DON'T BE AFRAID



Small Group Resource

Lots of us are afraid for lots of good reasons.
But there are glimmers of goodness and love all around,
like feathers fallen from an angel's wing. Will you notice them?
Experience awe and wonder together with others this Christmas.

Advent can be a noisy season – full of activity, expectation and distraction. This small group resource is designed to offer a different kind of space: peaceful, reflective and real. A place of *gezellig* (a Dutch word that captures warmth, belonging and comfort in the company of a few others). A chance to pause, connect with others and listen for God together.

These sessions are for anyone who wants to grow as a disciple of Jesus, alongside others. They're rooted in the Advent lectionary and shaped by simple, thoughtful conversation. All that's needed is a willingness to listen, share and make space for others.

We'll provide all the content: a short summary of the biblical text, plus simple questions to help your group reflect together. There are no 'right answers' – just space for people's experiences, questions and insights.

Hosting a group

You don't need to be an expert theologian to lead – but you do need to be a good host. That means:

- creating a welcoming atmosphere where everyone feels 'seen' and valued
- sticking to timings (start and finish when you say you will)
- helping everyone contribute equally
- being gentle and kind with people's stories and emotions: remind everyone to respect the confidentiality of the conversations, with the usual exception for safeguarding disclosures
- encouraging guests to connect with each other, not just with you.

It's often the little things that make the biggest difference – a warm drink, a homemade cake, a seat that's been saved, an invitation to speak. Think *hygge* (a Danish and Norwegian word describing a contended mood) – to form an atmosphere of calm, safety and care. You might ask guests to contribute snacks or help with setup. Just be sure to check for any dietary needs.

Making your small group more just, diverse and inclusive

This resource is designed to be used in a wide range of settings, and we recognise that every group reflects a rich diversity of backgrounds, identities and experiences. As you gather, take care to use language that is welcoming and inclusive, drawing on the breadth of biblical imagery for God and avoiding assumptions about those present. Be mindful that your words and examples help create a space where people of all identities, including LGBTQ+ people, feel safe and valued. For further guidance, you can refer to the Church's Inclusive Language Guide: **methodist.org.uk/InclusiveLanguage**

The material offered here is intentionally flexible. Adapt activities, discussion and prayer so that everyone can take part in ways that feel comfortable for them, whatever their age, ability or circumstance. Participation should always be invitational and never pressured – people can listen, speak or engage in ways that suit them.

As you meet, consider accessibility in your context, especially if you are in a home or informal setting. For example:

- describe visual elements or objects out loud
- offer digital or large-print versions where helpful
- adapt activities so they can be done seated or without fine motor skills
- make sure participation does not depend on mobility, dexterity or sight.

Above all, aim to create a space of trust, where people are able to share honestly, listen generously and know that they are not alone.

Group size and setup

Groups of six to ten people work well. With fewer people, you may miss out on a variety of perspectives; with more, it's harder to create a sense of intimacy and trust. If you have more than ten people, think about dividing into smaller groups.

Ask everyone to silence their phones (unless needed for emergencies) so you can be fully present to one another.

Using the resource

Each session includes a short reflection on the Bible passage. Use this as a springboard for your own conversation. The accompanying questions are designed to prompt discussion – not to test knowledge. Use what's helpful, skip what isn't, and let the Holy Spirit guide your conversation.

Mini adventures

Each week, we'll offer a simple 'mini adventure' to try between sessions. These are small, practical ways of putting the theme into action in everyday life. The idea connects with the *On The Way* course, where faith is shaped not just by what we think, but by what we try, notice and experience along the journey.

Each mini adventure invites you to take a gentle step: noticing where fear shows up, and beginning to respond with greater awareness, trust and openness.

Drawing on insights from both the Christian tradition and contemporary writing on anxiety (including Owen O'Kane's *Addicted to Anxiety*), these practices offer small, everyday steps towards greater freedom and trust. You don't need to do them perfectly; just give them a go and see what you discover.

When you meet again, there will be space to reflect together on what you noticed, what surprised you, and what you might want to carry forwards.

ADVENT 1

Week before **Sunday 28 November**

Don't be afraid
Hope is hiding in plain sight

C

Welcome (10 minutes)

Snack idea: Popcorn (plain or sweet/lightly salted)

The snack is part of the spiritual experience each week. Keep it simple, but take a moment to notice it together: notice its taste, texture and what it might reveal about the theme.

At first glance, popcorn kernels or small seeds look unremarkable, but they hold hidden potential. When transformed, they become something abundant. Where might hope be present in your life, even if you can't yet see what it will become?

One person reads this prayer aloud:

God of small beginnings,
open our eyes to what we might overlook.
Help us notice hope where it feels hidden,
and trust that you are already at work.
***Amen**.*

Bible (5 minutes)

Read Mark 13:24–37 and this summary:

Jesus speaks of a world shaken by upheaval, where familiar signs seem to fail. He urges his followers not to panic, but to stay awake and alert. Like leaves beginning to grow on a tree, small signs point to what is coming. Don't be afraid: even in uncertainty, God's future is already drawing near.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Use these questions to help everyone join in, even if they're not used to Bible study. Keep things informal and open. Rephrase or skip questions as needed for the group.

- Where do you find yourself feeling most anxious or unsettled at the moment?
- What makes hope hard to notice in this season of the year?
- Can you name a small sign of hope you have noticed recently, even if it felt easy to overlook?

Craft activity (30 minutes)

Signs of hope garland

You'll need:

- scrap card from old packaging
- string or twine
- hole punch
- pens/pencils

Instructions

1. Ask everyone to cut three simple leaf, seed or star shapes from recycled card. On each one, write or draw:
    - a small hope they see in the world
    - a small hope for their community
    - a small hope for themselves.
2. Thread them onto a shared garland and display it during the session.

Prayer

When everyone has added their shapes to the garland, invite the group to hold it together in a circle.

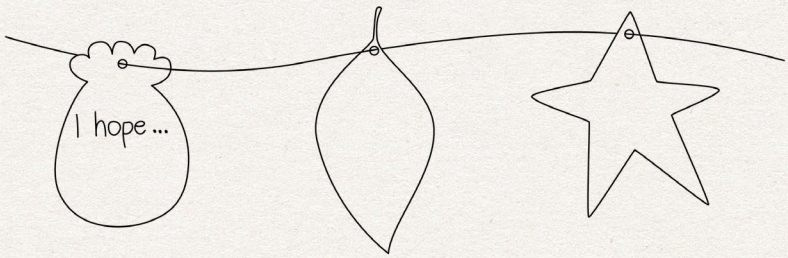
"As we look at these small signs of hope, we offer them to you, God. Help us notice where you are already at work in our lives, our communities and our world."

After a short silence, each person can point to one shape and pray: "God, help me not overlook this hope."

The garland could remain on display for the whole Advent series.

Connection

Jesus speaks about noticing signs, like leaves appearing on a tree. The garland becomes a visual reminder that hope often begins as something small and is easy to overlook.



Mini adventure (10 minutes)

This week, notice small signs of hope

Each day, take a few moments to notice something small that feels hopeful.

- It might be something you see, hear or experience.
- Keep it simple – it doesn't need to be significant or dramatic.You could write it down or just pause and give thanks.

Why it helps

Jesus speaks of watching for signs, even when the world feels uncertain or unsettled. This practice helps us train our attention away from fear's loud voice, and towards the quieter signs of hope. As we notice more, we begin to see that God is already at work, even when it isn't obvious.

ADVENT 2

Week before **Sunday 6 December**

Don't be afraid
A new chapter is beginning

C

Welcome (10 minutes)

Snack idea: Swirled marble cake or cinnamon rolls

These sweet treats visually show movement, change and formation, a process underway rather than something static.

Notice the patterns and layers: nothing here is accidental. What might God be shaping in your life, even if the full picture isn't clear yet?

One person reads this prayer aloud:

God of new beginnings,
when life feels uncertain, draw us into your story.
Shape us with your Spirit, even in unseen ways,
and help us trust what you are starting.
***Amen**.*

Bible (5 minutes)

Read Mark 1:1–8 and this summary:

Mark begins with a bold announcement: this is the beginning of good news. In the wilderness, John calls people to turn back to God and prepare the way. God's new start does not wait for perfect conditions, but begins in unlikely places. Don't be afraid: even here, something new is already beginning.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Use these questions to help everyone join in, even if they're not used to Bible study. Keep things informal and open. Rephrase or skip questions as needed for the group.

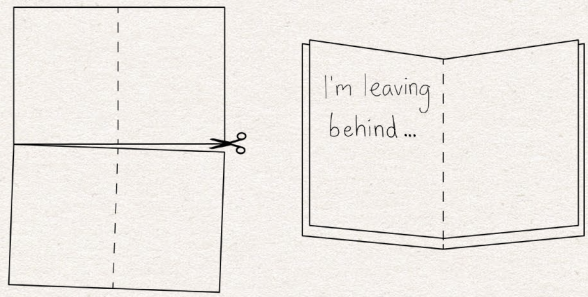
- Where in your life does it feel as though things are stuck or going nowhere?
- How do you usually recognise that something new is beginning?
- What would it look like to prepare for God's movement rather than control it?

Craft activity (20 minutes)

Folded paper beginnings book

You'll need:

- recycled A4 paper
- pens
- old magazines for collage (optional)



Instructions

1. Cut a sheet of A4 paper in half, then fold each piece in half to create a simple eight-page booklet.
   - On the cover, write: "A new chapter".
2. Inside, participants create pages representing:
   - something they're leaving behind, or something they would like to see less of in their life
   - something beginning, growing or emerging, however small
   - one small step they could take
   - a prayer or hope for the journey.

If it feels hard to identify a new beginning, you might reflect on a new season, a new year approaching, a new opportunity to learn, or simply the possibility that God is still at work in ways not yet visible.

Prayer

Invite people to turn to the page where they wrote their small next step.

Hold the booklet in your hands and pray silently:

"God, I offer you this next chapter. Give me courage to take the next step, even when I cannot see the whole story."

People may choose to write a final one-line prayer on the back cover, beginning: "God, help me begin..."

The booklet then becomes a personal prayer companion during the week.

Connection

Mark's Gospel begins with "the beginning of the good news". The booklet represents a new chapter whose story is still being written.

Mini adventure (5 minutes)

Last week

Last week's mini adventure was to notice small signs of hope in everyday life, even when they were easy to miss.

- What did you notice when you paid attention to small signs of hope? Did anything surprise you?

This week, make a small start

Each day, choose one small thing to begin or prepare.

- It might be a task, a conversation or a change you've been putting off.
- Keep it realistic and manageable.
- Don't wait for the perfect moment – just begin.

Why it helps

John the Baptist prepares the way in the wilderness, not in perfect conditions. This practice reminds us that new beginnings rarely feel tidy or complete. Taking a small step helps us move beyond fear and into trust that God is already beginning something new.

ADVENT 3

Week before **Sunday 13 December**

Don't be afraid
God is nearer
than we think

C

Welcome (10 minutes)

Snack idea: Citrus segments (clementines, satsumas) with the peel still on initially

There's something hidden just beneath the surface – fragrance, sweetness, richness – which is discovered when you pay attention or draw closer.

As you open or bite into the fruit, notice what was hidden becoming known. Where might God be closer than you first assumed?

One person reads this prayer aloud:

God who is close,
quiet our hearts and slow our rushing.
Help us recognise your presence among us,
and trust that you are nearer than we realise.
Amen.

Bible (5 minutes)

Read John 1:6–8, 19–38 and this summary:

John the Baptist points beyond himself to someone already among the people. Though unrecognised, God's presence is already at work in their midst. The challenge is not that God is absent, but that God's new work is as yet unnoticed. Don't be afraid: the one you are waiting for is closer than you realise.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Use these questions to help everyone join in, even if they're not used to Bible study. Keep things informal and open. Rephrase or skip questions as needed for the group.

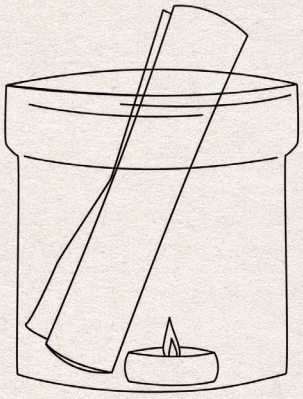
- What makes it difficult to notice God's presence in the middle of busy or noisy weeks?
- John the Baptist points to someone already among the people. Where might God already be at work around you?
- How do you sense the presence of God?

Craft activity (20 minutes)

Hidden message lantern

You'll need:

- clean glass jars
- scrap paper
- pencils
- battery-powered reusable tealights or LED lights
- string



Instructions

1. Participants write on strips of paper:
   - places they have noticed God recently
   - places where they struggle to notice God.
2. Roll or fold the strips and place them inside the jar. Place a battery-powered tealight or LED light underneath or alongside the jar so that the light shines through the glass.

Prayer

Place all the lanterns together and dim the lights if possible.

Invite everyone to look at the lights shining through the jars and notice the contrast between light and shadow.

"God, shine your light on places where I struggle to notice your presence."

Allow a minute of silence while people hold or look at their lantern.

As they leave, encourage them to place the lantern somewhere visible at home and use it during the week as a reminder to pause and notice where God might already be present.

Connection

The light reveals what is hidden inside, echoing John's message that God is already present among people, even when unrecognised.

Mini adventure (10 minutes)

Last week

Last week's mini adventure was to make a small start, taking one simple step without waiting for the perfect conditions.

- What helped you take a small step forwards? What made it easier, or harder, to begin?

This week, notice nearness

Take a few moments each day to pause and become aware of your surroundings.

- Notice people, places and moments you might usually rush past.
- Ask quietly: "Where might God be present here?"

Why it helps

John points to God already present among the people, even though many do not recognise it. This practice slows us down and helps us become more attentive. Often the challenge is not that God is absent, but that we are distracted.

ADVENT 4

Week before **Sunday 20 December**

Don't be afraid
God interrupts
for good reasons

C

Welcome (10 minutes)

Snack idea: Surprise-filled chocolates (eg Revels)

This explores unexpectedness and disruption: you don't fully know what you'll get until the moment arrives. You didn't choose exactly what you received, and yet it might hold something good. How do you respond to interruptions you didn't plan?

One person reads this prayer aloud:

God of unexpected moments,
meet us in what we did not plan or choose.
Give us courage when life is unsettled,
and help us trust your good purposes.
***Amen**.*

Bible (5 minutes)

Read Luke 1:26–38 and this summary:

An angel appears to Mary, interrupting her ordinary life with unexpected news. She is confused and uncertain, yet greeted with grace before anything is asked of her. God's calling comes not with control, but with promise and presence. Don't be afraid: even life's interruptions can open the way to new creation.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Use these questions to help everyone join in, even if they're not used to Bible study. Keep things informal and open. Rephrase or skip questions as needed for the group.

- How do you usually respond when plans are disrupted or interrupted?
- Can you think of a time when an interruption later turned out to matter more than the original plan?
- What fears surface for you when God's call unsettles what feels settled?

Craft activity (20 minutes)

Unexpected collage

You'll need:

- old magazines, leaflets and newspapers
- recycled card
- glue sticks

Instructions

1. Ask everyone to choose images and words quickly, without overthinking. They then create a collage from whatever they happen to pick.
2. Afterwards, discuss:
   - What surprised you?
   - What connections emerged unexpectedly?

Prayer

Ask participants to look for one image or word that surprised them. Invite them to place a finger on it and pray silently:

"God, where might you be speaking to me through what I did not expect?"

After a short silence, everyone can hold up their collage while the leader prays:

"God of surprises, help us trust you when life does not go according to plan."

The collage becomes a reminder that God can work through interruptions as well as intentions.

Connection

Mary's story begins with an interruption she did not choose. This activity gently mirrors receiving something unexpected and discovering meaning within it.

Mini adventure (10 minutes)

Last week

Last week's mini adventure was to notice where God might already be present in the everyday moments you usually move past.

- Where did you begin to notice God's presence? Did slowing down change how you saw things?

This week, make space for interruption

Each day, notice when something unexpected disrupts your plans.

- Instead of reacting immediately, pause.
- Take a breath before responding.
- Ask: "What might this moment be inviting?"

Why it helps

Mary's life is interrupted by God in an unexpected way. This practice helps us respond to disruption differently; not just with frustration, but with curiosity and openness. Sometimes what we resist may hold something important.

CHRISTMAS 1

Week before **Sunday 27 December**

Don't be afraid
Good things take time

Welcome (10 minutes)

Snack idea: Fruitcake or Christmas cake

These cakes require time, patience and process; they cannot be rushed without losing something essential. Where might God be working slowly in your life, even if you'd rather hurry it along?

One person reads this prayer aloud:

God of patience,
teach us to wait without losing hope.
When things feel slow or unfinished,
remind us that you are still at work.
***Amen**.*

Bible (5 minutes)

Read Luke 2:22–40 and this summary:

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple, continuing ordinary acts of faith. There, Simeon and Anna recognise that God's promise is quietly being fulfilled. After long waiting, they see that something new has begun. Don't be afraid: even when it feels slow, God's purposes are unfolding.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Use these questions to help everyone join in, even if they're not used to Bible study. Keep things informal and open. Rephrase or skip questions as needed for the group.

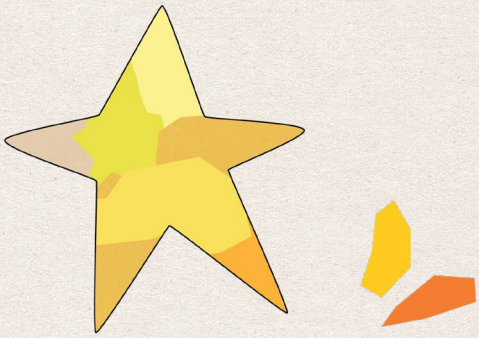
- What feels slow, unfinished or unresolved in your life at the moment?
- Simeon and Anna wait for many years. Are you a patient person?
- How does this passage challenge ideas that transformation must be quick or dramatic?

Craft activity (20 minutes)

Layered patience picture

You'll need:

- recycled card
- tissue paper scraps, old wrapping paper or magazine pages
- glue



Instructions

1. Create a simple picture (tree, candle, star or abstract design) by building it slowly in layers.
2. Encourage people not to rush and to enjoy the process.

Prayer

Once the pictures are complete, ask everyone to notice one area that required several layers. Place a hand over that part of the picture and pray:

"God, I give you the parts of my life that feel unfinished. Teach me patience and help me trust your timing."

Invite people to take the picture home and place it somewhere they will see it when they feel tempted to rush.

Connection

Like Christmas cake and the waiting of Simeon and Anna, something beautiful emerges gradually through patience.

Mini adventure (10 minutes)

Last week

Last week's mini adventure was to make space for interruptions, pausing before reacting and staying open to what might emerge.

- How did you respond to interruptions throughout the week? Did anything unexpected turn out to be meaningful?

This week, practice patient attention

Choose one moment each day to slow down and wait without rushing.

- It could be standing in a queue, sitting quietly or waiting for something to finish.
- Resist the urge to fill the moment with distraction.

Why it helps

Simeon and Anna wait patiently for years, learning to recognise God's promise when it appears. This practice helps us become more comfortable with waiting, and more attentive to what is quietly unfolding over time.

CHRISTMAS 2

Week before **Sunday 3 January**

Don't be afraid
God has made a home among us

Welcome (10 minutes)

Snack idea: Traybake pieces (cut and shared from one dish)

These feel homely, shared and grounded: food that belongs on tables, in kitchens and in the community, echoing the theme of dwelling and presence. What helps you feel 'at home', and how might God be present there?

One person reads this prayer aloud:
God who comes close,
thank you that you choose to dwell with us.
Make our hearts a place of welcome and peace,
and help us notice your presence here.
***Amen**.*

Bible (5 minutes)

Read John 1:10–18 and this summary:

John declares that the Word became flesh and lived among us. God has never been distant from our world, but the ever-presence of God becomes more real by fully entering human life in the person of Jesus Christ. Some do not recognise him, yet his presence brings grace upon grace. Don't be afraid: God has chosen to dwell with us, and does not stand far off.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Use these questions to help everyone join in, even if they're not used to Bible study. Keep things informal and open. Rephrase or skip questions as needed for the group.

- What does 'home' mean to you?
- What strikes you about the idea of God choosing to dwell rather than visit?
- How could we become better at making space for God – and for one another?

Craft activity (20 minutes)

Community house display

You'll need:

- recycled cereal boxes or card
- pens and colouring materials
- large sheet of display paper

Instructions

1. Each person creates and decorates a simple paper house. This can be a flat house shape or, if preferred, a simple 3D house using template on the next page.
2. They write on it:

- something that helps them feel at home
- a way they can help others feel welcome.

3. Place all the houses together to create a village or neighbourhood display, reflecting the community the group is building together.

Prayer

After arranging all the houses into a village or neighbourhood, stand around the display. Invite everyone to place a hand gently towards their house.

"God who dwells among us, make us people of welcome. Help our homes, churches and communities become places where your love is known."

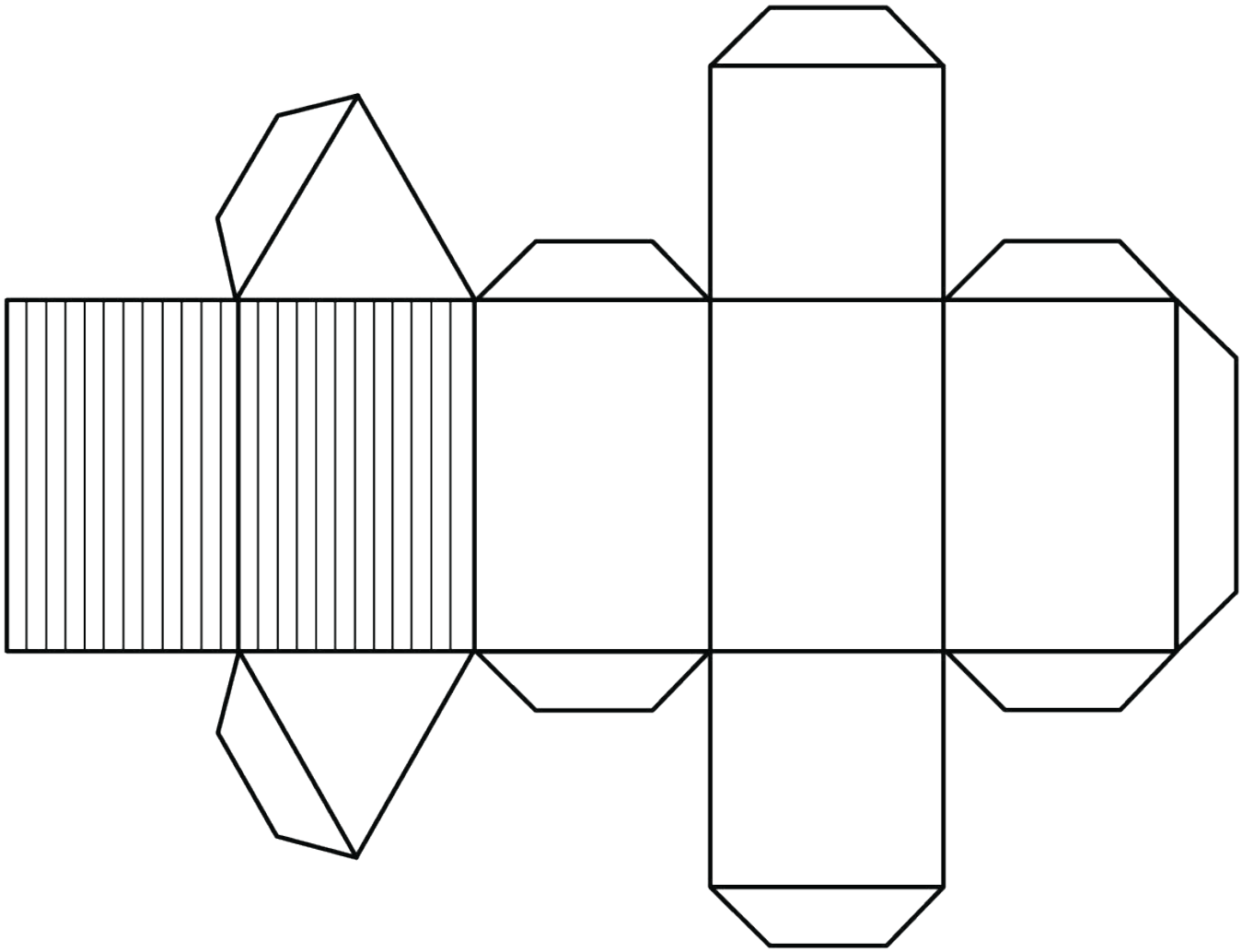
You could then invite each person to say one word aloud:

- welcome
- peace
- belonging
- kindness
- friendship
- grace.

The finished display becomes a collective prayer for the community the group hopes to create.

Connection

The individual houses become a shared community, reflecting John's image of God dwelling among us and our call to make space for one another.



Mini adventure (10 minutes)

Last week

Last week's mini adventure was to practise patient attention, slowing down and staying present without rushing or filling the space.

- What did you notice when you slowed down or waited more intentionally? Did anything feel different?

This week, notice where you feel at home

Each day, notice a place, moment or interaction that feels like home.

Somewhere you feel at ease, welcomed or grounded.

- Take a moment to be present there.

You might ask: "What makes this feel like home?"

Why it helps

John speaks of God choosing to dwell among us: not visiting briefly, but making a home. This practice helps us recognise God's presence in ordinary, lived-in spaces, and to see home as something shared, not just owned.

The **Methodist** Church

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