

Omega – Leader's introduction

Beginning with an end in mind...

Christmas is big business and it's booming. Even in recession, high street and online spending is worth billions – and many families report that they spend half the year saving up for it, or paying it back. Estimates put our Christmas spending in the UK at around £20 billion in 2011 – more than ten times what the world's poorest 1.4 billion people are living on each year. And the Christmas period in 2011 accounted for approximately 29% of total retail sales in the UK for the entire year, according to www.the-spirit-of-christmas.co.uk (Johnston Press).

Presents; food; drink; party outfits; wrapping paper; decorations; cards; stamps... the pre-Christmas shopping list goes on and on and the time and money spent increase more and more. But what are we celebrating anyway? Just whose birthday is it? Does the 2.5% of our national annual Christmas spending given to charity, as estimated by the director of a major aid agency, adequately reflect what our priorities should be?

Perhaps it's time to take a second look at Christmas.

Omega is a simple two session course designed to help Christians take a second look at Christmas. We suggest you run it just before Advent starts, or during the first week or two.

It unashamedly provides the time and space to re-examine whether we have embraced the noise of what this season has become so much that we have lost the whisper of Jesus drawing near. And whether our frenetic activity and increased spending sufficiently reflects the King whose presence we are celebrating, and the kingdom he came to build.

This isn't a course for scrooges! It isn't about reducing Christmas. It's about reclaiming it – coming back to what it's all about and reminding us that the good news Jesus brought was about transformation and counter-cultural living and giving.

Through exploring the questions raised by *Omega*, we can all take an honest look at whether we really are experiencing, demonstrating, and sharing the joy Jesus brought, and the kingdom he built. And we can take a second look at whether our Advent preparations are all about Christmas, or about Christ-with-us.

The church year ends with Christ the King Sunday and then immediately begins again with Advent Sunday. Like the Advent wreath, it is a circle. Christ the King Sunday focuses on the Second Coming of Christ, Advent Sunday on his First. Our preparations for the one should therefore reflect our preparations for the other. So Advent should provide a fresh opportunity to reassess what we are doing to celebrate Jesus' arrival. We all need to prepare the way for him to come, and to work with him to build his kingdom of justice, peace and love. Let's get started!

Knowing where you're headed

During *Omega* your group will explore the wonder of the incarnation and the kingdom Jesus is building; take a deeper look at the reality and effects of seasonal spending and stress in the UK; get the chance to start examining the fruits of their own spending and activity; and re-consider the direction of their giving.



Session 1 is inspired by the question “What are we preparing for?” and takes a second look at the meaning of Christmas and the focus of our activity during December. Session 2 asks “What can I give him?” and takes a closer look at our spending patterns as a way into addressing whether our giving and activity is moving in the right direction.

In addition, an individual’s follow-up resource “The end is just the beginning” helps participants continue their journey through Advent and Christmas. (We suggest you photocopy one for each participant to take away at the end of the course.)

Both sessions include Bible study, times of discussion and interactive exercises, and there is space provided for worship and personal reflection.

Course overview

The two sessions that form this course are designed to be run as a series. You could spread them over two weeks, or run them back to back instead of a church service, or as a separate church event in a morning or afternoon with refreshments between the two sessions.

It’s up to you when in Advent you choose to run the course, but we would suggest doing it just before, or just as, Advent begins, so that people can have the maximum benefit from exploring the key messages that year, with a view to perhaps making some adjustments for the following year.

You can run the sessions at home, or in a church building, but you will need a reasonable amount of space as some activities involve flipcharts, role-playing or group work. Equally, you can run the course for a group of any size, but if you have a large group you may find that some activities work better if you subdivide your group so people are able to discuss issues more easily.

Session overview

Length: Each session is designed to take roughly an hour (but you can shorten this if necessary by leaving out one or two elements as desired, or take longer over some exercises if you have the time available).

Each section is given a rough time estimate to help you plan in advance, and facilitate during the session itself. However, the time taken – particularly for discussion activities – will depend on the size, engagement levels, and personalities within your group, so it’s worth bearing this in mind when you are preparing.

Preparation: Each study contains a *Leader’s preparation notes* section. Generally speaking anything that needs to be done in advance is minimal and practical.