



What is Lancashire Sings Christmas?

It's an idea we pinched from Churches Together in Leicestershire (with their permission and blessing!) and made our own, and over the years it's worked really well as a way of building links between churches and their communities. At county level, it also helps to cement an excellent relationship between BBC Radio Lancs and Churches Together in Lancs.

The idea is very simple; on an evening during the week or so before Christmas, a carol service is broadcast live from the BBC Radio Theatre and jointly led by Joe Wilson, the presenter of the Sunday morning religious affairs show, and one of the county Church leaders (Bishop, Methodist Chair of District, etc). The Blackburn Salvation Army band provide the music. A couple of Churches Together choirs are the core of the on-air carol singers, but the BBC also make a fair number of free tickets available for members of the public. Both years these have been snapped up quickly.

Through the autumn, the Sunday morning show has been pushing the project hard, encouraging churches / Churches together groups / individuals to find a community venue (pub, club, supermarket café etc – anywhere where people gather) and ask if they can bring a group down to tune in and link up with the live broadcast. Similarly, CTL has been pushing it to all the denominations, and to CT groups.

We set up a website (www.lancashiresingschristmas.co.uk) and ask people who want to take part to go there and register their group. There we make available for download carol sheets, posters, which can be personalised, and invitations, extra suggestions for making your event go well, etc. We ask people to register to let us know how many venues are taking part, and then we publish on the site a list of all venues that are open to the public. We have up to four outside broadcasts set up to take us to interesting venues on the night, and during the broadcast, people can text in to the studio and have messages read out on air. We have over 100 venues taking part, most of them open to the general public.

The feedback we've had is brilliant, because it's a win-win. Pubs love it because their trade is up, and we've had several stories of pubs approaching the churches to do other joint events through the year. Churches love it, because it's a way of preventing sad carol singing efforts on rainy street corners (we've all been there!) and gives them support to do community carol singing that goes really well. The radio station absolutely love it - they've never had so many texts sent in to a show before (and apparently this counts for a lot in the way they rate things). The next one is usually booked in the diary immediately. And there are lots of ways in which it can be built on to make natural connections between church and unchurched people. Some venues took up one of our 'extra' suggestions of having a 'prayer tree' – people could write requests for prayers on labels and tie them on to a little Christmas tree with the promise that they'd be prayed for in

local churches over the coming days. Some who'd just come in for a drink at the pub venues were leaving prayer requests and wanting to talk once the broad cast was over. And a common experience is of church groups being bowled over by how much the pubs want to have them – even in some cases laying on mince pies or even a free hot pot supper.

What do you need to make it work?

The key is the relationship with the Radio Station. I don't know if BBC Radio Lancs is unusual in having a Sunday morning Faith show, or if CT Lancs is unusual in having a good relationship with it if so – but if that relationship isn't there or can't be created, you'd have an uphill struggle to get it off the ground. I see Joe Wilson as one of my most important colleagues / allies in ecumenical work, and without his advocacy, I don't think we'd have got an hour of prime air time and a couple of outside broadcast reporters / vans. The mentions every week on the Sunday show through the autumn – and then right across the schedule throughout December (we even had our own jingle!) also gave it a profile we simply couldn't have created.

Here's how we do it:

- Plan the service
- Recruit the SA band, Church Leader, reader, child to say a Christmas prayer, any other participants
- Create the carol sheets, posters, resource sheets etc
- Set up and administer the website
- Liaise with Joe about the broadcast
- Talk about it endlessly to anyone else who will listen!

Things we've learned

- Simplicity is everything! Lengthy bits of talking, sermonettes, solo performances and unusual carols are not what's required. Singing everyone's favourites with a bit of banter in between, hopping round the outside broadcast venues, reading people's texts out, with a short simple scripture reading and a child reading a prayer and a blessing from a bishop or equivalent, are the successful formula.
- In the radio theatre, you need people who can sing but don't sound like a choir, some members of the public, and the SA band. No interesting string quartet or rock group can compete with trombones at Christmas.
- The important thing to get across to churches / CT groups is that this is about getting out of their comfort zone. There is very little point in doing it in your church building – although one or two do. You have to go to somewhere that is full of people who wouldn't come to your carol service.