



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 dechurched. 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. 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 a tremendous opportunity. 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? One large congregation changed their afternoon final Christmas practice to an additional worship service. They target inviting the community to that service, and many grandparents and friends attend that afternoon service and hear the message, thus providing a bit more room on Christmas Eve.

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? 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 face. Christmas Eve provides congregations with a wonderful opportunity to wrestle with how they will achieve that balance.

The purpose of this C19 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 will likely be planning how to tie those ministries into its Christmas celebration. Therefore, in this C19 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. 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.

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 don't 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.

So, after sending out postcards to your community, an unchurched couple with two young kids comes 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 identifying a children's service (or at least a Christmas Eve service which includes participation from children) as outreach. Such a service can be used for outreach quite well.