# Hanging the Greens

The question about whether popular Christmas traditions should influence what churches do during Advent is not as active as it once was. Though the extent to which they do varies, most congregations embrace the festivity of December and include it in their preparations for Advent, especially as concerns what at home we call “decorating.”

As communities of faith, though, we aren’t so much decorating our sanctuaries and buildings as preparing them to be a symbol of preparing ourselves for the birth, and rebirth, of Jesus. A Hanging the Greens service is an opportunity to make this connection either at the beginning of Advent or throughout its four weeks.

Most of the signs of Christmas are ones our North American society has inherited from Germanic traditions popularized in Victorian England: wreaths on doors; branches, boughs, and lights inside; and an evergreen tree where people gather. Many churches have simply borrowed these for their own spaces, both in the narthex and in the sanctuary. That these are not exclusively Christian symbols, however, doesn’t prevent them from supporting the Christian message.

Fir and pine boughs are natural signs of everlasting life, persisting in summer and winter and retaining their colour even as leaves change and fall. Cedar wood is associated with royalty, including in the Hebrew scriptures. Holly and ivy—the green leaf and the red berry—are sung about as symbols of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, especially in the popular carol, “The Holly and the Ivy.” So, these familiar signs of Christmas can serve as symbols of our deeply lived faith.

This liturgy is formatted as a single service of Sunday worship but is structured so each section, with its symbol of preparation, could also be used during a different week of Advent. Depending on the worship space and how participation occurs, some things such as hanging lights and standing the tree should be done ahead of time. Although incense is not part of United Church liturgy, this would be an ideal time for its use, even if only before worship to heighten the sense of smell. Alternatively, a small pile of cedar shavings hidden somewhere by the entrance to the sanctuary could work, obviously being mindful of allergies and sensitivities.

## Gathering in God’s Presence

### \*Processional

*While not required, a processional is an excellent way to begin a new season and bring the symbols of that season and of worship (Bible, cross) into the sanctuary. Options for the congregation to sing include “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (VU 1), “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” (VU 2), “People, Look East” (VU 9), and “O Ancient Love” (VU 17).*

### Opening Prayer

*Having a child ask these questions as the leader of the responsive prayer can be effective and inclusive.*

With what shall we come to God’s house?

**We come bringing branches of pine and fir,**

**evergreens for wreaths of welcome, and garlands of joy.**

What is this lovely fragrance that follows us here?

**It is the smell of cedar—bough of wisdom, wood of honour—**

**the holy breath and presence of God in our midst.**

What will these things become in this place?

**The promises of God, the words of prophets,**

**and the blessings of disciples—**

**signs of the temple not made with human hands—**

**all brought to life in the one called Jesus,**

**and reborn in us this season.**

### \*Carol

“Hark the Glad Sound,” VU 29

### \*Passing the Peace

### Refrain

**“**There Is Room for All,” MV 62

### Time with Children

*Talking with children about the signs of the changing church season—from Pentecost into Advent—can begin with recapping the rapid changes that have happened since returning to school: weather cooling, leaves changing and falling, frost, and maybe even snow. How did we prepare for these changes? We put away bathing suits and brought out sweaters, preserved fruits and vegetables, brought in seasoned firewood. That is, we anticipated the changes. The symbols of Advent we bring into the sanctuary indicate the time of year and, likewise, our anticipation of and preparation for it. The leader can take some time here to let the children see, name, touch, and smell the symbols of Advent, and describe what these represent according the descriptions in each section below.*

*An excellent story for children at this time of year is* The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey *by Susan Wojciechowski. It’s a longer story, taking at least 15‒20 minutes to read in full. The story could be summarized, if being used for one week, or could be told over the course of the four weeks of Advent.*

## Hearing God’s Word

*Each section, with its focus symbol, includes a scripture reading, a sung response during which the symbol is placed in the sanctuary, and a prayer. If placing the symbol in the sanctuary will not take long, a verse or two from the hymn/carol can be selected.*

### Reflection

*Depending on what else happens during this service, the worship leader may want to offer a reflection on the symbols being used in Hanging the Greens. They will have more meaning if they’re described before being installed.*

*The atmosphere of this liturgy is one of wonder and mystery. Evergreens are familiar to us as decorations, but the intent here is to offer a deeper connection. Cedar was a highly valued wood for Israel – as witnessed by David’s intention to build a temple out of it to house the ark of the covenant – and is also a traditional medicine in many Indigenous communities in Canada. The evergreen, ubiquitous in Canada, is resilient and strong, offering life-giving breath and also giving shelter to us and to so many creatures.*

*These things we use to decorate our homes, however, also offer a symbol of the universal and eternal presence of God and have long served as an image of hope in God’s promises (e.g. the root of Jesse). The preacher might describe the nature of hope not simply as the desire that, someday, things will be better, but as trust in God’s promises – a trust borne out by God’s steadfast presence in our lives. The traditional themes of Advent – hope, peace, joy and love – are rooted in the words of the prophets and in the teachings of Jesus concerning God’s coming kingdom of peace and justice. This amplification of the meaning of Advent will help to deepen the meaning of the liturgical symbols.*

### Light in the Night

### John 1:1‒6 (7‒14)

### Hymn

“Herald! Sound the Note of Gladness,” VU 28

*During this hymn/carol, lights are placed on a tree in the sanctuary. Different congregations have different traditions around what kind of tree, if any, is in the sanctuary during Advent. For example, if there is a Blue Christmas/Tree of Memories service, the lights for this can serve as this symbol. Options for music here include “Hark the Glad Sound” (VU 29), “Unto Us a Child is Born” (VU 54), and “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (VU 61).*

### Prayer

Bless these lights, as we await the Light of Life, Holy One.

**May your light shine hope into**

**our lives and in your world**

**and remind us of your living presence in all things.**

### Branch of Peace

### Jeremiah 23:5‒6

### Hymn

“Hail to God’s Own Anointed,” VU 30

*During this hymn/carol, branches of cedar wood can be placed on or under the communion table, perhaps with other greens or as part of an arrangement. Options for music here include “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (VU 44), “’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” (VU 71), or an anthem version of “What Is This Lovely Fragrance? (Quelle est cette odeur agréable?)”. There is an especially beautiful setting of it by the Canadian composer Healy WiIlan.*

### Prayer

With this fragrant wood, we lift our voices in song,

that our prayers might rise up like incense before you, O God.

**The gift of cedar is a branch of promise:**

**that your justice will prevail among all people,**

**and that your wisdom will guide us to true peace and friendship,**

**here, and in all places.**

### Wreath of Welcome/Garland of Joy

### Isaiah 35:1‒10

### Hymn

“Joy Is Now in Every Place,” VU 45

*During this hymn, wreaths are placed on the doors of the sanctuary and garlands are hung on the walls. Some churches also hang wreaths and garlands in the narthex and on the doors to the church building. This is probably best done before or after worship. Options for singing include “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You” (VU 31) and “Joy to the World” (VU 59).*

### Prayer

With these garlands, and in our hearts and lives, we prepare the way for the Lord!

**Open wide the doors of God’s house,**

**go out into the highways and byways**

**to welcome all and make neighbours of those we meet!**

### Bough of Love

### John 13:34‒35

### Carol

“See amid the Winter’s Snow,” VU 76

*During this carol, boughs of ivy with holly can be placed in windows, as pew markers, or as an arrangement near the front of the sanctuary. Options for singing include “Down to Earth, as a Dove” (VU 42) and “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” (VU 48).*

### Prayer

With these boughs we remember the love of God,

revealed in Jesus’ self-giving, becoming the Christ for us,

that love might heal God’s people and world.

**Open our hearts, that we might receive him still.**

**Open our hands, that we might share his loving example.**

**Open our lives, that we might be transformed in love.**

### \*Hymn

“O Ancient Love,” VU 17

*Options include “God of All Places” (VU 4), “All Earth Is Waiting” (VU 5), “People, Look East” (VU 9), and “Love Is the Touch” (MV 89).*

## Responding to God’s Word

### Community at Prayer

In the midst of our busy lives and preparations, O God,

you come to us in the child of promise and surprising joy.

With hope, we await the coming of your kingdom,

when your love will fill the world.

We thank you for the beauty of winter,

of gentle snow cloaking trees and land with life-giving moisture.

We wonder at the infinite glory of your creation

and know you by the works of your hand.

We thank you for all the gifts we enjoy

as part of our holiday preparations,

especially the company and love of family and friends.

We thank you for the love and joy

that fill our hearts at this time of year.

May we also be filled with your spirit, compassion, and vision,

that your loving kindness will be known through all

our thoughts, words, and actions.

We remember those for whom this season will be difficult, even painful:

those who grieve lost loved ones,

relationships that have been broken,

health issues that fracture peace,

those without enough to eat or a safe place to live.

Help us to be present to those who feel alone,

to share with those in need,

to offer our time and attention to those who are anxious,

to seek the strengthening of the lives and communities around us.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, the One who comes, who taught us to pray, saying…

### Invitation to Offering

Not by human hands will the kingdom of God be built,

but by compassion and trust in God’s presence in all things.

We offer the work of our hands and the faith of our hearts

as we make our morning offering.

### Offering Prayer

God of hope and peace, joy and love,

made known in Jesus who became the Christ,

receive these gifts that they may they bless

the work and witness of this place and these, your people.

Amen.

## Going Out in God’s Love

### \*Canticle

“Prepare the Way (Isaiah 40),” VU p. 882

### \*Commissioning and Benediction

Joy is now in every place, the light of promise shines

on every wall and window and door. So does that same light

shine in each and every heart gathered here.

Let us go into God’s world to share that same light,

the light of the One who comes. Amen.

*—Andy O’Neil i**s minister at St. Paul’s United Church in Riverview, NB*