

Performance Notes:

The length of time it takes to perform the play is 20 minutes. It was originally written to be performed before the children's Christmas Eve service, but it could be presented as a longer, stand-alone play by adding Christmas carols (sung by the congregation or a children's choir) at different transition points in the script.

There are three songs sung a cappella in the script, so there is no need for musical accompaniment. The first is a Christmas version of "Old Mac Donald Had a Farm" sung by Daddy Dog (or Dove, Donkey, Cat) and the animal family. The song in the middle of the play is sung by Mary to baby Jesus. We have used "Isn't He Beautiful" by John Wimber, but you could also use the first verse of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or the first lines of "Silent Night" sung slowly as a lullaby. If you have a Mary who does not want to sing, let the song be sung by someone else, or a group as Mary smiles down at the baby and rocks Him in her arms. The last song is the chorus of "Go Tell It On the Mountain," sung by the Mama and her family as they skip down the aisle at the end of the play.

As far as assigning parts, if more than one person wants the same part, put names in a hat, close your eyes and pull out a name. Let God pick them.

Also, not everyone wants to be an actor or an actress. It is perfectly wonderful if they want to be included and just watch and be a part of the storyteller's family.

And (to answer an often-asked question) we do not use a pillow under Mary's outfit to indicate a "before and after" arriving to Bethlehem.

There are four plays with a different storyteller in each, but the plays are primarily the same. My idea was for churches to make the Play a tradition.

As children act out different characters over the years, they would have a new perspective of the Bethlehem experience, and a new understanding of God's truths.

Each of the four characters represent the themes of the four advent candles: Grammie Cat – Hope; Nana Dove – Peace; Daddy Dog – Joy; and Grandpa Donkey – Love. In the book, “*Grammie Cat’s Christmas*” each character has a chapter in the book where they tell a story about themselves and how they found God’s hope, peace, joy and love, with the intention of teaching children how to find God’s hope, peace, joy and love for themselves. Each story could be added to the Sunday School class the four weeks leading to Christmas, or at a rehearsal, creating opportunities for us to open our hearts and experience and learn more about Him.

You could also offer a special gift or surprise for children reciting from memory the Bible verse related to the theme, found at the end of each chapter of the book. (Some kids need more help to recite from memory, so being “close” and trying, or saying the verse together as a group works great.) I created games I played with my Sunday School classes to help children memorize a Bible verse. See “*Activities*” for a list of games.

During church rehearsals, it can be a long time for young little shepherds and sheep, or wisemen, or manger animals to wait to get to their part in the play. I had a Christmas Box with coloring books and small crayon packs, and the kids would sit and color while waiting. At the end of the practice, they would return the coloring books and crayons to the Christmas Box for the next rehearsal.

As the play progresses, Mary, Joseph, Angel and the Innkeeper, enter and exit (stage left) acting out the Christmas story as told by the storyteller and the Narrator. The shepherds with their sheep enter from the back of the church. The wisemen with a camel following the star, enter from the back of the church. No words need to be spoken, or sounds made by the actors who are pantomiming the Bible story, even though I often have had children and parents add their own lines. On “The Characters” list, the recommendation for a child or an adult to fill the role is just a suggestion. Have fun with it.

Make a game out of practice time together.

- Two games I have played before with my children in Sunday School are classic charades (see “*Activities*”), and a version of it where 3 people take turns acting out the same character pulled out of the hat. The “audience,” armed with soft little stuffed animals, then votes for their favorite act by throwing their stuffed animal at them. The person with the most stuffed animals thrown at them wins a prize. Of course, the younger kids are often shy, so after their first try, either myself or another person will usually call out loudly, “I think _____ (Johnny) did great!” That is the cue for others to throw their animal at the brave little actor. It is about complimenting and encouraging self-expression and creativity. I believe everyone should win by being themselves.
- My #1 rule. “We only use kind words!” Play acting is self-expression. My classes have heard me say this often, “We only use kind words!” I repeat it loudly when someone has broken the rule. In a large classroom full of kids, after watching someone act out a part, I would have the children raise their hand to say what they liked about the performer’s act. In small groups, I would go around the room and let each person say something kind about the performer’s act.

The idea behind casting adults/parents in this children’s play was to create an opportunity for families to make memories together. Whether the parent is in the play or not, the child is performing with other adults and rehearsing at home becomes a game when parents and children imagine themselves as the different characters in the play and have fun together. By making up their own actions and sometimes adding lines to the play, (because pantomime actions are always open to adding words, especially when it comes from the actor’s heart) families can add their own joy to performing the play. (Get the play director’s approval, before adding them to the script.) Please feel free to create and improvise, and travel together to the inside of the Christmas story.