

ROOM AT THE TABLE

SANCTUARY FIRST
CONNECT BIBLE STUDY
ADVENT 2025

WELCOME TO CONNECT!

A Connect Bible Study is a small group who meet regularly to explore faith and life, going deeper and wider with God. Anyone can host one using these materials and can contact us for support and guidance. Online or in-person, our heart is that they offer a relaxed space for faith, friendship and fun. We hope the resources and discussion points encourage, inspire, and invigorate you on your walk with God.

Each week is designed to be flexible and offers a set of questions as a starting point for your conversations to develop. We imagine the material for each week would work for 60 or 90 minute sessions meeting weekly but feel free to adapt to the needs of your group!

ADVENT RESOURCES

This booklet contains a five week Bible Study, a meditation, and two short prayers. Towards the back of this booklet we have a **RUNNING A CONNECT GROUP** guide with some pointers and suggestions for structuring sessions.

Each week will have a corresponding page in our app and online at sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/connect where you can get the questions and videos.

We will also be publishing online a series of short stories by Lily Cathcart, an interactive Advent Labyrinth, and a Christmas song from The Bogle Band ('Room at the Table') that you can listen to on our website or Spotify.

There are plenty more songs, videos, podcasts and blogs linked to Advent and more on the Sanctuary First **website** and **app**.

ROOM AT THE TABLE

There's room at the table!

It's such an evocative, welcoming phrase. It invites us to be generous and open handed towards each other. It calls us to table and to make room; to budge up; to practise hospitality to the stranger in need as well as for those we love and cherish. It speaks warmly of expectation and acceptance. In fact it's a kind of prefiguring of the Kingdom of Heaven being born in the human heart. To hear there is room at the table is to hear the voice of God saying there is a place at the table in my Kingdom set for you!

Advent is a time of journeying, waiting, preparing and expectation. It resonates with the inward longing within all of our hearts to find a spiritual home, a place where we know we belong and where we are accepted. The story of Advent is primarily one of God journeying towards us, but it also uncovers unnumbered stories of very diverse people discovering they too are on a journey towards God. As you read this perhaps you too are thinking that's me. Of course you might be also asking how will I be accepted, will I be too late? Am I fooling myself, is there a table? Is there a God? Is there a homecoming?

We will encounter all sorts of people on the journey to the table of the King. Think of the journey Joseph and Mary made to encounter Jesus. The journey the shepherds made to find themselves known by God. There were also foreigners, wisemen from the east perhaps a little later but they made an incredible journey. So we too will have our personal journeys with doubts and struggles to encounter King Jesus.

Then there is the waiting. There is a certain degree of patience required hoping that those invited will come. Those who have arrived need to be patient as others come from distant journeys. The big brother syndrome always has a tendency to emerge as time passes and the table places are not yet filled. Yet the patience of the King continues. 'Room at the table' speaks of his open heart and the preparation he knows is required to make the journey, and to wait for the coming of others.

No doubt the place of waiting will resonate with us all at some point in our lives. However the most hopeful of all our spiritual feelings is that of expectation. When we literally gather around the Lord's Table for Communion it is much more than a remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is filled with expectation that there is room at the table for our identity in time and in eternity.

In the coming weeks and months we hope to invite members of the Sanctuary First Community to help us extract out the meaning of 'Room at the table' in such a way that we will see many more people start out on the journey to enter into the Kingdom of God.

And perhaps this Advent as you begin to make your preparations for Christmas you might literally think about what it would mean to leave room at your table for the unexpected guest.

WEEKLY OVERVIEW

- **Leaving room** — *hope and expectation*
- **Finding room** — *harmony and flourishing*
- **Room enough** — *hospitality and generosity*
- **Making room** — *welcome and belonging*
- **Room to spare** — *room for all the world*

Thanks to James Cathcart and Albert Bogle for developing this material.

MEDITATION

There's room at the table

There's room at the table for loss
there's room at the table for doubt
there's room at the table for hurt
there's room at the table for you.

There's room at the table for scepticism
there's room at the table for unease
there's room at the table for failure
there's room at the table for me.

There's room at the table for third and fourth
chances.
there's room at the table for a difference of
opinion
there's room at the table for disagreement
there's room at the table for us.

There's room at the table for hesitation
there's room at the table for questioning
there's room at the table for honesty
there's room at the table for everyone.

There's room at the table for hope
there's room at the table for sorrow
there's room at the table for love
there's room at the table for you.

James Cathcart

PRAYERS

Let us pray:

Father,
We thank you for the world you have made
For the rich diversity within your creation
We thank you for the colour and vibrancy of
life all around us
Help us to be life-givers,
To be life-lovers
And the example of your love throughout
your world

Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you have the power to make all
things new,
Break into our thoughts
Break into our traditions
Expand our understanding of your Word
Bringing renewed hope to the darkness of this
time
Amen

Laura Digan

WEEK 1: LEAVING ROOM — *Hope and expectation*

INTRODUCTION:

We begin Advent reflecting on anticipation and expectation. As we journey through the season what are we anticipating? What are we expecting? What are we leaving room for? And what room has been left for us? How do we respond to the invitation to God's table where all are welcome and there's always room?

SEEDS TO SOW:

This can be such a busy season but it's important to make room and make time too. What do you want to stop doing over Advent to leave room for other things?

Additionally the group could reflect on the Advent short story that will be released each week of the theme at sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/blog

READ ROMANS 13: 11-14

Getting up, getting dressed, and getting going!

Q: What are the clothes of Christ we are being advised to wear in the reading?

Q: How does this passage feel relevant as we begin our advent journey?

Q: As we get up and going as a community heading into Advent who are we wanting to leave room for? Who do we want to feel included and like they belong this Christmas in our local communities and in our world?

READ PSALM 85 & PSALM 23

Coming to the table to discover something new.

At God's table we long to uncover a new prophetic picture of justice and mercy for a world that all too often tears itself apart.

Q: How do these psalms make you feel? What, if anything, in these psalms makes you feel hopeful for the world around you?

Q: At the unity of a shared, happy table we get a glimpse of what verses 9-10 of Psalm 85 are describing. What does a land look like when God's glory dwells there, when love and faithfulness meet and righteousness and peace kiss?

Q: In verse 5 of Psalm 23 God prepares a table for us before our enemies. Are we leaving room for God to create a table for us in the presence of our enemies? In other words: are we leaving room for peace, even reconciliation, with those who are opposed to us?

CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE...

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 11: 23-26

There's always a space left open at the Lord's table!

In verse 23 Paul says he received the instruction about the Lord's Table from the Lord himself, but Paul was never at the Passover meal in the upper room.

Q: Is Paul speaking metaphorically, that he has inherited this tradition from the first followers of Jesus and is passing it on? Or could he be referring to an encounter he had with the risen Christ (such as in Galatians 1:12, 1 Corinthians 9:1, 1 Cor 15:8) when Christ instructed him? Or does he mean that time and space blur at the moment of Communion and that in a sense he was there, and we are there with Christ when we enact the meal? Or is it a mix of all three? Discuss!

Q: Are we leaving room at the Lord's table for others? Have we made Communion tables too remote, too inaccessible to the everyday life of the average person? What are the hurdles between people and joining in Communion?

WEEK 2: FINDING ROOM — *Harmony and flourishing*

INTRODUCTION:

A week on the transformative power of belonging; on the life-changing power of finding room, finding a place, and finding harmony.

SEEDS TO SOW:

What helps you to feel at home?

Additionally the group could reflect on the Advent short story that will be released each week of the theme at sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/blog

READ 1 SAMUEL 1: 1-28

Finding room for Hannah.

Many of us find ourselves like Hannah at this time of year. Pacing around, out in the cold, on edge, feeling like we don't fit or belong. The intense materialistic spectacle of the season can magnify the isolation we already feel through hardship, loneliness or bereavement. It can put pressure on us to feel the fulfilment, purpose, and roles being sold to us.

But God wants you to know there is room for Hannah, and her son, and there is room for you! None of us are left out in the cold – there is room at the table!

Q: What words and phrases strike you in Hannah's story?

Q: What echoes or similarities do you see between Hannah and Mary, mother of Jesus? And what parallels does Hannah have with people living on the margins in our world today? Who are modern-day Hannahs?

READ PSALM 72

Finding room for peace.

At the table of our Lord Jesus Christ we find room for peace, justice and mercy.

Q: Which is your favourite verse in this psalm? And which verse do you find the most challenging?

Q: Who are the poor and vulnerable who are trying to find room this Advent? How can room be found for the vulnerable, the oppressed, the displaced and the victimised this winter? What part can we play?

READ LUKE 1: 26-38

Finding room for God on earth.

Through Mary, room was found for Christ in humanity. This Advent let's remember the courageous openheartedness of Mary who agreed to carry Christ into the world.

While Gabriel's news is going to turn Mary's world upside down he is at pains to reassure her. He tells her not to be afraid and answers her questions.

Q: What do we learn about God's nature in this reading? And what do we learn about Mary herself?

Q: Inspired by Mary, what brave and welcoming things can we do this Advent?

WEEK 3: ROOM ENOUGH — Hospitality and generosity

INTRODUCTION:

This Advent how can the invitation of 'Room at the table' challenge ongoing narratives of hostility, fear and antagonism? How can an ethos of hospitality and generosity change how we do politics, economics, church?

SEEDS TO SOW:

How hospitable and welcoming are church buildings in our local communities today?

Additionally the group could reflect on the Advent short story that will be released each week of the theme at sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/blog

READ ISAIAH 35: 1-10

Room enough for abundance!

This surely is a picture of the new heaven and the new earth — a picture of the Kingdom that is coming. Advent is a reminder that God will make all things new.

Q: There are several key themes in this reading: redemption, rejoicing, flourishing, renewal, justice, transformation, abundance, guidance and restoration. Which of these themes is resonating most for you this Advent?

Q: How can this vision of a future of abundance and renewal help us to counter competing visions of the future of scarcity, conflict and decay?

READ LUKE 1: 46-55

Room enough for the hungry!

Let's unpack the prophetic edge of Mary's voice in this reading. Her song declares that in Christ's Kingdom there is room enough for the poor, the hungry and the oppressed. But there is challenge here as well as reassurance — for the same God who lifts the marginalised also displaces the proud, the powerful and the rich.

Q: Does this reading make you feel comforted or uneasy? Or both?

Q: Where do we hear Mary's voice today — who is championing the cause of the deprived and the disadvantaged?

READ MICAH 6: 8

Room enough for what is required!

There is room enough in our hearts to love mercy, and to walk humbly!

Q: Once you read this verse it has a way of staying with you. How does it make you feel?

Q: How can we help an entire nation, an entire world even, to love mercy — to believe that there is room enough for everyone? How can we use hospitality and generosity to nudge the world towards mercy and humility?

WEEK 4: MAKING ROOM — *Welcome and belonging*

INTRODUCTION:

As we head to Christmas day itself we reflect on the incarnation — God becoming flesh and blood as room is made in humanity for God.

SEEDS TO SOW:

Do we squash Jesus to fit into the space that's left over in our lives, or do we make room for Jesus?

Additionally the group could reflect on the Advent short story that will be released each week of the theme at sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/blog

READ JOHN 1: 1-14

Making room for rejection!

This story of Jesus's incarnation goes way back to the beginning of everything.

In the heartbreaking verse 10 Christ is willing to make room for recognition AND rejection, an offering of grace for our world.

Q: Verse 10 is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Why would someone say such a thing about this verse?

Q: What makes verse 14 such an outstanding endorsement of Jesus?

Q: Does making room for people always mean making room for rejection?

READ ISAIAH 52: 7-10

Making room for good news!

The good news is that the birth of Jesus ushers in God's Kingdom.

Q: Who do you think the writer is referring to in verse 7?

Q: Are we making room for those carrying good news? Or are we more often making room instead for the doomsayers, naysayers and soothsayers? Why are we often drawn more to bad news than good?

READ ISAIAH 9: 2-7

Making room for the Lord!

Q: Which of the names given to the son in verse 6 resonates with you the most this Advent and why? Wonderful Counselor? Mighty God? Everlasting Father? Prince of Peace?

Q: How can we use hospitality and compassion to make room for the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace?!

WEEK 4: ROOM TO SPARE

INTRODUCTION:

As we head into the New Year with our expansive message that there is room at the table for all — we further widen our scope to the natural world and indeed to the cosmos. There is room to spare for all creation! How can 'Room at the table' change how we think about our world?

SEEDS TO SOW:

What are we making room for in 2026? What tables are we going to be setting?

Additionally the group could reflect on the Advent short story that will be released each week of the theme at sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/blog

READ PSALM 148

Room to spare for creation.

There is room enough for all of us in the majesty of God's creation, indeed room to spare, and yet we often live absurd lifestyles that are profoundly wasteful and unequal. Mountains of food go to waste while others hunger. Habitats that have long sustained life are squandered for short-term gain.

Q: Is the psalmist's invitation for nature to praise God an example of poetic licence? Not a literal instruction but an artistic way of expressing the vividness of creation? Or is it an actual invite, and if so what does it mean for creatures, weather systems and habitats to praise God?

Q: There is room at the table, not just for you and I, but for all of creation too! How can we re-embrace and rediscover creation as a partner not a source of plunder?

Room for all the world

READ COLOSSIANS 1: 15-23

Room to spare at the table — draw up a seat!

This table is cosmic, bigger than we could imagine.

Q: What do you think it means that through Christ "all things hold together"? How can we begin to get our heads around such an enormous statement?

Q: How does this passage inspire you to work towards the reconciliation of all things?

READ LUKE 2: 22-35

Room to spare for all nations!

Simeon's prayer is both deeply personal to him and universally relevant to us all. There are no geographical or ethnic limits to God's grace — all are invited to God's table, all are welcome.

While Simeon's prayer is heartening this reading is bittersweet as it's followed by Simeon's quiet words of warning to Mary.

Q: Why do you think the prospect of a truly open invitation to salvation offered to all people — wherever they come from — was so controversial back in the first century?

Q: Do you think this message is still counter-cultural in the 21st century? If so, is it for the same reasons or for different reasons than it was two thousand years ago?

RUNNING A CONNECT GROUP

Follow the Spirit and do what works for your group!

Our Connect material is intended to be flexible and you are encouraged to adapt it to suit your needs and where the Holy Spirit takes you. Below is a completely optional rough outline of how we envision the material could be used in a 90 or 60 minute weekly session. As a leader you are free to shake things up (either as you prepare, or on the fly) responding to the discussion as it unfolds. Our experience of small groups is often the fascinating stuff happens 'off topic' when a group has gone on a tangent and ended up somewhere new. Go as the Spirit leads you and don't feel like you have to cover every reading or topic in each session.

If you are a pre-existing group/community you may have already have a format that works for you. Perhaps you always begin with a song, maybe you read a short liturgy aloud, share a meal together, have an informal catch up before diving into the reading, break for tea and coffee in middle and so on. If so that's great, just weave our material into that.

Optional outline for running a session:

1. Welcome — introducing yourself as the group leader and asking others to do the same, you could share briefly what interests you/draws you to the theme this month/week
2. Brief summary of the overall theme and Sanctuary First/and or specific organisation running individual group
3. An opening prayer, inviting God to travel with us as we explore the Bible
4. Introducing the theme of the week — reading the theme introduction aloud and/or tailoring to your group context, allow space for comments and initial impressions if any
5. Point to videos, podcasts, Daily Worship etc on the Sanctuary First site that links in (there is a short video to accompany each week in the Connect section)
6. Share the Seed to Sow for the week and perhaps return to it at the end of the discussion
7. For each section begin by inviting someone to read the Bible text aloud. Then the leader begins the discussion, reading the prompts out to the group and then throws it over to them to respond. (As a leader you may wish to adapt/expand/edit, for instance only focusing on two readings etc or changing the order, or expanding reading ranges etc). The discussion prompts are designed to go in a number of directions. It can be helpful to ask general questions about what stood out for people in the reading, what questions, insights or personal responses do they have to the text? And then you can link those responses to the topics in the material.
8. A closing prayer led by the leader or the group leaving space for intercessory prayer as the group develops and gets to know one another
9. Telling people about the next session's topic and pointing them to Connect resources on the Sanctuary First website.