

# GENERAL PROGRAM

## CHRISTMAS

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DISCIPLES WOMEN



2011

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# The Joy in Christmas

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## **Purpose:**

The purpose of this session is to bring a smile to the faces of those participating, to remind us again of the childlike qualities we used to have. Ultimately, the purpose is to allow us permission to experience the joy of Christmas like a child. Laughter would be a great outcome of this session, simple warm laughter and love.

## **Suggestions to Leaders:**

- Check your own level of pressure as you enter this Christmas season. If possible, secure a book by Philip Gulley entitled “Christmas In Harmony.” Read the book. It will make you laugh and lighten your spirit. Although Gulley is quoted in the lesson, you may wish to use other portions as you see fit.
- Do you have some kind of Alternative Christmas event at your church? If so, this lesson is the perfect time to uplift the projects and get people on board or report how it went, if the event has already been held.
- If you do not have anything like an Alternative Christmas event, this would be a great time to explore the possibility of providing this gift-giving alternative to your congregation for next year. Sometimes called “Whose Birthday Is It Anyway?” or Christmas Fair, here are places you can get information:
- Global Ministries will provide a suggested project list with ideas on particular projects. You may wish to do something suggested by the Woman-to-Woman Worldwide (WWW) participants. For any of this type of information contact [www.globalministries.org](http://www.globalministries.org) or call Sarah Riester, Program Associate with Global Ministries, 1-317-713-2564. Service project for WWW journeys are available at [www.discipleswomen.org](http://www.discipleswomen.org) click on Woman-to-Woman Worldwide link.

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- Some charities provide their own Christmas gift catalogues. Samaritan's Purse, call 1-800-353 5957; Habitat for Humanity, call 1-800-422-5914; Heifer Project International, call 1-800-422-0474.
- You can tailor any program to your particular Church. This year is the time to begin plans for next year's celebration. If you would like to talk to someone who has been involved in an Alternative Christmas Event, and has seen it evolve particularly for her local church, call Marilee Hattendorf of Southern Hills Christian Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. She has hands-on experience with what works, what doesn't, when to start, how to get everyone involved. Call 1-405-478-0070. Marilee has graciously consented to give advice if asked.
- Referring to the program, you can enlist someone to read the Philip Gulley excerpts, and another to read the quotes from Erma Bombeck. These are most effective if read with a sense of humor and a lively spirit. It helps the reader to have the material before the meeting so they can be comfortable and read with personality!
- Have paper and pencils ready for group if you decide to have participants make two lists: "What I Wouldn't Miss" and "What I Would Miss."
- Worship setting should include a skirted table with a child's drum or drums plus drumsticks set at the center. A candle signifies God's presence and should be lit as you start the worship service at the end of the meeting.
- Secure the music to "The Little Drummer Boy" and play it at the appropriate time during the worship
- This is a festive meeting and a joyous addition to the season, which can be overwhelming unless we prepare our spirits for the real meaning. If your group eats together, you might consider having the hostess prepare a big pot of beef broth (Swanson's),

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add an appropriate amount of browned ground beef, and have the beef broth on the stove as friends arrive. Ask everyone to bring one can of canned vegetables from the grocery store – potatoes, carrots, corn, peas, whatever they would like to add to the “stone soup.” When guests arrive, they open their canned vegetable, drain the liquid, and add the veggie to the broth. Let the soup warm during the program, and then dine together on this surprise soup. Add bread and a drink and nobody had to work too hard.

- What about starting a “Humor in the Church” group? We have committee meetings, board meetings, and problem-solving meetings, but when do we joyously come together to laugh? It would take creativity and childlike enthusiasm, but a group could form to meet once and share something they find funny – a reading from a book, a joke, a movie, anything that is humorous. Share these humorous things and enjoy. See what happens. It could be a one-time event or a 6-week course. Imagine!

### **Background:**

One of America’s favorite authors and philosophers, Erma Bombeck, wrote about “Children of Christmas – December 25, 1969”:

“There is nothing sadder in this world than to awake Christmas morning and not be a child.

Not to feel the cold on your bare feet as you rush to the Christmas tree in the living room. Not to have your eyes sparkle at the wonderment of discovery. Not to rip the ribbons off the shiny boxes with such abandon.

What happened? When did the cold bare feet give way to reason and a pair of sensible bedroom slippers? When did the sparkle and the wonderment give way to the depression of a long day? When did a box with a shiny ribbon mean an item on the charge? A child of

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Christmas doesn't have to be a toddler or a teen. A child of Christmas is anyone who believes that kings have birthdays.

When did it happen? Maybe it was when you decided to have your Christmas cards printed to send to 1500 of your 'closest friends and dearest obligations.' Maybe it was when you discovered that the traditional Christmas tree was a fire hazard, and you traded its holiday aroma for a silver one that revolved, changed colors, played 'Silent Night' and snowed on itself."

Here are some questions to ponder as we face another Christmas season this year:

- How would your life be different if Jesus had never been born?
- What if Jesus never grew up to become a teacher whose words have touched so many lives?
- How would we be different if we'd never been reassured by Jesus that there is a place for us in His Heavenly Home, that life is eternal?
- What would your life be like without Christmas?
- Do you have any "child" left in you?

### **Lesson:**

It's hard for us to IMAGINE what life would be like without Christmas. Most of us would surely be involved in some kind of religious exploration. That's because most of humankind, world over and age-to-age, has the inborn desire to commune with its Creator. We want to know where we fit in and what's life all about.

Fortunately for us, we have heard the good news and we do know the Christmas story. We are taught that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, and of the song the angel sang to the shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night.

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Luke 2: 8-11

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

“Good news, Great joy for all the people,” the angel said, so how do you manifest that Joy at Christmas?

For so many of us, we have given the power of buying presents as our manifestation of joy. We think, the bigger the present, the more the joy. The more presents, the more joy. Unfortunately, Santa Claus has become the dominant person at Christmastime. We know that’s wrong, but darn it, it’s hard to live any differently in today’s consumer society!

Quaker pastor and author, Philip Gulley, reminisces about his first memory of Santa Claus in his book “Christmas in Harmony.”

“My first memory of Christmas was in 1966. I was five years old and standing in line at Kivett’s Five and Dime with my mother and brother, Roger, waiting to see Santa Claus, who looked suspiciously like Bud Matthews, the man in our town who did odd jobs. He smelled like Bud Matthews, too – a blend of Granger pipe tobacco, Old Spice aftershave, and sawdust.

For a while, I believed Bud Matthews was Santa, and that he spent the off-season in our town patching roofs and fixing screen doors. Bud Matthews was jovial, like Santa, and had a bushy white beard. His wife looked like Mrs. Claus on the Coca-Cola calendar at the Rexall. Except they had a son named Ernie, who was in my grade, and everyone knew Santa didn’t have any kids, just elves and reindeer. Then when I was eight, Uly Grant took me behind the school and told me that Santa was really your parents, which

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explained why, despite my persistent requests, I never got the Old Timer jackknife with a genuine bottle opener I'd asked for."

I have to chuckle at Philip Gulley's admission that as a child he was scared to death that his parents would abide by the advice their pastor gave them each Christmas.

"Although he was nice, Pastor Lindley had a few alarming tendencies, chief among them his sermons encouraging us to remember the reason for Christmas – that it wasn't about presents and cookies, but about God sending his Son to be with us. I feared that my parents might take his message to heart. I had nightmares about running down the stairs on Christmas morning to a tree with nothing under it, and my father sitting in a chair, a Bible balanced on his lap, smiling and saying, 'Your mother and I have decided that this year we're just going to thank God for the gift of his Son, because that's the only gift we really need.'"

A Quaker minister's admission makes us all admit that the child in us all just loves the gift giving, and especially the gift getting!

How about, as adults, we explore additional ways to achieve joy, not only at Christmastime, but the rest of the year as well? And how do you do this while still holding on to the precious "child" within each of us?

How do we show joy without material exchanges?

When was the last time you really felt joyful?

What were you doing?

What happened with your body?

As simple and mundane as it may seem, one bodily manifestation of joy is smiling!

Remember the true story about the little boy who couldn't smile? The muscles in his little face, the muscles that allow the ends of the mouth to turn

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up, didn't work. Can you imagine how children treated him? He always looked so unhappy and unresponsive. What other way do we have to indicate our feelings and reactions if we can't show it in our face? A facial surgeon operated and the outcome was that the little boy could smile! Think of what a gift from God we have with our ability to smile.

Once I wrote a devotional piece about what a difference a smile can make. To prepare, I did an experiment. For a week, I simply smiled at everyone I encountered – at the grocery store, at work, at church, in the mall, everywhere. Surprisingly, my humble experiment resulted in the following outcome:

When I smiled at men, most raised an eyebrow, as though they were analyzing how to respond.

When I smiled at women, most smiled back.

When I smiled at “street kids,” the kids who wore black trench coats, black spiked hair, with black painted fingernails, they looked surprised and would point at themselves as though to say, “Me? Are you smiling at me?” Yes, I would nod, and they usually smiled back.

A genuine smile represents joy – a gift to give at Christmastime or any time of the year.

And speaking of smiles, author and psychologist Daniel Goleman, Ph.D tells about “a previously unknown class of neurons – mirror neurons – that act like a neural WiFi system, monitoring everything the other person is saying and doing. These neurons serve us with a synchronizing function, causing our brains to be activated the way we see the other person's brain acting. Mirror neurons appear to let us ‘simulate’ not just other people's actions, but the intentions and emotions behind those actions. Thus when you see someone smile, for example, your mirror neurons fire up, too, creating a sensation in your own mind of the feeling associated with smiling.

This could answer the age-old question – why is a smile contagious? On the other hand, does this make watching violence ‘stimulate’ violence within us?

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It's a tricky argument, but it does make one think twice about who you hang around with, and what you watch on the tube."

Yet another physical sign of joy happens like this: your epiglottis constricts your larynx, which causes respiratory upset. Though it sounds uncomfortable, it isn't, that's what happens when you laugh!

God designed us this way: When a person laughs, all body systems are involved: muscles contract, respiration is increased, blood pressure is elevated, and body temperature increases. With the increased breathing, pumping of blood and muscle contractions, you'd think a laugh wouldn't be so good for you, but the value comes AFTER a good laugh. All the levels fall BELOW normal, giving us a feeling of deep relaxation and overall good feeling.

One misconception that we have is that joy and laughter come our way without doing anything ourselves. Oh, no, we have to pursue, put ourselves with people and in places where joy is found. Have you ever noticed that when you walk on the sidewalk sometimes, the cement is just plain gray? But in the afternoon when the sun hits it just in the right places, that gray cement sparkles because of the glass particles that radiate in the sun's light. We have to look for the joy, the sparkles of the sun's light!

I have heard it said that some experts in physical fitness tells us that laughter is good for your health, and that healthy people laugh 200 to 400 times a day!

In a recent class, Humor in the Church, we learned that the Bible is full of humor, but in order to understand it, we must understand the language and culture, yet much of it goes right over our heads. As I tried to explain certain examples, it became quite clear to me that the participants would rather share funny stories of their own. We did just that and finally came out with a joke book for our church. We called it something quite original, "Ode to Joy." (We couldn't reach Beethoven to get the rights!)

Nora Ephron, in her latest book "I Remember Nothing," admits that although she is 69, she's not old. But if you were young, you would definitely

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think she's old. Nevertheless, she tries to think of what she wants to do every day to make that day really count. "I try to say to myself, if this is one of the last days of my life, am I doing exactly what I want to be doing? I aim low. My idea of a perfect day is a frozen custard at Shake Shack and a walk in the park. (Followed by a Lactaid.) My idea of a perfect night is a good play and dinner at Orso. (But no garlic, or I won't be able to sleep.)"

Nora ends her humorous book by thinking of things she wouldn't miss if she weren't here, a few of which were dry skin, mammograms, small print, and Panels of Women in Film. She follows that with a list of things she would miss. To name a few: my kids, bacon, twinkle lights, the Christmas tree, and pie.

Would it help you get in touch with your joy if you made those two lists? What would you list as things you wouldn't miss? What would you miss? Perhaps this could be a take-home assignment, to be discussed at the next meeting.

In this dangerous world, we need to concentrate on things that bring people together. Laughter is the shortest distance between two people. Laughter unites us, especially when we laugh together. Laughter heals. This is the way God created us.

And yet, it is sad to report that Christmas can be such a hard time for people who have lost their joy. It could be depression, loss, illness, so many things. For many, Christmas is a very hard time, so to say, "just smile," or "you should be laughing!" falls on deaf ears. We need to be very sensitive and kind in treating others. Perhaps some need smiles and kindness most at Christmas.

And ultimately, what do you give the Almighty at Christmas? Nothing is more moving than music, so ponder the words of this beautiful Christmas song by Gilbert M. Martin.

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### The Jesus Gift

Shall I gather emeralds? Shall I bring him gold?  
Shall I shower diamonds, white hard, bright cold?  
Shall I spangle jewels like stars above?  
Give him laughter, bright peace-filled laughter,  
Offer him warm laughter and love.  
Simplest of gifts, gentlest of hearts,  
Kindness he'll use as he leads –  
So, give him these gifts, hand him your hearts!  
Honor his birth and you'll need no –

Emeralds nor rubies, silver nor gold,  
Neither bright diamonds, white hard, bright cold,  
Spangle not rich jewels, like stars above,  
You'll have laughter, simple peace-filled laughter  
Simple warm laughter and love.  
Simple warm laughter and love.

Pastor Gulley's childhood fear would be realized if he ran to the tree on Christmas morn, to see his Dad sitting there, Bible in lap and no presents under the tree, and saying, "Your mother and I are giving you a new gift this year. (Smile) I have a joke for you!"

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Let's admit it, gift giving is here to stay. Remember, a child of Christmas is anyone who still believes that Kings have birthdays. And how about adding the extra kindness of smiling at everyone we meet and going for the laughter that God gave us, because: "Do not be afraid. Jesus is good news, JOYOUS NEWS TO ALL PEOPLE! Jesus was born in the city of David, and He's our Messiah, Christ the Lord!

Sing together: Joy to the world, the Lord has come

Let earth receive her King!

Let every heart prepare him room

And heaven and nature sing

And heaven and nature sing

And heaven and heaven and nature sing!

### **Worship:**

As we move into our time of worship, I will light the Christ candle to remind us that a child was born for us and all the people – a child of great promise, the Messiah, the Lord. This is a time for JOY.

A litany using Erma Bombeck's words:

**Leader:** Let us become Children of Christmas

**People:** Children of Christmas are givers

**Leader:** That's what the day is for. They give....

**People:** Thanks, love, gratitude, joy, and themselves to one another

**Leader:** It's like lighting a candle

**People:** That you've been saving

**Leader:** It's like caroling

**People:** When your feet are cold.

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- Leader:** It's like giving something
- People:** That you've made yourself
- Leader:** It's like laughter
- People:** Being with people you like
- Leader:** It's like falling to your knees and saying,
- People:** "Thanks for coming to my birthday party!"

### DEVOTION

Another child of Christmas is the Little Drummer Boy. Listen to this simple childlike approach to the Christ King. "Come, they told the little drummer boy, a newborn king to see." But he has no gift to bring to honor this king, and he's a poor boy, too. But wait, after all, he's the Little Drummer Boy, so he asks, "Shall I play for you—on my drum? On my drum?"

Listen to the song. (*Play the song.*)

Then the Baby Jesus smiled at him, him and his drum. It may not be scriptural, but the baby smiled. We need to be reminded that Jesus was indeed a baby - a baby who cooed and laughed. A baby's laughter signals us that the baby is connecting with us – one of the most joyous signals they can give the adults in their lives. Help us to be Children of Christmas!

Erma concludes: "How sad indeed to awake on Christmas and not be a child. Time, self-pity, apathy, bitterness and exhaustion can take the Christmas out of the child, but you cannot take the CHILD out of Christmas!"

Oh, yes, I remember the incident when people were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Luke 17: 15-17

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### **Closing prayer:**

Help us, O God, to take these old hands and make them eager to do something special for someone else this Christmas.

Help us, O God, to take this body that's not so childlike anymore and inspire us to embrace others with smiles of encouragement.

Help us, O God, to take these tired feet and dance into hope.

Help us, O God, to remind our spirits what it feels to be childlike again, not overcome with much fussiness, but brimming with childlike enthusiasm.

Help us, O God, to turn up the corners of our mouths and smile because we do thank you that we can.

Help us, O God, to let our bodies do their work, even when it ends in respiratory upset.

Thank you that we can laugh. May we be a joyous people this Christmas.

In Christ's joyous name, Amen

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### **Christmas Litany Hand-out:**

Leader: Let us become Children of Christmas

**People: Children of Christmas are givers**

Leader: That's what the day is for. They give....

**People: Thanks, love, gratitude, joy, and themselves to one another**

Leader: It's like lighting a candle

**People: That you've been saving**

Leader: It's like caroling

**People: When your feet are cold**

Leader: It's like giving something

**People: That you've made yourself**

Leader: It's like laughter

**People: Being with people you like**

Leader: It's like falling to your knees and saying,

**People: "Thanks for coming to my birthday party!"**