HISTORY AND MEANING
Advent is an important period of the liturgical year for many Western traditions of Christianity. The degree to which it is acknowledged and celebrated varies—it is observed most prominently in Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestant traditions (Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, etc.). The season lasts for approximately a month, always beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas day. The first day is known by many observers as Advent Sunday. It marks the beginning of the liturgical year and a period of waiting for the birth of Jesus.

In Eastern Christian traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Eastern Catholic, etc.), this time of year is known as the Nativity Fast. Beginning on November 15 and lasting through December 24, the observance is a combination of fasting interspersed with special feast days. Unlike in Western Christianity, this is not the beginning of the liturgical year, which is in September.

In all Christian traditions that observe either Advent or the Nativity Fast, the season is one of penitence and hopeful anticipation. It is a time to anticipate the celebration of the birth of the Messiah (Jesus) and Christ’s return, which is yet to come.

TYPICAL OBSERVANCES
• An Advent wreath is used in churches and in homes each of the four Sundays prior to Christmas. A candle is lit for each Sunday of Advent.
• Devotionals and prayers may be read.
• Purple or royal blue are often worn.
• Dietary restrictions in the Eastern tradition: Observers often abstain from eating red meat, poultry, dairy products, fish, and oil and wine, except for certain feast days and breaks in the fast.
• The eve of the Nativity is commonly a strict fast day.

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RELIGIOUS & CULTURAL OBSERVANCES

Advent and Nativity Fast (cont’d)

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING THE VANDERBILT COMMUNITY

- Do not make the assumption that everyone is celebrating Christmas or that every person who is Christian would celebrate in the same way.
- Communication is key. Ask how you can support observances.
- Students are not automatically excused from class for this holiday. Graduate and professional students must refer to their own school and departmental vacation policies and calendar for more specific information.
- Staff members may request paid time off to celebrate. Support their preference to take leave for their religious observance.

RESOURCES FOR MANAGING WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

People feel many types of emotions during the holidays—joy, peace, stress and depression, to name a few. Whatever you feel, know you are not alone, and Vanderbilt has resources to help you through these challenges.

Faculty, Staff and Postdocs
Work/Life Connections–EAP
(615) 936-1327
vumc.org/health-wellness/work-life

Students
Office of Student Care Coordination
(615) 343-9355
vanderbilt.edu/carecoordination

This resource is part of a toolkit created by Equity, Diversity and Inclusion to highlight religious and cultural observances that members of our community may practice. This toolkit is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead to provide a general overview of how we can support staff, faculty and students. We continually refine this information and welcome your suggestions.

For more information or to provide feedback, contact Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at edi@vanderbilt.edu. For information on the university’s policy on religious holy days and observances, contact the Office of the University Chaplain and Religious Life at religiouslife@vanderbilt.edu or Human Resources at human.resources@vanderbilt.edu.

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