

Clergy Zoom Conversations
September 15 & 16, 2020
“Preparing for Advent and Christmas”

Rev. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries at Discipleship Ministries, was the guest presenter. Members of the WPA Conference Program Staff also shared information and ideas.

Derek Weber’s Presentation

- 1) Advent/Christmas should not be scaled down this year – it needs to be bigger than ever! Not in terms of activity, but in terms of confidence and clarity of message! God’s got this and we need to let the world know that good news!
- 2) People are hungry for a word of hope and promise amidst the current circumstances of our world. Don’t hold back from proclaiming a hopeful word.
- 3) Advent is about something new coming. Birth always takes time. We are in the midst of something new being born in our world.
- 4) Advent/Christmas needs to “leak out of our buildings” and move into the community!
 - a. Our celebration of Advent is typically internal – this year it needs to be external, a public proclamation that something new is coming!
 - b. Advent is not just a countdown to Christmas but an opportunity to look for the hope that comes in Christ.
 - c. Public displays of Advent at the church building
 - i. Advent Wreath in the church lawn: plywood cutouts of candles; add one each week
 - ii. Shine a light on an external church wall or tower. Add a new light each week to mark the lighting of the Advent candles.
 - iii. Add more lights or decorations each week in the church yard to proclaim to the community we are still here and have hope
 - d. Invite online viewers to light Advent candles at home to engage them
 - e. Invite people to use the windows in their home to communicate the coming of Christ. Each week add another light to a window or if you have 4 windows, light an additional window each week.
- 5) People are hungry for connection: find creative ways to connect with people in the church and community during the Advent/Christmas season
- 6) Challenge your congregations to not post anything negative on Social Media throughout Advent. Invitation to be people of hope and promise – post positive messages to influence others as part of our Christian witness. Live into the hope, even in the midst of worry.
- 7) Discipleship Ministry provides Advent/Christmas preaching and worship resources
 - a. This year’s theme is “Company’s Coming.” There is worship and preaching information for the 4 weeks of Advent; Christmas Eve; and the 2 Sundays in Christmastide.
 - b. Information can be found at umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/companys-coming
- 8) Advent/ Christmas Music
 - a. There is an article by Diana Sanchez-Bushong on the Discipleship Ministries website about music in the midst of covid-19. You can find it at umcdiscipleship.org/articles/advent-and-christmas-music-in-the-midst-of-covid-19

- b. There are also other articles on the Discipleship Ministries website about streaming, copyrights, etc.
- c. Discipleship Ministries is working on getting a blanket copyright to create a Virtual Choir Library – watch for this in the future!
- d. There is a virtual choir resource: choircreator.com. There is fee for usage.
- e. The WPAUMC Conference is working on providing a comprehensive guide to licensing, copyright and legal issues in regards to virtual worship and music. Look for that soon!

“Christmas Gifts” from the WPAUMC Program Staff

The Program Staff is working to provide some special “Christmas” gifts” for the WPA Conference. Clergy and laity of the Western PA Conference are invited to use these specially designed resources without cost or concern about copyright in your local congregations and ministry settings. A notice will be given in the weekly e-news when the resources are ready and will be posted on the Conference website. The anticipated release date will be in October 2020. The following resources will be available:

- 1) An Advent/Christmas Worship bundle. This will include liturgies and prayers written by WPA members. (similar to the Easter bundle shared in Spring 2020).
- 2) An “Advent in a Box/Bag” recipe. This recipe will give churches an opportunity to reach out to children and families in their congregations and communities to participate in Advent rituals when not able to be in-person for worship and activities.
- 3) A WPA “Advent Mission Calendar” for use in local churches. Participants can use the calendar to pray for and support Conference, national and global missions.
- 4) Several “Zoom Christmas Pageant” skits for congregations to use when unable to gather for in-person worship or activities. Written by a WPA published playwright, these skits have been adapted for use on virtual platforms like Zoom and are flexible in how many participants are needed. You can still involve children (of all ages!) in a Christmas pageant!

Idea Sharing by Participants and Presenters (from both sessions)

- 1) Hold Christmas Eve worship in a Barn. Will need to dress warmly! Or rent a large party tent (with space heaters) and hold Christmas Eve worship on the church lawn
- 2) “Come & Go” Christmas Eve worship: invite people to walk through the sanctuary during designated hours (no seated worship service)
 - a. Musician(s) playing Christmas carols or recorded music playing
 - b. Stations placed around the sanctuary with visual displays or devotional readings
 - c. People walk up to altar to light a candle from the Christ candle; carry the light out, leaving candles in a bin at the door
- 3) Christmas Eve Parking Lot Worship Service: each carload invited to bring a luminary to place on their car to provide the candlelight
- 4) Hold additional Christmas Eve worship services in order to maintain social distancing but accommodate more people
 - a. Hold a daylight service or add additional evening services: leave enough time between services to move people out and wipe down high touch surfaces
 - b. Hold a “Christmas Eve-Eve” worship service on December 23. Or hold multiple services over multiple days to have a smaller number of worshippers in each service
 - c. Hold a Christmas Day worship service to give people more worship options

- d. Shorten the length of the worship services so that more time options can be offered
- 5) Share a “live nativity” on the church grounds where people either drive through or walk through to see various scenes of the Nativity story. (or a community park!)
 - a. Planning for this needs to be immediate, especially if you want to secure live animals for the evening!
 - b. Distribute take-home packets: devotional message, small gift, snack, etc.
- 6) A Walk-Through Nativity Display: various and unique nativities are displayed (inside or outside); people walk through and view nativities while maintaining social distancing (if inside, can regulate the number of people inside or have timed tickets for entrance)
- 7) Hold a “Blue Christmas” or “Longest Night” service online to help people dealing with grief during the holidays. This may be especially important for this difficult year.
- 8) Telephone Christmas Eve message offered for those who do not have the internet: have a recorded message and Christmas music; people use a phone-in service to access
- 9) Revive Christmas caroling in neighborhoods! Can sing outdoors, maintaining social distancing. Good way to take the message out into the community.
- 10) Plan Cooperative worship services/events with other churches in the community. Partner with a local fire department to hold a community Christmas Eve worship in fire hall (could be more space to hold more people while practicing social distancing)
- 11) For candle-lighting services, find alternate “candles” so that people do not have to blow out the flame (potentially spreading germs!)
 - a. Cell phone lights or flashlight apps
 - b. Glo-Sticks
 - c. Battery candles or tea lights
 - d. Use a candlelight app on the phone: virtual candlelight (check your app store to find options)
- 12) Hold a “Hanging of the Greens” service in the parking lot: various activity stations placed around the space; activities could include a craft station (make and Advent wreath or crismon); cookies and beverage station; devotional or prayer station; etc.
- 13) Offer a virtual carol sing along for people to watch while they decorate their homes for Christmas.
- 14) Plan a virtual cookie-baking party. Could invite a member or two to provide online instruction for cookie baking. Perhaps, the cookies baked could be donated to a local nursing home or to local first responders.
- 15) Give Christmas Gifts to the Community
 - a. Cookie bags or pre-packaged treat bags to distribute in neighborhoods
 - b. Mason Jars with everything inside to make a batch of cookies (w/recipe)
- 16) Lots of good ideas can be found at amplifymedia.com/the-promise-of-advent/
- 17) Hold a virtual Gift Wrapping Party with Christmas trivia, music, etc.
- 18) Encourage families and individuals to make Advent wreaths for their home or yard
 - a. Pool noodle yard candles (google it for examples!)
 - b. <https://buildfaith.org/99-cent-advent-wreath/>
- 19) Revive placing luminaries at the church and at homes: organize neighborhoods to place luminaries out on Christmas Eve. Fill the world with light!