# Advent Worship Services

*To mark* [*Gathering*](http://www.ucrdstore.ca/magazines/gathering)*’s 30th anniversary, the following resources have been gleaned from the “best loved” material of earlier Advent/Christmas/Epiphany issues.*

## The Gifts of the Four Directions: Evening Service for Advent

*Jeanne Manning Stright writes: The idea for celebrating the Gifts of the Four Directions came from* Celebrate God’s Presence*, p.96.*

### THE SERVICE

**Introduction** (*offered aloud or in bulletin*)

Tonight we are celebrating the Gifts of the Four Directions of Advent. Aboriginal teachings using the medicine wheel and the four directions have been incorporated into the tradition of the Advent wreath by Stan McKay, who is of Cree ancestry and a former moderator of The United Church of Canada.

Four candles have been placed in four directions of the sanctuary: green for the south, representing summer and growth; red for the west, representing the setting sun and introspection; white for the north, representing snow and the wisdom that comes with age; and yellow for the east, representing the rising sun. These will be lit during the service, with scripture readings and reflections for each of the directions based on the geography of the Holy Land.

**Greeting** and **Announcements**

**Silent Preparation for Worship**

**Call to Worship**

Sing praises to God on high, for glorious are God’s works.

**Sing praises to the ends of the earth.**

Shout and sing for joy, O people of God,

**for great is the Holy One in our midst, blessed is the One who comes to dwell among us.**

**Introit**

“Come, radiant one” (Bruce Harding, [www.evensong.ca](http://www.evensong.ca))

(*Advent candles are lit during the singing.*)

**Opening Prayer**

God of the unexpected and undreamt, in this holy season, kindle hope in our hearts.

Prepare us, so we can hear again the song of the angels and see again the beckoning star. Amen.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Hymn**

“God of all places” (*Voices United* 4)

**Choir**

“Hope is a candle” (Linnea Good, www.linneagood.com)

### The Gifts of the Four Directions

**1. South**

One: (*reads*) Micah 5:2–5*a*

Sung Response: “Kindle a flame” (*Voices United* 19)

Two: We light this candle in the direction of the south, signifying summer, the time of warm breezes and growth in our lives. (*lights candle*)

One: We look to the south, toward Bethlehem, and the promise that from Bethlehem shall come a ruler who shall rule in gentleness and peace.

**All: Creator God, as we await your promised reign of peace, help us to be peacemakers. May your face shine upon us, that we may grow in gentleness and learn the ways of peace. Amen.**

**Hymn**

“O little town of Bethlehem” (*Voices United* 64)

**2. West**

One: (*reads*) Mark 1:1–5

Sung Response: “Kindle a flame” (*Voices United* 19)

Two: We light this candle in the direction of the west, the place where the sun sets, the place of introspection. (*lights candle*)

One: We look to the west, toward the Jordan valley, remembering John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way of the Lord, calling people to repent.

**All: Creator, as we prepare your way in our world, give us the courage to look within ourselves to see what needs to be changed. Help us to turn from all that separates us from you and from each other; to turn toward you and walk in the light of your love. Amen.**

**Hymn**

“Herald! Sound the note of gladness” (*Voices United* 28)

**Choir**

“Magnificat!” (Bruce Harding, www.evensong.ca)

**3. North**

One: (*reads*) Luke 2:1–4

Sung Response: “Kindle a flame” (*Voices United* 19)

Two: We light this candle in the direction of the north, reminding us of white snow and winter winds, and the wisdom that comes with age. (*lights candle*)

One: We look to the north, toward Nazareth, remembering Joseph and Mary, who made a difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the final stages of Mary’s pregnancy.

**All: Creator, as you spoke to Joseph and Mary in their dreams and through your messengers, speak to us. Give us the wisdom to discern what you are calling us to do and how we can serve you in the world. Amen.**

**Hymn**

“The virgin Mary had a baby boy” (*Voices United* 73)

**4. East**

One: (*reads*) Matthew 2:1–6

Sung Response: “Kindle a flame” (*Voices United* 19)

Two: We light this candle in the direction of the east, the place where the sun rises and we awaken to a new day. (*lights candle*)

One: We look to the east, remembering the Magi, who saw a bright new star rising and followed it to find a child, born to make a new beginning.

**All: Creator, in the birth of your son, you make all things new. May your saving power rise on us like the sun, bringing healing like the sun’s rays, that together we may heal the earth and heal each other. Amen.**

**Hymn**

“From a distant home” (*Voices United* 89)

**Offering** and **Offertory Prayer**

We give because we have received. God, our Creator, you have blessed us with an abundance of gifts. In Jesus Christ you have given yourself to us. Accept these gifts we give to honour you and to help our neighbours. May they be expressions of your compassion and generosity. Amen.

**Choir**

“O ancient love” (*Voices United* 17)

**Prayers of the People**

In this Advent season….

(*prayer by William S. Kervin and Paul Peters Derry,* Celebrate God’s Presence*, p.106, 1T012*)

**Hymn**

“’Twas in the moon” (*Voices United* 71)

**Commissioning** and **Benediction**

We return to the world from which we came….

(*prayer by Paul Peters Derry,* Celebrate God’s Presence, *p. 104, 1X001*)

**Hymn**

“Joy to the world” (VU 59)

***Jeanne Manning Stright,*** *Merigomish/Green Hill–Alma Pastoral Charge, Merigomish, N.S.*

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## La Posadas

## Special Litanies and Prayers for the Season

Britt Jessen writes: This is a series of litanies used as part of a sermon theme based on the Latin American tradition of La Posadas. La Posadas (Spanish for the inns) is a re-enactment by villagers of the search by Mary and Joseph for an inn or shelter where Jesus could be born. The idea is adapted from the book Making Room for Christmas by Herbert Brokering (Augsburg Fortress 2001). The litanies, however, are my own. They are mostly set in the time of Jesus: we imagine Mary and Joseph visiting significant places as they look for shelter, leading up to Jesus’ arrival in our world at Christmas. These litanies can be used in a variety of ways in worship: as a prelude to prayers of the people, as an introduction to the Christmas story shared with the children, as part of a sermon, as an accompaniment to moving the manger scene to different stations in the sanctuary over the weeks leading up to Christmas, or as a readers’ theatre where the litanies are read in succession.

### Advent 1 – The Gates of the Temple in Jerusalem

**Joseph:** Hello. My name is Joseph. We need a place for the night. Do you think you could help us?

**Pilgrim:** Well, there is plenty of room here if you want to camp out for the night. Many pilgrims sleep here at the temple gates. Are you pilgrims?

**Joseph:** No, not exactly pilgrims. But we are seekers. My wife is pregnant and about to give birth. We are anxious to see our child. And, like many, we have been waiting for him for a long time. We have been told he will be very special.

**Pilgrim:** All children are special. I had a child once, only one. She died a long time ago. Sometimes though it almost seems like yesterday.

**Joseph:** You have had a great loss. The child to be born knows a lot about loss. We have been told that he will be the cause of the rise and the fall of many, and that his mother will know great grief because of him.

**Pilgrim:** The rise and fall of many? That sounds a bit unsettling. I wouldn’t say that too loudly even here. Herod’s agents are everywhere. It could be rather dangerous for you.

**Joseph:** We know something about danger, having travelled all this way alone and only on a donkey. We are not afraid.

**Pilgrim:** Well, you should be. Even the walls have ears. And did you say that your wife is about to give birth? That’s not so good either. The temple authorities will be upset, and we will all have to go through extended purification afterwards. I am beginning to feel rather uncomfortable about this.

**Joseph:** Any place will do...a corner, a small room.

**Pilgrim:** No, no. My mind is quite made up. I think you should move along. This isn’t quite the place for you. No definitely not. Move along please.

### Advent 2 – The Doorstep of Caesar’s Palace

**Joseph:** We are cold and hungry, and my wife is pregnant and about to deliver a child. Can you give us a room for the night?

**Palace Guard:** No one is allowed into the palace gates except by appointment and only on Thursdays between one and four.

**Joseph:** We have no appointment, but we also have no place to stay. The baby is coming, and we need a room.

**Palace Guard:** The only babies that are born here are those who are heirs to the throne, and even they are suspect. Is this child an heir?

**Joseph:** Well, he knows something about power, so the angel told me. His name will be Jesus, and he will be called the Prince of Peace.

**Palace Guard:** We already have a Prince of Peace. Caesar has done more to bring peace to our world than anyone before him. We hardly need another Messiah. Besides, you look more like peasants than royalty.

**Joseph:** It’s true. I have worked hard all my life. I don’t understand why this child will be born to us, but his time is at hand, and we need shelter. We’d be happy to pay, but we have no money. His mother does sing a song that might do, however.

**Palace Guard:** A song might be nice. What’s it about?

**Joseph:** It’s the song she sang in her heart when the angel announced she was to have this child. It’s a song of praise to God whose mercy is great, who scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, sends the rich away empty, and remembers the lowly and hungry. It’s quite beautiful.

**Palace Guard:** You would dare to sing such a song outside of Caesar’s Palace? You’re not only poor, you are foolish. I can see now that this is hardly the place for you. As I say, no one is allowed into the palace gates except by appointment and only on Thursdays between one and four. Clear off now! I’ve more important matters to attend to.

### Advent 3 – The Gatehouse to a Large Estate

**Joseph:** Hello, hello! Is anybody there? We come looking for shelter.

**Estate Agent:** Who’s there? You, do I know you? You look like a wanderer. We do not make provision for the likes of you.

**Joseph:** My name is Joseph, and I am travelling with my wife, Mary. She is going to give birth, and we need shelter.

**Estate Agent:** The main house is quite a ways up the road. It’s locked tight, and the dogs are out. You’d never make it, and no one would be home to call the dogs off. His Lordship, you see, is currently away at his villa on the coast.

**Joseph:** But you are here. Could you not let us into the gatehouse? The time grows short, and Mary’s hour is beginning.

**Estate Agent:** Me? Let you in? I am only a slave. I do what I am told. I keep the gates closed and let no one in. I safeguard the property. I wish I could help you, but someday, if I can work here long enough to pay off my debts and get my land back, I hope to be free. That won’t happen if I fall down on the job.

**Joseph:** Debts are a heavy burden, and many are weighed down by them. But the child Mary is carrying will have a lot to say about debts and about forgiving them, and even about forgiving debtors. Joy and a softening of the heart shall be his gift to us all when we behold his face.

**Estate Agent:** What foolish nonsense! No child can do anything about debts. Of course there is joy when a new child is born, but then reality eventually hits home. We all have to make our own way in the world, no ifs, ands, or buts. Life is hard, and I don’t intend to make my life any harder by letting you in. Be off with you, and good night!

### Advent 4 – The Lobby of an Inn

**Joseph:** Hello! Hello! Is the manager here?

**Innkeeper:** I am the innkeeper. Hang on. I’ll be right there.

**Joseph:** I need a room for the night. We are out of options and will take anything.

**Innkeeper:** Look around you. The place is packed. There’s not a room left in the place, and I’ve just about run out of wine. The crowd is getting ugly. Do yourself a favour and go somewhere else.

**Joseph:** There is nowhere else. My wife is in labour, and we need a place now.

**Innkeeper:** No room. No room. That’s it. Can’t say I’m not pleased. All this fuss about coming home to pay taxes is good for the old pocketbook. And what other occasion except a funeral would bring all my cousins together for a visit? Taxes and death, don’t you know. Taxes and death. But still, there is no room. Can’t help you.

**Joseph:** But the child is coming. He at least should not be left out in the cold. His life matters more than you realize. The angel told me about it in a dream.

**Innkeeper:** I know, I know. The life of every child matters, but you’ve caught me on a bad night.

**Joseph:** But this child is God’s child, God’s only son. There is no night like tonight for him to be born. This time will only come once on the face of the earth, nor will you ever see his like again in living memory.

**Innkeeper:** I really am very sorry. Listen, go next door. The next guy over has a stable out back that might do. It’s not a great place to have a baby, but you’ll be warm with the animals—if you don’t mind the camels spitting on you once in a while. And anyway, you’ll probably be safer with them than you would with this crowd tonight. Go on…if he gives you trouble, I’ll put in a good word for you. Go on with you!

### Christmas: Late Night Shopping on Christmas Eve

**Joseph:** We saw the Christmas display in your store window, and all the lights were on.

**Manager:** Come in, come in! I have everything you could ever want for Christmas right here: Pokemon and Polly Pocket and Potato Heads galore. You name it, we’ve got it.

**Joseph:** No. You don’t understand. I am Joseph, and this is Mary. She is about to give birth, and we need a place to stay.

**Manager:** Joseph and Mary! Really? What a scream! In my store—imagine! But hey, this could be a real break. Imagine the promotional opportunities! This could be great for business.

**Joseph:** Your business and mine are not necessarily the same. This has to do with God and God’s business. My concern is with the child and his mother. The child will not wait any longer. Will you let us in?

**Manager:** Well, at least let me call in a news crew. Think of the royalties you’ll make when you sell your story. You look like you could really use the money. And what a hit you will be, splashed all over the news. I can just picture it now–guest appearances and limos and paparazzi. You’ll be stars, and we’ll all make a bundle.

**Joseph:** This birth is not about money. It is about the heart. Just that. The heart. The child to be born is from the heart of God, and is the son of God–Jesus. He is not here to bring money, but peace and joy and hope and love, even to you, if you let him.

**Manager:** Those sound nice. Especially the love part. I could use a little of that. Here I am, Christmas Eve, working my tail off, not even able to be with my kids. Sometimes I’m not sure what the point of it all is. Honestly, I can’t even remember the last time I really enjoyed doing this, but it is all that I have and the thought of all that money, it has its appeal. In the end, what could be more important than that?

**Joseph:** The love of this child will be more important than anything you know. He will bring joy even to you and will lighten many burdens you carry. And the story will get out, even without cameras and money. The angel has promised this. And you and everyone else will be amazed and more.

**Manager:** Hmm—amazed? A lot of things promise you the thrill of amazement, but…all right. You can come in. I still need to cash out, but I guess I’ll trust you with the place, Joseph and Mary. Who could believe it? But still...on this night of all nights, I suppose anything is possible.

**Britt Jessen**, Beaumont U.C., Beaumont, Alta.

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## Hanging of the Greens

Meg Illman-White writes: I like the idea of a service for Hanging of the Greens for the first Sunday of Advent, but find that many service ideas out there are heavy duty in sacrificial theology. I wrote this service for the United Church context.

Prelude

Welcome/Announcements

Opening Chorus

“Wait for the Lord” (*Voices United* 22) (four times)

### Lighting of the Advent Candle

Voice 1: When a candle is lit in a dark room, its light allows us to see, when before we only found darkness.

**Voice 2:** When angels began telling people that God would send Jesus, it was like a light in their darkness; a sign of hope in a troubled world.

**Voice 1:** Today we light the candle of HOPE. (*one blue candle is lit*)

**Voice 2:** The blue colour of the candle reminds us that God speaks loudest in silence when we make room to truly listen. May this Advent season be a time of listening for God’s voice right in the confusion that happens in our lives.

**Voice 1:** Let us join in singing the hymn “A candle is burning”

Carol

“A candle is burning” verse 1 only (*Voices United* 6)

Opening Prayer

**One:** Gather with us, God of eternal glory, as we seek your presence in the signs and symbols of this Christmas season;

**All: as we prepare for Christmas celebrations, keep us open to the miracle of your grace, which is for all people, in all times and places;**

**One:** fill us with wonder and awe once again at the wideness of your mercy and the fullness of your love.

**All: As we are blessed by your grace, so send us forth to touch our world with love. Amen.**

### The Garland: God’s Welcome Extended to All People

**One:** A garland is often found lining the handrails into homes as a symbol of welcome and approach. For the Christian church at Christmas, it reminds us that God’s welcome is for people of all social, economic, and cultural groups. God’s embrace is particularly clear for those who live in constant fear of social ridicule and exclusion.

**Two:** Mary knew such fear as she realized the social consequence of her decision to parent God’s chosen one, Jesus. As a single, unwed mother, Mary could have faced total exclusion from the community, certain poverty, or even death by stoning.

**One:** When Joseph opted to marry her, he broke through all social expectations with bold, new action.

**All: And so Mary sang this song of deep joy that speaks so clearly of God’s radical inclusion…**

Scripture

Luke 1:46–55

Hymn

“Hope is a star” (*Voices United* 7)

(During the singing of the hymn the garland is placed around the pulpit and front of the church. The garland will hang from hooks that have been preset in the sanctuary ahead of time. The children and designated parents take pieces of garland to their classrooms and other parts of the church. You might add to the attraction of the garland by winding lights around it. Set the plug in place, but **do not plug it in** at this time. The children and adults return and wait at the back for the poinsettias and for poinsettia sprays.)

### The Poinsettia: A Symbol of the Unexpected

**One:** The poinsettia is native to Mexico, often growing 10 feet in height. Its “flowers” are actually at the centre of the colourful leaves, and the part that *looks* like a flower (the red, white, or pink parts) are leaves. However, the plants only develop their lovely coloured leaves when they have been subjected to a specific number of hours of dark in a 24-hour period. This unique feature of a poinsettia makes it a symbol of surprise…like our God who makes our deserts bloom and our barren places spring to life.

Scripture

Isaiah 35:1–2

Hymn

“Come, let us sing” (*Voices United* 222)

(During the singing of the hymn, children carry the poinsettias to the front, and then are seated at the front. Someone arranges the poinsettias around the pulpit. The children are followed by a group that brings up the poinsettia sprays. The sprays are displayed along the window sills, and people from this second group are also seated at the front of the church. Other children might bring forward candle holders and/or candles to position in the windows.)

### The Wreaths: A Symbol of Never-Ending Love

**One:** The wreath is made of evergreen. Evergreen trees remind us of the never-ending gift of God’s love. The wreath is shaped into a circle that has no beginning and no ending. The love of God holds us without conditions. With the tenderness of a parent, God seeks us out even when we feel abandoned and lost. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah felt lost and abandoned by God. What they dreamed for most in life simply hadn’t happened. Then, just when they had given up all hope, something remarkable happened….

Scripture

Luke 1:5-25

Solo or Hymn

“All earth is waiting” (*Voices United* 5)

(During the singing of the hymn, older children will bring up the wreaths and hang them up at the front. Again, prepare ahead for the electric cords for the lights, **but do not plug them in**.)

Prayer of Confession

**One:** God of infinite love, we confess that we are quick to give up on ourselves and on others. We fail to trust that you are with us when our lives become filled up with busyness or darkness, sadness or conflict.

**All: Forgive us when we fail to see your face in the people around us. Fill us with your graciousness that as we are forgiven, so we may become a forgiving, reconciling people. Amen.**

### Mistletoe: The Promise of Peace

Words of Assurance

**One:** In ancient times, mistletoe was considered the “meeting place” for warring parties. Under the mistletoe, enemies could exchange the “kiss of peace” and work to let go of anger and past hurts enough to really listen to each other and understand one another’s points of view. In the presence of God’s love we gather, continually grateful for God’s forgiveness and grace. We are a forgiven people. We are freed by God’s grace to reach out to a broken world with compassion and love.

Passing of the Peace

**One:** Peace be with you.

**All: and also with you …**

Response

“Halle, halle, halle” (*Voices United* 958) (*sing as we greet one another*)

(During the singing of “Halle,” four youth hang the mistletoe.)

Reading

Luke 1:57–66

Chorus

“Prepare the way of the Lord” (*Voices United* 10) (*three times*)

Reading

Luke 1:67–79

### The Christmas Tree: A Symbol of Celebration and Rebirth

**One:** The Christmas tree is also evergreen: a symbol of rebirth in a time of dormancy (winter). The evergreen reminds us that new life is possible, even in the darkest times in our lives. The needles on the tree point upwards as if joyfully giving thanks to the creator of life. The Christmas tree is full of wonder for small children and adults alike. Its lights cause even the saddest heart to sing.

Hymn

“Make a joyful noise” (*Voices United* 820)

(During the singing of the hymn, the younger children may move forward with balls, white flowers, and red boxes and decorate the tree. Sunday school teachers can lift children to position decorations at the top. Make sure the tree has been secured and will not topple. The decorators return to their seats.)

### The Candles and Lights: God Promises to Give Light

**One:** The prophet Isaiah foretold a time when the darkness of the world would be replaced by light and when that light would bless all people. Into our personal darkness comes Jesus, not just once long ago, but again and again—holding up God’s promise of hope, even when life is filled with struggle. Listen for Isaiah’s words…

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2 and 60:1-3

Hymn

“Arise, your light is come” (*Voices United* 79)

(During the singing of the hymn, invite youth or parents to plug in Christmas lights.)

Offering

(special music)

Prayers of the People

Celebration of Communion

Hymn

“Come, thou long expected Jesus” verses 1–4 (*Voices United* 2)

Commissioning

Go from this place as those who have seen the Christ light and who long to share it with others. Go with a heart and mind of faith that you may live with high expectation and with great compassion into this season of hope.

Benediction

And may the hope, peace, joy, and love of God encompass you and light your path now and always. Amen.

**Meg Illman-White**, Grace-St. Andrew’s U.C., Arnprior, Ont.

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## Light in the Shadows: Proclaiming God’s Love and Acknowledging Our Grief

Barbara Miller writes: As people arrive, they are given small cards. We use 2.5" x 3" cards, which are decorated in a subdued Christmas theme and have strings attached. Pens are available for people to write the names of deceased loved ones or other concerns/losses that are weighing on their hearts. People may take as many cards as they need, and during the service there is an opportunity for the congregation to come forward and hang the cards on the Christmas tree. After hanging their cards, congregants continue to move along the front to the altar where they are invited to light tea lights in honour, in memory, and in hope. Then they pass by the font where the palm of their upturned hand is marked with the sign of the cross in anointing oil.

### Materials

* cards, string, and tea lights sufficient for your congregation
* a Christ candle and four white tapers to light during the Liturgy of Remembering (I recommend either a wax taper or a slim tapered candle to light the tea lights.)
* chime

### Order of Service

**Scripture Sentence:** Matthew 1:23

Greeting and Welcome

Call to Worship

O come, Emmanuel, come to us, for we are despondent and needful of your presence.

O come, Emmanuel, bring us your gift of hope.

O come, Emmanuel, come to us,

for we are anxious.

O come, Emmanuel, bring us your gift of peace.

O come, Emmanuel, come to us,

for we are sorrowing.

O come, Emmanuel, bring us your gift of joy.

O come, Emmanuel, come to us, for we are lonely.

O come, Emmanuel, bring us your gift of love.

Opening Prayer

O come, Emmanuel, we humbly pray, bringing your gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love that we may experience them in our hearts and lives. We remember all whose hearts are heavy this Christmas—heavy with loss, anger, fear, despair, sadness. Help us all to know that you are with us, now and always. Amen.

**Hymn:** “Come, thou long-expected Jesus” (*Voices United* 2)

Scripture: Matthew 11:28

Reading

“The Wintered Spirit” by Joyce Rupp from *The Circle of Life* by Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr (Sorin Books, 2005) pp. 242–243

Psalm: Psalm 23 (VU pp. 747–749)

Scripture: Matthew 2:13–15

Reading

“The Refugees” from *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems (The Westminster Press, 1985) pp. 59–60

Reflection

Focus on the anguish of that first holy night—the unsentimentalized version—and on the difficulties of being a young family on the run; on how God, as known to us in Jesus, would have experienced suffering for us at his birth as well as at his death, that we might know the depth of God’s love and grace. My hope was to allow the anguish of the first holy night and the time the holy family spent as refugees to mirror the sorrow and hardship of our lives, thereby allowing God’s deep love, as shown in these acts, to soothe and comfort our grief and sorrow.

A Liturgy of Remembering

We name our losses before God,

the loss of a partner in life,

the loss of a family member,

the loss of a friend,

the loss of a loved one,

the loss of a pet,

the loss of health,

the loss of a cherished dream,

the loss of independence,

the loss of self-confidence.

We name our own particular losses in silence before God: moments of memory—the good ones and the hard ones—and reflection on the feelings that have been ours in loss. We pause and remember and reflect.... (*a time of silence*)

Lighting the Christ Candle

We now light the Christ candle, a symbol of peace to all on earth, and we remember all who yearn for a word from God, all who gaze into the night sky in longing and in hope, all who listen for an angel song. (*Chime will sound.*) As we light this candle we remember the promise of hope that the Messiah would bring and we pray that this light would also kindle a flame of hope within our own hearts.

Choir: “Don’t be afraid” (*More Voices* 90)

Lighting the Candle in Memory of Our Loss

We light this candle in memory of our loss.

We remember and acknowledge the loss and sorrow that brings us here and

we light this candle in memory.

We remember those we have loved,

we remember all we have lost.

We remember in sorrow and in hope.

(*Chime will sound.*)

As we light this candle, we remember and acknowledge our loss.

Choir: “Don’t be afraid” (*More Voices* 90)

Lighting the Candle of Compassion and Community

We light this second candle in honour of the love and support that we have received from family and friends who have walked with us through the valleys of shadows in our lives. We remember their friendly faces, their warm embraces, and the empathy of their presence, and we thank you, Holy God, knowing that their love and support is also an expression of your love for us. (*Chime will sound.*) As we light this candle we remember the compassion and the gift of those who have walked with us.

Choir: “Don’t be afraid” (*More Voices* 90)

Lighting the Candle of Wisdom

We light this third candle as a prayer for wisdom. We know that we cannot change what has befallen, but we can pray for the wisdom of acceptance and the grace that would enable us to move forward. And though in our hearts we may rage against our loss and our pain, the reality is that we must accept it for healing to begin. (*Chime will sound.*) As we light this candle we pray for wisdom that will lead to the peace that passes understanding.

Choir: “Don’t be afraid” (*More Voices* 90)

Lighting the Candle of Faith

We light this fourth candle as a symbol of our faith. Even though we walk through the shadowed valleys, we know, we trust, we believe that God walks with us. And so we light this candle to proclaim our faith and as a reminder of the hope, peace, and love that God promises to each and every one of us. (*Chime will sound.*) As we light this candle we remember God’s unending love for us all.

Choir: “Don’t be afraid” (*More Voices* 90)

Placing of Our Symbols and Lighting of a Candle

You are now invited to bring forward those names and situations that you would like to place on the tree, and to light a candle. This liturgy will also include an anointing on your upturned palm.

Prayer of Grace (*in unison*)

**Gracious God, we remember our pain and we remember our sorrow. We have placed these symbols and lit these candles in memory, in honour, and in hope. God of all compassion, we pray that your Spirit would uphold us. When we wander through the deep darkness, help us to see the light of your love; give us a sense of your presence that we might know that you are with us yet, just as you have promised to be. Lift us above our present sorrow into the peace of your presence. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

**Anthem:** “Spirit God, be our breath” (*More Voices* 150)

Prayers of Intercession

God of the ages, all around us we see the lights of Christmas, we hear the sounds of joyful celebration; at times, we struggle with how to respond. As the nights have grown longer, sadness and emptiness, loneliness and pain wrap around the hearts of many of us, eternal God. We aren’t always able to put into words that which causes us to feel melancholy rather than joyful. And so we turn to you, O God, with all of our pain, and lay it at your feet: for some, a loved one has died, for others, a friend has moved away; still others have lost a job, a cherished dream, or a sense of hope.

Some of us might be feeling worried, trapped, insecure, adrift, or alone.

Some may be grieving what might have been, but will not be, or grieving over what used to be, but cannot be anymore.

Some of us may simply be in need of a place of quiet and calm in an otherwise busy season.

Whatever it was that has brought us here, we offer it to you, mighty God, you, who were born frail and innocent in Bethlehem’s stable, that we might know of your great and unending love for us. We know that there is no pain that does not echo in your heart, O God, and no joy that does not come from your hand. We know, we trust, we believe that through all the shadows of this world, there still yet shines the light of your love. For this and for all of the ways that you have touched us, we give you thanks.

In our darkness, and in the darkness of this world, we pray that your light will continue to shine, bringing us peace, bringing us hope, bringing us joy, and bringing us the amazing gift of your love.

Comfort us and strengthen us, we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, who is God with us. Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

**Hymn:** “Silent night” (*Voices United* 67)

Blessing and Sending Forth

We return to the world from which we came:

a world of promise, a world of pain;

a broken world that needs to hear God’s words of hope, of peace, and of love.

And so we pray that God, who leads by a star,

will show us all the direction to Bethlehem,

to the place where the hope of the world is born;

to the place where the light of the nations shines bright; to the place where the prince of peace will come to reign.

May these gifts be born anew in your lives this Christmastime and always. Amen.

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First published in Gathering, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, 2009–2010. Reproduced here with permission of the author. Please credit the author.

1. Adapted with permission from “God of the unexpected and undreamt....” by Peter Wyatt, p. 82 1G003 in *Celebrate God’s Presence: A Book of Services for The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)