

## FOREWORD

From the third Thursday of November through January 1 of each year, America is celebrating. Party follows party. Family gatherings are planned with care. Food becomes a national past time.

Hopefully, somewhere in the mix is joyful worship of Jesus Christ.

It is the hope and prayer of the North American Mission Board that you and your church will take the opportunity to offer friends and neighbors in your community a little joy, good news, and proper perspective to these seasons.

With a little brainstorming, observation of your community, and a willingness to draw outside traditional lines, the church can use Thanksgiving and Christmas as evangelistic times.

This manual is designed to give specific ideas you can use to share the gospel at Thanksgiving and Christmas. But, more than that, it should also stimulate you to think of your own ideas. Almost any secular holiday or event you have held for the church body can be adapted to reach outside the body and be evangelistic. Ask yourself: “What goes on in the community or at church at Thanksgiving and Christmas that we adapt to reach the lost? What goes on in our community that I can plug into and use as a vehicle for sharing the gospel? What are needs in our community that we can meet under the banner of a Thanksgiving and Christmas activity through which we then share Christ’s love?”

In addition to evangelistic event ideas, this manual offers preaching themes for Thanksgiving and Christmas. With so much of the world focused on a superficial fun, these holidays provide the opportunities to show people they can enjoy themselves in the name of Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

Football and food.  
The mall and money.  
Stuffing and stockings.  
Indians and Pilgrims.  
Santa Claus and sleighs.  
Christmas trees.  
Baby Jesus.

Thanksgiving and Christmas have long been rolled into one long season. It is a mixed bag of fun and frenzy, and it is pregnant with opportunities to share the real reason for the season.

As America becomes increasingly secularized, the thanks we are giving are too often not directed at God the Father, and 'Christ' is too easily removed from Christmas, literally and figuratively.

As born-again disciples of Christ, you have the opportunity to not only make sure that your holiday season has the right focus, but to use this special time of year to gently help others re-focus.

Consider for a moment some of the themes that surround the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Thankfulness. Giving and receiving gifts. Family.

Then consider some of the very 'American' traits that have come to be associated with these holidays. Stress. Over-indulgence (financially and in food). The rush, rush, rush that leaves many wondering, "Are we having fun yet?"

Finally, carefully consider with your church family how you can take advantage of the holiday season the message that true peace comes only through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

This training guide is designed to help you and your church or para-church organization utilize a secular holiday to share the Gospel. And you know what? You and your kids can have fun doing it!

The lost and confused people of this world aren't likely to fall into your church in large numbers asking for answers to life's questions. Thus, we must take the message to them in creative ways that package it attractively, yet reveal Jesus Christ when the package is opened. Thanksgiving and Christmas afford us the opportunity to do that, as do many other seasons of the year.

This manual offers strategies we trust will enable you to better share Jesus at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

It is formatted according to the simple 'A-B-C' method devised by Toby Frost, manager of event evangelism for the North American Mission Board.

**‘A’ stands for ‘attraction.’** No matter how dynamic your event, no matter how glorious your music, and no matter how engaging your speaker, evangelism cannot take place without an audience of unchurched people! Plan an event which will attract the unchurched.

Be sure to try and capture the interest of the community when you promote your event. And remember that promotion must be accompanied by enlistment. Members of your church should bring their friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers to the event.

**‘B’ stands for ‘bridge.’** Provide a non-threatening, relational bridge for sharing Jesus. This could be a meal, special music, group-building fellowship activities, evangelistic film, or any number of other elements to bring people together to hear the message of Christ.

**‘C’ stands for ‘communicate the gospel.’** There is no point to your event without this! The gospel must be clearly and convincingly expressed to your audience. Plan to share Christ with as much care and detail as you use planning all the other elements of your event.

Follow-up is crucial. You must record and follow up on all those who surrender their lives to the Lord.

Be daring. Be willing. Take the gospel to your community.

## THANKSGIVING AND CHRISTMAS—PAST TO PRESENT

You might be surprised to learn that Thanksgiving is more rooted in Christian tradition than is Christmas, which was originally a purely pagan holiday having nothing to do with Christ.

Thanksgiving began in the fall of 1621 after the pilgrims had a bountiful harvest. They were grateful to the Lord and the Wampanoag Indians who had not only received them peacefully, but had taught them much about farming, hunting and fishing.

Governor Bradford declared a day of public thanksgiving and invited the Indians. The two parties mixed their food supplies and had great fellowship, including athletic contests such as foot races, wrestling and shooting. The thanksgiving was extended to three days. A particular focus of the celebration was the prayers of William Brewster, who made clear his peoples' thankfulness to God. He thanked God for the Indians, for providing for needs even when the pilgrims had doubted, and for His overall remarkable providences. (Note: Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, 1977, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI)

President Lincoln officially established Thanksgiving as a U.S. holiday in 1863. He intended it as a day of national repentance and prayer. He wrote: "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own." (Note: Rev. William M. Cwirl, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church of Hacienda Heights, Calif., home page)

More than 135 years later, how true Lincoln's words ring. Through the years, many of the original tenets of Thanksgiving have been retained: large fellowships, much food, a frequent athletic emphasis. However, as America has drifted from its Christian roots, Thanksgiving has taken on more of a generic tone.

So has Christmas, which has almost come full circle from a pagan holiday, to a Christian holiday, and increasingly back toward a pagan celebration.

There is no Scriptural evidence that the early church celebrated the birth of Christ. (Note: The Revell Bible Dictionary, 1990, Fleming H. Revell Company)

It was not until 354 A.D. that the birth of Jesus was mentioned in connection with this date. The actual birth date of Jesus cannot be fixed, but the date of December 25 was chosen to celebrate because it was the date of a pagan celebration commemorating the sun's climb following the winter solstice. Many 'gods' were previously worshiped on this date, so followers of Christ sought to 'Christianize' the holiday.

In many respects, we are faced with the same challenge today. As Christians, we must strive to retain the Christian roots of Thanksgiving and to focus Christmas of giving, and on the ultimate gift—Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior!

## **BASIC STEPS**

Following is a framework for organizing an evangelistic event. Although every church is unique, the principles and procedures suggested here are basic to every church's needs. This framework, or some variation of it, should be applied to all events.

### **1) Set the date.**

Schedule the outreach dates as far in advance as possible. You may or may not have the outreach event on the actual holiday, so be sensitive to other holiday-related events scheduled in your community. Also, do not schedule major church events the month preceding the outreach meeting in order to allow for thorough preparation. The date should be accessible to as many people as possible.

### **2) Establish the program content and personalities.**

Enlist workers for the event far in advance, especially any who may play a more prominent, public role, or who are undertaking decorating or design tasks that are time consuming.

### **3) Organize the people.**

Outreach preparation is essential. Organize the congregation into working Ministry Teams. Depending on the size and complexity of your outreach event, you may organize Ministry Teams to lead the church in spiritual preparation, prayer, visitation, publicity, hospitality, and inspiration. Carefully select the chairperson for each Ministry Team. The pastor may choose to make the selection or assign the responsibility to another staff member or key leader in the church. Another method of selection is to work through the church's Evangelism Committee. (If you do not have one, you may want to consider starting one.) All Ministry Team chairpersons should begin their work at least six weeks before the outreach date.

The church's size will determine the number of Ministry Teams needed, as well as the number of people needed on each Team. Do not assume that the church only needs one or two Ministry Teams simply because you are not a "large" church. The key to effective preparation is to involve a large number of church members in some capacity of participatory preparation. Those involved will be the people most eager to invite unchurched friends. Generally, for every person you actively involve in the outreach preparation, you will have four or five additional people present in the outreach services.

### **4) Train the people to do the work.**

We pastors are often guilty of giving people jobs without training them to do the work. Do not make this serious mistake. Once the Team Leaders have agreed to serve, the pastor, another staff member, or a qualified, committed layperson should meet with each one individually. By taking time to meet in this manner, you demonstrate to each leader how special this outreach is, and how important is their involvement.

Give each chairperson a copy of his or her Ministry Team's worksheet and calendar. Share with each one your excitement and emphasize the important part they have in leading the church into real outreach. Let them know that they are part of the Steering Ministry Team, which will be the primary coordinating team for the outreach meeting. Answer all questions as fully as possible so that each chairperson knows what they are to do.

#### **5) Train the people to share the gospel.**

If you are not going to do this, do not bother having an event.

#### **6) Set goals.**

To identify a goal is to define for yourself and for others what you believe to be God's will. Goals give a sense of where you want to go and, consequently, some understanding of where you do not want to go. Goals and plans provide a way of telling others what you think is a desirable outcome so they can work under the Holy Spirit's power at attaining goals. Do not be afraid to identify specific goals for the church outreach. Make the goals concrete and measurable.

Once the Ministry Teams are appointed, the pastor and/or the general chairperson should lead the Evangelism Council and/or Steering Ministry Team to set goals and put them in written form. Suggested goals to set are:

- Attendance during the outreach
- Number of unsaved or unchurched people ministered to during the event
- Number of people involved in prayer for the outreach
- Number of professions of faith

The pastor or the general chairperson should not attempt to impose preplanned goals on the outreach. Goals handed to people are not likely to be taken as seriously as goals they set themselves. Therefore, the pastor or general chairperson should involve the Ministry Teams in setting the suggested goals and any other goals they may wish to establish. They will learn that goals soon become an expression of our faith. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for" (Heb. 11:1, NIV).

#### **7) Initiate plans.**

With the date set, leaders selected and trained, and goals established, it is time to put plans into action. Goals and plans are only dreams until they are put on the calendar and set in motion. The general chairperson should check with each chairperson to see that work is progressing. Above all, see that each chairperson has put his or her priorities and plans on his or her countdown calendar (supplied with each chairperson's worksheet). The calendar will serve as a reminder of work deadlines.

Each chairperson should start from the dates of the outreach meeting, then move backward and place each event on his or her calendar. The calendar will remind Ministry Team members of meetings and keep them from forgetting little jobs such as telephone calls to workers or the personal enlistment of helpers. Each Ministry Team, doing its job efficiently and on time, will prevent an exhausted, rushed feeling that often comes at the last minute before a major event. Encourage each Ministry Team member to fulfill his or her duties without further instruction from you, but let them know that you are available to give any needed assistance.

#### **8) Maintain the spirit of outreach.**

The people will be ready to enjoy a very exciting outreach if the Ministry Team leaders have faithfully carried plans through to completion. The pastor should express his appreciation to each leader for his or her work. As church members enjoy the fruits of their labor and the grace of Jesus Christ, they will celebrate the personal victories witnessed in each service.

The general chairperson should work closely with the Follow-Up Ministry Team in seeing that every person who made a commitment is contacted immediately and encouraged in additional steps of spiritual growth.

The pastor has a great role in conserving the spirit of outreach. He should remind the people that outreach is not over because the event is over. The real results of the outreach will be felt in the congregation—and in the community—forever!

#### **9) Evaluate the outreach.**

The pastor and/or the general chairperson should lead the Evangelism Council and/or Steering Ministry Team in an honest evaluation of the outreach. After the event, plans and goals used in outreach preparation should be evaluated. Note things that worked well. Note things that were not as effective as planned and ask why. Decide which plans should be repeated and which should be omitted in future outreach events. Always determine what you can do to ensure the next outreach is even better than the last. File your evaluations in a secure place and review them carefully before you plan your next event.

#### **10) Pray.**

Above everything else, pray. When you seek to win people for Jesus Christ, you are invading Satan's territory. Expect spiritual warfare. Effectual, fervent prayer with a heart intent on righteousness gets results! Planning, promotion, and creativity are all key to us effectively accomplishing our work in events such as these. But God accomplishes His work as we pray.