

A WORLD OF CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

by Gail Gaymer Martin



CHRISTIAN PUBLISHERS

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A World of Christmas Customs

A children's program with
a global perspective

by Gail Gaymer Martin

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas program *A World of Christmas Customs* focuses on Christmas customs found in many countries. These customs, appropriately, emphasize aspects of the Christmas story.

The program is written as readings. The Bible readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and are most appropriately read by one child. The commentaries which follow may be read by more than one child by dividing the reading into two or three sections. The program closes with a response and prayer. The children may read from stands or, if the program is in the sanctuary, the children may read from the pulpit and lectern with a riser so that the shorter ones may be seen and heard. Microphones may be used for a large audience.

A small artificial or real Christmas tree, at least four feet in height, is placed forward on the center chancel or Center Stage. The tree may be placed on a low table to be seen by the congregation or audience. Following the commentary readings, selected children will hang ornaments on the Christmas tree, as indicated by the script. The children's choir may be comprised of all the children or a selected group. The included song, "Children of the World," has original lyrics by the author and is sung to a familiar carol tune in the public domain. Other selected carols are suggestions only.

This Christmas program does not require costuming, but traditional costumes from various countries may be worn, if available, to enhance the program. Children could also dress in costumes representing the various Christmas symbols: stars, animals, shepherds, angels, or Mary and Joseph to represent the Nativity. Playing time, with hymns, is approximately twenty minutes.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

READER 1

READER 2

READER 3

READER 4

READER 5

READER 6

(Reader parts 2-6 may be doubled)

PRAYER READER 1

PRAYER READER 2

CHILDREN'S CHOIR

TREE DECORATORS

(Many children may be used in the choir
or for tree decorating)

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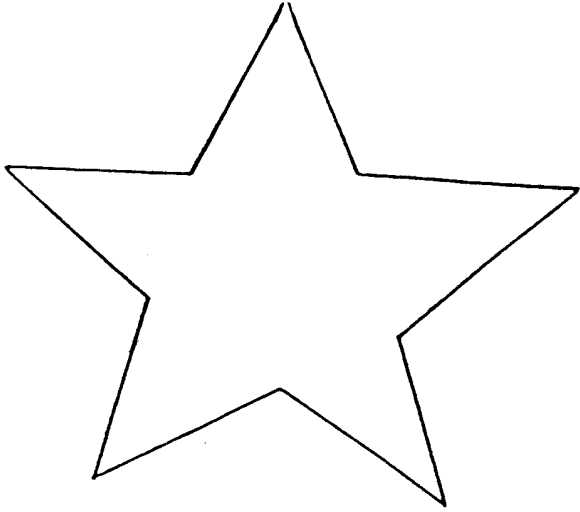
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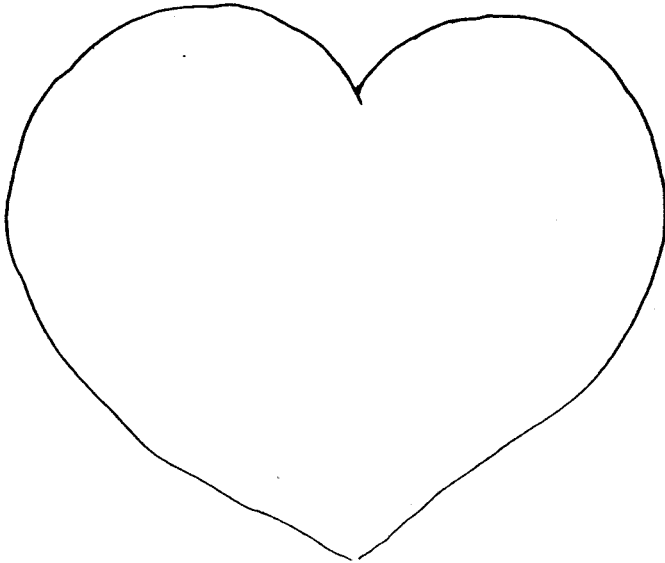
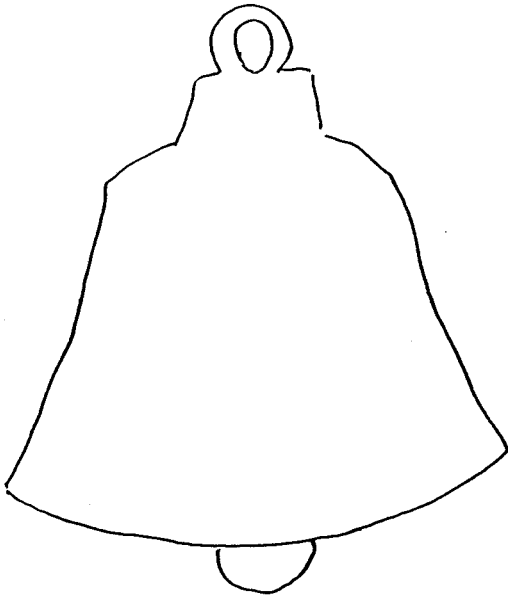
ADVENT ACTIVITY

During Advent, the children have an opportunity to prepare for Christmas by making Christmas tree decorations which are used in the Christmas program.

The size of the tree will determine the number of ornaments needed. Extra ornaments may be given to the children, as well as the congregation, following the program to take home for their own Christmas trees.

The five designs used in the children's program are a bell, a heart, a star, an angel, and a small bunch of straw tied together with ribbon. The first four ornaments may be made of heavy paper, colored and decorated by the children with glue and glitter to create individual ornaments. Small packages of straw may be purchased at craft stores or Christmas stores. Using clear fishing line, the bundles may be wound so that they hold together and then tied with a bow of selected Christmas ribbon and decorated with Christmas garland, if desired. The same ornament may be assigned to a class, or each student may select a design of his or her choice from the five types needed for the program. Patterns are supplied as a sample of the ornament size and shape.

ORNAMENT PATTERNS

ORNAMENT PATTERNS

(READER 1 and READER 2 enter and go to a stand on each side of the stage. READER 1 reads the Bible lesson and remains throughout the program. READER 2 reads the commentary.)

Bible Reading: Numbers 24:17a, Romans 15:12, Revelations 22:16a

READER 1: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near — a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” And Isaiah said, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” And Jesus said, “I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star.”

Customs about Christmas Stars

READER 2: At Christmas we see many stars. They decorate homes and Christmas trees. The star is a symbol of Jesus, the star out of Jacob, the bright morning star. Many countries have Christmas traditions about stars.

In Poland on Christmas Eve, the children watch the sky until the first star appears. Then they call out, “I see the first star.” that signals the beginning of the Festival of Stars. After the evening meal the “Star Man,” usually the village priest, visits the homes and tests the children on their Bible lessons. The children who answer well are given special treats of nuts and fruit.

In Alaska, boys and girls carry star figures from house to house, singing carols and hoping for treats.

We place stars on the tree as a reminder that Jesus is our bright morning star. (READER 2 exits. Selected CHILDREN come forward with star decorations and place them on the small tree which is in the center chancel or stage as the congregation sings selected verses of the carol. The CHILDREN return to their seats during the hymn.)

Congregational Carol: "The First Noel" (Traditional Carol)

(As the carol ends, READER 3 comes forward.)

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7

READER 1: In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Customs about the Animals

READER 3: In many countries, animals are honored at Christmas for two reasons. According to tradition, animals and birds in the stable were the only witnesses to Jesus' birth. Another tradition says it was the warm breath of the animals which helped to keep Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus warm.

In many countries, animals are given special treats on Christmas. In Germany, children carry their pets into the house on Christmas Eve to get the first view of the Christmas tree. In the farm areas in Northern Europe, the animals and birds are given extra food on Christmas. Sometimes the food comes from the family table. Sheaves of grain are placed on tall poles as treats for the birds.

The animals remind us that Jesus, the Son of God, was not born in a palace or even an inn. He was born

in a humble stable. His crib was a manger. A manger is a food trough for the animals. We place bundles of straw on the tree as a reminder of Jesus' humble birth. (READER 3 exits. Selected CHILDREN come forward with decorations made by bundling straw into Christmas ornaments and place them on the Christmas tree, then return to their seats or join the CHILDREN'S CHOIR or group as they sing the carol.)

Children's Carol: "O Come, Little Children" (Traditional Carol)
(After the carol, READER 4 comes forward.)

Bible Reading: Luke 2:8-14

READER 1: In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Customs about the Angel's Message of Peace

READER 4: At Christmas, we see many pictures and decorations of angels. Angels brought the message of Jesus' birth to the shepherds. The angels also brought the message of peace to the whole world.

Peace and kindness are an important part of Christmas. Sunday schools and churches collect gifts for needy families. People donate money on street corners to

help buy toys and food for children and their families. It seems like we all try very hard to avoid arguments and to solve problems at Christmas. Even countries at war have stopped shooting their weapons on Christmas.

Many countries have traditions that symbolize peace. In Russia and Poland, a “peace wafer,” like a Communion wafer, is part of the Christmas Eve dinner. In Lebanon, part of the Christmas service is the passing of the peace. The priest begins and each person touches the person on their right, repeating the words of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.”

We place angels on the tree as a reminder of the messages which the angels brought to earth. The messages tell of peace and of the birth of our Savior. *(READER 5 exits. CHILDREN come forward with angel ornaments to decorate the christmas tree as the congregation sings selected verses of the carol. The CHILDREN return to their seats during the singing.)*

Congregational Carol: “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”

(Traditional Carol)

(As the carol ends, READER 5 takes his place for the readings.)

Bible Reading: Luke 2:15-16

READER 1: 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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph with the child lying in the manger.

Customs about the Nativity

READER 5: When we think of Christmas, we picture the stable with Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus in the manger. In many homes, we have Nativity scenes which include the animals, the shepherds, and the wise men.

The first manger scene was created by St. Francis of Assisi. The scene was placed in a cave outside a small town in Italy. It was made up of real people and real animals. The only character who wasn't real was the baby Jesus. A life-sized figure made from wax was used. On Christmas Eve, people from all around came to see the wonderful sight. St. Francis thought this made Jesus' birth seem more real to the people. He encouraged the children to gather around the manger as they sang songs and danced with joy.

Just like those children, Christmas puts much joy in our hearts. We place hearts on the Christmas tree as a symbol of God's great love for us when he gave his only Son, Jesus. (*READER 5 exits. Selected CHILDREN come forward to decorate the Christmas tree with heart ornaments. Then they join the other CHILDREN for the Children's Carol.*)

Children's Carol: "Away in a Manger" (Traditional Carol)

(*As the CHILDREN are seated, READER 6 comes forward for the final reading.*)

Bible Reading: Luke 2:17-20

READER 1: When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these word and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Customs about Christmas Bells

READER 6: The shepherds ran out among the people with excitement, telling the wonderful things that they had heard and seen. Today, all Christians share the good news of Jesus' birth with those we meet. Church bells often toll on special occasions. On Christmas, the Christmas bells are considered a way to remind all people of Jesus' birth and to ring out the wonderful news.

We know Jesus' birth is part of God's plan for our salvation. Through God's plan, Jesus has conquered death and the Devil. It was believed that when the bells rang on Christmas Eve, the Devil died. So when we hear bells at Christmas, we can remember God's gift of eternal life to all believers through Jesus. We hang bells on the Christmas tree as a symbol of the gift of salvation. *(READER 6 exits while selected CHILDREN come forward to sing their special program song.)*

CHILDREN'S CHOIR: "Children of the World"

(CHILDREN remain standing or gathered around the tree for the final readings and prayer. PRAYER READER 1 and PRAYER READER 2 come forward to the stands and reads from Numbers 24:17a, John 12:46, Luke 2:17-18, and Mark 16:15.)

PRAYER READER 1: A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. And Jesus said, "I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness."

PRAYER READER 2: Jesus, you are our bright morning star. You were born to bring light to a darkened world. Help us to let our light shine, so that all people will know you through us.

PRAYER READER 1: And shepherds made known what had



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