

A Church Year Line

On your marks:

This is a teaching activity to help people understand more the pattern of the Church year and is particularly appropriate for churches that have marking the different Church seasons as a strong part of their practice.

Get set:

You need to be able to hang a line across the front of the church, in a place and at a height that is visible to the whole congregation. You will need about 56 A4 cards in purple, red, green, white and gold. The following reflects the practice of one church, (but do check your own church's practice!):

10 purple (note—one is replaced by a red card, as Palm Sunday is part of Lent but is denoted with red) for the times of preparation

9 white and

8 gold for the times of celebration

3 red

26 green for 'ordinary' time (this comes from 'ordinal numbers' and refers to the way the Sundays are numbered.)

It is helpful to add some simple line drawings to the key cards, for example a star and manger on the white card for Christmas day; a palm branch on the red card for Palm Sunday; a cross on the red card for Good Friday; an empty tomb for Easter Sunday; a mountain and a cloud for Ascension Day; flames on the red card for Pentecost; a crown for Christ the King Sunday. The drawings provide helpful marker points, particularly for those people who may not be so familiar with these terms.

You will also need 55 clothes pegs. It is also helpful to involve one or two other people to help people peg up the cards in the correct place, freeing the 'narrator' to 'tell the story'.

Go!

As people arrive, give out a card to everyone, and more than one if necessary, explaining that they will be needed later in the service.

1. Begin by talking about calendars and how they can be indispensable items at the beginning of a new year. They 'map out' the year to come, especially when we mark in significant dates—birthdays, anniversaries, holidays. The way we mark time indicates what is really important to us. Just as our calendars reflect what is important in your lives,

so the Church has a calendar that reflects what is most important to its way of life. And just as we often use colours to represent our moods at different times, so the Church uses colours to represent the moods of its particular seasons.

Together we are going to show how the Church marks time here at the front on this line. Explain that everyone will be asked to bring up their card at different points in the talk to peg on to the line.

2. We start the Church's timeline with the three high points of the church's year around which everything else is anchored:

Christmas—the time when we celebrate the Incarnation, that God became human in a baby. (Place the white Christmas card at the beginning of the line).

Easter—the time when we celebrate God raising Jesus from death to new life. (Place the gold Easter card in the middle of the line.) Explain that white and gold are the colours of celebration.

Pentecost—the time when we celebrate God sending the Holy Spirit to the disciples and through their ministry and witness the Church of which we are a part began. (Place the red Pentecost card to the right of the middle of the line.)

3. The Church's timeline doesn't start with Christmas, though, but before that, in Advent. The beginning of the new year for the Church is the first Sunday in Advent. We need time to prepare for celebrations: Advent is the time when we get ready for the great celebration of Christmas. The colour of Advent is purple, and it stretches over four Sundays. (Add in four purple cards before the Christmas card.) Purple times are times of standing back, of thinking and reflecting about ourselves and our lives with God. But they are also times when we are encouraged to look forward, to catch a glimpse of something amazing that is about to happen.

4. Christmas is a very important time and in the Church it lasts for longer than one day! The celebration of Christmas runs into the celebration of Epiphany, when we remember the Wise Men visiting Jesus, through to Candlemas when we remember Mary and Joseph taking the baby Jesus to the temple to be blessed by Simeon. This great white season stretches over five Sundays. (Add on five white cards after the Christmas card.)

5. Easter is also a very important time. We can't truly celebrate it if we have not spent time getting ready for it, and so we have Lent—a longer time of preparation. This stretches over six Sundays. (Add in six purple cards before the Easter card.)

6. Easter is such an important time that it goes on for 50 days, called the Great Fifty days, and stretches over six Sundays. (Add on six white cards after the Easter card.) The great time of celebration for Easter also becomes the time of preparation for Pentecost, because during this time we celebrate the Ascension—the time when Jesus ascended to heaven so that he could be with all people in every time and in every place. (Insert an extra white card for Ascension Day.) Between then and Pentecost we have a time of waiting with the disciples as they waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had promised.

7. We also have a low time—the time from Palm Sunday through to the Crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday. Although part of Lent, Palm Sunday is always symbolized with red. (Exchange the last purple for a red card with a palm branch.) Red is the colour for Good Friday. (Add on the red card with a cross.)

8. We have some more special days to add in: Trinity Sunday (add on the white card with the Trinity symbol after Pentecost); towards the end of the year we remember and celebrate All Saints Day (add in the white card with a halo) and then, the last Sunday of the year, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday (add on a white card with crown) when we celebrate Christ as King and Lord of heaven and earth. (You might like to add in a card to show your own church's dedicated saint.)

9. In between all these high times, low times and preparation times, we have what's called 'ordinary' time. To say it's 'ordinary' time can convey a sense of it not being very important, but not so. It is from *ordinal* as in *ordinal* numbers and it's because of the way these weeks are counted. Green is the colour for ordinary time: it is the colour of growth. During this season we focus on what it means to be the Church—Christ's body—carrying on his work of transformation in the world. It depends when Easter falls as how the 'ordinary' time is spread through the year. In 2007, 'ordinary time' stretched over three Sundays before Lent (place three green cards between the end of the Christmas season and Lent) and over 21 Sundays between Trinity Sunday and All Saints' Sunday, (place 21 cards after the Trinity card), and also over two Sundays between All Saints Sunday and Christ the King Sunday (add in two green cards).

10. Conclusion: through the Christian Year we are re-enacting the life of Jesus from waiting, through his birth, ministry, death and resurrection, to the birth of the Church and its witness in the world today. Whereas our own personal calendars mark human time, the Church calendar marks sacred time. For us as Christians, our spiritual lives can be nourished if we can enter into this pattern of sacred time, both together and individually, and interweave our own human time with sacred time.

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