

A new take on Christmas carols

Is your Christmas Carol Service in need of a refresh? Steve Dixon offers two imaginative ways of exploring the history and meaning of some of our most well-loved Christmas carols.

Introduction

A carol service is one of those special occasions when people who do not normally have much contact with the Church cross its threshold. It is a great missional opportunity, and the experience it offers is therefore vital. People often come because it's a seasonal tradition, so the suggestions below include plenty of well-known carols. But an innovative approach might encourage 'Christmas visitors' and 'regulars' alike to engage more deeply with the story.

We offer two frameworks for structuring your carol service interspersed with short dramas: one is framed around the carol 'Good King Wenceslas', and the second tells the 'back stories' of many famous carols. You could use the suggestions as they are, or they might inspire you to develop your own – experimenting with music and drama to present the stories behind much-loved carols or exploring some less well-known gems. Andrew Gant's book *Deck the Hall* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2023) from which we have drawn information for 'Framework 2', may inspire you further.

The scenes can be mimed, but suggestions for costumes and props are also included.

FRAMEWORK 1 WENCESLAS WALKS OUT

Some of the carols we enjoy singing don't actually include any of the Christmas story. The following idea offers a way of linking one of them to the Biblical narrative. 'Good King Wenceslas' has a strong storyline into which other carols with clear Nativity content could be woven. The whole carol service then becomes a drama. How that is presented depends on your worship space and congregation's gifts. It contains two old folk carols which are probably not suitable for singing by those unfamiliar with them, but you might want to give the opportunity of hearing them sung, or they can be omitted.

Costumes

Wenceslas – crown and cloak

Page – tabard

Guests – gaudy smock-tops

Servant – apron

Poor Man – hessian/sacking smock

Nativity figures (non-speaking parts) – traditional costumes

Props A table with cloth and Christmas table decorations; boar's head on a platter (shape the head round a rugby ball, using brown crêpe paper, with card ears and tusks); cardboard castellation around a 'raised area'; knapsack and sticks; hamper, jug and goblet; manger and baby doll.

Scene 1 The Castle of the King

Carol 'God Rest ye Merry, Gentlemen'

King Wenceslas's Page, acting as a narrator, appears and invites the congregation to imagine they are in the castle of King Wenceslas, where a Christmastide feast is being prepared (although it is Boxing Day – the Feast of Stephen). He/she announces a reading, to remind us of the reason for the feast (see script on [WEB](#)).

Page: Welcome, guests, to the castle of King Wenceslas. Come inside, settle down. Warm yourselves. Yes, it is very chilly out there. Mind yourselves, the king's household is very busy preparing for the Feast of St Stephen today. Of course you are invited. What's that? You aren't familiar with that festival? Don't worry, I can explain. St Stephen was the first Christian to die for his faith, and we remember him each year, but to understand why a man would give his very life, well then you must hear the story of Jesus, to see why he's worth living and dying for. It's Jesus we celebrate at Christmastide. While everyone's busy preparing for the feast, why don't we have a reading, to remind us of the reason for all these celebrations.

Reading **Luke 2:8-16 'The Shepherds and the Angels'**

Page: Perhaps, like the shepherds, we will go on a journey to see the baby tonight. But first, let's prepare the feast.

Scene 2 The Boar's Head

Carol 'Deck the Hall'

During the singing, Page and a Servant carry on a table and decorate it.

Page: The feast is ready – but no one can find the King!

Page searches the worship space asking the congregation if anyone has seen King Wenceslas. After a few moments, several guests appear.

Guests: The King! The King!

Page: Where? I can't see him.

Guest: The King of the Feast – the boar's head!

Servant carries in the boar's head on a platter.

Song 'The Boar's Head Carol'

This is a 15th century folk carol which could be sung by a choir or group, or you could play a recording [WEB](#)



Also on YouTube [WEB](#)

Version with lyrics and translation [WEB](#)



During the singing, the guests perform a simple dance.

Page: But where is King Wenceslas?

Everyone exits, searching.

Scene 3 The Poor Man and the King

To sound effects, or music evoking winter, a Poor Man appears, bowed under a bag of sticks. He mimes picking up more sticks. Wenceslas appears, on a raised area looking down on the Poor Man.

Carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter'

Page: *Recites (or sings) the lyrics to 'Good King Wenceslas', verse 1.*

Servant: *(hurrying towards the king) Your Majesty! At last, we've found you!*

Wenceslas: *Points to Page and addresses (or sings) the first four lines of verse 2 to him/her.*

Page: *Recites (or sings) the rest of verse 2.*

Wenceslas: *Addresses (or sings) the first four lines of verse 3 to Servant.*

Servant rushes to fetch hamper, flagon and goblet. Poor Man has wandered away. Wenceslas and Page follow, bearing food. Dim lighting to indicate outdoor scene.

Page: As narrator, addresses (or sings) the remaining lines of verse 3 to congregation.

Song 'Cold Winter is Come (Time to Remember the Poor)'

This is a folk carol collected in Devon in the 1870s by Sabine Baring-Gould. It could be sung by a choir or group or played as a recording [WEB](#).



During the song, Wenceslas and Page follow Poor Man.

Page: As narrator, addresses first half of verse 4 of 'Good King Wenceslas' to King.

King: Replies with second half of verse 4.

King and Page catch Poor Man and give him food and drink.

Page: As narrator, addresses verse 5 of 'Good King Wenceslas' to congregation.



Scene 4 A Nativity vision

Brighten lights to indicate a celestial vision as the Scripture is read, unannounced.

Reading Luke 2:1-20 'The Baby in the Stable'

Carol 'Silent Night'

During the carol, costumed characters form a Nativity scene. Wenceslas, Page and Poor Man look on in wonder.

King: What is this?

Poor Man: Fear not, Sire. It is a Christmas vision! You shared your banquet, and for your kindness you have a glimpse of the greatest feast of all. (to Page) Faithful Page, you have trudged so far behind your earthly king, and as your reward you have found the King of Kings. (he points to the baby Jesus)

Carol 'Good King Wenceslas'

Conclusion Prayers for charity and a Christmas blessing.



FRAMEWORK 2 BACK STORIES

The first two sketches are testimonies about the creation of carols. Testimony could provide a theme for the service by incorporating Christmas memories from congregation members. These personal 'back stories' to the significance of Christmas could be a striking witness to those who rarely visit a church.

Costumes

Rossetti – flowing white gown

Girl and Niles – 1930s work clothes

Trapp Singers – 'The Sound of Music' costumes

Props coins, notebook and pencil; classical-style guitar.

Introduction

Narrator:

The history of Christmas carols is fascinating. They have sometimes been sung to a variety of tunes before settling on the ones familiar today; and often the words have had a winding journey through time and place and been amended along the way. For our Carol Service this year, we will explore the 'back stories' of three well-known carols and introduce you to one you may not have heard before.

A poet ponders

Narrator:

The authorship of some carol lyrics is either contested or lost in the mists of time, but not so **In the Bleak Midwinter** which is by the major 19th-century poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). It began life as a poem, and that's how we'll hear it, before we have the pleasure of singing it together. Allow me to introduce the author.

'Christina Rossetti' appears and, reflects on the composition of the poem (see script on [WEB](#)).

Carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter'

Reading Luke 1:26-38 'Mary gives herself'

A chance encounter

Narrator:

Rossetti wondered as she surveyed a winter scene. Here is another, less well-known song of Christmas wondering. **I Wonder as I Wander** is credited to folksong collector and singer John Jacob Niles (1892-1980), but he collected the first three lines and a sketch of the melody during a chance meeting in 1933 with a young girl in Murphy, North Carolina. He later developed this material into his carol.

The encounter is dramatized (see script on [WEB](#)).

Carol 'I Wonder as I Wander'

Reading Matthew 18:1-5 'He called a child'

Tyrolean folk

Narrator:

The story behind 'I Wonder as I Wander' reminds us that traditional 'English' carols have sometimes originated elsewhere and that Christmas is an international festival of a world-wide faith. The famous story of the First World War Christmas truce, when British soldiers heard 'Stille nacht' drifting from the German trenches, indicates that **Silent Night**, like the Christmas tree, is a European import. The words were written near Salzburg about a century before the First World War incident. The music was originally played on guitar as part of the Tyrolean folksong tradition. To perform it for us now, we have The 'Trapp Family Singers'...

Ah, here come the Captain and his singers now!

Play the theme to 'The Sound of Music' as a guitarist portraying Captain von Trapp plus a small group appear. The Captain introduces 'Silent Night' (see script on [WEB](#)).

Carol 'Silent Night'

Reading Luke 2:8-20 'Christ the Saviour is born'

Culture clash

Narrator:

'Silent Night' reminds us that the 'traditional' church organ was not always the standard accompaniment for our favourite carols. And, staying with a consideration of music, **It Came Upon the Midnight Clear** is one example of several carols which did not begin with the music now regularly associated with them in Britain. It is a mid-19th century American song with a standard American tune, but when it crossed the Atlantic, it left its melody behind. Arthur Sullivan furnished the British one, which he called a 'Traditional air rearranged'.

An American and a British friend discuss a UK carol service (see script on [WEB](#)).

Carol 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear' (alternating American and English tunes)

Reading Isaiah 9:2-6 'The Prince of Peace'

Conclusion Prayers for peace and a Christmas blessing.

