

# DRIVE-IN CHRISTMAS CAROL SERVICE

## Christmas isn't Cancelled

'Christmas is Cancelled' announced a headline recently. As we look towards Christmas, some are already predicting a miserable time will be had by all. And of course, for some this will be a very trying Christmas.

Yet, the question I am asking myself is how are we going to make the most of the significant opportunity that Christmas provides this year to speak of Emmanuel, God with us, to a world reeling with the uncertainties that COVID brings?

The Church of England has called their Christmas campaign this year 'Comfort and Joy', beautifully capturing the twin realities of what people need to hear and receive this Christmas. Comfort for those who mourn the loss of loved ones through COVID-19. Comfort for those who are going to find themselves on their own. Comfort for those who are overwhelmed with anxiety and fear.

And also joy. Joy that is based in knowing that God is with us; that through centuries of persecutions and pandemics, the followers of Jesus have always known God to be faithful to his promises. Joy in the knowledge that the child in the cradle was the creator of the cosmos, who was crucified as a criminal and will return as the champion of creation-renewed when 'all will be well'.

We have good news to share, and perhaps we have a world more open to receiving it than in years past. How might we do that? Here is one suggestion: a Drive-in Carol Service.

## Drive-in Church

A number of churches have done Drive-in Church over the last few months, and it got us wondering about the evangelistic potential of a Drive-in Carol Service.

When so many other events aren't going to be possible, this would be a creative way of attracting people to a Christmas event.

This guide has been put together largely on the basis of the experience of two churches who have run Drive-in Church, St Paul's Leamington Spa, and St Michael's, Stoke Gifford, Bristol. We are really grateful to them for sharing their insights and experiences, and in particular to Adam Tams and Tom Benyon who coordinated the project in each of their churches. Whilst focused on a Drive-in Carol Service, it can of course be used for Drive-in Church at other times of the year.



## STEP 1. PRAY AND THINK

In busy church life, and in particular in this pandemic season, there are always lots of possible things to do. Taking time to pray and think about whether this is the best thing to do is time well spent. There are three important questions to explore before you start planning what you might do.

### 1. What are you trying to achieve?

As with most things, it really helps to be clear about what you are trying to achieve. A Drive-in Carol Service could be to gather the existing members of a church(es) family, or it could be focused as an outreach event to attract people who perhaps normally come to church just at Christmas time, or perhaps have never been



before. Be clear what you are trying to achieve, as it will shape all the decisions that follow from this point.

## 2. Who is it for?

You've begun to explore this in the first question, but answering this second question will refine your answer. The main thing to be clear about is whether it is for all ages. If so, certain things will flow from this decision. But it is also possible you answer this question 'for people in our parish', and then realise that most people in your community don't have a car, in which case this isn't going to be a great idea.

## 3. Who is going to co-ordinate this?

There is a significant amount of work involved in running an event like this, along with some significant financial costs. For many churches this will be beyond their reach and capacity, but if a group of churches joined together across an area, an event like this may become possible. However, someone needs to head this up, have a vision for it and the ability to co-ordinate a significant project. Without such a person, do not go ahead. That person will then need to complete step 2.

### STEP 2. IDENTIFY YOUR TEAM

This event is going to take a lot of organisation, so work out who is going to oversee the event, and who is going to help with the running of the event. You are likely to need:

- **A co-ordinating group** This may be one person, but would probably be better if it was two or three people who oversee the whole thing.
- **Prayer** An event like this, particularly if it has an evangelistic focus, will benefit enormously from being well-prayed for.
- **Publicity** Someone to look after the promotion of the event (see below).
- **Technical team** Sound, camera, visuals.
- **Music** A band and/or choir.
- **Signage** Will you need signage to help with the flow of traffic?
- **Stewarding** Quite a number of people to ensure the safe arrival and departure of cars.



### STEP 3. LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The next thing to consider is a location. There are a number of 'Drive-in Cinemas' popping up around the UK at the moment, and a good place to start would be to see if there is one local to you who would be willing to let you use their facilities. It will save significant costs and time as the main bits of equipment needed (screens and sound) and the space are already provided.

If that isn't possible, there may well be some public or private spaces that would be suitable. St Michael's managed to negotiate the use of a car park in a local supermarket for the evening having been advised that a privately-owned space may well be easier than a local authority owned space. Alternatives include a shopping centre car park, a school car park, an airfield, or a show ground.



For a Drive-in Carol Service a solid surface is going to be more suitable than a field as the weather worsens and conditions may be very wet. How big you need the space to be will depend on how many cars you want to attract. Unlike in a supermarket car park, where cars park close to one another, for an event like this you want cars to be around a car's width apart in both directions to ensure COVID related distancing and safety in case of an emergency.

### STEP 4. SOURCE YOUR EQUIPMENT

You may already have some of the equipment within your church or through your congregation members. If not, there may be businesses within your community who would be prepared to loan some of it to you as a charity. You need to consider:

- **How will people see?** If it is a smaller event, you may not need screens, and even with a larger event, if you can get the 'stage' high enough, it may be visible from a distance. Large screens can be rented with a relay from a camera from a number of different places around the UK. The advantage of using a Drive-in Cinema is that the screens will already be there, hired from someone like ARB events. There are lots of other similar firms - and most can also provide the camera if needed. You'll need a visuals mixer to put the words to songs over the camera feed, or you could choose to either switch to a laptop feed for the words, or provide a PDF of the words in advance to those attending (which is also good to do for those

who need larger print copies). St Michael's reckon that one large screen works for around 100-110 cars, two screens up to 200 cars.

- **How will people hear?** Again, if using a Cinema, they are likely to have already paid for a license to transmit the audio through an FM signal into the car radio. Alternatively you can use a large PA system, but this will limit the number of people able to attend and hear well, especially in winter when people are likely to want to keep their windows closed.
- **Where the service will be led from** A focal point for an event like this is necessary, probably requiring some sort of covered area/stage (it could be wet!) for those leading the service and a band/choir if you are using one. Whilst this focal point will only be seen by the first few rows of cars, it helps give a focus on the screens as well.

Specialist firms like [ARB](#) can cover all aspects of this, depending on your budget. For more general PA and event management requirements [Novum](#) come highly recommended. They have a lot of experience and are able to tailor to your needs. This sort of equipment isn't cheap, hence the ideal is to find a location which already has this equipment (ideally a Drive-in Cinema) or to source it through existing contacts within your church(es). You can expect to pay around £800-1000 for a day's hire of the large, trailer screens.

In addition to the sound and visual aspects of the event, think about the following:

- **Toilets** If you use a supermarket car park you may be able to negotiate with the supermarket to allow you to use their facilities, otherwise you may want to hire in some portable loos and place a sanitising station next to them.
- **Decoration** As a Christmas event, suitable decorations would really add to the atmosphere. If you choose your location wisely such decorations may already be there, but if not, see if lights and/or a Christmas tree could be added. Also, you could invite people to come with battery fairy lights to display in or around their car.
- **Fluorescent bibs** Ensure you have enough of these for all who are involved in running the event.
- **Two-way radios** You may want to communicate across quite a big area. Mobile phones are a cheap way of doing this, but not always as immediate as a two way radio system.
- **Van** You may need to hire a van to get all the equipment to the venue.



## STEP 5. PLAN THE CONTENT

Obviously this will be specific to your needs, and what you are trying to achieve. There may not be a lot of difference from your normal carol service, although worth considering the following:

- **Length** Probably ideal to aim for 45-50 minutes. Sitting in a car will be cold in the middle of winter (more on this below), and it will take time to get people on and off site, so keep it short.
- **Singing** The lovely thing about an event like this is people can sing, but they may feel a bit strange or self-conscious about doing so. For that reason it may be better not to have your traditional nine lessons and carols, but somewhere between three to five well know carols for people to join in with if they wish. If you have a song more aimed at the children, try and choose one where they can join in by honking the car's horn at a relevant point.
- **Talk** Again, keep it short and relevant for those attending. Why not include an interactive element within it. For example: a quick quiz where people have to text in the answers to a number displayed on the screen and the first right answer gets delivered a box of chocolates to their car (socially distanced and appropriately packaged of course). Or invite people to find certain items in their car (a map book, an air freshener, a phone holder) and wave them out their windows.





- **Visuals** Make good use of the big screen by including relevant visuals or videos through the service. Have a rolling series of slides/visuals as people arrive. Perhaps include a quiz element in these to engage people who may well be sitting in their cars for 30 minutes before it starts. Readings could be pre-recorded or live or a mixture of both. If pre-recorded think about doing them in well-known locations in the community that might relate to something in the reading (for example outside the local maternity hospital).
- **Collection** You may want to take a collection to help recover some of the costs, but generally it is better at Christmas, if you are going to take a collection, to take it for a local cause/charity. We suggest you don't take a cash collection due to difficulties in doing that in a socially distanced way and the implication for COVID security of cash. Instead set up the means to do it via text (information on this can be found at [Parish Resources](#) or [The National Churches Trust](#)).
- Only allow those who have signed up to attend (primarily to ensure you don't breach capacity for the license, but also so you can send them instructions about the event). If you use a church management programme like Church Suite you can use this for tickets, alternatively you can use an online facility like [Eventbrite](#), which also enables you to send details of the event through to people.
- Be clear that everyone out of a car needs to keep at least two meters apart at all times.
- Arrange for an onsite medic (St John's Ambulance may well be able to help with this).
- Have hand gel available at any points of 'traffic' (including any onsite portable toilets).
- Ensure that the team of helpers are allocated specific roles and know what to do in an emergency (everything from a lost child to a car bursting into flames).

Much of the above will be mitigated by good joining instructions sent out to everyone attending the event. They could contain:

#### STEP 6. ENSURE COVID-19 SECURITY

A key part of an event like this is a vigorous risk assessment. Here are the things to consider:

- Limit the number of people able to be outside of their cars by clear instructions both pre-event and at the event to stay in their cars.
- Clear explanation of how they will be directed to arrive and leave the service.
- If you are using FM radio to broadcast sound into their cars, an encouragement to bring an FM radio with them if they don't have that facility within their car.



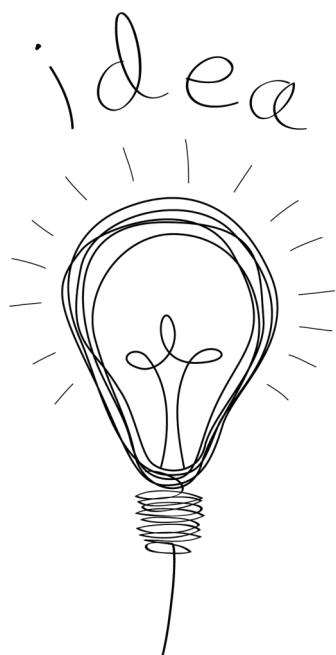
- Details about staying within their car and social distancing if they have to get out.
- Information about toilet facilities.
- Information about how to keep warm (people sitting with their car engine running isn't a good idea both in terms of the pollution levels within the area, but also for the environment as a whole), so encourage them to come wrapped up as if this was an open air carol service, and to bring blankets, hot water bottles, flasks of a hot drink, mince pies to eat and so on.

### STEP 7. WORK OUT YOUR PROMOTION

Remember the key to good promotion is to do it in as many ways as possible over a relevant length of time. There are probably four phases for an event like this:

1. **Three months** Let your congregation members know about it around three months in advance and help them to know they have the most important role in inviting people along.
2. **Six weeks** Around six weeks ahead start actively promoting the event using the channels mentioned below.
3. **Two weeks** Have a second big push around two weeks before.
4. **Three days** To catch the late adopters and last minute merchants have a third big push around three days before.

As with all church services/events, the best publicity is one-to-one, an excited and informed congregation member inviting their neighbour, work colleagues, friends to come along, so spend time informing and inspiring your congregation members well ahead of the event, and provide them with relevant publicity materials.



Next use all the social media channels available to you, and in particular get your young people involved. Perhaps create a short 'teaser' video (less than 60 seconds, ideally less than 30 seconds).

Engage the local press. This is the sort of event that they will be interested in. Create an attractive press release and send it to local papers, radio, TV around a week before the event. It is also the sort of thing the national press may well pick up on. Invite them to attend the event (both Drive-in Churches mentioned here had interviews with radio and TV).

Finally, don't forget the post event promotion opportunities. If you have a photographer in your congregation arrange for them to take photographs throughout and then use these with relevant copy to send to your local papers after the event, and also place some of the images on your website and social media feeds.

### STEP 8. RUN THE EVENT

There is a suggested timeline below based on the experience of St Michael's. Be sure to allow time for the unexpected problem. Also, think about ways to bless the team who are running the event. Flasks of hot drinks, snacks, and hand warmers will go down a treat.

### STEP 9. TAKE TIME TO REVIEW

Don't forget to have a brief review after the event to give thanks to God and learn from the experience. It may be that you won't ever do another Drive-in Carol Service again, but there will be cross transferable insights and lessons to make note of for future events like this. Be sure to record them somewhere they can be accessed in the future. A simple structure for the review is (a) What worked well? (b) What didn't work well? (c) What can we do to improve next time?

### Go For It

Both Adam and Ben recognised what a lot of work was involved in running an event like this, but both said it was so worth it. You may also like to take a look at this [two minute video](#) on another church's experience of drive in church.

Gathering people in this way, particularly when normal large gatherings aren't permitted, is a great way to reconnect people, even if they are sitting in their cars. And of course, it is a wonderful opportunity in the midst of all the challenges of COVID to focus on the 'comfort and joy' that is at the heart of the Christmas message. Go for it!

## Appendix: Possible Timeline for an Evening Carol Service

DAY BEFORE		SUPERVISING
4.30	All items required for the event gathered at a central location and checked against checklist	
DAY OF EVENT		SUPERVISING
	Collect all equipment	
3.30	Equipment arrives at venue	
4.00	Musicians, Audio/Visual, Decoration Teams unload and get cracking	
4.35	Stewards arrive	
4.45	Steward Team meeting and prayer	
5.00	Stewards to posts to be ready for early arrivals	
5.15	Possible pics of arrivals transmitted live on Facebook	
5.15	Sound checks and run throughs start	
5.30	Prayer for all involved in the service	
5.30	Pre service visuals running on screen	
5.50	Warm up	
6.00	Service starts, stewards remain distributed throughout the site	
6.50	End of service	
7.00	Stewards ensure safe departure of cars	
7.10	Musicians and Audio/Visual team begin to strip down the equipment	
7.30	Car park cleared	
7.45	Van loaded and site checked for litter/equipment	

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