



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

From our Churches

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Church: Zion Mennonite Church

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God With Us

A Christmas Eve Service

The attached program was designed for use at Zion Mennonite Church and in some ways reflects the specificity of that congregation. However, I think it can be adapted to almost any congregation. I make some suggestions for adaptation below. You may want to make others.

The program, as written, takes about one hour without the carol singing at the end. We sing carols, usually not more than one or two verses from each, for about 15 or 20 minutes, by the light of the candles in people's hands, without songbooks. This year, since we had the PowerPoint equipment for the pictures, we used it to project the words on the screen. We end with "Silent Night."

The intent of the program was to experience the hope inherent in the Christmas story, hope in the midst of experiences that tempt us to despair. We try to keep performance and production simple, recognizing the limitations of rehearsal time. The program requires no memorization of script. Staging is simple enough that we were able to produce the program with only one rehearsal the day before.

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We had a piece of artwork commissioned to use in our advertising of our Christmas Eve service—a picture of the baby in the rubble of the collapsed WTC tower. If you want to use this, contact us.

Adaptations:

The numbered suggestions below correspond to note numbers in the text of the program.

- 1. This reflects the facility we have. The Christ candle is lit for it is from that candle that the candlelighters (sharers of the Christ light) light their candles to share the light with the members of the audience at the end of the program. The manger is present but in the background.*
- 2. This is how the script is designed. However, the program could be run with 2 female narrators (#1 & 3) and one male (#2). It would require the reassigning of the piece read while the prophet is writing.*
- 3. I've tried to include details of choir music where possible. Do not feel like you are restricted to using the choir songs we did. There may be music known to your group just as, or even better, suited to the program. Feel free to make those changes. If you don't have a choir, you may have a worship team or other small group. Another option is to use congregational songs at the points where the script calls for choir songs.*
- 4. There are simple lighting instructions on the script. Our building essentially gives us three choices: left side of stage, right side of stage, and full stage light. To have that much choice helps draw the congregation's attention to the appropriate scenes. If you have access to a spotlight, that can be helpful but by no means crucial. We did without. Remember, the emphasis is not on fancy and elaborate but on experiencing the story, in its simplicity yet power.*
- Lights in the sanctuary are off for the entire program after the opening two songs and the welcome. We had a couple of candelabras with lit candles at the front to give soft lighting throughout the evening. Soft lighting, especially with candles, creates a wonderful atmosphere.*
- 5. We used PowerPoint pictures to add more visual material. They added to our experience but are not crucial to the program. I believe the script could work well using the narrations without the pictures. WARNING: If you are going to use copyrighted pictures, getting the necessary permission to use them can be cumbersome and time consuming. Give yourself lots of time. If you do not have access to PowerPoint, slides can also be used.*
- 6. We used German because of the number of seniors of ethnic Mennonite stock in our congregation. Use English, or another language suitable for your setting. No organ chimes—use piano or the choir humming.*
- 7. Use these headlines, find some from recent editions of your local newspaper or other news reports, or write your own, representing stories that your congregation can identify with.*
- 8. The WTC attacks and collapse were the obvious event for us to start with, Christmas, 2001. You may decide that, a year or more later, another event—global or local—would be the better one to use. Make the necessary changes in the script (and in the pictures, if using PowerPoint or slides).*
- 9. I recognize that this is a mixing of religious tradition (Jesus in all likelihood was not born on December 25) and fact (Jesus' birth probably happened in 4 BCE not 0). Such is the nature*

of the Christmas story. 4 BC works better than 0 in script and headline. I used BC instead of BCE because our congregation is more used to that older designation for the calendar.

10. Instead of a narrator, we had the women in the choir sing these lines from a cantata or oratorio for which we had the music. We did this at each place in the script where this text is repeated.

11. This song has a mournful sound, expressing the longing that existed for the people. If you do not have access to the song, the program works well without this song. Simply allow a pause as the prophet struggles with what words of hope he can write.

12. If you do not have organ chimes, for here and other scene changes, there are other options:

- piano*
- choir humming*
- recorded chimes*

13. "Comfort, comfort, O my people" would be another option.

14. There would be a number of songs appropriate for this spot, including the rest of "Joy to the World." Another option, Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." The intent is to create the sense of joy and excitement at what has happened—the birth of Christ.

15. This could be either a grandmother or grandfather. We try to repeat this scene each year and alternate between grandmother and grandfather.

16. A wide range of Christmas music would be appropriate here.

17. Have them sit wherever they will be out of the way for now but available to do the candle lighting at the end.

18. Another option here would be "Go tell it on the mountain."

May the message of Christmas—God with us—become more real for your congregation as you celebrate the story again.

THE PROGRAM:

Background Info:

The screen is down. A table with lit Advent candles (the Christ candle and 4 unlit candles) is in front of it and in front of the table, the manger. [1]

The Choir is in the choir loft. One side of stage has a table and chair, the other a rocking chair.

Three narrators, 2 male (#1 and #2) and 1 female (#3). [2]

Choir [3]

Spot light/floodlights [4]

PowerPoint equipment [5]

Explanation:

pp – PowerPoint

d – live drama scene

Congregation: O Come, All Ye Faithful

Welcome

Congregation: I heard the bells on Christmas Day

(sanctuary lights off, and so for rest of program)

Choir: Silent Night

(Choir sing verse 1 in English, organ chimes on a verse while narrators read headlines of violence, war, crime, etc. Choir sing verse 1 in German) [6]

Headlines: [7]

1: Twelve dead in attack on Indian parliament.

2: AIDS virus growing resistant to newest drugs.

3: Drought threatens Western farmers.

1: Anthrax scare empties MCC headquarters.

2: Three dead in Israeli retaliation attack on Palestinian targets.

3: Northern Ireland peace shattered by bomb blast.

1: Family of Five killed in highway collision.

2: Mine closure heralds bleak Christmas.

1: Thousands feared dead in World Trade Centre Twin Tower collapse,

2: Ebola virus spreads from Gabon to Congo.

(pp-picture of World Trade Centre exploding with headline)

R1: “The Day that Changed America” shouts the headline over the picture of a World Trade Center Tower with fire exploding from its side. September 11, 2001.

(pp-nativity scene with headline)

R2: “The Day that Changed the World” proclaims another headline next to the picture of a baby silently sleeping on a bed of hay. December 25, 4 BC.

(pp-two pictures, side by side – World Trade Centre, Mary with baby)

R3: Can both be true? Tonight, Christmas Eve, softly falling snow, carols on the stereo, family gathered on winter’s most holy night, we desperately want to believe in the one, the story of the baby. And yet, how can we forget the other, and 3000 dead?

(pp-Christmas scene – snowy street with church with a steeple that would have bells)

Choir: I heard the bells on Christmas Day (vs. 1-2)
Solo vs. 3

(pp-picture of swirling clouds and darkness)

R1: In the beginning...the earth was empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness.

R2: And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness.

(pp-earth taken from space)

R1: God created the heavens and the earth...God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

(pp-Cain & Abel)

R2: In the beginning there was jealousy and hate and violence and fear. And people hid from God. Then Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel. And Cain was afraid.

R3: This is what God created? This is “very good”?

(pp-Hebrew slavery in Egypt)

R2: In another time, and another place a refugee family had found a home in a new land. But, over the years, the people who were there first had grown afraid of these newcomers. They turned them into slaves. That would stop all visions they might have of taking over power. And, just to be sure, the powerful ordered that all baby boys should be killed, by drowning in the river or at the edge of the sword.

(pp-people grieving)

R3: “A cry of anguish is heard in Ramah – weeping and mourning unrestrained. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted – for they are dead.”¹

¹ Matthew 2:18 New Living Translation

(pp-Israelites going through Red Sea)

R1: God heard the cry of these slaves – fathers cruelly beaten by taskmasters, mothers weeping for their sons. God heard and rescued them. God lead them to a new land where they could settle in safety and security, a land flowing with Milk and Honey. He gave them peace and promised to be their God.

(pp-war in Bible times)

R2: Then these rescued refugees did what was evil in the Lord's sight. They abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. The result was war, hunger, fear, and death.

(pp-people grieving)

R3: "A cry of anguish is heard in Ramah – weeping and mourning unrestrained. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted – for they are dead."²

R1: Year followed year, decade followed decade, century followed century. And always there were people who struggled with the question"

(pp-two pictures, collapsed World Trade Centre, Nativity scene)

R3: Which is true? Light or Darkness? War or Peace? Terror or Good-will? The shriek of missiles or the song of ananges? The cries of those who will not be comforted or the shouts of the shepherds?

(screen up)

(d – a prophet, sitting at a table, thinking) (light on him)

R2: With an inspiration that came from God these people – prophets – contemplated what was and struggled for insight into what might be. With the power of God's Spirit they looked into the darkness, they asked questions, and they gave birth to hope.

R3: One such prophet was Isaiah of Jerusalem.

(prophet writing on a scroll, with heaviness and sighs)

R1: "My people will be led away as captives, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and shake their fists at heaven and curse their king and their God. Wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness."³

(narrator stops and prophet stops writing, thinking, struggling with what to write next)

Choir: *Messiah* – with O Come, O Come Immanuel, Leech, arr. Bergquist [1]

² Matthew 2:18 New Living Translation

³ Isaiah 8:21-22, New Living Translation

(suddenly prophet has an inspiration and with excitement, writes again)

R1: "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light – a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow. Israel will again be great, and its people will rejoice as people rejoice at harvest-time...For God will break the chains that bind his people and the whip that scourges them...In that day of peace, battle gear will no longer be issued. never again will uniforms be bloodstained by war...

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the Lord Almighty will guarantee it!⁴

R2: From such deeds the dream grew, ever bigger, ever clearer, ever brighter till is clarity was overtaken by the brightness and grandeur of the vision, of what would be.

R1: And yet always they were face to face with reality, with what was. The question remained.

R3: Which is true? Light or Darkness? War or Peace? Terror or Good-will? The shriek of missiles or the song of angels? The cries of those who will not be comforted or the shouts of the shepherds?

(while prophet leaves, woman and father take their places)

(Chimes: 1 vs. "I heard the bells") [12]

R1: It is a question we still ask today.

R2: It is asked by those for whom life seems normal, comfortable, as it should be.

(d-young woman sitting at table and writing) (light on her)

R3: Dear Susan, I was working on my Christmas cards and thought that I should include at least a brief note in yours. It seems like such a long time since we met last summer. Bug, I guess that's how things are when Joe's job means you have to live out there and we are here, a thousand miles away. Well, have a Merry Christmas.

(actor pauses in writing and narrator pauses; then both resume)

I was just going to write a short note, but it sounds so hollow. To be honest, Christmas just doesn't feel very "merry". There's an emptiness inside of me that seems to grow more pronounced each year. The cheeriness of the lights and songs and shouted greetings and brightly wrapped gifts seem so contrived. The kids just want more and more. Don and I get along but it's like we never talk anymore or have time to be together. Christmas parties are filled with faked friendliness and hollow laughter. And this year, on top of everything else, I keep thinking about September 11 – all those people dead, all those families grieving, all the talk about war. Sometimes I wonder why we even bother with Christmas. I know that sounds terrible but it's how I feel. I could just cry.

⁴ Isaiah 9:107 (selections), NLT

(Drops her head on her arms. Light on rocking chair, with a man – a father holding a picture of his son who died of cancer a month ago)

R1: It is asked by those who grieve the loss of someone they loved.

R2: It's not right! It's not fair! God, how could you have done this?! Jim was just 19. He had his whole life ahead of him. How could you have taken him away? I thought you said you loved us! I thought you wanted people to live! I thought you needed people! Jim was going to go to college. He was going to be a youth pastor! He was so good with people. What joy do you get from killing him?! Why should he die and the no-good trouble maker next door stays around, dealing drugs every weekend? It's not fair! And you still want me to believe in you? You think we'll ever celebrate Christmas again?

R3: "A cry of anguish is heard in Ramah – weeping and mourning unrestrained. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted – for they are dead."⁵

(Organ chimes softly play a verse of "I heard the bells" while woman and father exist and Mary takes seat in the rocking chair, Joseph at table with a piece of wood. Angel standing in background.)

R3: And there still was the dream –
The people who walk in darkness will see a great light
They will beat their swords into ploughshares
The wolf will lie down with the lamb
For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.

R2: For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.

(light on Mary and Joseph)

R1: A young couple in Nazareth was eagerly anticipating their wedding when suddenly all was thrown into confusion. Mary came to Joseph with the news. She was pregnant. An angel had come and told her she would have a baby. Joseph knew he was not the father. The only option was breaking the engagement. But, out of respect for Mary, he would do so privately, sparing her any public humiliation.

(Joseph drops head to arms on table as if asleep, Angel moves to stand beside Joseph, looking at him)

R2: Confusion. Fear. Broken hearts. Pain. A hand grenade of betrayal had shattered the joy. Now all was confusion and pain.

R3: Even here, in a small quiet village, in the middle of happy plans for a wedding, the question is haunting. Which is true? Light or darkness?

R2: The Gospel storyteller picks up the story.

R1: As [Joseph] considered this, he fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to go ahead with your

⁵ Matthew 2:18 New Living Translation

marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this happened to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God with us).”⁶

R2: “God with us.” Could this be the answer? God with us?

Choir: *O Jesus Grant me hope and comfort* – Frank, arr. Stein [13]

(Piano continues playing song as manger is moved to front and centre and the nativity scene forms in the darkness. Then, as piano plays introduction for “Joy to the World,” full stage lights)

Choir and Congregation: Joy to the World, vs. 1

(If possible sing without announcing the song. Choir can be told ahead of time. Choir director can turn to congregation and signal their participation by directing them)

Choir: *Rejoice* – Frank Hernandez [14]

Soloist: *(from the back of the sanctuary, invites children to come with her/him to the manger scene. Then begins to sing as s/he walks towards front, collecting children as s/he goes)*

O come, all ye children

A Grandmother: Luke 2:1-20 [15]

Children and Congregation: *Away in a Manger*
(children return to their seats)

Choir: *Peace, Peace* – (with Silent Night) Powell, arr. Bock
Still, Still – (with For Unto Us) Kirby Shaw [16]

R1: Never before had the vision shone so bright. Never before had believing been so easy, so compelling and doubt so unthinkable. God with us. It was so. It was true. This was the answer to the question. God with us.

R2: But even in the middle of this brightness, darkness was not far away.

(Angel whispers in Joseph’s ear. He whispers to Mary. Quickly they take the baby and exit, as do the shepherds and wise men. One shepherd and one wiseman [candlelighters] sit on steps at each end of stage) (Lights on the empty manger) [17]

R3: After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up and flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to try to kill the child.” That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his brother, and they stayed there until Herod’s death...

Herod was furious when he learned that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, because the

⁶ Matthew 1:20-23, NLT

wise men had told him that the star first appeared to them about two years earlier. Herod's brutal action fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah:⁷

R3: "A cry of anguish is heard in Ramah – weeping and mourning unrestrained. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted – for they are dead."⁸

R1: It seemed like the light had been wiped out by the darkness yet again. But not this time for "Life itself was in [the baby that was born], and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."⁹

R2: From now on it would never again matter how dark the world, the light would always be brighter. God would be found not just in the light but also in the darkness. In fact, God would be found where light and darkness meet. After all, it was the same story that told of Rachel weeping without comfort that also named the baby: God with us.

R3: God with us is the answer.

Choir: I heard the bells on Christmas Day, vs. 4

(Woman and father take their places at table and rocking chair)
(Lights on father at table)

R2: God, it hurts so much! We loved Jim. I remember how, when he was 3, he used to run to the door when I came home from work. I remember the great visits we had fishing each summer. I remember his enthusiasm for life and for you.

I know God, you loved him too. This wasn't your plan that cancer get him this early. You had plans for him too. You are crying with us. It just doesn't make any sense. But, I believe you love us. You were with Jimmy when he died and you will be with us. Christmas will hurt like crazy but God, I believe you will give us the peace and strength we need.

(Lights on woman at table)

R3: Dear Susan, I started a letter to you, complaining about how empty Christmas seems. Then, I started thinking, and praying. I remembered that Christmas Eve service at church last year, and the strange peace and calm that it brought on the day before Christmas. That first Christmas was not only a quiet manger, but it was Mary and Joseph running away and Herod going after those babies. I realized that God came to give hope in this troubled world.

Tonight, Don and the kids and I will light a candle, read the Christmas story, and remind ourselves what it's all about – love, hope, peace, not away from this world but right here in the middle of everything. Maybe we can bring some peace to our lives and share it with someone this Christmas.

R2: God with us, that is the truth about Christmas. God with us - when cancer brings death, when hearts are broken, when hope seems dim, when buildings collapse. God with us, that is the truth of Christmas.

Choir: I heard the bells on Christmas day, vs. 5

⁷ Mathew 2:13-17, NLT

⁸ Matthew 2:18, NLT

⁹ John 1:4-5, NLT

Choir: *I Just Heard Some Good News* – Jay Althouse [18]

R3: God with us – the ever abiding truth of Christmas. Darkness may still hover around the edges and even come crashing in when we least expect it. But, in faith, believing – God with us – we can light one candle of hope. From that one candle, a thousand candles can burst into flame till the darkness is pushed back and the whole world believes – God with us.

(Organ chimes: I heard the Bells while choir leaves loft to sit with the rest of the congregation)

Duet: “We light a thousand candles bright”

During the singing of this song, the two actors from the contemporary scene with one shepherd and one wise man light candles from the Christ candle and then light the candles of the people in the audience.

Carol singing