

When the future is more
uncertain than usual
we wait and long
for the gift of givens
offering permission or denial,
setting the boundaries
of what we might imagine;
anticipating news
in hope or dread,
our plans cannot set
until we know the limits
they will occupy.
And so we watch this space,
still formless and void,
waiting for definition enough
that we may fill it with
whatever good ideas will fit.

Where there was an embrace
there is now a gap even between
outstretched finger tips.
And yet all the unspent love
is poured into the void
preserving distance
and preserving life.
And so we watch this space,
these two metres that separate us
and yet bind us
in our care for one another.

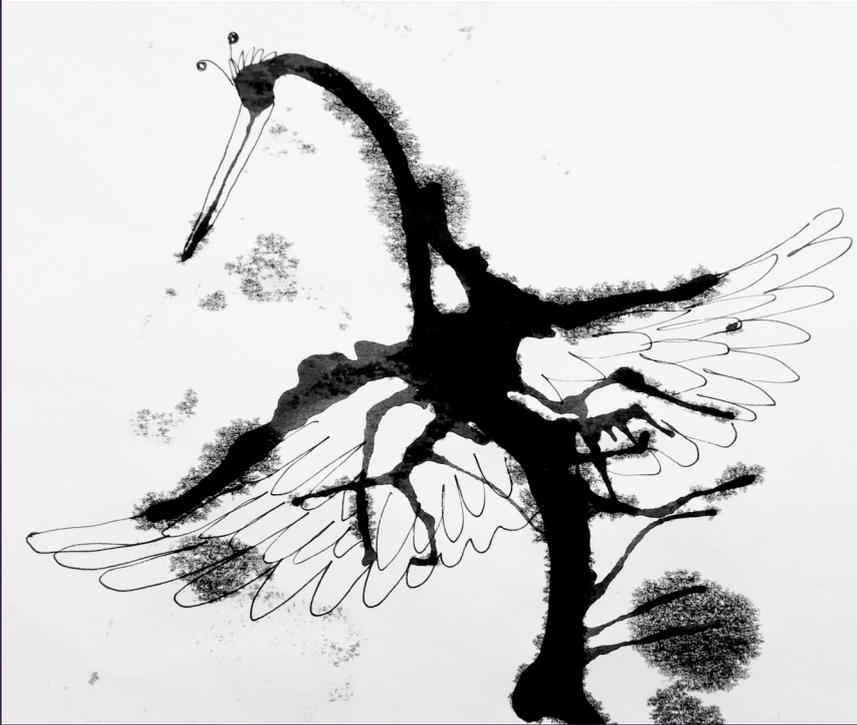
We pick out those
we have not seen for a while.
And hunt for the faces of all
we hope will be there.
There is always someone missing:
missing in person
or missing on screen;
ninety-nine looks awfully
like a hundred
and until we find their absence
we watch this space
so that what is missing
does not become lost.

**We
stay
alert.
As the night
watch looks
for the morning
we long for God.
In uncertainty,
in distance,
with the
missing;
in doing,
in being,
in worship
in the
world,
we
watch
this
space
for
God
is in
this
space.**

In everything
that is anxious
and traumatic
and heartbreaking;
in everything
that is busy
and rushed
and burdensome;
in everything
that never seems
to stop or slow
we dig out with bare hands
a well from which to drink
finally sitting back as the water
impossibly rises up
And so we watch this space
and give thanks
for the blessing of a moment
of being and not doing.

The crib figures are freed
from their tissue paper beds
and placed one by one
into the stable
or on their journey.
We arrange them,
as artists have always done,
with just enough room between
the two nearest shepherds
for one more visitor
to kneel at the manger.
And so we watch this space
and as the last figure
takes their place
our fingers pause
to touch the straw,
and we know in our heart
that we are that last one,
for whom there is always room,
and we kneel in wonder
at heaven touching earth.

Improvising



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Most of us find uncertainty difficult, especially if we have responsibility for other people, buildings, or budgets, and we are not just concerned with our own future, but with others' future, too. The pandemic has brought with it a huge amount of uncertainty for those whose lives have always felt secure until now, and it's vastly increased the levels of uncertainty and anxiety for those who have always had to live precariously. It's also brought new and different 'givens' - limitations and rules around which we have been learning to live and work.

Human beings are adaptable, and these new 'givens' have been a catalyst for some amazing creativity, but for others, creativity has felt stifled. The activities below may help us unleash the creative potential of givens, to live with some of the uncertainty, and to become more comfortable with the discomfort of improvising, finding potential even in what looks unpromising.

Take a blank piece of paper (scrap paper is perfect) and pour some ink or paint onto it. (any ink or runny paint is fine). Tilt the paper this way and that, and/or blow on the ink blot, to let the ink do what it wants— you may be able to affect it a bit, but you won't be able to control it. Look at the shapes, like you might look at clouds, and say what you see. Feel free to add details around the ink blot to make it into whatever you want, or just into a beautiful pattern.

In a small group or just with a partner, one of you starts by saying something about a topic, and the next person responds beginning with 'yes, and...' - building on what has gone before, even if it's a bit random. Notice the connections you make.

Check out Jack Monroe's blog posts about using leftovers and supermarket bargains to improvise meals—does someone in your community have the skill and experience to help others feel confident in making the most of what's available?

Filling the space between

Have a seat...

You're welcome to sit here, to help keep social distance.



Please don't sit here...

...an invisible angel is helping us to keep social distance



One of the hardest things about the pandemic has been the distance that it has made us keep from loved ones. Distance is absolutely an expression of love, but it is not one that we ever wanted, and we have learned new ways and rediscovered old ways of connecting with one another when we can't do so in person. The activities suggested here may help process some of the grief that we are experiencing because we are having to keep our distance.

If your church building lends itself to this, how about using the gaps between available seats in a creative way? Photographs of people who can't be there in person (look at what [this Church did during lockdown](#)) or artworks created by members of the community, life size figures from the nativity story, or depictions / models of angels, could all be used to fill the church and soften and redeem the spaces between people.

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there is now a gap even between
outstretched finger tips.
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in our care for one another.

If your church has people who knit, or crochet, or sew, could you encourage a project to make blankets or prayer shawls that could be quarantined and then distributed? There's something about the sensory nature of a handmade blanket that allows the maker's love and care to become part of its fabric, and for them to experience something of the love of the recipient. Blanket squares can be made separately then combined.

The work of talented photographer Kadija Saye, the who died in Grenfell Tower, was featured in an outward-looking exhibition during lockdown—the gallery displayed her photographs in the windows so that people could see them from the street. What might an advent-themed art exhibition look like in your community if people were encouraged to put their pictures in their windows (encouraging local businesses to join in as well), and perhaps using 'what three words' to let people know the locations of participating households. This could be a focus for the themes of peace, hope, love and joy, building on window artwork supporting the NHS.

Missing but not lost



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we have not seen for a while.
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we hope will be there.
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or missing on screen;
ninety-nine looks awfully
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The pandemic has brought some of the cracks in society into sharp relief. In our own work and life we will probably have found that the systems we usually use don't quite seem watertight enough to ensure that we think of everything, and that nothing gets lost or forgotten. And we will be very aware of the people who we usually see but can't see at the moment, and, crucially, who is most at risk of being 'missing' during this time—who has become more invisible, who has less access to community, to support, than before? And who do we now see, online, but weren't seeing before, and how will we preserve those relationships when everything does turn back to something like normal? The activities below may be helpful in reflecting on how we can make sure the missing don't become lost.

Would your community be able to organise a letter writing scheme, including those who are having to isolate / shield, and may not have good access to the internet? What about a 'view from my window' drawing or photography project, to make visible those who might otherwise feel forgotten?

How might you include contributions from those who cannot be in church (either online or in person) in worship? Writing prayers, offering photographs or artwork for use in worship, or written/ recorded reflections may all help people to be seen and heard even in their absence.

What might a collaborative creative project look like in your church or community? One church on London gave everyone square of fabric during lockdown and invited them to decorate it responding to a prompt, and send it back, at which point it was turned into an altar frontal. Could your congregation be incited to respond to peace, hope, love and joy as themes, each sending in something that can contribute to something greater than the sum of its parts?

Space for being



Whether COVID19 has left us with more to do than ever, or with a sudden loss of work and structure, it can be hard to create intentional spaces in which we can focus on being replenished and renewed. There are many excellent practices in the Christian tradition to help with this. The suggestions below may help if you are new to this or your usual ways of creating space aren't working.

Download some colouring sheets intended to promote mindfulness, and take just a few minutes a day to focus just on what's in front of you, paying attention to the colours and shapes and not to the other things that may be on your mind—and you will also be creating something beautiful.

Light a candle and watch the flame for just a few minutes each night before you go to bed. Focus on the light and the warmth. You may like to use this time to pray, or just to breathe, letting the natural pace of your breathing flicker the flame.

Draw round a mug or bowl in the middle of a piece of paper. Use the area outside the circle to write or draw all the things that are on your mind, and then focus on the empty circle itself, letting your mind let go of the worries just for a few moments.

In everything
that is anxious
and traumatic
and heart-breaking;
in everything
that is busy
and rushed
and burdensome;
in everything
that never seems
to stop or slow
we dig out with bare hands
a well from which to drink
finally sitting back as the water
impossibly rises up
And so we watch this space
and give thanks
for the blessing of a moment
of being and not doing.

Clear a little space at home, or at work. It can be as small as it needs to be. Set it aside as a special place during advent, a focus for your own need for space. You may like to define it by using a cloth—a scarf or serviette is fine—or by lining items up to make a little wall around it. You might like to put a candle in it, (as long as it's not left lit, and it's out of the reach of children or pets), or a favourite prayer,

If you have a notebook that's not been written in yet, save it for the start of advent, and find a time each day just to write down one word on a new page that connects you with hope, peace, love or joy. Spend a moment with that word, and if you like, doodle around the word or illustrate it in some way to help still your mind.

Space for one more



© Jesus Mafa [retrieved from Vanderbilt Digital Christian Art library](#)

The crib figures are freed from their tissue paper beds and placed one by one into the stable or on their journey. We arrange them, as artists have always done, with just enough room between the two nearest shepherds for one more visitor to kneel at the manger. And so we watch this space and as the last figure takes their place our fingers pause to touch the straw, and we know in our heart that we are that last one, for whom there is always room, and we kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth.

It may be harder this year to enable members of a church community to participate in building and populating a crib scene together. But doing so can be a really important part of preparing to 'make room for Jesus', especially for families. These suggestions may help people to engage physically with the nativity and its characters, and to place themselves into the story.

Encourage people to pick out the cards they receive during Advent that feature nativity scenes, and to reflect on how the scene is depicted in each. Who is there? Who is absent? How are the figures set up? Where is the viewer standing? You could encourage reflection on how easy it might be for people to see themselves as part of the scene—it is easier to join in a scene if you see people who look like you. Encourage people to think about who might feel excluded from Christmas this year, and how to make your church's Christmas more accessible.

Encourage people to set up a crib scene at home if they have one, or to make or draw one if not. They can think about who they want to include and what materials they might use for the figures—being as imaginative as they like! Then invite them to find a way to place themselves into their scene—they could draw themselves in, or make a little plasticine figure, cut a paper person out of paper, or use photo editing software.... How does it feel to have a place in the nativity scene? How many ways are there in your set-up for more people to be added? Is there anyone else you'd like to include (perhaps family that you're not able to see)? You could add them in and then send them a photo of the finished scene.

Many churches run a Posada during Advent, with a nativity set travelling between homes each day in the run up to Christmas. This year, we'll need to experiment with virtual posadas, or other ways of keeping the tradition going that don't involve direct contact. If you have an idea, share it!