

# BETHLEHEM

## CAROLS UNPACKED

Creative ideas for Christmas carol services

Lucy Moore and Martyn Payne  
with Embrace the Middle East



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## Preface

# ABOUT EMBRACE THE MIDDLE EAST

Embrace the Middle East has been at the heart of a Christian compassionate ministry for almost 160 years. It began as the Turkish Missions Aid Society in 1854, at the height of the Crimean War, later becoming the Bible Lands Society and then Bible*Lands* before its transformation in the 21st century to Embrace the Middle East. Throughout, the charity has maintained its crucial focus: to improve the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the Middle East. It does this in partnership with local Christians, focusing on education, healthcare and community development.

Embrace works in partnership with more than 40 projects in Israel and Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt.

### ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

In Israel and Palestine, the birthplace of the Christian faith, Embrace's partners work in some of the most challenging conditions imaginable. The communities whom they serve endure the daily consequences of occupation—poverty, unemployment, a lack of social cohesion, disruption to services and education, economic uncertainty and a shortage of basic commodities, curfews and travel restrictions. Despite these underlying conditions, Embrace's partners are dedicated to alleviating poverty and promoting justice.

## EGYPT

In Egypt, Embrace's partners provide urgent medical and social care to the people of a country where one third of the population lives close to or under the poverty line. The geography of the land means that the majority of Egypt's 80 million inhabitants live in vastly overcrowded cities, while those in rural areas face unimaginable poverty, disease and deprived living conditions. Some of Embrace's partners in Cairo also provide much-needed care to the thousands of refugees who arrive in Egypt, having fled from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia.

## LEBANON

In Lebanon, after the terrible destruction of the 1975–90 civil war and the brief but devastating conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, the economy has become crippled by debt, and prospects for recovery are bleak. In a country where an increasing number face unemployment and hardship, and political and religious tensions spill over into everyday life, Embrace's partners continue to offer hope. They help to provide many of the key services that the state cannot afford to maintain.

Embrace the Middle East's partners in these three countries work in three key areas of service:

- **Education:** Embrace supports schools and colleges that offer a high standard of education to children whose families cannot afford it, including those with special educational needs. It also supports vocational training programmes for people with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Health:** Embrace funds hospitals, clinics and local primary care centres. It also supports projects offering care and rehabilitation both for those who have been seriously injured or suffered major

trauma and for those with congenital physical or learning disabilities.

- **Community development:** Embrace provides social care to children who have lost one or both parents and to children in particularly deprived circumstances, local infrastructure support, revolving loans, education and technical support to communities, housing, primary health care, literacy programmes, and support and care for refugees.

Embrace the Middle East is funded entirely through generous donations, appeals, legacies and grants from individuals, churches and trusts. Without this prayerful and financial support, Embrace's work could not continue. And in such an unsettled region, this support has never been as vital as it is now.

The Bethlehem Carol Sheet has been popular for nearly 60 years, enabling Embrace and its partners to share in prayer and worship with their supporters at Christmas time and raise funds for this valuable work.

*Bethlehem Carols Unpacked* provides an excellent opportunity to extend the nature of this celebration in a creative and contemporary way. It brings the Christmas story to life in the 21st century by including stories about the work that Embrace currently supports in the region where the Christmas story began. We hope and believe that these stories will interest and inspire all those taking part in a carol service.

There are many ways in which you can offer your continued support throughout the year. If you would like further information about how you can become involved in this work, Embrace would love to hear from you at: Embrace the Middle East, 24 London Road West, Amersham, HP7 0EZ. You can also visit Embrace's website at [www.embraceme.org](http://www.embraceme.org).

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## FOREWORD

The first years of the 21st century have witnessed a growing interest and participation in Christmas carol services. In a world increasingly reliant on virtual experience and remote communication, it seems that our appetite to gather together, to stand and sit and listen and sing, is undimmed. For any of us who plan these services, the challenges are considerable. We are charged with bringing to life the greatest story ever told, in words ancient and contemporary, music traditional and modern.

This interesting, creative and inspiring book helps us to navigate our passage through the cultural filters on the way from first-century Palestine through medieval Europe to the modern-day United Kingdom and back to the contemporary Holy Lands. In these pages we will hear once again the familiar songs and stories; we will also sharpen our Christmas faith on the anvil of profound suffering and conflict. Embrace the Middle East partners tell their stories with compelling simplicity and a moving faith that shakes us out of our complacency and causes us ever more fervently to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem' and her neighbours.

We have a duty, as leaders of worship, to offer familiarity in a Christmas celebration that, for many, is a touchstone in an ever-changing society. But we also have a duty to evoke, in contemporary language and visual communication, the awesome reality of the incarnation. We are bound to proclaim the God who knows no boundaries of space or time but who comes to earth and knows our human life. These remarkable stories and tunes give us a new language to say again that God is with us in the vulnerability of a baby, and with the light and power of his Son.

*The Reverend Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James's Piccadilly*



# INTRODUCTION

## CAROLS AND CAROL SINGING: A BRIEF HISTORY

A carol is a joyful religious song created and sung by ordinary people. The root meaning of the word ‘carol’ is ‘to dance in a ring’ and probably came from the Old French *caroller*, through the Latin *choraula* and, originally, the Greek *choros*, which was a circling dance. Traditional carols are essentially joyful. Even when the subject is solemn, the music is lively and the words trip easily off the tongue.

Carols first became popular in the 15th century as earlier restrictions on music and drama in church decreased. Some carols had pagan roots but were adapted to the Christian faith, along with other customs. Their subjects are down-to-earth and include references to plants and animals, food and drink. ‘The holly and the ivy’ and ‘Here we come a wassailing’ are popular examples of carols in which a Christian dimension has been added to these subjects. The church sang Gregorian chant in Latin, while the people sang and danced to carols in the street, the home and the inn.

Most carols that have survived are connected with Advent and Christmas, but there are also carols to be sung at Easter, on saints’ days and at different seasons of the year. The style varies: many have skipping rhythms, some have choruses and others are narratives in the style of ballads. All Christian nations have carols; those of France are called *Noels*, a word that probably came into English as ‘Nowell’ through the Normans. The origins of this word are discussed in more detail in the chapter on ‘The first Nowell’.

In the 17th century, when the Puritans disapproved of celebrating religious feasts, including Christmas, and dancing was banned, carol singing declined and was almost forgotten. In 1871, however, *Christmas Carols New and Old* by Revd H.R. Bramley and Dr John

Stainer was published and brought 13 traditional carols and some original compositions into wide and popular use. The effect of this book was enormous. Some of the arrangements were weak and rather pious but the restoration of the traditional carol is largely owed to them. It was gradually recognised that, with the advent of universal education and wider travel, the great wealth of folk music, including carols, was in danger of being lost. Composers including Ralph Vaughan Williams collected and published many traditional words and melodies in the *English Hymnal* (1906) and the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928).

The last 70 years has shown a continuous increase in carol services, along with Festivals of Nine Lessons and Carols, first devised in Truro Cathedral and later popularised by annual broadcasts from King's College, Cambridge. For example, the service records of Gloucester Cathedral record no carol services before 1930, but by 1990 a carol service was being held almost every evening during the fortnight before Christmas. Today, carol services are held in almost every church and school as well as numerous concert halls. New arrangements of carols are published every year, and seasonal CDs are increasingly popular.

The *Bethlehem Carol Sheet* has done much to make carols from every part of the world available to carol singers and services. The eleven items chosen for this book cover a wide range of styles, periods and traditions. Only 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' and 'The first Nowell' are traditional carols. The others range from hymns written to teach children in Sunday school (such as 'Once in royal David's city' and 'Away in a manger') to a biblical text, 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night', which is a metrical version of Luke 2:8–14. Works by leading churchmen of their day include 'Hark! the herald-angels sing', an adaptation of words by Charles Wesley, the leading 18th-century hymn writer, set to music from Mendelssohn's oratorio *Festgesang*, and 'Good King Wenceslas' with original verses from J.M. Neale, who translated numerous early Greek and Latin hymns.

Carols were always modern in that they expressed the faith and ideas of ordinary people in their own age. Their charm lies in their being true to the culture of their time. Some of the poetry may be rough and the melodies simple, but their genuine expression of faith and life shows against sham antiquity or banality. Some comparatively modern works have kept the spirit of traditional carols in that they have been written by ordinary people for a specific purpose, often with music added by equally humble musicians. ‘We three kings’ and ‘Silent night’ are two of the best examples of modern compositions that have rightly passed into the rich heritage of carols and carol singing.

#### HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Christmas is a time for remembering Jesus’ own poverty and the needs of the homeless and disadvantaged. This results in an increased opportunity not only to give to national charities but also to respond to the desperate inequalities and needs of the wider world—especially in the lands where Jesus was born and carried out his ministry. Each of the well-known and well-loved carols in this book explores a particular project connected with and supported by Embrace the Middle East and, through this vehicle, the carol service can also be an ideal opening for congregations to act on these concerns through prayer and giving.

Against this background of expectations, longings and concerns, the collection in this book offers a way to blend the traditional with something new and original. Each carol includes a brief outline of the story behind its composition, together with notes on its content, meaning and biblical links. This information is intended primarily as background for those leading the carol service, but may also be useful in providing insights for an introduction to each carol, helping to place it within the framework of the service as a whole.

The eleven carols in this collection are the top eleven favourites

## Introduction

in Embrace the Middle East's ever popular *Bethlehem Carol Sheet*, which has been produced by the charity each year since 1953. The latest edition of the carol sheet, which includes 26 of the most popular Christmas carols and hymns, is available from Embrace the Middle East. Contact details are as follows:

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24 London Road West  
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Fax: 01494 897951  
Email: [info@embraceme.org](mailto:info@embraceme.org)  
Website: [www.embraceme.org](http://www.embraceme.org)

## Unpacking the carols

Each of the carols (or Christmas hymns) in this book is unpacked in a variety of creative ways, including poetry, drama, material for under-fives, prayers, stories and ideas for sensory worship. The intention is to enable you to pick and mix the ideas by selecting just one of these approaches for each carol that you have chosen. For example, one carol could be introduced or followed by a short drama presentation; another might become the subject for a piece by an under-fives group; a further carol could be used to build up your nativity tableau for all ages at the front; another could be the stimulus for the prayers; a further carol could be linked to a reading and a short talk, or, as an alternative, become the inspiration for a story or piece of poetry read by older children. Finally, one carol should be reserved as the opportunity to present a creative piece about a project supported by Embrace the Middle East. Each carol in the book contains enough ideas to make this selection possible.

## Embrace the Middle East PowerPoint presentation material

For more information about the work of Embrace the Middle East, together with a downloadable PowerPoint presentation of images relating to the projects referred to in the book, please go to [www.embraceme.org](http://www.embraceme.org).

### PLANNING A CAROL SERVICE

In many ways, a Christmas carol service should be one of the most straightforward acts of worship to put together each year. There is a definitive pool of readings and songs to work with and a short but powerful tradition to draw on. That legacy can become a challenge for the service planner, who dare not do anything too different, and for the congregation, who may be lulled into missing the real impact and meaning of the Christmas story through participation in something that has become overfamiliar.

One of the great opportunities presented by any carol service is that it may attract large numbers of less regular churchgoers, who are looking for that elusive mix of carols and nostalgia with which they feel comfortable (perhaps half remembered from when they were young), and may be feeling a deeper and unexpressed longing for something new to satisfy a spiritual hunger. In retelling the familiar story, there should be an opportunity for those present to grow in understanding of its eternal message while reflecting on its particular relevance in our own culture and time. Church attendance at Christmas can present a tremendous opportunity to use what is traditional to proclaim afresh the truth of the Christian faith.

Which carols should you choose? Nearly every carol is based on two short Bible passages: Luke 2:1–16 and Matthew 2:1–12. It is not easy to include all the old favourites (thus repeating the same information) while retaining a sense of movement. If you decide to use a carol that covers the whole Christmas story, this could come

either at the beginning or near the end, to sum up the completed narration. The longer version of 'O come, all ye faithful' or 'The first Nowell' are well-known examples.

There are, however, those carols that focus on specific aspects of the story and these lend themselves to being used throughout the service. For example, the story of the shepherds and the angels is told in carols such as 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' and 'While shepherds watched', the scene in the stable is portrayed in 'Silent night' and 'Away in a manger', care for those in poverty is the subject of 'Good King Wenceslas', and the visit of the wise men is recorded in 'We three kings'. Reflection on the significant part that the Christmas story plays in the bigger picture of salvation is the subject of 'Once in royal David's city', 'O little town of Bethlehem' and 'Hark! the herald-angels sing'.

There is often a concern that every carol used in the service must be 'known'. However, carols need not be restricted to the most popular Christmas hymns. Many traditional carols move away from the nativity narrative and are lively and easy to sing. Not included in this book, 'I saw three ships come sailing in' and the Sussex carol 'On Christmas night, all Christians sing' are well-known examples. In the same way, the format of Bible readings and carols should not be treated as binding. Poetry, drama and dance can be effective commentaries on the story, and the use of light and movement around the building can be powerful illustrations. Furthermore, if a church has few musical facilities, an informal 'Songs of Praise' could provide the opportunity to sing popular carols while allowing time for things to be said about the carols themselves and their meaning. This format may also attract people who do not enjoy a formal or lengthy service.

For a carol service that involves young children, a maximum of five or six carols is ideal, with the service lasting not more than 40 minutes. This is especially appropriate if you plan to include a special item from a choir or introduce a new carol. It is always good practice, however, for the final hymn or carol in any service to be

short and lively. People will have stood and sung for longer than usual and both the elderly and the young may feel fatigued or be ready to go home. Carols such as ‘Hark! the herald-angels sing’ sum up the theological message behind the Christmas story and allow the congregation to leave in a joyful frame of mind.

Each carol in the book has been given a specific subtitle that relates to the main theme of that carol, and this may be helpful in putting together a service with a particular focus, where that carol is central. You will then be able to make use of more than one creative idea from the selection given, while using other carols from the book (or elsewhere) in support.

### Planning a carol service in a primary school

If you are involved in planning the carol service in a school, either as a teacher or as a member of the clergy or church team invited into the school as a guest, the ideas in this book should be helpful. The wealth of creative material available for each of the carols in the book lends itself well to special use within primary schools. One approach might be for each class to select one of the carols to explore as a class project. There is plenty of information to accompany each carol, along with the different approaches to explore it. Each class could then interpret and present their chosen carol to others. This could result in a creative carol concert at the school for friends, parents and carers or could perhaps form the basis for a service at the local church.

### Worship space

Not all carol services take place in a church building, so the term ‘worship space’ has been used alongside references to the church as a building. The term ‘worship space’ denotes any space in which worship takes place, including a school hall or any other venue that is not a church building.

## Involving under-fives

Much of the language and many of the theological concepts within the carols and Christmas hymns in this book are clearly beyond the understanding of very young children, but children may gain intuitively from being present in worship when these carols are sung. If young children are encouraged to feel part of the worship and appropriate ways are found to involve them, their hearts and spirits may still be touched by the experience. The activities described in the under-fives sections are designed to help young children to appreciate something of the messages and imagery contained within these popular carols, laying a foundation of positive encounter that can be built on in years to come.

Choosing which activities to use and how to organise them will depend on a number of factors related to your local situation, such as the nature of the service you are organising, the layout of your worship space, the numbers of children involved and the availability of other adults. It is expected that young children are likely to encounter most of the carols in an all-age context where they will be accompanied by adult carers.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to put together simple activity packs that are given to each child (or their carers) as they arrive or given out at an appropriate time in the service. If you choose to do this, bear in mind that young children will probably want to do the activity as soon as they are given it, so it is worth thinking in advance of the point at which the activity would be most helpful. On other occasions, it might be more appropriate to gather groups of children at a particular time during the service to work on a creative activity. In this case, some activities may best be done while a carol is being sung, but others may best be done at an earlier part of the service so that they can be used during the singing of the carol.

Part One

# THE CAROLS

## AWAY IN A MANGER

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.  
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay—  
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*

*The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes,  
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.  
I love thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky,  
And stay by my side until morning is nigh.*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay  
Close by me for ever, and love me, I pray.  
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,  
And fit us for heaven to live with thee there.*

Part Two

## UNPACKING THE CAROLS



## Away in a manger

# STARS AND SALVATION

### UNPACKING THE STORY BEHIND THE CAROL

No Christmas carol service is ever complete without this carol, not only because of the ‘ahh’ factor elicited by the sight of young children performing the nativity story but also because many people remember it as the first carol they themselves sang.

The first two verses of ‘Away in a manger’ were first published in 1885 in an American Lutheran Sunday school book. This created the misconception that the words were written by Martin Luther. The original author is, in fact, unknown. The most well-known melody, ‘Cradle Song’, which transformed the simple rhyme into a carol, was composed by William J. Kirkpatrick (1832–1921) in 1895, ten years after the carol was first published. Another popular melody is that of a Basque carol.

Perhaps the original author remained unaware of the fact that his or her words had become such a popular carol, which is why he or she remains, to this day, anonymous. The lyrics of the third verse (attributed to J.T. McFarland) were written ten years later than the melody, around 1906, so, 20 years from the carol’s conception, it seems that the original author was still unaware of how the piece had grown. Over 100 years on, the carol remains one of the best-loved carols of all time.

## UNPACKING THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE CAROL

The words of the carol, aided and abetted by the melody, form a simple lullaby. In the tradition of most lullabies, the sentiment is sweet and syrupy—a far cry from the real setting of Jesus’ birth. The first line is based on Luke 2:7. Each Christmas this verse is embellished many times over, with hosts of angels, innkeepers and their wives, donkeys, camels, shepherds, sheep and wise men all crowding on to the scene in the quest to create a part for each child in the nativity play.

The Bible verse simply says, ‘[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.’ The carol does not embellish the verse in the tradition of the nativity play. Instead, it homes in on the baby sleeping on his bed of hay in a rough and ready cattle trough. But there seems to be rather a lot of Vaseline on the camera lens. The reality of the event is indistinct and incomplete: the stars are twinkling in a bright sky; cattle are gently lowing; the baby doesn’t cry when he awakens. It all sounds idyllically peaceful, rather like the image you might find on a Christmas card. There is no mention of the dreadful reality of a young girl, far from home, having to give birth on a cold and dirty earthen floor. Victorian propriety has sanitised the event of Jesus’ birth and given it a warm and sentimental aura in the carol, suitable for delicate, well-bred children, dressed in their Sunday best.

There can be little doubt that the carol was composed with young children in mind. This theory is further supported by the animation of the stars looking down at the sleeping baby and, indeed, by the scene shift in the second verse in which Jesus himself now looks down from the sky while the child is the one sleeping—supposedly, unlike the baby Jesus, in a crib with all the trimmings.

J.T. McFarland has matched the approach of the original author in the creation of the third verse. His verse turns the carol into a

simple prayer, which furthers the thought that Jesus can be near us, not only while we sleep but throughout our lives and, indeed, through all eternity. However, in the final line of this verse, we are led to suspect that a further shift of scene has taken place and the children singing the carol are now the ones looking down from the sky—their heavenly home.

This is perhaps the Peter Pan of carols—no one in it ever seems to grow up—but perhaps this is part of its appeal. It transfers a warm, sentimental glow upon us, transporting us back to our own childhood, reminding us of our own early years and, if we have reached that stage in life, those of our children or our children’s children.

#### UNPACKING THE MEANING OF THE CAROL

Despite its sentimental feel, this carol does contain deep theological truths, especially in the third verse. As well as being the first carol that some children learn, perhaps it would be appropriate for the first two lines of verse 3 to be the very first prayer that they are taught. ‘Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay close by me for ever, and love me, I pray’ could be turned into a simple bedtime prayer, learnt by heart and called to mind in the years ahead. In theological terms, this line picks up Jesus’ promise that he will be with us always, ‘even until the end of the world’ (Matthew 28:20). In fact, the whole carol in some ways carries out Jesus’ command in the following passage:

*‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth! Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you. I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.’*

MATTHEW 28:18–20

If the words of the carol were originally written for Sunday school children, presumably they would have been within the context of biblical teaching. However, the words of this carol are well known even among those who have never attended Sunday school. Many people hear the Christmas message through this carol and are perhaps comforted by its familiarity. The original intention of the unknown author has found its place in making Jesus' promise known and fulfilling his command. How far that seed of truth has been scattered beyond the original Sunday school class!

The blessing at the end of the carol moves the child out of its immediate world to the world of those around, and draws in the story of salvation. Jesus is now not the baby laying down his sweet head but the king of heaven welcoming us into our heavenly home. Perhaps the whole story of salvation is rather a lot to draw from this simple carol but, bearing in mind the age of the original hearers and the era in which they lived, it is important to recognise that this is *implied* rather than *applied* theology. It sows the seed; the application can come later. The child learns to love Jesus, not because he or she understands the theology of salvation but because of Jesus' own love and care for the child. It is the first step in a lifetime of discovery about who Jesus is and what he has done for us and for our salvation.

In this respect, this is a 'belonging' carol, in which the steps towards 'believing' the gospel message have only just begun. Bearing this in mind, perhaps even those bright twinkling stars are not quite as sentimental as they seem, for within their imagery is the promise God first made to Abraham that he would have as many descendants as stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). In the ancient scriptures of the Old Testament we see how from Abraham's first step of faith grew the nation of God's people. In the New Testament, we learn that those who believe the gospel message are descendants of that family and inheritors of the promise to Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus. Imbedded within the simple words of this carol is the sweep of God's great rescue plan from incarnation to ascension, from a

roughly hewn cattle trough to the throne of heaven. What lullaby of love could ask for more than that the child within should be blessed with the promise of eternity?

### BIBLE LINKS

The simple words of this carol pick up many biblical themes. Its childlike quality calls to mind Peter's words in his first letter: 'Be like newborn babies who are thirsty for the pure spiritual milk that will help you grow and be saved' (1 Peter 2:2). Thus we see the invitation to build on small seeds of faith and continue on the journey. Peter shows us that from the simple seeds of a newborn faith grows a spiritual house—living stones built firmly on the cornerstone of Christ:

*You have already found out how good the Lord really is. Come to Jesus Christ. He is the living stone that people have rejected, but which God has chosen and highly honoured. And now you are living stones that are being used to build a spiritual house. You are also a group of holy priests, and with the help of Jesus Christ you will offer sacrifices that please God.*

1 PETER 2:3-5

As the carol closes, we find a prayer of blessing, drawing us into the arms of Jesus and the promise of his kingdom. As the prayer in verse 3 implies, we are fit for heaven only through the help of Jesus Christ; with his help, we are able to become holy priests, ready to further the kingdom of God. Also, within the carol and Peter's first letter, we find an echo of Psalm 34: 'Discover for yourself that the Lord is kind. Come to him for protection, and you will be glad... If you obey the Lord, he will watch over you and answer your prayers' (vv. 8, 15), and the promise of Jesus in John's Gospel that he has prepared a place for us to be with him for ever:

*'Don't be worried! Have faith in God and have faith in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house... I am going there to prepare a place for each of you. After I have done this, I will come back and take you with me. Then we will be together.'*

JOHN 14:1-3

As previously mentioned, the carol also links to the following passage:

*Then the Lord took Abram outside and said, "Look at the sky and see if you can count the stars. That's how many descendants you will have." Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord was pleased with him.*

GENESIS 15:5-6

Finally, we cannot leave our study of the way this carol links into the Bible without bringing to mind Jesus' own attitude to children.

*Some people brought their children to Jesus so that he could bless them by placing his hands on them. But his disciples told the people to stop bothering him. When Jesus saw this, he became angry and said, 'Let the children come to me! Don't try to stop them. People who are like these little children belong to the kingdom of God. I promise you that you cannot get into God's kingdom, unless you accept it the way a child does.' Then Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them by placing his hands on them.*

MARK 10:13-16

## Part Three

# USING AN EMBRACE THE MIDDLE EAST STORY RELATED TO THE CAROLS

For more information about the work of Embrace the Middle East, together with a downloadable PowerPoint presentation of images relating to the projects in this section, please go to [www.embraceme.org](http://www.embraceme.org).



## EMBRACE THE MIDDLE EAST'S WORK

Here are some of the partner organisations supported by Embrace. These could be presented as part of your carol service to illustrate the relevant theme.

### AWAY IN A MANGER

Themes: Homes and belonging

#### JL Schneller School, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

The Schneller School provides an education for 350 children and young people aged from five to 20 years. The school's story goes back to 1860, when a German pastor named Johann Ludwig Schneller gave ten orphans a home in Jerusalem during the persecution of Christians in Lebanon. Johann's grandson moved the school to its current location in 1952.

For some of the children, without a family or from deprived circumstances, the school is also a home. There are boarding facilities for around 170 boys and, in more recent years, Embrace provided funding for the school to open a girls' boarding home for the first time. During the July War of 2006, Schneller School also provided a safe shelter for 150 displaced people who were made homeless for several months.

Part Four

INVOLVING CHILDREN  
IN A CREATIVE CAROL SERVICE



## CREATIVE IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE CAROLS

### AWAY IN A MANGER

#### The first nativity

St Francis of Assisi is well known as the patron saint of animals and founder of the Franciscan monastic order. Around the year 1220, he celebrated Christmas by setting up the first nativity crib in the town of Greccio, near Assisi. He used real animals to create the nativity scene so that worshippers could contemplate the birth of Jesus in a direct way.

With this in mind, encourage people to think about the visual aids that might have been present at the first Christmas. Have the following items to help spark the imagination.

- A small bag of fresh hay
- A small bottle of water and a shallow bowl
- A baby's shawl or blanket
- A soft toy animal (preferably a cow, sheep or donkey)
- Glow stars, or stars cut from holographic paper

Hide the visual aids in different parts of the worship space and, before the singing of the carol, choose a few of the children to hunt out the hidden items. When all the items have been found, read the words of Luke 2:7: '[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.'

Next, ask the children which of the items would definitely have been present at the first Christmas and which wouldn't. Point out that although water is not mentioned in the nativity story in the Bible, it is very important to our well-being. Ask in what ways water might have been needed on that first Christmas night. We associate animals such as cattle, sheep and donkeys with the nativity story, but no creatures are mentioned in the biblical story. In what ways would the nativity story be different if we didn't include the animals?

Finally, think about the night sky and the vastness of God's creation. Stars are traditionally associated with the Christmas stories. Why is this? Stars are millions of light years away. Their light has travelled for many, many years before we see it shining in the night sky. It is amazing to think that the stars that lit the night sky at the beginning of creation are possibly the very ones seen at Jesus' birth, and visible to our eyes today. Imagine the stars mentioned in the carol being flung into space at the very start of creation. They were created by the hand of God and, in the imagery of this carol, are now looking at their maker—a tiny baby asleep on a bed of hay. You might like to consider darkening the worship space and projecting images of star clusters, such as the Milky Way or the Pleiades cluster, on to a screen or wall while the carol is being sung. Star images can be downloaded from the Internet on to a laptop for a PowerPoint display, or transferred to acetate for use with an OHP.

## GOD REST YOU MERRY, GENTLEMEN

### A Victorian Christmas

This carol draws us towards the nostalgia of Christmas celebrations over a hundred years ago and reminds us that, through the years, the Christmas message has remained the same, passed on from generation to generation.



## IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE CAROLS THROUGH POETRY

### AWAY IN A MANGER

#### The cost of love

Here is a poem that you could use to explore the message of salvation underlying this carol.

*There are too many noughts in the days of a star  
To measure its life and compare it with ours.  
Our eyes cannot see, our minds cannot grasp  
How something so small can be so very vast.*

*Lord of creation, your hands made the stars,  
A myriad jewels in a light-filled dome.  
Our eyes cannot see, our minds cannot grasp  
The vastness of you, Lord, who made us your own.*

*There are precious few years between crib and dust  
Yet you gave up heaven's grandeur to become one of us.  
Our eyes cannot see, our minds cannot grasp  
How much you surrendered to make eternity ours.*

*Lord of creation, you came as a babe,  
A borrowed manger, a borrowed grave.  
Our eyes cannot see, our minds cannot grasp  
The cost of your love poured out on the cross.*



## IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE CAROLS THROUGH DRAMA

### AWAY IN A MANGER

#### Home and away

This short drama sketch is designed to help tease out the meaning behind the familiar words of the carol. You will need two actors, each holding a copy of the *Bethlehem Carol Sheet*.

**Narrator:** (*Pensively*) Away... a way... way, way away.  
Absent... gone... not here... Oh, I don't get it!

**Child:** Hello!

**Narrator:** (*Startled*) Oh! Hello, there! Perhaps you can help me.

**Child:** I'll do my best...

**Narrator:** (*Opens the carol sheet at 'Away in a manger'*) Well, it's this carol, you see. It starts 'Away in a manger'. I'm not sure what that means. Away—that's... 'not here', 'absent'. Absent in a manger—I don't get it.

**Child:** (*Reads carol sheet*) I think the manger was in Bethlehem.

**Narrator:** Bethlehem? Bethlehem? The carol doesn't mention Bethlehem.

**Child:** Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem—that's where Jesus was born.

**Narrator:** Ah, well, there you are, then. The manger wasn't absent—it was present. It was Jesus who was away—away from home when he was born. *(Thinks)* Well, that's true—he was away from his heavenly home.

**Child:** *(Reads carol sheet)* Perhaps that's why the stars looked down where he lay?

**Narrator:** No mention of Mary, though. Or Joseph.

**Child:** Mary laid Jesus on a bed of hay.

**Narrator:** Well, that would explain it, then—mangers, hay, must have been a stable. No mention of that, either.

**Child:** *(Reads carol sheet)* There were cattle.

**Narrator:** Yes, well—that's definitely not in the Bible! Lowing cattle. Not exactly hygienic surroundings for a newborn baby, is it? Giving birth in a cattle stall! Whatever next?

**Child:** *(Reads carol sheet)* The baby awakes.

**Narrator:** Well, I'm not surprised! All that mooing going on—it's enough to waken any baby.

**Child:** But the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.

**Narrator:** Who says so? Most babies cry. Crying is what babies do—it's what they're best at. I don't think I've ever met a baby that didn't cry.

**Child:** Was Jesus a real baby?

**Narrator:** Of course he was! As real as you and me. But he was also God. *(Thinks)* Perhaps that's why the carol says he didn't cry. It's to make us think he was perfect—which, of course, he was, being God. But babies don't cry because they're naughty—they cry because they don't have any

other way to tell us what they want.

**Child:** (*Reads carol sheet*) Hmm... one moment Jesus is asleep on a bed of hay and the next he's looking down from the sky. What's all that about?

**Narrator:** You know what? I think you really *have* helped me to see why the 'away in a manger' bit is there! When Jesus grew up, he did amazing things and people began to realise that God was living among them. So, when Jesus died on the cross they were devastated. (*Pause*) But then he rose from the dead and went home to be with his heavenly Father.

**Child:** (*Reads carol sheet*) Is that why the carol turns into a prayer: 'Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me for ever and love me, I pray'?

**Narrator:** Absolutely! Jesus is with us every day of our lives, looking after us and blessing us with his love.

**Child:** (*Reads carol sheet*) And he fits us for heaven to live with him there!

**Narrator:** Yes! As well as being with us every day of our lives, Jesus has prepared a place for us to be with him in heaven.

**Child:** Home and away.

**Narrator:** Precisely! (*They do a high five*)



## IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE CAROLS THROUGH CREATIVE WORSHIP

### AWAY IN A MANGER

#### Held in Jesus' care

**You will need:** packs of card stars (available from office stationers), two or three bread baskets, pens or pencils, sticky tack and a large board covered with black sugar paper.

Place the stars in the baskets, making sure there are enough for everyone present. Invite everyone to take a star as they come into the worship space. Have the pens or pencils ready to distribute as needed. Place the board covered with black sugar paper at the front of the worship space and have the sticky tack nearby.

After the singing of the carol, ask everyone to write on the star the name of a person they want Jesus to hold in his care. Play the melody of the carol through gently and invite everyone to offer that person to Jesus' care by fixing the star to the black board. Finish with the following prayer:

*Lord Jesus, thank you that you were prepared to leave your heavenly home to live among us. Thank you for everything you have taught us about God, your heavenly Father. We lift the people whose names are written on these stars to you today. Please stay close by them for ever and love them. Bless each person named with your love and care and fit each one of us for heaven, to live with you there. Amen*



## IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE CAROLS THROUGH CREATIVE PRAYER

### AWAY IN A MANGER

#### Pebble pool prayers

Set up a pebble pool at the front of the worship space. For this, you will need a large shallow bowl, some large flat pebbles, one or two lengths of soft blue fabric, a large basket of small pebbles, some packs of confetti stars and a container in which to place the (loose) stars.

Fill the bowl with water and place the large pebbles in the bottom. Set the pool on a base of blue fabric. You will also need a large basket of smaller pebbles, enough for each person present. Read the words of Psalm 8 (see below), then invite people to take a small pebble out of the basket and place it in the water of the pebble pool. The small pebbles represent the things each one of us has thought, said or done that have caused us to turn away from Jesus' love. Invite people to think about those things as they slip their pebble into the pool.

Have the melody of the carol playing quietly in the background as people come up to place their pebbles in the pool.

*Our Lord and Ruler, your name is wonderful everywhere on earth! You let your glory be seen in the heavens above. With praises from children and from tiny infants, you have built a fortress. It makes your enemies silent, and all who turn against you are left speechless. I often think of the heavens your hands have made, and of the moon and stars you put in*

*place. Then I ask, 'Why do you care about us humans? Why are you concerned for us weaklings?' You made us a little lower than you yourself, and you have crowned us with glory and honour. You let us rule everything your hands have made. And you put all of it under our power—the sheep and the cattle, and every wild animal, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and all ocean creatures. Our Lord and Ruler, your name is wonderful everywhere on earth!*

PSALM 8

When everyone has placed their pebbles in the pool, invite them to cast a few confetti stars upon the water. Watch how the stars float on the surface of the water, while the pebbles sink to the bottom of the pool. The stars represent the promise of God that we are part of his family and that he will be with us always, covering our wrongdoings with his sacrificial love and fitting us for heaven and the promise of eternity.

### Star prayers

Have a large cut-out of a five-pointed star. Colour each point as suggested below. Each of the five points represents a different topic for prayer, as follows:

- First point (blue): Prayers for our world
- Second point (red): Prayers for our country
- Third point (green): Prayers for our community
- Fourth point (yellow): Prayers for our family and friends
- Fifth point (pink): Prayers for ourselves

Hold the star so that everyone can see it. Ask five volunteers to take turns in holding the star, each by a different point. As each point is chosen, pray for that particular topic.



## IDEAS FOR UNDER-FIVES

### AWAY IN A MANGER

In the poem below, use hand actions to describe the shape for the words in bold. For example:

- **Stable:** Hold up both hands facing each other (palms inward) and then bend the fingers to join in the middle to create a shelter.
- **Star:** With both hands, open and close the fingers several times in a twinkling gesture.
- **Baby:** Rock an imaginary baby in your arms.
- **Jesus:** Touch the palm of each hand with the index finger of the opposite hand (the sign for Jesus in British Sign Language).

*This is the **stable** where Jesus will lie.  
This is the **star** that appeared in the sky.  
This is the **baby** asleep on the hay.  
**Jesus** was born on the first Christmas Day.*

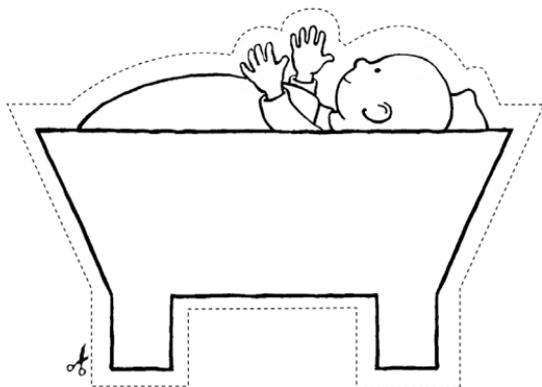
### Praying hands

This activity is linked to the suggestion that the first two lines of verse 3 could be a prayer for young children to learn.

In preparation, make a pair of praying hands for each child by drawing around a hand on folded card, placing the edge of the hand against the fold of the card. Cut through both pieces of card and open out. Make a label on which is printed the two-line prayer. Ask the children to stick a picture of Jesus in the manger on the inside of one hand, and the prayer label on the inside of the other hand.

## A Christmas tree decoration

In preparation, draw a simple outline picture of Jesus in a manger and reproduce it on to thin card. Cut around the outline. Punch a hole for a hanging thread. Either ask the children to colour in the picture or have pre-cut textured pieces for them to stick on to the picture—for example, wood effect paper for the crib, raffia for straw, vivelle or felt for the baby shape. Place a thread through the hole and tie the ends in a secure knot.



GOD REST YOU MERRY, GENTLEMEN

### Chorus only!

Teach children the chorus so that they can join in with that part of the carol. Prearrange a signal that children can look out for, so that they will know when to come in.

### Chime along

Use simple percussion instruments to accompany the chorus. Have someone to take the role of conductor to bring the children in at the right moment.

To purchase this book, visit [www.brfonline.org.uk](http://www.brfonline.org.uk)

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