

WHOSE BIRTHDAY IS IT, ANYWAY?

Ideas for a
Christ-Centered Holiday
2007



Simple
Ideas For
Reducing
Christmas
Chaos

Why a
Simpler
Christmas?



Inspiring Reflections
& Fun Activities

Recovering Jesus
by Tony Campolo

Away in a
Stank Manger




Alternatives
for SIMPLE LIVING

TOP 10 USES of “Whose Birthday?”

For Congregations:

1. Distribute to individuals, families and groups (Use our free promo kit on paper or on-line.)
2. Bible Study, such as a women's circle or men's breakfast
3. Sunday School and Adult Forum
4. Pulpit Talk or sermons
5. “Simple Christmas” workshop for your congregation or community (Use our “Alternative Event Organizers’ Kit.”)

For Individuals and Families:

1. Weekly Family Meeting & Fun Time
2. Personal devotions
3. Mealtimes discussion
4. Extended family gatherings
5. Christmas planning time or event
Hold a family meeting between Oct. 1 and Nov. 1 to talk about Christmas expectations. What do each of us really want? Who is going to do what? What is really most meaningful? Are we willing to spend less on ourselves and give more to the needy? Write down and post decisions and changes to consider.

NOTE: If you need a DAILY Advent/Christmas guide, choose from 20 at SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives » Advent/Christmas Calendars. Some are lectionary-based; some, thematic. Copy your choice on recycled paper as a bulletin insert, in your own Advent-Christmas booklet or as a series in your weekly service bulletin. Pay a royalty of only 5¢ per copy of the complete calendar. Alternatives’ dues-paying Members may copy for free!

For 2007, WE RECOMMEND 2001 - same cycle (A) and start date - Dec. 2nd.

More Exciting, Helpful Ways to Use “Whose Birthday?”

1. Order additional copies of this booklet. Give or mail them to friends in place of Christmas cards. Use a 9x12 recycled envelope. Insert a personal note or your family Christmas letter (on recycled paper).
2. Send photocopied articles to friends, relatives and members of your congregation.
3. Download the text for your church newsletter at SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives » Whose Birthday? Pay Alternatives a reprint license of only \$25 (up to 500 members) or \$50 (500+ members). Read past editions there too.
4. Read BONUS materials not included in this booklet at SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives » Whose Birthday? 2007.

Going Beyond “Whose Birthday?”

1. Check out the 20+ ideas of our Simpler Living Community Network. Visit SimpleLiving.org » Volunteers » Activities to Try, select an activity. Try it!
2. Learn how to influence others toward simpler living. Read “Guidelines for Change.” Visit SimpleLiving.org » Volunteers » Activities to Try » Simple Living 101: How to Influence Others.
3. Be a proactive volunteer. Read “Simple Living 101: Toolbook for Activists Shy or Bold” at SimpleLiving.org » Volunteers » Activities, or order a copy on paper. Listen to “Living Simply and Loving It!” CD.
4. Plan a public event, such as “Unplug the Christmas Machine” workshop. Order and read “Alternative Event Organizer’s Kit.”

Want more ideas and details? Visit SimpleLiving.org » Volunteers. We’d love to share your results and ideas with others!

NOTE: If you want lectionary-based Biblical reflections, you have many to choose from. Visit SimpleLiving.org » Service » Archives » Whose Birthday? Year A (Matthew) includes: 2004, 2001, 1998, 1995, 1992, 1989.

More on Alternative Giving p.16



Organized in 1973 as a protest against the commercialization of Christmas, Alternatives for Simple Living encourages people of faith to examine and challenge our consumer society.

Commercial advertising is full of alluring and seductive yet empty promises. Strong cultural pressures at Christmas and throughout the year lead many to live and celebrate in ways that are neither fulfilling nor joyful.

Alternatives is a non-profit organization that works with Protestant and Catholic churches to provide materials on responsible living, social justice and peace.

We proclaim that celebrations and living can indeed be what we hope for. Joy to the World need not be an empty promise.

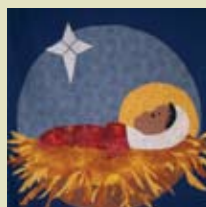
We welcome people to join us in our efforts by becoming members and volunteers. Contact us for our free catalog, about membership and our nationwide speakers' network. Visit our extensive web site - SimpleLiving.org.

Resources

- Christmas resources for church and home
- Year-round worship materials
- Videos, CDs and DVDs challenging consumerism
- Wedding Alternatives
- Toolbook for activists shy or bold
- Collections of graphics and quotations
- Ideas for celebrations throughout the year
- Resources for individuals, church leaders and groups
- Meeting the needs of young adults

Services

- Free quarterly Resources Guide
- Web site - dynamic home page, eStore, archives
- Simpler Living Community Network
- Simply 60 Seconds email newsletter



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Alternatives' Honorary Board of Directors

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Why a Simpler Christmas?

A simpler Christmas leads to freedom. A consumer Christmas leads to stress and debt. Simplicity leads to generosity.

It leaves room for more joy. It is such a joy to get the burden of stuff off our shoulders.

It builds relationships. We are told thousands of times every day by commercial advertising that we will find meaning and happiness through stuff. Voluntary Simplicity says we will find happiness and meaning in life through relationships – within ourselves, with others, with the Earth and with God.

It leads to a whole life of simplicity. Celebrating is one part of a total life of integrity. This booklet is one step on the life-long journey of simple living. Only we can choose to simplify our own lives. This booklet can help.

It promotes justice. By using only our fair share of Earth's resources, we leave some for others around the globe and for future generations. "Live Simply that Others May Simply Live."

It Cares for Creation. A simple life is an Earth-friendly life.

Let's have a simpler Christmas this year! - Editor

Whatever Happened to Christmas?

A few hundred years ago, the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas because they thought it was frivolous and that the joyousness was inappropriate to true Christian piety.

That's not where we are. We believe in the joy and laughter and meaning that Christmas can bring. We also believe that despite the pressure from our consumer culture, our celebrations of Christmas should make sense with the values of Christ who was born in simple surroundings.

Alternatives for Simple Living offers "Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?" as an instrument for reclaiming the real meaning, joy, and value of Christmas. It is an invitation to rethink and re-feel the ways we celebrate.

May this Christmas bring you hope, peace, and joy. - Doyle Burbank-Williams, Chair Alternatives' Board of Directors

Weekly Family Time: How to Use These Reflections & Activities

The resources provided here offer individuals, families and other small groups a way to remember the reason we celebrate this holy season. The reflections are intended to be used from the first week of Advent and follow through to the Feast of Epiphany.

Before Advent begins, make an ADVENT WREATH. Find a book with instructions or follow these simple directions. Take a large, flat, shallow bowl (at least 9 inches in diameter) and fill it with sand or coarse salt. Place four purple candles securely around the edge

of the bowl. Place a large white candle in the center. Make a circle of evergreens and place them around the bowl.

You will also need a manger scene, a Bible and matches. Light one purple candle the week of Advent I; two the week of Advent II, etc. Light all five beginning on Christmas Eve.

Set aside time each week to worship, perhaps after a meal on Sundays. Invite those who may be alone to join in.

Depending on the ages of those in your group, adults may want to read

the reflections beforehand. Incorporate the short Advent-Christmas ideas throughout the booklet into worship time, especially as a discussion starter.

Read and discuss one reflection at each meeting. Sing along with the well known tunes of the "Carols with Justice" CD or from SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives, scroll down to Carols.

Gather around the Advent wreath. Take turns reading, lighting the candles, praying, singing and sharing feelings and ideas.

Whether this is your first or your 20th year reading "Whose Birthday?" WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK on the new format and design, as well as the content. Email Alternatives@SimpleLiving.org, write or call. Thanks.



Would you still take your kids? After all, isn't Christmas supposed to be about Him, not the guy in the red suit? Or can it be about both? Share your opinion at www.wondercafe.ca, the home of lively discussion on spiritual topics, moral issues and life's big questions.

wondercafe.ca 

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

This Season, Practice Christian Hospitality

by Marilyn Sharpe

More than two decades ago, as we decorated our home for Christmas, I dreaded what lay ahead. With three young children and shabby furniture, Christmas was the ONE time our home really looked its best. I felt that I really ought to entertain while it looked festive. One house cleaning could cover a multitude of parties. I could dazzle them with my cuisine. I thought about all those I really owed a return invitation. There were sitters to line up to watch our children, while we went to the parties others threw to pay us back. What a miserable economy of paybacks!

And, oh, how different is Paul's call to hospitality from the pickle I'd gotten myself into. "Welcome ... as Christ has welcomed you ... for the glory of God." I had it all wrong, and I needed to get off that merry-go-round-gone-mad.

So, what changes have we made over the years that bring the Good News to us, so that we might share it with others?

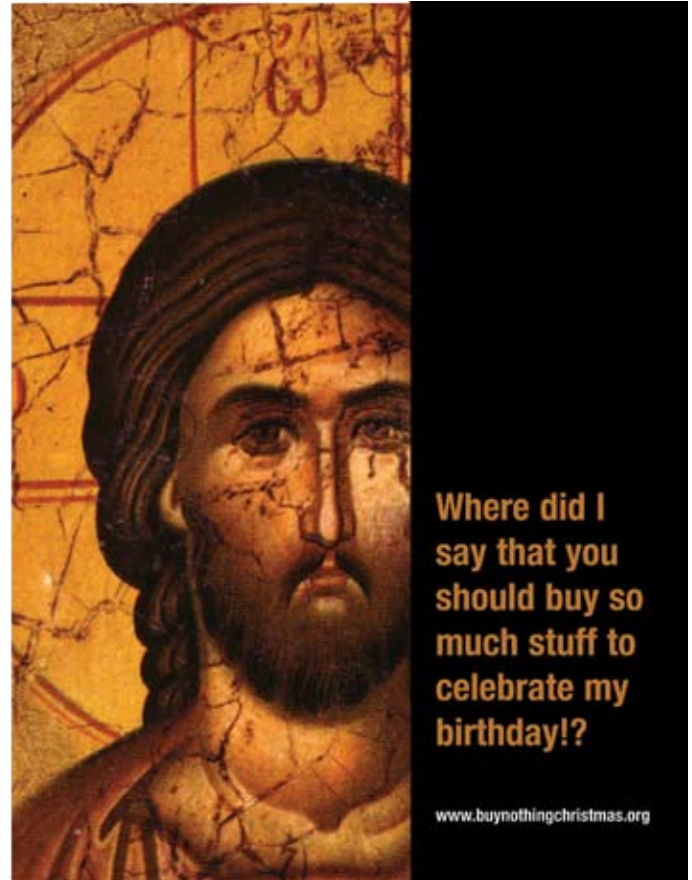
STOP - Evaluate absolutely everything you do for the Christmas season. Does it give life and joy? Does it bear Christ's light into the world? If not, say "goodbye."

PRIORITIZE - Family comes first. Make space in a hectic schedule to enjoy the beauty of the season together in your own home.

SIMPLIFY - Instead of a gourmet extravaganza, host potluck dinners or invite friends for a cup of Christmas tea and a plate of cookies.

DO IT DIFFERENTLY - Instead of hosting a dinner, go to a soup kitchen and serve those who are not overfed this season. Now, that is welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God.

SABBATH TIME - Savor the relationship you have with God, the relationships you have with others, the gift of this day. Be still. Listen. Give thanks.



Columnist Marilyn Sharpe serves as Director of Christian Parenting and Intergenerational Ministry for The Youth & Family Institute, Bloomington, MN - www.tyfi.org

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Let's Get Off the Christmas Roller Coaster! (on Christmas Trilogy audio CD)

A Simple Christmas

Simplify & Celebrate: Embracing the Soul of Christmas

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When would be the best time to evaluate everything you do for the Christmas season?
2. Name three things you can start doing now to SIMPLIFY Christmas.
3. Are you willing to "do it differently," to serve the needy? If not, why not?
4. Name one new way you can honor Sabbath time.

PRAYER

Holy God, help us to stop, prioritize, simplify, do it differently and honor Sabbath time. Help us remember that Christmas is about loving and caring and welcoming, not about extravagances. Give us insight and strength to make changes in our Christmas celebrations. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Promise of Advent: Gospel Nonviolence

by Paul Amrhein

The promise of Advent is nothing less than Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. Our daily Scripture readings for this season are full of the promise of God's covenant with the chosen people for Israel to send a Messiah to redeem them. This Messiah showed us the way to be God's children.

Two thousand years later we are still an Advent people trying to live out that promise. Nonviolence is an integral part of living out that promise, a mainstay of Jesus' Gospel message, and a reflection of the Advent season.

Take for example, Jesus' handling of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:2-11, where Jesus prevents a woman from being stoned to death. The crowd, ready to cast stones, represents a very human tendency to want to have the situation brought to closure and move on. The punishment is prescribed: carry it out and the world is a better place.

Jesus' nonviolent handling of the situation, telling the crowd, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," may appear to be a clever end to the story, but such is never the case with Gospel non-violence.

The practice of Gospel nonviolence is ever the beginning – ever the Advent story. Its challenge is that there is rarely an immediate solution or closure but rather it provides the opportunity for the Gospel of God's love to take root and bloom.

This is an important point for contemporary Christians who too frequently look for others to take leadership in applying the Gospel and/or blame others for evil in the world. As followers of Christ we believe God loves us each equally and each of us is accountable to God.

John 8:2-11 – Jesus said to her,
“Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

The difference nonviolence makes in the story as told is, all have the chance to repent and follow the Gospel. The adulteress woman in this story, aside from receiving the scare of her life, is given the opportunity to repent. The stone throwers also see their own need to repent.

Whenever we practice Gospel nonviolence in our lives, it is rarely an immediate solution to our problem. Rather, it is the beginning of the solution. It provides us the opportunity to work out our differences with those with whom we are in conflict.

A primary problem in dealing with violence in our culture is that so few of us recognize the violence in our own lives. Our actions and words help perpetuate a culture of violence.

The United States has one of the highest violent crime rates in the world, the highest percentage of its people incarcerated in the world and one of the only industrialized democracies of the world with a death penalty, sadly enough, popularly supported by many Christians. Watch the news or just about any TV program and see violence, hear it in the language. Violent talk and violent actions all breed more violence.

The challenge of Advent is to examine our own lives - do we treat every person with dignity and respect as a child of God? Are we truly making way for Christ to be born among/within us?

Paul Amrhein serves as the Director of Social Concerns at Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi, Raleigh, NC.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Kids Creating Circles of Peace
 Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference
 How to Teach Peace to Children
 "Gifts of Peace" packet on CD-ROM
 ("Simply the Best: Over 30 Years of Alternatives")

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are you surprised by the information about violence in American culture? Why or why not?
2. Where do you see violence in your home – TV, video games, other places?
3. Has physical violence affected your life or the lives of loved ones? How about verbal violence, disrespect or bullying? How have you responded? How are you dealing with it?
4. Do you think everyday events – gossiping, back-biting, name-calling – are violence? How do you deal with such situations?

PRAYER

God of Peace, help me to recognize the violence in American culture and in my life. Give me insight to figure out ways to replace it with peacemaking. Give me strength to be an example of peacemaking.

Getting Beyond Trading

by John Marty



During the Great Depression, my parents considered themselves very fortunate if they with their siblings together, received a toy for Christmas.

Those were tough times and they didn't have much, so their parents would stretch every last dime to get a gift for the kids. These were gifts of love in the spirit of the Christ Child's birth.

Times have changed. Children receive more toys at one Christmas than their grandparents received in their entire childhood. In our consumer society, most households have too much stuff; a big problem is finding a place to store it all.

Yet despite our overabundance of possessions, we are taught that it is socially proper to buy Christmas presents for numerous people. Not just family members, but nieces and nephews, co-workers, friends, and children's classmates. These days we trade gifts, more out of obligation than a spirit of giving. If someone gives us a gift because

they found something special that they want us to have, we are socially obligated to return the favor. The Christmas gift exchange, where we draw names and everyone gives and gets a gift, has become expected behavior.

Most participants in gift exchanges struggle to find a suitable gift for the recipient "who has everything." So retailers sell us gift cards, allowing the recipients the ability to choose what they want. Not surprisingly, this has morphed into friends merely exchanging \$10 or \$20 gift cards. Several years ago, our son decided to illustrate the silliness of this when he and his cousin avoided the hassle

Luke 4:16-19 Jesus read,
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

of gift cards and simply exchanged \$20 bills!

We don't need to lose the giving spirit of Christmas - we just need to find recipients who could use our

generosity. Church World Service and other groups have developed Christmas "gift catalogs" to help out. Several years ago, when our kids gave us a flock of chicks through Heifer

Project International, they pointed out that this gift wouldn't add clutter to our house. And their gift gave some family a source of income, nutritious food, and a better future. That is truly meaningful Christmas giving.

John Marty has been a member of the Minnesota State Senate since 1987 and is chair of the Senate Health, Housing, and Family Security Committee.

The son of author and theologian Martin Marty, John is a former corporate foundation administrator and is a freelance writer. John and his wife Connie have two children and live in Roseville, MN.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

- Affluenza & Escape from Affluenza DVDs
- Living More with Less – book, study/action guide, poster, post card, bookmark
- Hundred Dollar Holiday
- The Conscious Consumer: Promoting Economic Justice Through Fair Trade

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When I do Christmas gift shopping, why am I struggling to find something meaningful for each recipient?
2. Is this struggle due to my lack of creativity, or is the problem that the recipient is "the person who has everything?"
3. Instead of spending my energy finding the elusive "right gift" for my neighbor, could I spend more energy finding the right "neighbor" for my gift? How does Christ define our neighbor?
4. Do we give gifts for the benefit of the recipient or for our benefit as giver? Are we giving gifts because we feel obligated to do so, or because we believe the gift will improve the life of the recipient?

PRAYER

O Lord, as we celebrate the gift of your coming, renew our spirit of generosity. You came to proclaim good news to the poor; help us bring good news to the poor too, learning to give to those who need our gifts, not to those who struggle with too much. Give us the ability to see our neighbors in need around the globe and to rejoice in our ability to give them needed gifts. Teach us to stand up to the social pressures of our society and remember the meaning of your birth.

Giving BIG - A Modern Day "Widow's Mite"

by Peter Marty



The manger scene on our church's front lawn had theft issues for five of the eight years I served that city congregation. Someone was hell-bent on stealing the

baby Jesus. I'm not sure what made this Jesus so attractive. I always figured that he probably landed in a house that needed him more than our outdoor crèche.

Most December mornings my pattern was to check for a Jesus kidnapping as I made my way into the church office. One cold morning, when Jesus was fast asleep on the hay, I noticed a small wrapped package beside him. A tiny note with a misspelling was taped to the red Christmas paper: "Happy Birthday Jesus." I had no idea if this was a makeshift bomb, a booby trap, a Candid Camera set-up, or an honest-to-goodness gift of some kind.

And then: Was it ethically right to remove something that was possibly as sacred as someone's personal gift to Jesus? Curiosity answered that moral quandary with a "YES." I scooped up the present and brought it inside to open.

Beneath the wrapping was an old "Shake 'N Bake" Pork seasoning box. Inside it was 33 cents and a piece of

notebook paper with some handwritten words: Dear Jesus. Happy Birthday! Here's some small change for you to feed someone hungry. I give myself to be kind as you were kind to other people on earth. Love, Maria.

Maria lived next door to the church with two other women in a house our congregation had opened for those living with chronic mental illness. I didn't know much about Maria, since her schizophrenia had turned her into something of a recluse. But I knew she

had a big heart. This day I discovered how big.

Maria died before the next Christmas. I didn't have the heart to tell funeral goers about the gift I had stolen. The "Shake 'N Bake" box still sits in my desk drawer, though, now fifteen years after I lifted it from the manger. Reverence for Maria won't let me let it go. And awe for what Christ brought out of this little woman with voices rattling around her head, still has me wondering, "When will I learn to give a gift as big?"

Rev. Peter W. Marty is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa, and host of the Grace Matters radio program - www.gracematters.org. Yes, his brother John Marty also contributed to this issue.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Christmas Campaign Kit: Alternatives Giving Cards; Buy Me Nothing, I'll Still Love You; Bearing Gifts Does Not Make Us Wise

Gifts of the Heart

Waiting for the Wonder: Voices of Advent

“Jesus watched people putting money into the temple treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two copper coins worth a penny. Then he said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had to live on.”

Mark 12:38-44, Luke 20:45-47,21:1-4

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tell about an experience you've had with a person who has a mental illness.
2. Have you ever experienced a similar situation of generosity – a gift that was sacrificial, even though small?
3. What did the author mean by, "When will I learn to give a gift as big?" Can you ask the same question of yourself?

PRAYER

Dear God, help us to see opportunities to be generous beyond ourselves. Give us the strength to take the first step. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Away in a Stank

by Shane Claiborne

The Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) visits us on occasion at The Simple Way community - to cut down our endangered trees, to fine us for cracks in the sidewalk, or to let us know according to city ordinance "it is illegal to invite guests into your home to eat." (For the record, most of you readers are also criminals for the same reason!) It could all make for a great sitcom.

But here's the newest twist: OUR INSPECTOR'S NAME IS "JESUS" (pronounced "hey-SOOS"). He's not a Galilean peasant, but a young, clean-cut Latino guy from North Philly. But that's not all. Our lawyer handling these theatrics with the City is a friend named Ralph Pinkus who happens to be Jewish (and one of the best real estate lawyers in the city, thanks be to Yahweh!). Ralph and I were joking the other day, and he said giggling: "Well, Jesus isn't helping you out of this one." We laughed hysterically, and you can imagine we've kept the Jesus-jokes rolling ever since.

It is just like our God to use a Jewish lawyer to save a Christian non-profit from violating the codes of an Inspector named Jesus, here in the City of Brotherly Love. Ha! All this makes me think of the riddles and stunts pulled by Jesus (of Nazareth, not of L&I) back in the day pulling money out of the mouth of a fish, reducing Mammon to fish food, letting everyone know that money may have

caesar's image on it but caesar has God's image on him; money may come from the mouth of fish but fish came from the mouth of God. YES! (Sometimes I would like to tell the L&I inspector to go catch a fish and it will pay the fine for us, but there's no lake nearby.) Or how about Jesus telling parables like the Good Samaritan where the heroes were heretics and outcasts - peasants who proved powerful in the face of negligent kings, sinners who proved faithful in the face of apathetic priests, beggars who proved wealthy in the face of thirsty rich folks.

As I have been studying the early Church, I am reminded of all the radical conversions. Justin (martyred in 165AD) wrote this of the early followers of the Way: "We ourselves were well conversant with war, murder and everything evil, but all of us throughout the whole wide earth have traded in our weapons of war.

“It is just like our God to use a Jewish lawyer to save a Christian non-profit from violating the codes of an Inspector named Jesus, here in the City of Brotherly Love.”

We have exchanged our swords for plowshares, our spears for farm tools." I see a lot of people trading in their swords.

There are the obvious ones, the terrorist Saul of Tarsus, Simon the zealot revolutionary, but I have seen some new ones this year. I keep being surprised by God at work where I least expect it, over and over. A soldier who was

on the ship that fired missiles into Iraq came forward at an altar call I gave praying for God to disarm him. A millionaire gave his



company away and now works with folks dying of AIDS. A young girl was raped and asked us to help her seek restorative justice that would heal her attackers rather than punish them. A lady whose family members were killed on Sept. 11 came up to me at a conference and said she wanted to join the hundreds of other victims of 9-11 crying out for peace. Two former CIA analysts I got to talk to for hours and hours about Iraq, the Church, and our Lover, have fallen in love with God afresh. A soldier returning from war said he had risked his life for an American lifestyle that he no longer believes in and that the world can no longer afford.

The world is groaning this Christmas. The world is groaning in the pains of childbirth as the Scriptures say. We are not simply celebrating the birth of a baby 2000 years ago. We are also in labor, giving birth to the Kingdom of God, on Earth.

This month we are having a Christmas service entitled: "Away in a Stank Manger," to remind ourselves that the birth of Jesus was not pretty. Children were being killed by Herod. Jesus' family was forced to flee, born a baby

PRAYER

O God, help us remember that Jesus was born in simple surroundings. Give us the enlightenment and courage to celebrate His birth with reverence and simplicity. In Jesus' holy name, Amen.

Manger

refugee on the run from oppressive rulers, born literally in the dung of our world. A pastor friend of mine, Wayne Gordon, of Lawndale Community Church, in Chicago told me a story. He had become so troubled by all the distractions of Christmas – buying, decorating, indulging. He struggled with what to do for their Christmas service to stay true to the story.

He decided to remind everyone of the filthy reality of the Christ-birth, so before the service, instead of decorating as usual, he spread out cow manure under all the pews. As people came in and sat down dressed in their best attire, they looked at each other awkwardly, as if someone needed some antacids. At first people squirmed and shifted uncomfortably. As time went on, they mystically remembered the lowly life of the homeless baby.

This is the Jesus we celebrate at Christmas – the one who was born

in a stank manger, who told stories where Jewish lawyers and Samaritan women could be heroes. (How encouraging, as my troubles come from Jesus of L&I and as my hope keeps coming from reborn soldiers!) Everyone was surprised, scandalized by the One who rolled around in the dirt with children.

We celebrate the one who refused the temptation to call fire down from heaven – and died the detestable execution reserved for traitors, insurrectionists, bandits, and failed messiahs with the world mocking, laughing, spitting on him. Indeed, we will undoubtedly find ourselves much more

likely to meet Jesus this Christmas in the stench of manure or the filth of the ghetto than we are to meet Him in the best decorated sanctuary or the most festive shopping mall.

“We will much more likely meet Jesus this Christmas in the filth of the ghetto than in the best-decorated sanctuary or the most festive shopping mall.”



Shane Claiborne is the author of *The Irresistible Revolution* and co-founder of The Simple Way community in Philadelphia. His book and new DVD are available from Alternatives. Photos by Becky Garrison.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Tony & Shane's DVD

The Irresistible Revolution

Unplug the Christmas Machine

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you and your congregation react if the minister put manure under the pews?
2. Do you and your family struggle with your celebration of Christmas – meal, budget, traditions, gifts? If not, why not?
3. Does the simplicity of the surroundings of Jesus' birth comfort you or condemn the commercialism of modern Christmas celebrations?
4. What are you willing to do to counter the growth of the commercialism of Christmas? What conversations are you willing to have with your family and friends about it?

Connecting at Christmas- A Memory of Warm Springs Chapel

by Becky Garrison

When I was twelve, my late father served as a supply priest at Warm Springs Chapel in the Warm Springs, Georgia, hospital. The highlights of these trips were serving occasionally as my father's acolyte and partaking of the free buffet afterwards. The rows of congregants in wheelchairs failed to capture the attention of this self-absorbed preteen.

On Christmas Eve, I was in a really foul mood. For starters, an older acolyte was allowed to robe for the service. Someone was concerned that as a kid, I might accidentally set the chapel on fire in the middle of this serene candlelight service. Also, I had just been informed that I wasn't getting some of the presents I put on my Christmas gift list. And to top it

off, there wasn't even a free buffet afterwards.

Right after the congregations had received communion, the chapel doors opened. The candles reflected the bright hospital white color that filled the sanctuary as hospital staffers escorted patients in stretchers down the aisle. When I saw one young man who was close to my age smile as he received the body and blood of Christ, I felt ashamed. Here I was having this pity party when these people who couldn't even get out of their beds had a glow about them. I saw how they possessed the gift of Christ's love, and in that moment I realized that that was the one gift that really mattered.

John 1:12

“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”



Becky Garrison is author of *Red and Blue God*, *Black and Blue Church* and Senior Contributing Editor for *The Wittenburg Door*. She can be reached at bgthedoor@aol.com

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

What Does Jesus Want for Christmas? pageant and music CD
Cloth for the Cradle (Iona Wild Goose Worship Group)
Shine On, Star of Bethlehem worship resources

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be a child of God?
2. Describe an experience when you've received the gift of Christ's love. What can we learn about God and our faith from people who are physically or mentally challenged?
3. Who in your community may be homebound or away from their families during this Advent season? How can you reach out to them? Check out www.where-to-turn.org to see how a local grassroots group put their faith into action helping those in need.
4. What does "Live simply that others may simply live" mean to you?

PRAYER

Dear God, help us see the gift that you give us at Christmas time is the promise of salvation. Remind us that your gift is more valuable than any other gift I may receive. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Christmas for Real

by Debra Dean Murphy

We all have images of her in our heads. We see her kneeling reverently, eyes closed, head bowed. She is usually shrouded in blue or white – halo optional. Mary, the mother of Jesus: demure, peaceful, passive – and so clean! And all this after just having given birth in a barn.

I've long felt that any woman who has experienced pregnancy and childbirth probably regards these images with skepticism. Birth, as we know, is messy; it is bloody and sweaty. Modern western culture, which seems to fear birth as much as it fears death, has always tried to sanitize the birth process – in life and in art.

Most of the depictions of Mary and the infant Jesus in Christian art and hymnody, while often beautiful, are too sterile, too pristine.

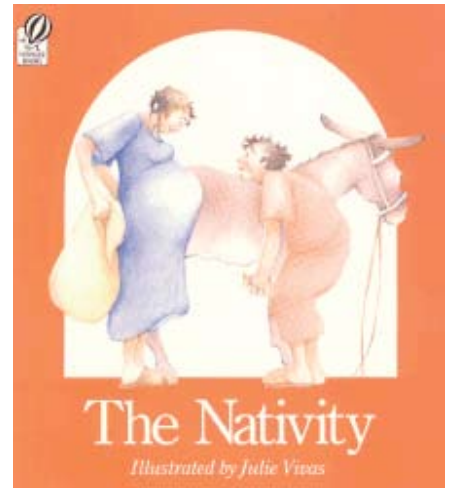
In contrast, for example, Julie Vivas' beautiful book, "The Nativity," captures

the gritty realness of Jesus' vulnerable beginnings. Her artwork depicts a more realistic holy family. With whimsy and humor, illustrator Vivas renders Mary in all her humanness, her womanliness. She shows Mary's growing belly and swollen breasts; we sense Mary's discomfort, her unwieldiness. Following the birth she looks utterly spent. We see Joseph as her tender protector. Even Gabriel, with his tattered, papery wings, disheveled hair, and beat up work boots, lends a comic, human touch to the story.

We need more of these kinds of images in our heads. We need not sentimentalize this most radical and most human of stories, for

it is in the disarray and brokenness that is our humanity that the divine meets us. And Mary, the one who bore God, bears that truth again to us, even now.

“Birth is messy. In the disarray and brokenness that is our humanity the divine meets us.”



Let's share new visions of Christmas by reading aloud, discussion, prayer and service.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

The Nativity
The Shoemaker's Dream
The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey
Let's Talk About Christmas (planner)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are we doing now that distracts us from a real Christmas?
2. Are we willing to "revision" our celebration of Christmas by using a planner, like "Let's Talk About Christmas" or a workshop like "Unplug the Christmas Machine"? If not, why not?
3. What are some of the implications of a real Christmas for us year-round?
4. What practices would help us live out these implications, such as reading aloud, discussion, prayer and service? Are we willing to adopt or strengthen such practices?

PRAYER

We pray for the strength and insight to shed the sentimentality surrounding Christmas and to search for its real meaning for our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Do Not Conform, But Be Transformed

From Anne Basye's Journal

Living at Holden Village* makes me remember the church bulletin with Romans 12 on it that I used to keep tucked into my bedroom mirror, for courage. "Do not conform, but be transformed" kept me brave, able to press ahead with life changes that transformed me.



I live this invitation. It's my mantra.

Yes, I can resist consumer culture!

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, I can talk to Alex or sit on the porch instead of watching TV.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, I can sell my car and live without one.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, I can work at home and be there for Alex.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, hand-me-down clothes are a gift!

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, I can appreciate what I have instead of always wanting more.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, I can borrow CDs from the library instead of buying them.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, it's okay to shop at garage sales.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, I can say no once in awhile and rest.

Do not conform, but be transformed.

Yes, God is inviting me to deepen my understanding of God's culture and to try to live God's principles in my faltering, imperfect way.

Author, columnist and poet, Anne Basye is a thoughtful observer and practitioner of simple lifestyles. A member of Unity Lutheran Church, she lives in Chicago with her son Alex, dog Barks and many friends.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal

Break Forth into Joy! Beyond a Consumer Lifestyle DVD

Your Money or Your Life

Excerpt from "Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal" available from Alternatives. ©2007 ELCA Hunger Program. Used by permission.

* Holden Village is a remote retreat center in Washington State.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is one of your favorite Bible verses? How is it helpful to you?
2. Name one area of your life that you feel needs transforming. Name two or three small steps that would start that transformation.
3. If you keep a journal, why? If not, why not?
4. How can you use the idea of transformation to go beyond simplistic New Years resolutions?

PRAYER

Transforming God, help us to see the conforming that we do that keeps us from doing Your will. Open us to Your change. In Jesus' transforming name, Amen.

Recovering Jesus

by Tony Campolo

A friend of mine had his TV turned on one morning in early December when he was taken aback by the strange announcement of a newscaster. "I have something disturbing to report," were the words that caught his attention. "Someone has stolen Jesus! Sometime between midnight and three in the morning, someone took Jesus from the manger scene that sits outside the county courthouse. If anyone in our television audience has any information that could lead to recovering Jesus, please contact this station as soon as possible. We very much want to get Jesus back where He belongs."

It doesn't take much of an imagination to be amused by that announcement or to glean all kinds of messages from it. Each Christmas it is easy to get a sense that Jesus has been taken away or gotten lost amidst all our harried activities, decorations, and presents. During the holiday season, we may want to put Jesus back in the center of things where He belongs, but we all

know that recovering Jesus involves more than getting some plastic Jesus returned to a crib on the lawn of a courthouse in St. Louis.

If the real Jesus is going to be recovered this Christmas, we will have to make room for Him in our hearts and minds. Whether that plastic imitation is ever found only has symbolic meaning, but making room in our lives for the real Jesus is what is desperately needed.

“An invasion by Bethlehem's Jesus in stillness is the best of all second comings.”

Each morning try to make room for Jesus through centering prayer. I empty my mind of extraneous thoughts and try to create that sacred space that the ancient Celtic Christians called "the thin place." I establish a subjective condition wherein there is receptivity for an invasion by Bethlehem's Jesus, and when in stillness that invasion occurs, I experience a wonder-filled recovery of the real Jesus. This, unquestionably, is the best of all second comings.



Tony Campolo, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University in suburban Philadelphia, a media commentator on religious, social, and political matters, and the author of a dozen books and numerous videos. He has served on Alternatives' Honorary Board of Directors since its inception.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also like:

It's Easy Being Green
Serve God, Save the Planet
The Art of Debt-Free Living
Tony & Shane DVD

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What keeps us from recovering Jesus in our lives, especially around Christmas time?
2. Are we willing to take the time and discipline to recover Jesus daily? If not, why not?
3. What practices, such as centering prayer, have been helpful to you in recovering Jesus?

PRAYER

Holy and faithful God, help us to recover Jesus everyday. Help us not to be distracted by all the attractive things of this world while serving You and our global neighbors in this world. Amen.

When we celebrate a birthday, we are careful to give what the person really wants or needs. Is there any doubt what Jesus wants from us? He insists that in order to give to him, we must find him in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

By helping to provide a goat for a farmer in Honduras, a decent home for a family in rural Mississippi, or food for those who are victims of war, you can give Jesus a birthday gift he really wants.

Contact one or more of these organizations to get more information on how you can give money, time and skills to those in need. (Information is accurate to the best of our knowledge. Please contact us with additions and corrections.)

ALTERNATIVE GIFTS INTERNATIONAL

Helps organize "alternative giving" events
Education, advocacy & fundraising to alleviate
poverty & restore the environment.
1103 Topeka • PO Box 3810 • Wichita, KS 67201
800-842-2243 • www.AltGifts.org

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES WORLD RELIEF OFFICE

Seeks to combat hunger and poverty
P.O. Box 851 • Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851
800-ABC-3USA x2156 • www.ABC-oghs.org

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

Seeks to root out the causes of violence that lie in
poverty and imbalance of wealth
1501 Cherry St. • Philadelphia, PA 19102
888-588-AFSC • www.AFSC.org

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Works to free prisoners of conscience and end
torture and executions around the world
322 Eighth Ave. • New York, NY 10001
212-807-8400 • www.Amnesty.org

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

Promotes education and legislation on issues of international and
domestic hunger and justice
50 F St. NW Suite 500 • Washington, DC 20001
800-822-7323 (800-82-BREAD) • www.Bread.org

CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DOC) BASIC MISSION FINANCE

Provides health, healing, education and
hope to marginalized people
P.O. Box 1986 • Indianapolis, IN 46206
317-635-3113 • www.DOCBMF.org

CHRISTIAN REFORMED WORLD RELIEF COMMITTEE

A relief, development and educational ministry
2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE • Grand Rapids, MI 49560
800-552-7972 • www.crwrc.org

THE CARTER CENTER

Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope
One Copenhill, 453 Freedom Parkway • Atlanta, GA 30307
404-420-5100 or 800-550-3560 • www.CarterCenter.org

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN EMERGENCY DISASTER FUND

Provides necessities and rebuilds
resources for victims of disaster
1451 Dundee Ave. • Elgin, IL 60120
800-323-8039 • www.Brethren.org

CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

Works in partnership with the needy while
providing immediate necessities
P.O. Box 968 • Elkhart, IN 46515
800-297-1516 • www.ChurchWorldService.org

ECHO (Education Concerns for Hunger Organization)

Provides agricultural information and seeds to those
working with farmers in the Third World
17430 Durrance Rd. • North Fort Myers, FL 33917
239-543-324 • www.echonet.org

EPISCOPAL RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT

Ministers to those who are hurt, forgotten, dispossessed,
sick or in need of training and education
815 Second Ave. • New York, NY 10017
800-334-7626 • www.ER-D.org

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA WORLD HUNGER APPEAL

Works toward development, relief and justice
8765 West Higgins Rd. • Chicago, IL 60631
800-NET-ELCA • www.ELCA.org/hunger

FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION (FOR)

Works to achieve a just and peaceful world community
Box 271 • 523 North Broadway • Nyack, NY 10960
845-358-4601 • www.forusa.org

FULLER CENTER FOR HOUSING

Provide adequate shelter for all people in need worldwide.
701 S. MLKing Blvd. • PO Box 523 • Americus, GA 31709
229-924-2900 • www.FullerCenter.org

A GREATER GIFT (SERRV INTERNATIONAL, INC.)

Promotes the social and economic progress of people in developing regions of the world
500 Main St. • P.O. Box 365 • New Windsor, MD 21776
800-422-5915 • www.AGreaterGift.org

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Works in partnership with poor people around the world to build simple, decent houses
121 Habitat St. • Americus, GA 31709
800-HABITAT (422-4828) • www.Habitat.org

HEIFER PROJECT INTERNATIONAL

Provides livestock and training to needy families in 107 countries
1 World Ave. • Little Rock, AR 72203
800-422-0474 • www.HeiferProject.org

KOINONIA PARTNERS

Teaches peace, kindness, sharing and simplicity; sells pecan and peanut products grown by the community
Americus, GA 31709
229-924-0391 • www.KoinoniaPartners.org

MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

Provides relief, services and development in 50 countries
PO Box 500 • Akron, PA 17501-0500
888-563-4676 (888-622-6337 in Canada) • www.MCC.org

MERCY CORPS INTERNATIONAL

Promotes self-reliance, productivity, human dignity among the world's poor
3015 SW First Ave. • Portland, OR 97201
800-292-3355 (or 888-256-1900) • www.MercyCorps.org

MINISTRY OF MONEY

Helps individuals explore, understand and address issues of money and faith
11315 Neelsville Church Rd. • Germantown, MD 20876
301-428-9560 • www.MinistryOfMoney.org

ONE

The Campaign to Make Poverty History
www.ONE.org



OXFAM AMERICA

Promotes self-help development and disaster relief projects worldwide
226 Cause Way St. 5th Floor • Boston, MA 02114
800-77-OXFAM • www.OxfamAmerica.org

PRESBYTERIAN HUNGER PROGRAM

Responds to hunger and poverty through education, direct food relief, development assistance, lifestyle integrity and influencing public policy
100 Witherspoon St. • Louisville, KY 40202
888-728-7228 x5832 • www.PCUSA.org/hunger

SOJOURNERS/CALL TO RENEWAL

A faith-based movement to overcome poverty
3333 14th St. NW Ste. 200 • Washington, DC 20010
202-328-8745 • www.Sojo.org

TEN THOUSAND VILLAGES

Provides fair income for Third World artisans through a nonprofit marketing program
704 Main St. PO Box 500 • Akron, PA 17501-0500
877-883-8341 • www.TenThousandVillages.com
www.TenThousandVillages.ca (in Canada)

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES OFFICE FOR POVERTY AND HUNGER

Seeks to end childhood hunger and provides lifestyle education
700 Prospect Ave-9th Floor • Cleveland, OH 44115
216-736-3704 • www.UCC.org/justice

UNITED METHODIST COMMITTEE ON RELIEF

Responds to Christ's command to feed the hungry, care for the sick and welcome the stranger in our midst
General Board of Global Ministries
PO Box 9068 • New York, NY 10115
800-554-8583 • UMCOR.org

Savoring Christmas Letters

by Leslye A. Korvola

We struggle to focus on and share celebrating Christ's birth with friends and family at Christmas. Initially it seemed impossible to insulate myself from the cacophonous din about spending money and about Santa Claus, but gradually I learned to just turn it all off, and I convinced at least some of my family to respect my view. Eventually Christmas Eve was celebrated in our home as a birthday party for Jesus, complete with a birthday cake frosted with shredded coconut and decorated with a simple nativity.

This year our children – with children of their own – said they wanted to celebrate in their own homes and my husband and I were faced with the prospects of being “alone” on this very special holiday. Alone on Christmas? Alone? This was to be the quiet Christmas I'd always said I wanted. The idea of how to spend the day took on new possibilities: after church we'd just come home and ponder the meaning of Christmas. That did not appeal to my husband who was feeling sad that there would be no children, no grandchildren, and not even the families or friends from our church congregation.

There were, however, those notes and letters from loved ones across the miles. As they arrived in the mail I put them aside unopened for my husband and I to open together on Christmas day. What wonderful gifts to open with news from families and friends to whom I'd mailed our letter weeks earlier. As I addressed our message to them I'd thought about how in past years sometimes I'd barely found time to send them off. Now we had all the time in the world to quietly think about others, and we were not alone at all!

Sometimes our memories fail us. My husband and I could share memories where one of us had forgotten. Who was that? Or from where did we know them? When is the last time we saw them? It took us all day to go through the cards and letters, because some inspired me to answer their notes immediately. It was a day full of friends and family and quiet celebration of life and this special day of Christ's birth.

In the weeks since Christmas additional letters have arrived and some people from whom we'd not heard (but to whom I wrote on Christmas Day because we were thinking of them) have telephoned. It seems it's “the thought that counts.” Christmas cards have become a tradition that busy people sometimes find more of a chore than a gift of sharing. Letters that only tell of our family's accomplishments and/or difficulties miss the opportunity to tell others of why Christmas means more to us than spending money and awaiting Santa Claus.

One person said she so enjoyed our Christmas letter (I have long since given up the expense of Christmas cards), she wanted to keep it as an outline for how she would write her Christmas greetings in the future. (I enclose a copy of the letter to share a little about our family.) I felt honored, but even more importantly, I realize that it takes more than turning off the cacophonous din: holiday greetings are a way to turn up the volume of Christian joy. Thanks for letting me share this thought with you.

Sharing the love of Christmas,

Leslye A. Korvola

P.S. By the way, while in Anchorage, we did celebrate Santa's arrival on Nicklaus, the 6th of December, a German tradition; and on Christmas Eve after the candlelight service at our church, we did have a birthday party for Jesus with our little ones living nearby in North Pole.

From Christmas Letter:

So at this holiday season it is my wish to share with you the reason for celebrating. I don't think I could face the challenges of life (or death) without the confidence that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him should not die but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) What a blessing to believe I am here for a purpose in this world so full of injustices and wrongdoings. What a blessing to be able to trust in God that in the end “All things work together for good to those that love God and are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28) This gives me peace that is beyond human understanding: I am at peace with God through the grace of Christ, my Savior, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. It is our wish that you and your loved ones will also have that joy and peace in your life.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

“What Shall We Tell the Folks” from *Whose Birthday?* 1988 and 1989, and “We Chose Something Different: Making a Change for the Better” from “*Whose Birthday?*” 2000 available on CD-ROM (“Simply the Best: Over 30 Years of Alternatives”)

The Joy of Reading Aloud

by Bruce Forbes

As I struggle to resist distracting pressures during the Christmas season, seeking instead a meaningful and fulfilling Christmas, I frequently ask friends and acquaintances what is their favorite Christmas custom or activity. It's a great way to gather ideas. If someone asks me the same question, here is mine:

A small group of my close friends annually selects an evening shortly before Christmas to get together. We each bring a snack or a dessert to share. It is not primarily a time to exchange presents, but some of us can't help ourselves and bring token gifts or humorous items. We start a fire in the fireplace in the living room, sit in a circle on furniture and on the floor, and spend the evening chatting and munching. For our featured activity, one of us selects a favorite Christmas short story. We read it aloud to one another,

“Our gathering, simply sharing time and reading aloud, is an oasis with one another in the midst of a bustling Christmas season.”

passing the book around the circle, with each person reading a page at a time. I imagine that it is a little like the “olden days” when families gathered around a big console radio to listen to a radio drama. The Christmas stories usually are humorous or touching or both.

Every one of us claims that this is the highlight of our Christmas season, and the reason, I think, is because it is so simple. No one has to prepare a meal or spend a lot of money. (At most, I have to clean my home!) Our gathering, simply sharing time and reading aloud, is an oasis with one another in the midst of a bustling Christmas season.

As a footnote, our favorite source for Christmas short stories is *Home for Christmas: Stories for Young and Old*, edited by Miriam Leblanc, available from Alternatives.



Bruce Forbes serves as Professor of Religious Studies at Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa and as a member of Alternatives' Board of Directors. He's the author of the new book *Christmas: A Candid History*.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also like:

Watch for the Light:
Readings for Advent & Christmas
Christmas Stories Set:
Christmas Reader, Collection and Sampler

What Would Jesus Buy?

Advent Haiku #14

by Cathy Brechtelsbauer

*What then should we do?
How can we be satisfied
with only one coat?*

Based on Luke 3:7-18 – The Proclamation of John the Baptist - for the 3rd week of Advent (Cycle C), vv.10-11 And the crowds asked John, “What then should we do?” He replied, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Gift of Our Gifts

by Mitch Harbison

A few years ago a group called "Peace in Our Day" from the Roman Catholic parish of St. Luke the Evangelist in Glenside, Pennsylvania, started a unique form of holiday giving. Held on the Feast of the Epiphany to commemorate the gifts brought by the Magi to the infant Jesus, the activity was called "Gift of Our Gifts."

Some in the group had participated in what is known variously as "Yankee Trading" or "Stealing Pollyanna" within their families or at work. The concept is that everyone involved brings a wrapped present to the event. Numbers are drawn to see who will be first, second, etc. to select a gift. Number 1 chooses a gift. The second person may choose a new gift or take the one just unwrapped by Number 1. If the first person loses his/her gift to the second person, s/he may choose a new package. Number 3 may choose a new gift or take either of the two

unwrapped gifts, and on it goes until the last number has been drawn.

The twist added by "Peace in Our Day" was that all of the "wrapped packages" were gifts of time and talent, written on the reverse of used Christmas cards along with the name and phone number of the person offering the gift. Some gift examples would be dinner for four, help in writing a resume, babysitting, mending, and even a singing telegram.

Offers of house cleaning or handyman help would change hands over and over again.

"Gift of Our Gifts" was designed to be a fun way to meet parishioners as well as a chance to share a talent by doing a job you love (or at least don't mind) for

someone else while avoiding a chore you don't particularly like. And no one had to go out and buy a present that might add to the clutter or stand in line to return a gift that didn't fit.

“No one had to go out and buy a present that might add to the clutter or stand in line to return a gift that didn't fit.”



Why not think outside the box?

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also like:

Christmas Campaign Kit:
Gratitude Cards

"Gift Theft"
("Whose Birthday?" 2003),

"Gifts of Ourselves"
("Whose Birthday?" 1996), and
"Guidelines for Alternative Giving"
on CD-ROM ("Simply the Best:
Over 30 Years of Alternatives")

Extending the Joy

by "Just Joan" Huguenard

Here's an idea for extending the joy of the holiday season.

Start with a dozen identical cards on which to write something like, "From someone who cares." Then identify a family who's down on their luck, perhaps someone right there in your own neighborhood. If you need help with this, nearly any church or social agency can identify a prospective recipient family.

Now the fun begins. On the 25th of each month, go shopping. Buy all the components of a healthy dinner for the selected family with generous portions so there will be yummy leftovers. Occasionally you could include extras such as flowers for the table, a family game or a special dessert.

Now if your grocery does not make deliveries, you'll have to hire a teenager who can keep a secret or maybe hire a taxi to bring the surprise brown paper bags to the recipient along with one of your unsigned cards.

I believe you'll find immense pleasure in these shopping trips as you carry the Christmas spirit throughout the year. Next December, of course, the delivery will arrive on the 23rd or 24th and the final matching card may reveal your name, if you wish.

(First published in *The Sonoma Valley Sun*, December 28, 2006 within the weekly column known as "just joan." Read the complete article at www.justjoanonline.com.)

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

"The Christmas Game" and "The Anytime Game"

Advent Table Prayer Cards

The Better World Handbook and Better World Shopping Guide



During this Christmas season, may you be blessed
 With the spirit of the season, which is peace,
 The gladness of the season, which is hope,
 And the heart of the season, which is love.

John Greenleaf Whittier

Twelve Days of Christmas Activity Envelopes

by Barbara Howard

As a gift to our friends and family this year, we put together intergenerational activities for each of the 12 Days of Christmas. We put one activity per envelope per day and decorated the outside of each envelope with clip art we found on the computer. The stack of envelopes was tied with a ribbon. (Those living farther away received their activities via e-mail.)

We started with an envelope for Christmas Day explaining the unique gift: "We often forget that Christmas celebrations begin on December 25 and continue until January 6 - the Epiphany...As a gift to you (because we know you don't need more STUFF), we put together some activities for your family to do. Don't worry. They're simple and they can travel with you." The feedback was positive! Many are saving their activities to do again next year.

Here are some sample activities.

December 26 - The 1st Day of Christmas

To show the travels of the Kings and the shepherds, move them far enough away from the nativity that they can move a little closer for each of the 12 days, arriving on the Epiphany, Jan. 6. If you're visiting a relative's house, be sure to ask them if you can use their nativity or bring yours and have them share in the fun.

Talking point: Looking back over Christmas Day have each family member share their most memorable or special moment. Consider keeping these memories in a Christmas journal you write in each year.

December 29 - The 4th Day of Christmas

Move the three Kings and the shepherds/sheep closer to the nativity today.

Just 4 You! Often we are our own worst critics. We tell ourselves so many negative things. Be honest with yourself today and think about 4 gifts you feel God has given you or 4 things that you do really well. Share out loud or not, but at least write them down so you can read them again when you're feeling sad or discouraged. Remember, God says, "You are mine!"

December 30 - The 5th Day of Christmas

Move the three Kings and the shepherds/sheep closer to the nativity today.

High 5! Give a High 5 along with a thank you to each person who does something nice for you today. Try to give out at least five high 5's or challenge yourself to give out five for each person in your family!!

For complete set of cards, visit SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives » Whose Birthday? 2007 » Bonus

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Christmas Angels: Garland and Calendar

What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy

The Scrapbooking Journey



St. Nick—The Real Santa Claus A St. Nicholas Event

by Bonnie Morgan

My husband Bill and I have been Santa and Mrs. Claus for years both for various charities and professionally. One Christmas Eve some ten years ago, we could not attend regular Christmas Eve services unless we came in costume because of commitments. We asked the pastor at that time whether we could slide in the back pew at the midnight service in costume to attend worship. He agreed, much to our surprise.

All was quiet and went very well until we took communion. After the service we passed out our remaining candy canes and were overwhelmed by grandparents who lamented that their grandchildren and children were not there to see Santa and Mrs. Claus putting the emphasis on worshipping Christ above commercialism and not presuming to be special, but indeed, to be last in line. We offered to set aside Christmas Eve

service time for the earlier service for the children and do the same thing the following year as it had been so well received...with a twist.

This Christmas we're putting on a community event to reduce the "gimme" theme and commercialism and to focus on being Christ-centered. We plan to ask the children to bring a gift to the baby Jesus that would be distributed to those in need in our community. We will have nativity characters tell their side of the Christmas story as the children wait for their turn with St. Nicholas (rather than Santa Claus) and again as they take their gift to the manger. We will have a photographer and allow the parents to bring their own cameras.

The ideal date for such an event is Dec. 5th, St. Nicholas Day, though any time in Advent is appropriate.



If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Christmas Campaign Kit:
Prayerful Santa greeting card

"St. Nicholas and the Tax Collectors" at SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives » Whose Birthday? 2007 » Bonus

"Picture Your Child with St. Nicholas" ("Whose Birthday?" 2005)

St. Nicholas articles at SimpleLiving.org » Services » Archives » Articles » St. Nicholas

Epiphany Celebration

by Barbara Howard

Last year we opened our family's Epiphany celebration to our entire parish - our first ever Epiphany Dinner and Celebration. The focus of the evening was to write down our gift to Jesus for the New Year and present our gifts, rolled like scrolls, to Jesus at the nativity. After dinner, crown making, and entertainment provided by our teen band, we processed to the church, gifts in hand, singing "We Three Kings." After reading from Matthew, we presented our gifts. Upon leaving, each family received the light of Christ, in the form of a votive candle, to take home. Everyone was also encouraged to take a different route home, just like the Magi. Once home, the light of Christ was to be carried into each room inviting Jesus to be with them in that room throughout the New Year.

The event was such a hit that we are now doing it each year! This year our entertainment was provided by our Special Needs Family Support Group and our Hispanic Ministry who also provided us with a live nativity! Having a celebration to end the 12 Days of Christmas has really made a difference in both my immediate family and my church family. The focus for us now is not on the easily broken "New Year's Resolutions," but on the everlasting gifts that we give back to God and Jesus with gratitude!

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

Treasury of Celebrations: Create Celebrations That Reflect Your Values and Don't Cost the Earth
Simply in Season Cookbook and Simply in Season Children's Cookbook

Simple Candle-Lighting Ritual

by Meg Cox

To celebrate Christmas with her extended family, one grandmother I know performs a simple ritual in a room where all the lights have been turned off. Each person in the family is given an unlit candle, and they stand in a circle. One candle is lit and then that person lights the candle of the person next to him or her, and so on, around the circle (with extra help and supervision for children). The entire family sings one verse of Silent Night, then everyone blows out their candles all at once and shares a moment of silence. Lovely.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

The Mini Book of New Family Traditions

Celebrate Simply

Wedding Alternatives



Christmas Math

by Meg Cox

At this time of year, like many of you, I start to cringe at all the fake cheer. I feel that if I see one more over-decorated store, I will choke. Most of these stores are filled with poorly made goods that nobody needs and the very air feels clogged with tinsel.

I want to run away to a clean room with a decorated tree and a pine-scented candle on the mantelpiece. I want to sit in a cozy armchair and read a good book to my kid while we drink cocoa.

Then, it will feel like Christmas.

Don't add more to your to-do list this year. Subtract anything you can if it makes you feel dis-spirited. Only add activities if they make it feel more like Christmas to you!

From Meg Cox's Ritual Newsletter for December, 2006. To subscribe simply send a blank e-mail message from your e-address to Subscribers-Join@megcox.com. Visit MegCox.com.

If you enjoyed this article, you'll also enjoy these resources:

31 Words to Create an Organized Life

Unclutter Your Home

The Knitting Way

Breaking the Rules

by Aiden Enns

Especially at Christmas, we North Americans engage in a lot of shopping. When middle-class religious leaders drive fancy cars, wear the latest fashion, use new technology and talk with glee about Christmas presents, they plainly bless our consumer society.

Some of us decided to sing a different song.

Last Christmas a group of us sang anti-shopping carols outside major shopping centers. And we got into trouble with the authorities.

Jesus got into trouble with the leaders of his day for transgressing their codes for upright behavior. He dined with tax collectors and sinners, which made him unclean in the eyes of the religious law.

He justified his breaking of the norms for ethical conduct because the

norms were not serving those who need serving.

When we live in a society so saturated with consumer messages, perhaps the spirit of Christmas is to inject a simple message of fun, creativity and generosity without all the shopping.

Is it possible? Of course it is. You can make, bake, and share things you already have. You can give

vouchers, create meals or hold special celebrations of song and stories.

Mark 2:15-17 Jesus said,
“Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick; I have to about sinners.”

Aiden Enns is the publisher of *Geez magazine: holy mischief in a time of fast faith*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. He is also the co-founder of BuyNothingChristmas.org. Subscribe to *Geez* at SimpleLiving.org » [estore](#) » [misc](#) » [magazine](#)



If you enjoyed this article, you'll also like:

Carols with Justice booklet and music CD
 Sing Justice! Do Justice! booklet and music CD
 The Good Life curriculum and music CD

Carols

by Erica Avery (courtesy of The Center for a New American Dream – NewDream.org) For more lyrics, visit buynothingchristmas.org >> resources.

Slow Down, Ye Frantic Shoppers

(to the tune of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen")

Slow down ye frantic shoppers for
 there's something we must say
 If you would spare a moment all
 the stores would go away
 Big business has been telling us
 what Christmas means today
 Now it's time we decided for
 ourselves, for ourselves
 Yes it's time we decided for ourselves.

To some folks Christmas means a
 time for gathering with friends
 And enemies might take it as
 a time to make amends
 But TV says it's time for pricey
 gifts and selfish ends
 Now it's time we decided for
 ourselves, for ourselves
 Yes it's time we decided for ourselves.

Some people feel that Christmas
 is when Jesus makes a call
 For others it's a time to stress
 good will and peace to all
 But advertisers tell us it means
 Santa's at the mall
 Now it's time we decided for
 ourselves, for ourselves
 Yes it's time we decided for ourselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Jesus ate with sinners and broke religious rules?
2. What religious rules are helpful? Which need questioning?
3. According to religious leaders, Jesus reclined with outcasts. What would similar behavior look like today?

PRAYER

Dear God, help us overcome the temptation to love things more than people. Help us discover divine love in simple acts of compassion and celebration.

Books



THE BOOK OF NEW FAMILY TRADITIONS

How to Create Great Family Rituals for Holidays and Everyday - Meg Cox, 128 pp. \$13. BNFT MINI Version. 135 little pages, \$5. MBNFT

THE NATIVITY

Julie Vivas, illustrator (Ages 3-8) Traditional Christmas story. Whimsical watercolors show humbleness of the people, wonder of life. 36 pp. \$6. NATIV



STORIES TO READ ALOUD OR ALONE

- Christmas Reader XMREAD-A
 - Christmas Collection XMCOLL-A
 - Christmas Sampler XMSAMP-A
- Collections 24 pp. each, \$3 each. All three, \$8. XMSET-A



THE SHOEMAKER'S DREAM

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A SIMPLE CHRISTMAS

Alice Chapin. Ideas, activities, how-to's. 256 pp. \$15. ASC



HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Anthology. 360 pp. \$20. HFC

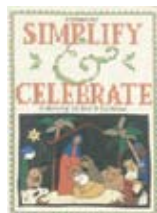
IONA WILD GOOSE WORSHIP GROUP

- 1) Cloth for the Cradle: Worship Resources & Readings for Advent, Christmas & Epiphany. 150 pp. \$16. CLOTH
 - 2) Stages on the Way: Lent & Easter. \$19. STAGES
 - 3) Present on Earth: Ordinary Time. \$20. POE
- All three, \$50.



HUNDRED DOLLAR HOLIDAY

Case for a More Joyful Christmas
Bill McKibben. \$12. HDH



SIMPLIFY & CELEBRATE!

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THE ALTERNATIVE WEDDING BOOK (WEDDING ALTERNATIVES) - UPDATED!

Create a Beautiful Wedding That Reflects Your Values & Doesn't Cost the Earth
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- Softcover, 124 pp. \$15. WEDBK.
- Packet (OK to copy), \$10, WEDPAC-A
- Nuestra Boda: Guia Para una celebracions fuera de lo comun (Spanish). \$10. NB-A.

Books



THE CLASSIC! UNPLUG THE CHRISTMAS MACHINE

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LEADER'S GUIDE TO THE UNPLUG THE CHRISTMAS MACHINE WORKSHOP

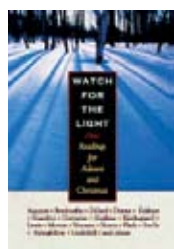
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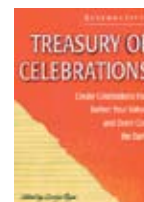
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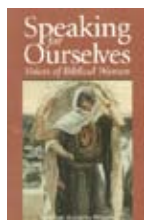


CELEBRATE SIMPLY

Your Guide to Simpler, More Meaningful Holidays and Special Occasions Nancy Twigg. 210 pp. Originally \$13. NOW ONLY \$10. CS



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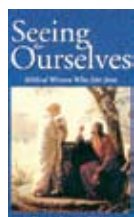


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GIFTS FROM THE HEART

Simple Ways to Make Your Family's Christmas More Meaningful - Virginia Brucker . Are you overwhelmed by the frantic commercialism of our modern Christmas? Do you long for a more meaningful celebration? Here are hundreds of simple ideas that will help you create a warmer, more loving celebration focused on sharing and giving. Parents, grandparents, early childhood educators, teachers, and youth group leaders will love the imaginative, practical, easy, heartwarming, timesaving ideas in this book. 336 pp. \$15. GFTH

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