

# Christmas

Christmas is a Christian holiday that marks the birth of Jesus, who Christians believe to be the Son of God. Western Christian and many Eastern Orthodox Christian observers usually celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In addition, Christmas Eve (December 24<sup>th</sup>) is an important day of observance for many Christians. Armenian Orthodox observers celebrate Christmas, also known as the Epiphany, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, while some Eastern Orthodox observers celebrate Christmas on January 7<sup>th</sup>.

## **The Story of Christmas**

Jesus' birth, known as the Nativity, is described in the New Testament of the Bible. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke give different accounts, but both accounts write that Jesus was born to a woman called Mary who was married to Joseph, a carpenter. The Gospels state that Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant. According to tradition, shortly before Jesus' birth Joseph and Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, however, the local inn was already full. The innkeeper let them stay in the cave below his house that was used as a stable for his animals, and that was where Mary gave birth to Jesus. The news of Jesus's birth reaches three magi (wise men) and a group of shepherds, who travel to visit Jesus, Mary and Joseph. These figures, along with the stable animals, comprise the traditional nativity scenes that are often displayed during this season.

## **Advent/Lent**

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year and is the period of preparation for the celebration of the anniversary of the birth of Jesus. It is also a time of joyous anticipation and hope for the Second Coming of Christ, when Jesus will return to Earth (this belief is derived from prophecies in Christian scripture). The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* meaning "coming." It begins four Sundays before Christmas day. Traditionally it is a penitential or lenten season (meaning that Christians are expected to atone for their sins and recommit to their faith through actions like confession or fasting) but is no longer kept as strictly as other penitential seasons like Lent.

However, in preparation for Christmas, Orthodox Christians might increase their spiritual exercise, particularly through fasting. The Christmas fast begins on November 15 and lasts until December 25. The fast includes refraining from meat, dairy, fish, wine and oil.

Advent wreaths are popular, especially in churches. They are made with fir branches and four candles. A candle is lit each Sunday during Advent.

## **Christmas Eve and Christmas Day**

For many Christians, participating in a religious service plays an important part in the observance of Christmas. Often, Christians who do not regularly attend church services attend church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, during which the account of Jesus's birth is retold and celebrated.

## **Cultural Celebrations**

78% of people in the United States are Christian, making Christmas an important religious holiday. However, Christmas is also celebrated in the United States as a cultural holiday. 90% of Americans

celebrate Christmas, and 26% of Americans say that Christmas is a cultural day rather than a religious holy day. This Christmas recognition extends into the workplace—99% of companies in the United States close on Christmas day.

Cultural celebrations of Christmas can include Nativity scene reenactments, Christmas lights, gift-giving, Christmas cards, caroling, hanging holiday wreaths and Christmas tree decorating. Additionally, at many celebrations it is common for people to dress up as Santa Claus and give gifts to children.

It is also important to keep in mind that not all Christians celebrate Christmas. Some Christians, including Jehovah's Witnesses, do not celebrate any holidays or birthdays.

### **Scheduling**

Due to how intertwined Christmas is with American culture, both Christians and non-Christians alike may request time off around the holiday season. In addition, many Americans are in multi-faith relationships or families and may need time off to observe holidays for more than one religious tradition. Be aware of potential scheduling conflicts when it comes to your employees' time off over the holidays. Consider implementing a policy for managing time off requests (such as a rotation schedule from year to year). It is important to remember that religious accommodation is not just a minority issue. Our 2013 Survey of American Workers and Religion found that 48% of white evangelical Protestants have witnessed or experienced religious bias in the workplace, including having to work on the Sabbath or a holy day.

Keep in mind that both religious and non-religious requests for time off are valid—non-religious employees may have a strong family or cultural tradition around Christmas, or want to spend time with their children who are on a break from school. Also remember that some employees may observe Christmas on days other than December 25<sup>th</sup>.

### **Parties**

Holiday or Christmas parties in the office can be a source of tension. For recommendations on how to create an inclusive office celebration, see our December Dilemma Tip Sheet (link below).

### **Greetings**

It can be hard to know the appropriate holiday greeting to use in the office. To some, saying "Merry Christmas" vs. "Happy holidays" can be a political statement – and in addition, Americans are split between whether they prefer a religious greeting like Merry Christmas (43%) or a seasonal greeting like happy holidays (49%). If you know that a colleague celebrates Christmas, wishing him or her "Merry Christmas" can send a message that this colleague—like all colleagues—is respected in the workplace. If you don't know whether a colleague celebrates Christmas, then a more general greeting like "Happy Holidays," "Season's Greetings," or "Happy Year End" may be preferable. For more on appropriate holiday greetings, see Tanenbaum's December Dilemma tip sheet.

For more information on other holidays that occur in December, see our

***December Dilemma tip sheet:***

**<http://tanenbaum.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/2014-December-Dilemma-Updated.pdf>**

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