

## **[Congregation's Name]: A 2011 Expanded Advent Test Site**

by

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First of all I want to express my thanks to you for taking the opportunity to observe a longer Advent season this year. St John's will be joining a rather exclusive group of several parishes in North America that are participating in this venture. In past years congregations in the dioceses of Newark, Rochester, Georgia, Ohio, Southern Ohio, Olympia (WA) and New Westminster (BC) have participated and some will again this year. This will help build a body of reflected experience over time in this effort of liturgical renewal. This year we are also adding congregations from the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Methodist Church.

### **The Proposal and Its Origin**

I am the founder and convener of the *Advent Project Seminar* in the North American Academy of Liturgy (people who are liturgical scholars and/or teach worship in the seminaries of a broad spectrum of churches including Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United Church of Christ). The aim of the seminar is to promote a calendar change in our liturgical year that would expand Advent to the seven weeks before Christmas. In our fifth year of existence we are in the process of gathering data from trial usage in selected test sites prior to engaging any official process of calendar alteration in any tradition.

### **Why Expand Advent?**

Two principal reasons come to mind. First, the churches long ago lost the Advent season to what I call the "Christmas culture" of our society. We all know that Christmas decorations and gift items begin to appear in all kinds of stores way before Hallowe'en. After October 31 the manifestation becomes complete! By the time the new church year begins a month later in December with Advent I, the churches are tempted to make the season exclusively a four-week journey to Bethlehem. But that focus is only one pole (and secondary at that!) of the Advent season. The primary one is beginning the new church year with a steady look at the "end times," that is, at the goal of fulfillment of all the implications of Christ's resurrection for humanity and, indeed, the entire creation. This is usually called the "kingdom" or the "reign of God." That emphasis is intended to give the beginning of the annual cycle of the liturgical year an emphasis that will help Christians to engage ever more deeply in Christ's mission of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. Having these things firmly in heart, mind, and will we may be able more authentically to enter into the yearly round from Bethlehem to the Passion, Pentecost, and the celebration of All Saints that concludes the year. Starting Advent in November

would, at least, give the primary focus of the season a chance before we are all overcome by carols in Mall music.

The second reason for an expanded season has to do with setting before us in our worship, rooted in Scripture, an alternative and, I think, more authentic vision of the "end times" or the "reign of God" than those otherwise so effectively media-touted ones offered in fundamentalist, millennialist, or rapturist versions. Whether this is possible and effective is, of course, part of the test in trial usage.

### **What Will Change?**

Very little. ("Whew, what a relief!" I hear you exclaim as you read this). The lections (readings) for an expanded Advent season are in place as the ones we already hear in our three-year cycle. Listen closely this year and see if, in fact, there is not a change in the atmosphere and tone of the lessons after All Saints' Day really concludes the long season of Pentecost. There will be, of course, some musical emphases that appear in hymns specifically for Advent. Weekly antiphons that are based in the Messianic titles for Christ that form the verses of "O come, O come Emmanuel" may also help us focus on the major theme of the season. The Prayers of the People may be more thematically oriented as well. At this writing, we are still working on the logistics of providing a seven-candle Advent wreath (as usual, "the devil is in the details"). For the rest, Advent blue will replace Pentecost green three weeks earlier this year; the Eucharistic liturgy will remain the standard for worship on the Lord's Day; and, finally, with an expanded Advent, we may come to the celebration of Bethlehem with a clearer understanding of why we are embarking once again on the annual pilgrimage of the liturgical year.

### **Your Participation & Reflection**

My hope, of course, is that this all-too-brief explanation will help in raising your awareness of what Advent is all about and why we are engaged in this trial usage. Such awareness is singularly important for participation in the liturgy—one of the glories of our tradition is that we worship as active participants and not just as observers or audience. Beyond that, there will be (you have surely seen this coming) a brief questionnaire toward the end of the season that will solicit your informed reflections on the proposal of this calendar change as actually experienced in worship. Many thanks in advance to your leadership and to you for helping to discover whether an expanded Advent would be a desirable development in the life and mission of the whole Church!

Please also see our web site: <http://www.theadventproject.org> for further information.