

## Advent in Bethlehem



Welcome to the last issue of BRF Ministries news in 2023. Carols are already playing on a loop in some of our shops and it won't be long before we're singing them again in church. 'Away in a manger', 'Little donkey', 'O little town of Bethlehem'... The images of a sleepy town with a dome-silhouetted skyline conjured up by these well-loved carols were quickly shattered on a recent visit to the Holy Lands. Today, Bethlehem has sprawling suburbs on the fields where shepherds watched their flocks and is cut off by the West Bank barrier separating Palestine from Israel, a powerful symbol of the current conflict.

My second surprise was at the Church of the Nativity. Located on the spot believed to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ, we were led underneath the church into a cave. Not even a hint of a wooden stable. It became obvious, now that I was standing on limestone bedrock in a hot country with few trees, that houses were built of stone and not wood, and you might well use a handy cave under the house as a basement to protect your livestock from wolves overnight. As I read Luke 2 again, I discovered it makes no mention of a stable, just that Mary, 'wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them' (Luke 2:7b NIV). Another nativity myth exploded.

Obviously, over 2,000 years have passed, and landscapes and cultures have changed. I did, however, get my Bible lands experience at Nazareth village,

an open-air museum that reconstructs and reenacts village life in the Galilee of Jesus' day. We met Daniel, the potter, making oil lamps, reminding us that we are the clay and God is the potter (Isaiah 64:8). Hannah was busy making yarn out of fleece and Joseph was using his tools in his carpentry workshop. As we walked through living representations of Jesus' parables, in their original context, suddenly so many of the stories made sense.

As we approach Advent, I wonder what images and expectations we have for this festive period? How can we bring to life this story of 'good news that will cause great joy for all the people' (Luke 2:10), in our own lives and communities?

Aike Kennett-Brown  
BRF Ministries Messy Church  
ministry lead

### Farewell to Sara



Our head of people and culture, Sara Sheerin, is moving on to an exciting and challenging new role. We'll really miss her sunny, 'can-do' energy, along with her knowledge, professionalism and commitment to innovation. We wish her every success in the future. She has made a huge contribution to BRF Ministries and her signature shoes will be hard to fill!

### IN THIS ISSUE:

Advent in Bethlehem

Advent on Orkney

Messy nativity in New Zealand

Talking Christmas to your kids

Top of the carol chart

and more...

### Pray with us...

*God of hope, who brought love into this world, be the love that dwells between us.*

*God of hope, who brought peace into this world, be the peace that dwells between us.*

*God of hope, who brought joy into this world, be the joy that dwells between us.*

*God of hope, the rock we stand upon, be the centre, the focus of our lives always, and particularly as we enter the season of Advent.*

*Amen*

From *An Advent Manifesto*, BRF Ministries Advent book for 2023, by Martyn Percy.

[brfonline.org.uk/  
an-advent-manifesto](https://brfonline.org.uk/an-advent-manifesto)

Our prayer resources can be found at [brf.org.uk/pray](https://brf.org.uk/pray)

**Christmas/New Year office hours:** Our offices will be closed from 12.00 noon on Friday 22 December until 9.00 am on Tuesday 2 January.

*'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

LUKE 1:78-79 (NRSV)



# Hello from Julie and the fundraising team



This will be my last time writing to you before Christmas and I am extremely grateful to everyone who has already ordered our Christmas cards and gift wrap. We still have plenty of stock of most of the designs, so please contact our friendly fundraising team on **01235 462305** or visit **brfonline.org.uk/cards** to order. Paper order forms were included in our September mailing and additional supplies of these are available through the fundraising team.

During November and December we are running our Christmas message appeal whereby you can send a message to BRF which we will hang on our Christmas tree. You may also include a donation if you wish. Cut-out Christmas baubles were mailed in October so you have them ready to display on your own Christmas tree or in your home. I hope looking at these will encourage you to pray for us and to support us in any way you can.

Many of you have already made a donation towards our work through our 'virtual gift' scheme. We thank you for this and we know that recipients are blessed by them.

As we approach the Christmas season and we think about the gift that God gave to us in Jesus, I reflect upon all

the generous gifts we have received at BRF Ministries: gifts that enable us to continue funding our vital work.

I never fail to be amazed by your kind support and I sincerely thank you for your donations and your prayers.

Sending very best wishes from Julie and the fundraising team.

*Julie*

Julie MacNaughton, MCIOf (Dip)  
Head of fundraising



# BRF

01235 462305 | [www.brf.org.uk](http://www.brf.org.uk)

BRF, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon, OX14 3FE

## Virtual gifts

For the person who has everything this Christmas, there is still time to order a BRF Ministries virtual gift online or via the order form. You can make a donation towards our ministries and give them a card to pop under the tree when the big day comes.

Find out more at  
[brfonline.org.uk/virtual-gifts](http://brfonline.org.uk/virtual-gifts)



## Christmas cards

Our range of Christmas cards for 2023 is still available. You can order online at [brf.org.uk/cards](http://brf.org.uk/cards), via the order form, or by calling our friendly fundraising team on **01235 462305**. Sales of these cards help us to continue our vital work.



Contact our fundraising team at [giving@brf.org.uk](mailto:giving@brf.org.uk), call us on **01235 462305** or drop us a line at the address on the back page.



# Advent on Orkney



Sue Kirkbride is minister of Peedie Kirk (Peedie is the Orcadian word for 'small'), 'a little United Reformed Church in the shadow of the mighty St Magnus Cathedral' in Kirkwall, capital of the Orkney Islands. Born in Wales, Sue was ordained some 25 years ago and discovered her 'heart for older people' in Edinburgh, where she served in two different parishes after she and her husband moved to the city with his work. Seven years ago, they were ready for 'one more big adventure'. Sue became minister of Peedie Kirk and her husband took on the local post office. Alongside her work as 'an ordinary local minister', Sue is an active and passionate member of the Anna Chaplaincy network and is also involved in consultation on the care of older people at a Scotland-wide level.

'Although I was heartbroken to leave Edinburgh, there was a sense of being called to here,' Sue says. 'The bulk of my work, obviously, is with my congregation: there are weddings and baptisms and funerals and services and meetings, all of those sorts of things to do. My work in the community is mainly in care homes and the local hospital. We also have a couple of day care centres so I sometimes pop into those as well.'

The care homes are all council run and are 'amazing' according to Sue. 'A lot of the people who work in them will know many of the residents because they've all been living in the same small, tight-knit community.'

Geography, isolation and weather impact everyone on Orkney and have helped to forge a distinctive spirit: 'We laugh when we say that Orkney runs on raffles,' says Sue, 'but what that means is that Orkney runs on the generosity of people who get stuck in and look out for one another. For me, the hospitality, the generosity, the resilience and the way people care for people is quite remarkable.'

As the community looks towards Advent and Christmas, the care homes and day care centres will be busy with carol services. In Kirkwall, Sue, along with an enthusiastic team of church volunteers from all the churches and across the city, will be distributing things like little hand-knitted stockings and chocolates to care home residents and older people in the community.

But most exciting of all will be the release of a professionally mastered CD of 'low and slow carols' recorded by 80-90 members of the local community in a church 'with just the right acoustics' in September.

'It's not meant to be a great musical performance,' says Sue. 'The whole point was to produce a collection of carols that older folk and those living with dementia can sing along with: so, lower in tone

and slower in pace, and we used the old, traditional versions of the carols because we know how powerfully these can touch the soul and lift the spirits.' The carols CD follows the success of a CD of 'low and slow hymns' recorded earlier in the year, both of which were made possible thanks to grants from the Life Changes Trust and the help of Age Scotland (Orkney).

'It's amazing the impact the project has had,' says Sue. 'It's a wonderful thing, with folk just so willing to take part, and even more special because the artwork on the CDs comes from local people living with dementia. It wasn't to sound like the Albert Hall, it was to sound like the Kirk on a Sunday morning, and we're so delighted that's how it's turned out.'



Sue outside the Italian Chapel at Lamb Holm, Orkney



## New Spiritual Care Series course dates

BRF Ministries is offering the opportunity to join a national Zoom programme for the award-winning Spiritual Care Series training course recently launched in the UK. The course is a comprehensive introduction to enabling people to offer good quality spiritual care to older people in their local communities.

The course will run from 7.00-9.30 pm on Monday evenings from 8 January 2024 with a half-term break on 12 February.

To find out more about the course, go to [annachaplaincy.org.uk/spiritualcareseries](https://annachaplaincy.org.uk/spiritualcareseries) and to register, email [spiritualcareseries@brf.org.uk](mailto:spiritualcareseries@brf.org.uk)

'The content is insightful, wide-ranging and in great depth. A course that would help anyone working with older people, reinforcing knowledge and bringing information to participants' attention they may not have previously known.'

Previous online course participant

# Messy Christmas Eve in New Zealand



**The Anglican Church of the Saviour, Blockhouse Bay, in the suburbs of Auckland, celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. As children and family coordinator Claire Wyeth says, 'That may not be old compared to some UK churches, but in New Zealand it is firmly established in our community. We gather as an intergenerational church each week and celebrate following Jesus together.' Since 2009, a key celebration has been an interactive**

**Christmas Eve service which has grown ever more Messy.**

In 2012 the church hosted the New Zealand Messy Church conference. 'We realised we had all the values and it was very messy-like,' says Claire. 'We started doing Messy Church more intentionally in 2014 and have drawn in more and more families.'

Christmas Eve services are really popular and usually involve an 'instant nativity'. This year will be no exception. 'It's manageable in a frantic season,' says Claire. 'Pull out the costumes and manger and see what happens... It will be chaotic, but so much fun!'

**'All ages come as they love to enjoy the story, dressing up, singing the carols and taking part in the service. It is the same story, told in different ways each time.'**

'Our hospitality is a sausage sizzle, usually eaten outside in the summer

sunshine. We of course also have the traditional fruit mince pies, which are a similar tradition right around the world.'

For Claire's family, the impact of the Christmas Eve service has been personal:

'A stand out for me is when my own family come. They don't attend church but they love to take part in the music, reenacting the story and the prayers. I have a photo of my sister and toddler nephew hanging glow sticks on a tree as our creative prayer. It's ten years old, but stays in my office to this day.'

And does Claire have any advice for Messy Churches thinking of their own nativity services? 'If you ever decide to add hay to your manger, add extra time to clear up – it goes everywhere! And confetti cannons are a wonderful celebration, but you'll still be picking up confetti until Easter!'

## Christmas round the fire

There are so many Christmas Messy Church sessions to choose from but this year, in keeping with our enthusiasm for getting outside, we're highlighting an outdoor session from the new style *Get Messy! Volume 1*: 'Christmas around the fire'.

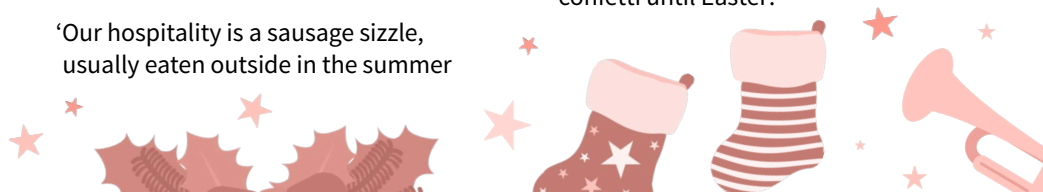
Developed by John White of the Hazelnut Community Farm, Bristol, this session is designed to take place outside around a firepit, retelling the Christmas story using creative symbolism and interactive questions.

Unusually there are only two activity suggestions, which make a great starting activity as you wait for people to arrive and more importantly for it to get dark, giving the lighting of the fire pit maximum impact. The light symbolically reminds us that Christ came into the world as a light shining in the darkness (John 1:5).

If the weather ends up stormy, or you prefer to meet inside, you can create a fake campfire, using sticks and battery tealights, but it will be harder to toast the marshmallows at the end!

**To buy Get Messy! Volume 1 go to [brfonline.org.uk/new-get-messy](http://brfonline.org.uk/new-get-messy)**

**Or to download December's session for £1.99 go to [brfonline.org.uk/getmessyvol1dec](http://brfonline.org.uk/getmessyvol1dec)**







# Talking Christmas



Parenting for Faith's Lucy Rycroft shares her tips on talking to your children about Christmas.

This will be my 15th Christmas as a mum, so there's not

much I haven't experienced when it comes to family Christmases. One thing, though, has never changed: my absolute, unswerving desire for our children to know the reason for our celebrations.

Because for every mention we make of Jesus' name, the world will be saying 'Santa' ten times.

For every Bible passage we read with our children, the world will be sharing twenty stories of flying snowmen and magical reindeer.

**'For every act of generosity we introduce this season, the world will be asking our kids thirty times what they're getting.'**

So how do we talk to our children about Christmas?

The nativity story – don't worry if you don't include all the detail. Your kids will hear this story many times. Focus on the basics: Mary, Joseph, Jesus' birth, the shepherds and wise men. As our children get older, we can talk about why they had to travel to Bethlehem, the cruelty of Herod, or the poignant prophecies of Simeon and Anna.

Santa – wherever we land on the Santa debate, we can be intentional about prioritising Jesus, who is true and real. Some families enjoy telling the story of the original Santa Claus, St Nicholas, which is a lovely way to bring his story back to the generosity of God.

Jesus – if we're not careful, the nativity story can end up sounding like make-believe to our kids. Linking this Jesus with the Jesus we worship, pray to and talk about the rest of the year helps our children to realise his power. Reading books like *The Garden, the Curtain and the Cross* (Good Book Company, 2016) will help our children to realise that Jesus' birth is one part of his amazing story.

Christmas is a time rich with tradition and sensory experience – whether it's a candlelit carol service or the smell of dried fruit wafting through the house – these are powerful experiences for children as they form their view of the world. But when we combine the festivities with words, they go from being merely a fun celebration to something life-changing: the realisation of a Saviour who loves us enough to give up his heavenly throne to bring us back to God. And that is worth talking about.

**We have some helpful articles on the Parenting for Faith website – search 'Father Christmas' on [parentingforfaith.org.uk](http://parentingforfaith.org.uk)**

## Christmas holiday tips

from the Parenting for Faith team

After a long term, the Christmas holidays can easily become crammed full of activities, leaving little chance for rest. There's a reason why staff and pupil absence is highest in January and February! But with a little forethought, we don't have to succumb:

**Plan and protect your 'down days'. You'll probably already have plenty in the diary. Try to protect any free days by diarising them. Be strict about protecting them!**

1



**Kids first. There are all sorts of pressures from wider family and friends in this season, but your priority is your children. Set kind but firm boundaries to ensure they get to rest.**

2



**Experiences over things. If you despair at the number of toys lying (unplayed with) around your home, why not ask relatives to club together for 'experience' gifts rather than more 'stuff'? A theatre trip, climbing experience or tickets to a sporting event will create wonderful memories for your children.**

3

# O holy night

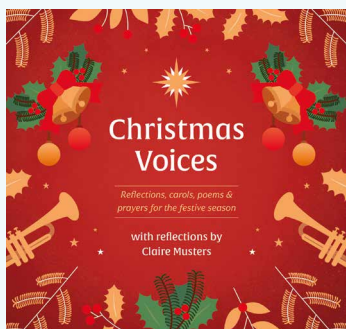
*Christmas Voices* is a lovely gift book, whether for friends, family or a treat for yourself. With 25 daily reflections by Claire Musters and a rich selection of favourite carols, poems and prayers from 40 contributors – including Margaret Silf, Chine McDonald and John Bell – it's the perfect way to carve out a moment of peace and prayer in a busy season.

Top of the carol poll was 'O holy night'. Restored CEO Bekah Legg explains it gets her vote:

"O holy night" is my favourite carol. Its beautiful melody leaves me wanting to close my eyes and just lose myself in the voices, but the lyrics are even more powerful. From the "thrill of hope" that captures the true joy of Christmas, to the reminder of this king of kings who humbled himself to a lowly manger, to the promise that this baby, this Jesus, will one day break every chain and end all oppression. It's the gospel in three verses and I love it.'

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;  
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope – the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!*

*Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices!  
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!  
O night, O holy night, O night divine!*



To order go to [brfonline.org.uk/christmas-voices](https://brfonline.org.uk/christmas-voices)

## The Christmas Story

If you'd like to explore the story of that holy night together as a family, Martyn Payne's *The Christmas Story: for families to share* could be just what you're looking for. Written for parents, grandparents and carers to share with their children through an interactive family Bible and prayer time, each section of this appealing booklet provides a short Bible passage and comment, questions to discuss, a visual aid, an activity idea, a prayer idea, a key verse and an Old Testament story link. *The Christmas Story* also makes a great gift for Sunday schools, Messy Churches and visitors to Christmas services. Multipack offers are available.

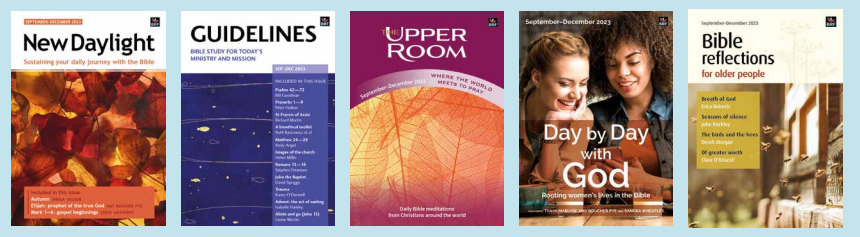


■ Go to [brfonline.org.uk/the-christmas-story](https://brfonline.org.uk/the-christmas-story)

'This book would make an excellent inexpensive pre-Christmas gift and would generate new ideas and conversations about the importance of celebrating the nativity and what it means to us today.'

Sue Piper, Transforming Ministry

## Give a gift that lasts the whole year



Thousands of subscribers find daily encouragement and inspiration in our four series of Bible reading notes. If you know the value of these notes in your own faith journey, why not think of arranging a gift subscription for a friend or loved one. We are offering a 10% discount on gift subscriptions until 5.00 pm on Friday 5 January 2024.

To find out more about the different notes – *New Daylight*, *Guidelines*, *The Upper Room*, *Day by Day with God* and *Bible Reflections for Older People* – go to [brfonline.org.uk/which-notes](https://brfonline.org.uk/which-notes) and to order a gift subscription call our friendly supporter services team on +44 1865 319700 and quote the discount code **GIFTSUB10**

As a charity, we rely on fundraising and gifts in wills to deliver Anna chaplaincy, Living Faith, Messy church and Parenting for Faith. Your gift helps us impact thousands of lives each year. Please support our work.

[brf.org.uk/give](https://brf.org.uk/give) +44 (0)1235 462305



Registered with  
**FUNDRAISING  
REGULATOR**

BRF Ministries, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE  
+44 (0)1865 319700 | [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk)  
[brf.org.uk](https://brf.org.uk)

