

# ALTERNativity

Just God, Simply Christmas



## Issue 21. September 2008

Hello and welcome to this edition of our newsletter. The last year has been an exciting time for us and we're grateful to be able to celebrate our ever expanding work and especially pleased to introduce our new Women's Worker Carolyn who will be working with groups of women in deprived areas. See inside for more on that.

Many of you will know that Maggie retired recently to be with her husband David this year as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Keep up to date with their adventures on the Moderator's blog on the Church of Scotland Website. I'm sure you'll join me in thanking Maggie for steering Alternativity so well and wish her and David well.

As you can see from the diary we have quite a few things to look forward to this year, if you would like us to come and speak near you then get in touch. We'd be happy to come and either introduce Alternativity to a new audience or refresh some memories.

As the new Coordinator I'd like to give a big thank you to everyone who has supported Alternativity and give a special thank you to our team of volunteers, on whom we really do depend .

Thanks again.

Matt

4th October	WEAVE Conference in Langham
5th October	Newport On Tay Workshops covering worship and lifestyle
15th October 7.30pm	Howard Centre. Kilmarnock. Open evening.
12th November	Christmas Fayre in Glasgow City Chambers
15th November	Recharge. Youth leaders event in Glasgow
17th November	St John's Guild Largs
23rd November	Women's workshops day @ the Bield at Blackruthven
See website	Ardrossan open evening
See website	Ayr open evening

# Introducing Carolyn

Hello! I'm delighted to be working for ALTERnativity as Women's Worker! Why me?

Scene one: last December ... I've gone away for an Advent quiet day with a friend ... she brings ALTERnativity's "Christmas – Celebration or Survival?" out of her bag and hands it to me. I'm immediately drawn to the colourful cover and challenging title ... an hour later, I've read it through and am committed to using it this year with a women's group ... somewhere! "That's the best resource material I've seen for a long time" I declare!

Scene two: 3 months later ... the same friend emails me details about a new job being advertised ... it's for a Women's Worker with ALTERnativity! I think about it ... and apply.

Scene three: now ... I've been in post 3 months! This is a dream come true!

When I was one of the ministers working with Drumchapel Churches Partnership in Glasgow, I was very aware that Christmas often brought more stress and pain than blessing. I discovered a new initiative called the "Blue Christmas Service" which begins to address this dilemma through worship; the folk who came to the community centre that evening were very appreciative of it. But I wished then for something more to help ease the strains ...



One of the big plus points, for me, of "Christmas – Celebration or Survival?" is that it can be used with or without direct reference to the Christian story. Just because many people know so little about the birth of Jesus, doesn't mean the effects of consumerism, breakdown of relationships, lack of self-worth, bereavement, unemployment, escape them. Nor does it mean that they need be excluded from discovering the 'real meaning' of Christmas; just perhaps they are the very folk who glimpse it most truly.

So here I am to encourage and help both community groups and congregations to use this excellent resource. I can be as hands-on or hands-off as is appropriate – all you need to do is contact me at [carolyn@alternativity.org.uk](mailto:carolyn@alternativity.org.uk).

I'm looking forward to hearing from you!

Carolyn Smyth

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Christmas, Celebration or Survival costs £9 plus 20% P&P and is available from the address below. Cheques should be payable to ALTERNATIVITY.

ALTERnativity 759A Argyle Street, GLASGOW G3 8DS 0141 221 4242

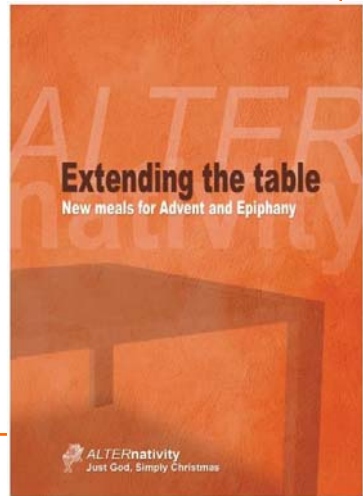
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**New Resource**  
**Extending the Table**

After the success of our original advent meal we are pleased to reveal our newest resource, **Extending the table**. This includes a meal to celebrate Advent and another to continue the celebration through to Epiphany. The central theme of the Advent meal is bread, bread for the journey, shared bread, Jesus as the bread of life, how much we take for granted when we say "give us our daily bread". The second meal for Epiphany helps to counter the idea that Christmas day is the end rather than the beginning.

Extending the table can be ordered for £5+p&p  
**Special Offer – The Advent Meal and Extending the table can be purchased as a set for £8 + P&P**



**Saturday 29th November**

A simple telling of some verses from Luke 2, sung to the tune O Waly, waly

It happened many years ago  
Upon a night of frost and snow;  
It took place in a cattle shed,  
The only place to find a bed.

Some shepherds in a field asleep,  
While keeping watch beside their sheep,  
Saw up above a wondrous light,  
So many angels, glorious, bright.

“Glory to God” the angels sang,  
While round and round the echoes rang,  
All telling of a baby’s birth -  
“Goodwill to men and peace on earth.”



**ALTERNativity**  
Just God, Simply Christmas

The shepherds rose, hearts filled with joy,  
To see this new-born baby boy;  
And to this child as gifts they took  
A new-born lamb, a shepherd’s crook.

They reached the cave, they stepped inside,  
A flickering lamp their only guide,  
And worshipped there the Holy One,  
The Prince of Peace, and God’s own Son.

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## Nativity Sets

In many cities there are now Christmas shops where at all times of the year one can purchase a variety of ornaments and decorations, many of which have more to do with the Christmas Santa and snowmen than the true story of the nativity.

Several years ago in the Polish town of Wroclaw I visited a small chapel which

But if you are ever in Innsbruck, capital of the Austrian Tyrol, go outside the main train station and take the tram to Fulpmes in the Stubaital. From the tram terminus walk up to the main road and go left following the road round to the church. Across the road and at the side of a bank you will find the entrance to a wonderful new museum – the Nativity Set Museum.



If your idea of a nativity set is based on small carved or ceramic figures you are in for an eye-opener. There are large cases peopled by small model figures representing the Holy Family, sheep, camels, shepherds, angels,

was filled with nativity set characters and was lit up with fairy lights. It even had a representation of the last Pope blessing the assembled personalities. It had been so popular when first created for Christmas that the Priest decided to leave it up all year round for tourists.

Eastern potentates and retinues and Herod and his soldiers all in a pseudo Eastern setting but with a background of Alpine mountainous splendour; iron Holy Family; gilt figures; and pictures of the lifesize models of the Christmas characters which were used each year in local churches.....

In a Bethlehem gift emporium there are carved nativity sets of all sizes and prices as well as small ceramic painted plates with scenes of the nativity for a few shekels. As few visitors cross the barricade of the Wall to reach Bethlehem, the sale of these items is important to the local economy.

If, however you cannot get to Fulpmes, do go on to the website [www.krippenmuseum.at](http://www.krippenmuseum.at) and get a flavour of what delighted me this summer.

Marjory

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## Success Stories

From time to time people get in touch to tell us what impact Alternativity has had on their celebrations, a selection is included below.

Last Christmas one of the youth leaders in our church decided to arrange an Advent meal and invite people to come together and have an evening of reflection + spend time together. It was good to see groups of all different ages come together and have a great night. It was also nice to be part of an Advent meal and not have to arrange anything.

“The Alternativity labyrinth was a peaceful and challenging way to reflect on what Christmas is about; the darkness and the flickering lights added a sense of wonder at the gift of the love that came down at Christmas”

“This year, because of the discussions from the pack, I made a determined effort to slow down and actually spend time with people.”

“I found the pack incredibly useful in a number of settings. Christmas eve service with the whole church, Christmas assembly at the high school, SU groups, new members class, my Sunday evening youth group.”

## Not Just For Christmas

In July I was invited to be part of an academic workshop titled “Not Just For Christmas”. The aim of the 2 day session was to bring together people from different walks of life to discuss popular culture, consumption and religious observance at Christmas. The workshop included people from the fields of, geography, visual culture, consumption studies and social history, alongside those in theology and homiletics, expository and religious broadcasting with participants coming from New York, Holland, Galway, Nottingham, Exeter, Canterbury, Warwick, London, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

The Workshop was part of a wider project which hopes to help people to understand the decisions they face in interpreting, understanding and engaging with ethical, moral and spiritual issues presented to them through visual culture and consump-

tion and will hopefully provide an informed user guide on this.

The sessions were really interesting and it was great to discover that there were people from other fields and countries who were engaging with a number of the same topics and challenges that Alternativity is interested in. The opinions and observations of each of the participants brought to the sessions were thought provoking and insightful.

It was encouraging that Alternativity was invited to be part of this and hopefully a recognition of work we've done in the past.

There are more sessions planned for the remainder of this year and I'll keep you updated on how things progress. Keep an eye out and you might hear or see some more about it in the media.

Matt

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# Advent

**“The child is not meant to die, but to be forever fresh born.”**

Advent is a time of waiting, a time of expectancy, a time of mystery. Advent is the yearly reminder that to be human is to embrace our humanity, not in the form of a ‘respectable’ adult, but in the form of a dependant child. As adults we persist in our attempts to lose, hide or deny our childlikeness, our essential humanity. God incarnate embraced true ‘being’; Jesus embodied the posture that we all must strive to recover, that of “forever fresh born.”

The desire to graduate from childhood to adulthood is, at the core, the desire to control, to know like our Eden ancestors, to be like God, to become more autonomous. Children are necessarily, unapologetically, and often embarrassingly (to our adult sense and sensibilities), childlike. Children and adults have been constructed into two distinct entities; children play while adults work, children need while adults provide, children learn, adults teach. The relationship between adults and children is a hierarchical one, with adults unequivocally placed on top. There is something necessary about this ‘relationship’ structure – while adults and children share equal rights as human beings, adults bear greater responsibilities, but is it necessary to leave the child behind? George MacDonald, quoted above, did not think so, and he is not alone; MacDonald’s vision for essential humanity is rooted in the God-child Himself.

That God came as a child is indeed a scandal. How did God expect to keep control of His salvation plan for the world as a baby? The work of salvation sounds like something to be trusted only to a

respectable adult. Did God not see that He put all of us at perilous risk with His crazy plan? I believe God knew exactly what He was doing; God decided to teach humanity an important lesson – to be human is to be like a child. This does not mean that we do not ‘grow up,’ but that in each stage of life human beings must retain their fundamental childlikeness, allowing it to be rebirthed at each transition.

But what does it mean to be a child, and to be “forever fresh born”? Advent is the perfect time to ponder these questions. As we wait for the birth of the world’s saviour, let us reclaim our childlike ‘to-be-ness’ in the light of His expectant arrival as the most vulnerable of children. We must reject the false desire to control – this is mere illusion. Instead we must embrace the childlike postures of play, neediness, and learning. Before the God-child, “fresh born children” are liberated in the knowledge that even their most clever and sophisticated endeavors are like the playing of a child; paradoxically important and unnecessary. We must celebrate our neediness expectantly; and delight in learning the wonders of a creation that is yet to be known even in part.

This Advent cast off the farce of respectability that we as adults have taken on, so that when the time of waiting is over we can play, need and learn like, with and before the God-child, the answer to centuries of collective prayers. The time is at hand to be “fresh born.”

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# Money Matters.

Over the years Alternativity has found funding from many different sources, generous donations from supporters, grants from large organisations, subscriptions from members\* and from sales of resources.

## ALTERnativity Advocates

This year we are inviting congregations to partner with Alternativity and become champions. Many churches adopt a charity for a year or have special offerings which are given to charities to support their work. Would your church consider supporting Alternativity financially and publicise its work and resources?

## Legacy Giving

In the midst of our celebrations it seems unsuitable to refer to our future demise. Yet every year thousands of people remember charities in their wills, the vast majority going to large national or international charities. We see legacy giving as an opportunity to make a significant and lasting contribution to our work. Funding raised will be used to help us to challenge injustice, exclusion and poverty and to help us raise awareness of the relationships between Christmas and poverty.

With the help of gifts we'll be more able to regain the spiritual Christmas, to bring worship and reflection into focus and continue to offer help to the many people who want to focus on the presence rather than the presents.

If you think you might be able to help and want more information then contact us using the details below or email [info@alternativity.org.uk](mailto:info@alternativity.org.uk)

\* Membership is usually £10 per year and includes discount on resources and access to a members only section of our website with exclusive resources and ideas.

While we're talking about money we'd like to thank the following organisations for their generosity in helping to fund the work of Alternativity.



The Novum Trust

trust greenbelt



SCOTTISH CHURCHES  
COMMUNITY TRUST



The Souter  
Charitable Trust
























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## ALTERNADOKU ( with thanks to Marjory Williamson)

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