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## My Favorite Christmas Theme

*Create meaningful and memorable Christmas services.*

One of my favorite Christmas programs my church ever produced started with a video of Sir Elton John. Who would have thought that a crazy, sunglasses, and sequin wearing musician would have an impact on how we created church that year? But, he did.

An incredibly creative team member shared a video of Sir Elton at one of our planning meetings boosted by Christmas music, coffee with peppermint creamer, and warm, cinnamon rolls to get us all in the Christmas mood.

Before I get to explaining how Sir Elton made such an impact on us, I want to make sure I state the obvious: Each year it's a struggle for preachers and church leaders to create a unique and meaningful Christmas experience for our church to enjoy every year. It takes half the year to work through ideas and themes. Why? Because it's a challenge to replay the Christmas story in a way and that doesn't neglect tradition, become white noise in its repetitiveness, or become so overly creative that it cheapens its meaning.

As a former youth pastor, I'll use an odd analogy that feels a bit heretical when it comes to this annual dilemma: Coming up with a creative Christmas service each year feels the same as when Taco Bell has to come up with a new item for its menu. I'll pause for your shock or nervous giggle.

Here's what I mean: Taco Bell has eight key ingredients and yet, when they introduce something new, we are thrilled—It's not a taco; it's a taco supreme! It's not a burrito; it's a beefy cheesy burrito! It's a crunch wrap supreme! Let's go have lunch! It's all the same ingredients, just shook up and layered in a different way.

The same goes for Christmas. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, angels, wise men, Herod, traditional hymns, don't forget those drummer boys, a reading from Luke, and more gussied up holiday attire from the parking lot to the stage—are all the same ingredients each year. That's

the dilemma, trying to avoid the danger of running into a plug-and-play Christmas while preserving the excitement and impact of the birth of our Savior.

Now that I have thoroughly dishonored Jesus' birth by comparing this moment to the Taco Bell menu (Lord, forgive me), and also shamed us for having a cookie cutter Christmas service that we run again and again, year over year, I'd like to share with you the year when I felt like our church staff "got it" and created a Christmas that was reverent and memorable.

## Find an Important Theme for Your Service

My favorite Christmas service theme we ever produced was on "Wonder: Recapturing the wonder of Christmas and believing like a child again." As we tossed out ideas and created mood boards for possible themes, the topic of "wonder" was so sticky. We couldn't shake the feeling of how important it was for adults to go back to our childlike faith and experiences and to refresh our sense of wonder and awe of God.

We decided our best approach would be to bridge the stories of Mary giving birth to God's Son, and to the shepherds hearing about Jesus in the fields, to our own stories of reclaiming awe and wonder. There was this epiphany in our discussions about how adults lose or deafen our sense of wonder as we age. This could be because of busyness, cynicism, self-sufficiency, heartbreak, loss—all the things we're often protected from as children but have to navigate as adults with our own faith.

Even more shocking and revealing as I look backward, this was our 2019 theme. We weren't even prepared for how 2020 would steal even more wonder through the fear, tragedy, hopelessness, and fatigue of COVID. I know God was working in the details as he laid this theme on our hearts.

## Unify the Team Around that Theme

This is where the Elton John video comes into play. I want you to pause and please watch this, knowing this theme of wonder and reclaiming our childlike faith. I'll be waiting for your response after ...

### [Elton John Video](#)

How do you feel? Do you feel transported back to your childhood? Is there a tinge of sadness about a lost sense of wonder and joy? Do you feel connected and endeared to Elton's story, seeing how one single gift could set the course for his entire life?

Although, we did not use this video for our actual Christmas services. We used this video to unify our entire church staff, all departments, so that when we planned for the coming Christmas, our hearts were aligned for what we were going to create together. We wanted to start with a feeling before the logistics and busy planning we were about to jump into.

Have you ever done this? Have you met with your church staff and key leaders about Christmas? Instead of immediately running through the message notes, Christmas songs, poinsettia budget, the PCO cue sheet, logistics for candle lighting, and creating invite-back postcards, what if you started with something that sets the tone, so that everyone is unified and working toward the same theme. This is church ministry gold. We cannot create a plan of attack to our fullest capability and creativity, until our hearts are aligned and passionate about the theme.

This was a game changer for us and something we hadn't done successfully in the past. Often times the creative and worship teams, along with the Senior Pastor, will create the Christmas services while everyone tries to translate this to their departments in real time. The win was having a unified spirit in all our departments to present a powerful and memorable Christmas experience for all guests who would join us that year. We wanted to ensure that when we opened our doors, every person and family experiences it with us—from first impressions to children's ministry, parking lot to production team.

## A 'Wonder'ful Christmas Time

So, how did we create “wonder” as our Christmas theme?

We got straight to work and included as many creative Christmas elements as we could think of. We started off service with a video of a bunch of children welcoming everyone, squeezing to the center to create open seats for guests in the aisles, and having the little voices remind our guests to please silence their cell phones. The point came across as cute and not pushy.

We opened with “Wonder” by Hillsong UNITED and two teens playing large drums at the front of the stage and lights that mimicked snow falling.

We included the video from *A Charlie Brown's Christmas*, where Linus gives his speech from Luke 2. This is a very memorable movie clip for most adults that takes us back to our childhood and reminds us of what matters. I love how Charlie Brown begins with, “I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about.”

Our campus pastors greeted the church, a pianist played Charles Shultz music in the

background while we showed a picture of them from childhood and they shared a memory about a Christmas present they once received.

We had life-size snow globes that families could take a goofy photo inside. We gave out candy canes, hot cocoa, and had games and hayrides for kids out in the courtyards before service began.

We took a small team to New York City to shoot on location in Time's Square where the big, famous Christmas tree and ice skating is. You've seen this space in movies. This is where our Lead Pastor filmed his message, since we're a multi-site megachurch that has messages via video.

We gave out commemorative Christmas tree ornaments with the large word, "Wonder" on them for people to remember this Christmas service. The message was centered on reigniting our faith through the Christmas story, helping us remember what it once felt like to be a child and to believe without allowing the world to steal our wonder.

## Tips for Creating Your Christmas Service

Some questions to ponder as you create your next Christmas service:

- Is there a song, prop, word, etc. to anchor your Christmas theme for your teams? Make it one thing. Ours was Elton John.
- What ways can you connect with your audience, rather than present/perform for your audience? Remember, your goal is for transformation, not information. We want our guests to participate, not spectate.
- Once you land on a theme, make a list of all senses and try and brainstorm together how you might find something that will fit into each category (sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste). This will either give you some fun tangible ideas for your actual service, or could help you nail down your Christmas theme. Post it notes stuck to a wall under each category while sipping hot cocoa is fun.
- What locations could you film some Christmas b-roll to play under worship lyrics or have your pastor preach from that could tie into your Christmas theme? Some ideas in addition to NYC were to film our Senior Pastor with his grandkids sitting under a tree. We also filmed him on one of our town's most iconic Christmas lanes (you know those streets that are known for their lights). Did we create a little bit of a distraction? Yep! But it was worth it.

- Have your team brainstorm this one idea: What is something our guests would walk away telling their friends, “I can’t believe they did that in church!” Could you make snow fall on your stage? Could you pump a pine scent or sugar cookie scent into the room as you tell a connected story?
- What is a gift or reminder you could send home with families to allow your Christmas theme to continue into their family traditions? This could be as simple as a candy cane, or as complex as a family devotion for the days between Christmas and New Year’s.
- What do you want to create that will become a part of your church’s tradition and what your church is “known for” in the community? I love thinking on this. What is your church’s identity? How do people in your surrounding neighborhoods know you (especially the ones who don’t attend)? What do you offer that other churches don’t? As you nail this down, this familiarity that others have with you will eventually help your church family go out and invite their friends, coworkers, and family members to join them for your service. This could be just something fun in your courtyards for children to play like a pile of snow (if you’re in AZ like me), or a fun bounce house with live music. One Christmas we offered free family photos with a professional photographer and wintery background.

I’ll leave you with this Scripture as you begin planning your program for Christmas and I pray that your team unites under a theme that you believe in wholeheartedly and that speaks to the heart of every individual who comes through your church doors.

Romans 15:13 says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

May the power of the Holy Spirit guide you and your teams this year as you celebrate the birth of our Savior!

Bri Johns

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