

Be Crafty this Christmas

By Hayley Barnard with Janice Tuck

Does Christmas bring out the crafter in you? Me too! At no other time of the year am I foraging in my garden for greenery to decorate my house or spray-painting pinecones gold. By the start of November I'm gathering inspiration from magazines for a table centrepiece, hand made Christmas decorations and ideas for home-spun Christmas presents.

A group of ladies in Southampton caught on to this trend and developed a community event that they are keen to share with Mother's Union groups as a way to get people together, build relationships and enjoy the build up to Christmas. For the past twelve years they have held a "Christmas Craft Evening" at the end of November, before Christmas preparations, school plays & carol concerts take over.

The evening involves four or five Blue Peter style demonstrations of Christmas-related craft items with a video camera trained on the presenter's hands to project a close up of the action on to the wall behind. The guests, seated at large round tables, are provided with goodie bags containing all of the materials to make a couple of the crafts being demonstrated. In addition, local craft sellers are invited to set up stalls, providing the opportunity to buy unique Christmas gifts and stocking fillers.

I first attended the Christmas Craft Evening two years ago. I'm not much of an expert at craft making but it didn't stop me having a fabulous and inspiring evening. So when I heard tickets were going on sale for the following year I was first in line and bought up a whole table, inviting nine ladies from my village. We had a blast! Some of our group were already established crafters whilst others were novices. But it didn't matter. We laughed, helped each other out, and got excited about Christmas together! It also gave me the chance to ask my friends about what Christmas means to them and to share something of the message of Christmas and its impact on my life.

The organisers are able to cater for 150 guests and tickets sell out immediately, with the craft evening now marking the start of Christmas for many in their local community. So how do you go about organizing such a complex event? I asked one of the key organisers, Janice Tuck, of Testwood Baptist Church:

"Ideas are pooled at a meeting in September, with carols in the background to set the mood. The aim is to find two main crafts where the materials cost less than £1.50 per person that can be completed in under half an hour, where glue or paint will have dried by the end of the evening. Table decorations, welcome wreaths, garlands and tree decorations have all been popular. The idea is to give a taster of crafts that many may not have had the opportunity to try, such as decopatch,

beading, felting, paper crafts like iris folding or tea bag folding, etc. Some ideas won't be tried again! Spray painting outside in the dark wasn't that brilliant!

Finding the right crafts that are challenging for experienced crafters but aren't too daunting for novices is a challenge in itself. The crafts are aimed at adults, but young people from 11 up are welcome and we regularly have three generations attending together.

Preparation for the evening involves getting together craft kits, printing out Christmas recipe sheets, and sourcing the materials needed for the evening... all within the budget of £6 per person. Cutting out and packing up craft kits takes time, but is an excuse to get together. A team of at least 12 means that jobs are shared out.

As people arrive for the evening they're served mulled tea and take time to browse around stalls of crafts for sale by local people. These include fabric crafts, cake decoration, soaps, cards, jewellery, and wooden crafts, with stalls selling crafts made in lower-income countries being an important feature.

Following the craft demonstrations the guests get to have a go for themselves. A team of eight people are then available to help with trickier bits, and of course there's coffee to drink, Christmas nibbles to sample and more time to be spent browsing round the craft stalls. The evening finishes with an invitation to other events being put on to celebrate Christmas in the church, along with the date of the next year's craft evening!

Christmas is about giving, so left over glue sticks & paper find their way to different children clubs, and extra kits are made each year to give to a group for women ex-offenders for their Christmas get-together. “