



A VERY MIDDLE EASTERN **ADVENT**

ALL-AGE SERVICE PLAN

INSTRUCTIONS

Thanks for choosing to host a “Very Middle Eastern Advent” service!

This service plan has been designed to help congregations understand more about Christmas in the Middle East and North Africa, and to pray for believers across the region. At a time of turmoil in the Middle East, it's more important than ever to lift up our brothers and sisters there – and nobody is too young to start learning about the challenges facing the world church! The service has been designed to have something for all ages – it would work best with a relaxed, family feel, where children are encouraged to colour in the activity sheets while the service is taking place.

The plan below is a suggested running order – feel free to make it your own. For instance, you may have other Christmas songs your church prefers or is more familiar with. We estimate the service, if used in full, would take around 45-60 minutes (depending on how long you pray for!). The service can easily be adapted to the needs of your congregation, such as moving or removing sections, or including an additional children's address.

We hope you enjoy learning about this amazing part of the world with us. Please let us know how your service goes, and send us photos or videos if possible, as we love to see our resources in action! If you have any questions or need any support in running your service, please get in touch with us at **respond@sat7uk.org** or call us on **01249 765865**.

Happy Christmas from all at SAT-7!

ORDER OF SERVICE



1. **WELCOME**
2. **SONG 1:** *O Come all Ye Faithful*
3. **TRUE OR FALSE QUIZ**
4. **SONG 2:** *Calypso Carol*
5. **INTERACTIVE PRAYER:** Holy Land
6. **SONG 3:** *O Little Town of Bethlehem*
7. **SHORT TALK** (including 2 x animated videos)
8. **OPEN PRAYER**
9. **SONG 4:** *Silent Night (with video)*
10. **CLOSE**

YOU WILL NEED....



- ☐ Projector and screen for slides/videos
- ☐ A prize for the winner(s) of the true/false quiz, such as a small chocolate bar
- ☐ Candles and matches for interactive prayer (or other interactive prayer materials – see suggestions in Holy Land prayer section)
- ☐ Shakers/instruments for kids (if wanted) during songs
- ☐ Middle Eastern refreshments (see page 10 for ideas)
- ☐ Colouring pencils
- ☐ Colouring sheets – downloaded from sat7uk.org/advent-resources and printed out
- ☐ Slides and videos downloaded from sat7uk.org/advent-resources

ICONS KEY



MICROPHONE: These parts are to be spoken aloud by the service leader or speaker



VIDEO: Download the videos from the resources page (available by 15 November)



SLIDES: Download the PowerPoint presentation from the resources page (version with videos embedded available 15 November)

DOWNLOAD RESOURCES



WELCOME



SLIDE: MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA MAP



LEADER: Hello and welcome to our “Very Middle Eastern” Advent service! Today we’re going to be finding out more about what Christmas is like in the Middle East and North Africa. We will learn how people celebrate in different ways across the region – some in more freedom than others. And as we think about Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born, we’ll also spend some time praying for people in the region who are living in war zones.

For children, we have some colouring and activity sheets that you can be doing during the service.

We read in Isaiah 9:2: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”

Let’s pray, then we’ll sing together.

Lord, we are all living in darkness without you, and there is so much darkness around the world today. We particularly lift up our brothers and sisters in the Middle East and North Africa who are living in the deep darkness of conflict, poverty and persecution. But we praise you for Jesus’ birth at Christmas, and the light that he brings in our own hearts, and even in the darkest situations. Thank you for the freedoms we have, and that we can come together with your family across the world in celebrating your birth at this time of year. Amen.



SONG 1: O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL

TRUE OR FALSE QUIZ

Get everyone to stand up.



LEADER (read out): Christians across the Middle East and North Africa celebrate in all sorts of different ways. I’m going to read out a fun fact about Christmas in the Middle East, and you have to decide if it’s true or false! If you think it’s **TRUE**, put your hands on your head. If you think it’s **FALSE**, put your hands on your hips. If you get it wrong, you have to sit down. Whoever is left standing at the end wins!

Read out as much or as little of the explanation as you want, depending on time.

TRUE OR FALSE QUIZ (CONT...)



SLIDES: SHOW EACH TRUE/FALSE STATEMENT ON THE SLIDE AS IT IS READ OUT

1

TRUE OR FALSE: Saint Nicholas, the inspiration for Father Christmas, came from Türkiye, a country in the Middle East.

TRUE: Saint Nicholas was a bishop who lived in Myra, now in modern day Türkiye, almost 1,700 years ago. He was known for his generosity to children. One night, he secretly gave a bag of gold to a poor girl by hiding them in her socks, which were hanging by the fire. This is where we get the tradition of putting presents in stockings!

2

TRUE OR FALSE: In Iraq, families celebrate Christmas by lighting bonfires of dried thorn bushes in their courtyards.

TRUE: Christians in Iraq gather in courtyards of homes and churches to read the Nativity story, then light a big bonfire and sing a Psalm while it burns. Once the fire has gone out, everyone takes it in turns to jump over the ashes three times and make a wish!

3

TRUE OR FALSE: Christians in Iran celebrate Christmas Eve with a huge musical parade through the streets.

FALSE: While some Christians in Iran are allowed to go to church, most Christians have to celebrate Christmas in secret – they definitely wouldn't parade in the streets, as they would get in lots of trouble and maybe even go to prison. We will hear a bit later on about what Christmas is like for a secret Christian in Iran. However, in Bethlehem, Christmas Eve IS normally celebrated with joyful parades through the whole town!

4

TRUE OR FALSE: Coptic Christians in Egypt celebrate Christmas Day in November.

FALSE: Like lots of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa, Coptic Christians celebrate Christmas Day in accordance with the Eastern calendar, on 7th January.

5

TRUE OR FALSE: Instead of leaving a carrot and mince pie for Santa and his reindeer, children in Syria leave hay and water for the Wise Men's camel!

TRUE: Legend says that the smallest of the wise men's camels was exhausted on the long journey to Bethlehem, but refused to give up – so the baby Jesus blessed the camel with eternal life! In Syria, instead of Father Christmas, it's said that the same camel still brings presents to children at Christmas to this day.



*If anyone is left standing having got all the answers right, they are the winner!
Give them a chocolate or treat as a prize.*



SONG 2: CALYPSO CAROL

INTERACTIVE PRAYER: THE HOLY LAND



SLIDE: PRAYING FOR THE HOLY LAND



Leader: We've just been singing about Jesus' birth in a place called Bethlehem. Bethlehem is in the Middle East, in a place sometimes known as the "Holy Land", as this is where lots of the Bible took place and where Jesus lived, died and rose again.

But the "Holy Land" today is not a peaceful place. Sadly, there has been a terrible war there over the last two years. Many people have died and many are living with the worry of violence hanging over them like a shadow. Other countries in the region have been involved like Lebanon and Iran. So, we can't talk about a "Middle Eastern Christmas" without remembering those this Christmas who are living in conflict zones. SAT-7 is a Christian ministry that has been supporting those affected through satellite TV and digital media in Arabic, Persian and Turkish. It broadcasts programmes of hope about Jesus and gives a voice to church leaders to call for peace and justice in the region. SAT-7's viewer support teams also listen and pray with people who message or phone them.

We're going to share a prayer from Marianne, who comes from Bethlehem and works at Bethlehem Bible College.

(Read out the prayer, or invite a child from the congregation to come and read it out)

Dear Jesus,

Just as the shepherds had to find their way to you in the town of Bethlehem on the night you were born, many people today are seeking to find you and know you. In Bethlehem, many of our neighbours have different faiths to us, and there are lots of different kinds of people. We pray that these people will come to know your love and want to be your friend. We pray that peace will reign in this land, that war and hatred would stop and all captives would be set free.

Jesus, the first ones the angels told about your birth were poor shepherds, and we pray that we would be happy to tell others that you came to show us how much God loves us! Even those who are different to us.

Jesus, as we find you may we really know the great joy of knowing you, may people around us see that joy and be hungry to meet you, too!

In the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.

INTERACTIVE PRAYER: THE HOLY LAND (CONT...)



We're going to play a special song now called "Oumana Isho Mshikha," sung by the Assyrian Church of the East Choir in Lebanon – another place in the Middle East where people have experienced recent conflict. The language they are singing in is called Syriac, a variety of Aramaic, which is the language Jesus spoke. Some of the words say:

"On this day there was light: shepherds attended to their flocks.

The Church received hope: Jesus is truly born.

There was peace on earth: let's raise boundless glory.

He saved our oppressed race: Jesus Christ the wise."

As the song plays, I invite you to come up to the stage and light a candle (with an adult's help if needed) and say a prayer for peace, comfort and joy in the Holy Land and beyond.



PLAY SONG (Song is 4.30 so feel free to fade it out at an appropriate point)

<https://soundcloud.com/aceceleb/oumana-isho-mshikha>

If you don't want to have candles burning, you could think of another creative way to pray here, such as placing a sheet of paper on everyone's chair before the service and inviting them to write a prayer down and bring it to the front, or giving everyone a paper tag/label that can be hung on a Christmas tree at the front.

After the duration of the song, once people have come up to pray, your music group or worship leader can start playing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and invite people to join in.



SONG 3: O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM



PLAY VIDEO 1: EGYPT



SLIDE: LUKE 2:10-12



SPEAKER: What do you find most exciting about celebrating Christmas? (*Wait for a few responses if appropriate*)

Sharing presents and food, seeing family, decorating with sparkling lights – these are all great ways to celebrate that Jesus has come to be with us. Can you remember what Mary's favourite food was to celebrate Christmas in Egypt? Ginger cookies! Mary also loved getting together with her family and church to sing and praise God for sending Jesus in to this world.

In Luke chapter 2, it tells us the shepherds discovered the amazing news about Jesus from the angel. At first they were frightened at seeing this amazing messenger of God, lighting up the sky. But then they heard what the angel said:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12)

How did the shepherds respond to this news? They were excited, and responded like us by celebrating! They did this by running quickly to find the baby king, then telling everyone they could about the great news so no one would be left out of the celebrations. And they praised God!

Why was this news worth celebrating? Why is Christmas still worth celebrating today? Because God had a rescue plan for us and that plan was about to begin. People in Israel had been waiting for this rescue plan for a long, long time – they were waiting for someone called the Messiah to save them. The angel told them that this person had finally arrived!

Did you realise we need rescuing? The Bible tells us that God wants to rescue us from all the bad things that we do, and also the bad things that happen to us. He promises to save us from fear, hatred and even from eternal death. Colossians 1:13 says: "God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves". Darkness represents all that is terrible and evil in the world. God's promise to the shepherds, to us, to the Middle East and North Africa, and to the whole world, is that He wants to bring us all to be safe with Him and His son Jesus. *Continued overleaf*

TALK (CONT...)



Sadly, there are many people in the world who have never heard this news. Just as the shepherds found out about this awesome news from the angel, people in the Middle East can hear God's message of joy by watching SAT-7 programmes on their TV or digital media in their own languages: Arabic, Turkish or Persian.

Persian is a language spoken in countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Unlike Mary in Egypt, who was able to celebrate freely with her family and church, it is very dangerous for people in these countries to tell others they are Christians. Often have to meet in secret. Can you imagine not being able to take part in Nativity plays, go to Christmas parties or sing Christmas songs at church like we do because the government won't let you?

We are going to watch another short video now about Darya who lives in a country called Iran. Let's hear her story and what Christmas is like for her.



PLAY VIDEO 2: IRAN



SPEAKER CONTINUES: How do you think Darya feels?

- **Sad** – that she can't openly celebrate Christmas?
- **Lonely** – because she can't meet with other Christians?
- **Frustrated** – that she can't go to church to learn more about Jesus?

The wonderful thing is that God has called us to be part of a church family all round the world – including in countries like Egypt and Iran that we just heard about. The Bible says the people of God are like a body - with many different parts. Sometimes God wants us to be like the helping hands for those parts of the body that are struggling. There are many people in the Middle East who feel alone in their faith like Darya, or are afraid because of wars and violence going on around them. Others have had to leave their home and may be celebrating Christmas in a refugee camp.

How do you think we could support people like them? Through SAT-7 TV, millions of people are encouraged in their faith and can enjoy Christmas programmes from the safety of their own home. They can also contact SAT-7's viewer support teams if they have questions or need prayer and support.

One of the most important things we can do for people like Darya in Iran is to pray. You're never too young to start praying! SAT-7's children's Christmas activity and colouring book, *A Very Middle Eastern Advent*, has lots of prayer points and ideas for prayer, as well as fun festive activities. Some of our activity sheets today came from the book. And for adults, SAT-7 also has a daily prayer guide which goes into lots more detail on the amazing Christmas traditions and heritage of the MENA, as well as a Bible study guide to take you even deeper. You can find all of those prayer resources at sat7uk.org/advent. *Continued overleaf*

TALK (CONT...)



OPTIONAL SLIDE: SAT-7 CHRISTMAS APPEAL

(Optional – if you don't feel it's appropriate to ask for gifts, leave this section out)



SPEAKER CONTINUES: Another way to bring help Christians in the Middle East is to give, to make sure SAT-7 can keep broadcasting comfort and joy to millions of people's homes. This is especially important in times of war, when people need to hear the message of Jesus. If you'd like to give a gift today, visit **sat7uk.org/give** or scan the QR code on the screen.

(You could alternatively take a collection for the work of SAT-7)

Let's finish now by spending some time in prayer.

OPEN PRAYER



LEADER: Let's pray.

Lord, we have so much freedom here to celebrate Christmas and to worship together as Christians – we're sorry for the times when we don't appreciate that freedom like we should. We lift up Mary in Egypt, and Darya in Iran. Thank you that there are believers across the Middle East and North Africa who are faithful to you, even when they are under pressure. Please bring them your comfort and joy this Christmas.

Let's shout out some prayers now - thanking Jesus our favourite things about celebrating Christmas, as well as any prayers for Christians in the Middle East.



PRAYER TIME: Allow time for people to share prayers, then pray to close before moving into the final song.

CLOSE



LEADER: We're going to close now by singing "Silent Night". The video shows believers across the Middle East and North Africa singing the song – so let's add our voices to theirs in praise of our Lord Jesus.



PLAY VIDEO 3: SILENT NIGHT (*Congregation can stand and sing along – alternatively, choose another Christmas carol or song to close*)



SLIDES ON SCREEN AS PEOPLE ARE LEAVING:

- *A Very Middle Eastern Advent Colouring & Activity Book*
- *A is for Advent Prayer Guide and Study Guide*
- SAT-7 Christmas Appeal



REFRESHMENTS:

Alongside tea and coffee after the service, you could serve Middle Eastern refreshments such as:

- Turkish apple tea
- Arabic coffee
- Mint tea (hot water, black tea, mint leaves and sugar)
- Baklava
- Ghraybeh (Middle Eastern almond biscuits – find the recipe in *A Very Middle Eastern Advent*, or search online)
- Dates