *(Several children should read responses to item five. If any*
14 *member of the congregation has an old family poem or prayer*
15 *— especially if it is from “the old country” — it should be*
16 *presented here. After this interlude, several children should*
17 *read selected responses to item six.)*

18 **NARRATOR:** But Christmas isn’t just a time for presents and
19 good food. It is the time when we, as a family, share that
20 special story: the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus
21 in that stable in Bethlehem. Throughout Advent, we hear
22 portions of the story at church on Sunday, and again in
23 our homes. It is a story we never grow tired of. It is a
24 story that never loses its mystery.

25 *(This would be a very good spot for a child to read the story*
26 *of the Annunciation. Several children should read responses to*
27 *item seven, concerning the sharing of the Christmas story.)*

28 **NARRATOR:** And then as Christmas approached, there was
29 the pageant. Some of us landed the coveted role of the
30 “Herald Angel” and got to stand in the center of
31 everything, crying out, “Fear not! For behold, I bring you
32 glad tidings of great joy!” But many of us got stuck being
33 the “third shepherd,” quaking before the glorious angel,
34 but with no lines to speak. Yet whether we took part in
35 the pageant or simply watched, we all know the story.

(At this point, the CAST assembles for the first of two short Christmas pageant scenes. The first is the “Innkeeper Scene” and includes MARY, JOSEPH, and the INNKEEPER. The second is the “Shepherds’ Scene” and involves at least three SHEPHERDS and the ANGEL. The NARRATOR may be different for each scene, or the lines may be read by the program NARRATOR. The narration may also be performed as a choral reading by a group of children.)

THE INNKEEPER SCENE

NARRATOR: So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born” (Luke 2:4-6, NIV).

JOSEPH: Are you tired, Mary? It’s been such a long journey. We are in Bethlehem now.

MARY: Oh, Joseph! I think it’s time to have the baby.

JOSEPH: Oh, no! I’d better get us a room — fast!

MARY: I wish I were at home. I’m all alone here with no friends or family.

JOSEPH: (Knocks on the real or imaginary door.)

INNKEEPER: Just a minute, just a minute. OK, what do you want?

JOSEPH: Sorry to disturb you, sir, but my ...

INNKEEPER: Before you go any further, I’m all booked up. I’ve got people sleeping on the roof, I’m so full. Look someplace else.

MARY: But, Joseph, what will we do?

JOSEPH: Please! You don’t understand what’s going on. We’ve come so far, and my wife is ...

INNKEEPER: I don’t have a room. It’s as simple as that.

1 Look, everyone's here for the census. There's nothing I
2 can do.

3 JOSEPH: But my wife is going to have a baby!

4 INNKEEPER: She is?

5 JOSEPH: Any minute!

6 INNKEEPER: Yikes! Well, why didn't you say so before?

7 Look — I don't have a room, but you could stay in the
8 stable. I know it's not the nicest place, but it's warm, and
9 it's the best I can do.

10 JOSEPH: We'll take it, and ... thank you.

11 MARY: Joseph! Help me — it's time!

12 INNKEEPER: Ho boy. You two go ahead. *(To the congregation)*

13 I'd better get the wife. *(The CAST assembles for the second*
14 *scene.)*

15

16 THE SHEPHERD SCENE

17

18 NARRATOR: So Mary gave birth to her first-born, a son. She
19 wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger,
20 because there was no room for them in the inn. And
21 there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,
22 keeping watch over their flocks at night" *(Luke 2: 7-8,*
23 *NIV).*

24 SHEPHERD 1: Have the sheep quieted themselves down?

25 SHEPHERD 2: Yep. It's gonna be a pretty calm night, I
26 figure.

27 SHEPHERD 1: Awful cold, though.

28 SHEPHERD 2: Quit your bellyachin'.

29 SHEPHERD 3: But look at that star — the bright one right
30 above us. I've never seen it before.

31 NARRATOR: Then an angel of the Lord appeared to them,
32 and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they
33 were terrified" *(Luke 2:9, NIV).*

34 SHEPHERD 1: Have mercy on us!

35 SHEPHERD 2: Pity us! We are just poor shepherds!

- 1 **SHEPHERD 3:** It is from God! It is an angel from heaven.
- 2 **ANGEL:** Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of
 3 great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is
 4 born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is
 5 Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: You
 6 shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying
 7 in a manger" (*Luke 2: 10-12, KJV*).
- 8 **SHEPHERD 1:** Did you hear what the angel said? We must
 9 go and see this child right away.
- 10 **SHEPHERD 2:** We must bring gifts. (*SHEPHERDS 1 and 2*
 11 *exit.*)
- 12 **SHEPHERD 3:** But I have no gift. Oh well, maybe he'd like
 13 to hear me play my drum.
- 14 **SONG:** This would be a good point for a children's choir to sing
 15 "The Little Drummer Boy."
- 16 **NARRATOR:** 'Twas the night before Christmas and all
 17 through the house, not a creature was stirring. But that
 18 didn't mean that we were really asleep. That long night
 19 seemed to creep toward morning. The excitement of
 20 waiting to get up on Christmas morning is something we
 21 all know about.
 22 (*Have a couple children read responses to item eight.*)
- 23 **CHORAL READING:** At this point a kindergarten or first-grade
 24 class could perform a choral reading of the following poem.
- 25 **Come Animals, Everywhere**
- 26
- 27 **Come animals, everywhere**
 28 **Hush and draw near**
 29 **A child is born**
 30 **In our stable here.**
- 31
- 32 **The ox and the donkey**
 33 **The cow and the sheep**
 34 **All wondered who lay**
 35 **In the manger asleep.**



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