



## School: Planning Children's Christmas Service: Inreach & Outreach

### The healthy tension

On the one hand, Christmas Eve is hands down one of the best opportunities your congregation has to reach the lost, the unchurched, and the dischurched. Surveys have demonstrated that 80% of unchurched Americans say they *will* go to church on Christmas Eve if someone invites them. That is *higher* than Easter (which comes in at about 72%). The commercialization of Christmas, which in one sense has robbed that day of so much meaning, also creates that opportunity. Christmas is a big part of our culture. Even with something like the Fourth of July, Americans may not do much to celebrate it. But most Americans want to celebrate Christmas in some way. And many people view singing carols in candlelight as a wonderful way to do that. Therefore, if you do not use Christmas Eve for outreach, your congregation may be missing out. For on that night there are masses of people who would be willing to come and give you an hour of their life, something they might not be willing to do on a Sunday morning.



But on the other hand, Christmas Eve has traditionally played a big role in the spiritual life of our Lutheran elementary schools. Many of us have fond memories of confessing our faith as a child by reciting Luke 2 or singing *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. We want the same opportunity for our children. It is a joyful evening as we recall the wonder of the Savior's birth with family. They all look forward to getting together on that special night and basking in a light much more beautiful than the glow of candles, the light of the Christ.

This creates a tension. Many of our churches are packed during that Christmas Eve children's service. Folding chairs are set up in the aisles and people crowd in to the point that fire codes are shattered. You have a family of four who have two children in your school, but they come in two cars with nine people – grandparents, some aunts and uncles, and a family friend. Is it wise to invite the community to join you for a worship service when there may be “no room in the inn”?

Some of our larger churches have moved their children's service into the gymnasium, where they can then set up more seating than they have in the sanctuary. But while school parents, eager to watch their children proclaim the word, will be fine sitting on metal folding

chairs in a gymnasium on Christmas Eve, will a prospect feel the same way? Is that how *they* picture Christmas?

So there is a tension. How do you provide the important opportunity of letting Christian children express their faith through a Christmas Eve service while *also* trying to reach out to your community on the perfect night to do so? However, this is a healthy tension. Balancing *inreach* (building up the faith of our members) and *outreach* (trying to reach out to those who lack faith or a connection to the means of grace) is one of the biggest challenges churches have to face. Christmas Eve provides congregations with a wonderful opportunity to wrestle with how they will achieve that balance.

The purpose of this C13 module is to serve as a discussion starter for church leaders as you plan your children's Christmas Eve service. This discussion doesn't just affect WELS churches that have large Lutheran elementary schools. Any church with an early childhood ministry or even a Sunday school likely will be planning how to tie those ministries into its Christmas celebration. Therefore, in this C13 planning module, we ask some questions for you to think about as you consider the best way to slot your school into your Christmas activities so that both inreach and outreach might be achieved.

### **Question: Does anyone want to watch my kid except for me?**

One of the first questions a congregation needs to consider is whether or not the children's service can serve well when trying to conduct outreach. Some might assume not. After all, does going to some event and watching someone else's kids sound appealing to you?

But remember, this isn't "some event." It is Christmas Eve. Through recitation and song your children will be proclaiming the word of God. God says, "[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

God's powerful word is only of benefit if it is actually heard, of course. "You will do well to pay attention to [the word], as to a light shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19). Conversely, you don't "do well" – i.e. are not spiritually benefited – if you don't pay attention to the word. Therefore, we want to present the word in a way that makes the gospel the focus, rather than putting the focus on the children. If children's recitations are recited so poorly they can't be understood, if songs are mumbled and stumbled through, then the focus is on the children. And then, for the prospect, your children's service is like a closed Bible. The word is still powerful. It just isn't being received. But when a children's service is well planned and prepared for, when the word is clearly proclaimed and heard, the "*power of God for salvation*" (Romans 1:16) is unleashed. Through the testimony of the children the Holy Spirit works, no differently than he works through the preaching of a pastor.

*A children's service, done well, demonstrates to prospects that your school is a place where their child might thrive – spiritually, academically and culturally.*

There's more, however. When a children's service is done well, it has a secondary appeal – the appeal to parents who want their children to succeed.

That is another aspect of modern American culture you can consider this Christmas. Parents are hyper involved in their children's lives. You have parents who do not just go to games, but to every practice. You have parents whose primary job seems to be chauffeur, shuttling children to this and that. Much of this is unhealthy. But ultimately it flows from the desire parents have to see their children excel.

And so after sending out postcards to your community, a unchurched couple with two young kids come to your Christmas Eve service. They see a dozen young children stand up, recite God's word in unison and then sing a song well. The unchurched parents are not only touched by God's word, they are impressed by what your congregation offers to children – the opportunity to excel at more than basic academics. A children's service, done well, demonstrates to prospects that your school is a place where their child might thrive – spiritually, academically and culturally.

Therefore, do not dismiss the idea of using a children's service (or at least a Christmas service which includes participation from children) as outreach. Such a service can be used for outreach quite well.

### **Question: Do you collect contact information during your children's Christmas service? If not, might it be worth considering doing so?**

Here is something you can do without changing a single thing about your Christmas Eve traditions.

We touched on the fact that extended family members will often come, year-after-year, to your children's Christmas service. Sometimes family friends come too. Do these people have a church home? Do you have a method for finding that out? If you are simply hoping they come back, you are probably missing out on an opportunity. Studies have shown that when worship visitors are followed up on it makes it substantially more likely they return again. Without any follow up, it is not very likely they return.

In C13, we are stressing F.R.A.N. outreach. F.R.A.N stands for *friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors*. It might be that for your church, the best way to do outreach with your children's Christmas service is to try and gather contact information from everyone at that service. Many of the guests are likely WELS members from other churches, coming to see their young relative sing. But you might be very surprised at how many of those relatives are unchurched.

One of the C13 templates we are offering is for "connection cards." You print these on cardstock, four to a page, and then put one card in every worship folder. Members and guests both fill them out at some point during worship. This is a *much* more effective way at collecting contact

CONNECTION CARD	
Name(s): _____ _____	You are a: <input type="checkbox"/> first-time visitor
Address: _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> repeat visitor
City State Zip code	<input type="checkbox"/> member
Best contact phone: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> member of another WELS church
Best contact e-mail: _____	
<small>Please place this card in the offering as it is received or after worship place it in the connection card basket as you exit the church</small>	

information than trying to get people to sign a guest-register in the narthex/entry foyer. Perhaps you could use those? The C13 program also has a step-by-step planning module for worship visitor follow up. Part of it includes dropping off information about your church and school. Might that be a good way of encouraging worship visitors to make a repeat visit?

This all might require you to do some training of your membership. The C13 program is also offering information for your members about F.R.A.N. outreach, explaining how they can get involved. If your member would know that you are going to *try* and reach out to his unchurched family and friends, his New Man would be more than willing to help in whatever way he can. But he might need some instruction about how to do that.

### **Question: If space is the issue, is it possible to offer more than one service?**

As mentioned, some churches have standing-room-only at the children's Christmas Eve service. Is it possible to have two (or more) services? (This is not an uncommon practice in WELS Lutheran elementary schools.) There are two options here.

For larger schools, you could split the students into two groups, having a different service for the upper grades and the younger grades. (Yes, some parents would end up coming to both. Is that such a burden?)

The more common option, one many of you might have been a part of as a child, is to have multiple identical services involving the school. The children have to be at both. But you ask the upper grade parents to come to one and the lower grade parents to come to another. By having only half the parents there, you have room to invite the community too. If your service is on Christmas Eve, perhaps the younger children could be part of a 5:00PM service and the older children part of a 7:00PM service.



### **Question: Is Christmas Eve the best time for the children's service? Is it the only time?**

Many WELS Lutheran elementary schools have the children's service on an earlier date than Christmas Eve. This is often done out of necessity, since many school families will be traveling for the holidays. But perhaps a move might be considered simply for the sake of alleviating the crowding on Christmas Eve so that this night might be used for outreach.

The third midweek Advent service can be a fine option. The Sundays of Advent tend *not* to be very "Christmasy." Just as the season of Lent prepares for Easter, Advent is a season of repentance that prepares one for Christmas. However, the midweek services of Advent can appropriately serve to foreshadow the joy of Christmas. Might a children's service on the third week of Advent serve as an option? You could even plan a three-week series that used different children's groups at the first and second midweek service, and then the whole school (or preschool or Sunday school or all of the above) for the third midweek service.

Another option for your children's service would be Christmas Day. Christmas Day, along with Easter, is one of the high-festivals of the Church Year. (Christmas Eve served more as a vigil.) And yet many churches report down attendance on that day. Might having your children's service on Christmas Day be a way of teaching your members about the history of the Church Year? Christmas Eve would then be the service you promoted strongly to your community. Christmas Day would be one you promoted strongly among members. It would include the celebration of the Lord's Supper. You could have the children sing the music during the distribution. Lovely!

Some parents might object to any of these suggestions because they want their child to be able to participate in worship in a special way on Christmas Eve itself. Having the children's service at a different time doesn't preclude that from happening. The C13 worship folder templates for both Christmas Eve services include options to use a children's choir. The whole service doesn't center around the children, but they can still play very significant roles.

### **Healthy tension will often mean passionate discussion**

As you consider these options, you are probably imagining voices of certain parents you know will object if you change *anything* about the children's Christmas service. Putting the best construction on things, we assume the majority of the passion of those parents flows from nothing else but love for the gospel. They want their children to have the opportunity to share the promise of peace that God gave to us in that manger.

Precisely because their passion flows from love for the gospel, the discussion about how to best use the children's service needs to be *rooted in* the gospel. Christmas Eve is about celebrating the day that the Son of God bankrupted himself for our sake. He set aside the comfort of heaven and the full use of his glory and power. Christmas Eve marks the beginning of thirty-three years of sacrifice that would culminate upon a cross. Christmas Eve is pure gospel promise: God came to live with us so that we might live with him. And that exchange cost him dearly. This is the life-giving gospel we are charged to proclaim to a dying world.

Therefore, any discussion about Christmas Eve *cannot* begin with, "*What is best for me?*" or "*What is most convenient for my family?*" or "*What do I want?*" or even "*What is our tradition?*" It *cannot*. For such a discussion is hardly worthy of the gospel. Rather, the discussion about Christmas Eve begins with the gospel. How can we best let it touch the hearts of our members, including the young ones? And just as important... What is the most (not the bare minimum) we can we do to proclaim the gospel to our community at this time of the year when they are actually willing to listen to it?

If the discussion of your Christmas Eve begins with the gospel, then the faith that the Holy Spirit has created in your people through that same gospel will come forward, and you will achieve balance as you consider the healthy tension that surrounds Christmas Eve.

May God grant you his wisdom.