



## Alternative Christmas Celebrations

Tired of the “Christmas rush,” when the season for festive joy gets hijacked by commerce, anxiety, maybe even exhaustion?

Sometimes we’re tempted with the thought of simply opting out. However, a life devoid of celebration—of parties and feasts and, yes, even extravagance—is no way to live.

What to do? Imagination is the key. Be inventive, establish new rituals (or revise old ones): within your congregation, your family, even your work place.

What follows is a list of practical suggestions. Use them to grease your own imagination. And remember: Perseverance is more important than heroic effort. This year decide on one or two changes. Then build on these in the future. Use these initiatives to establish and maintain new relationships.

### Be extravagant with your time rather than your money.

Design your own “gift certificates” pledging the donation of your time to sew, to help with computer problems, to baby-sit, to give a back rub, etc., which they can “cash in” at a later time.

Learn a simple craft—like making picture frames, or crochet, or photography—and use your skill, however modest, to make your gifts.

Young children can draw/color a picture or other design, and these can be laminated for use as book marks.

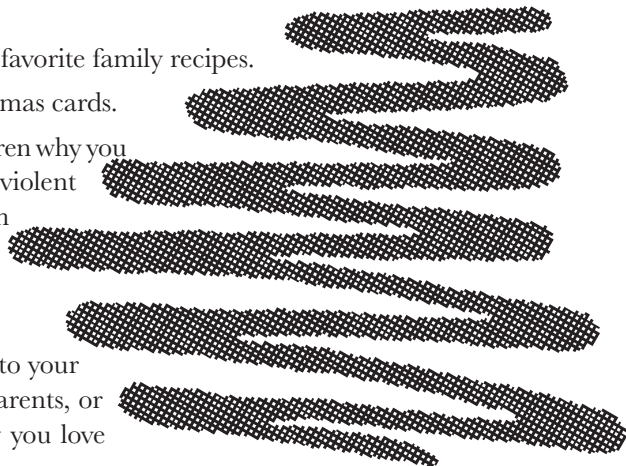
Have enlargements made of old pictures of family or friends.

Assemble a booklet of favorite family recipes.

Make your own Christmas cards.

Discuss with your children why you prefer not to purchase violent toys and games. Help them find new toys and games which are fun and foster imagination.

Write out a long letter to your spouse, or children, or parents, or close friends, saying why you love



them—personal things that are difficult to say face-to-face.

For a distant grandchild, nephew/niece, etc., make an audiotape of yourself reading a book they would like and send both the book and the tape. In addition to reading the words, talk about the pictures—just as if he or she were sitting in your lap. Use a bell to indicate when the page should be turned.

Volunteer to serve food in a local shelter for the homeless on Christmas day.

### Be extravagant in ways that benefit “the least of these.”

Purchase gifts from non-profit or “third world craft” organizations.

Keep track of your total spending on Christmas gifts. Contribute five percent of that amount to an organization working for justice on the local, regional, national or international level. If you have children, involve them in the decision.

Provide gifts for children in a local orphanage, in a shelter for abused women and their children, those in your congregation who have no family.

Shop at out-of-the-ordinary stores, like surplus and supply stores, nurseries, thrift shops. Buy from local craftspeople. Avoid malls and chain stores.

### Establish new traditions (or overhaul old ones).

Have your family host a festive meal in which you invite special guests: those in your neighborhood or congregation who have no family to celebrate with (e.g., senior citizens, people with AIDS who have been cut off from their families, international students, etc.). As part of such a festive gathering, orchestrate your own impromptu acting out of the Christmas story, assigning different characters (with equally impromptu costumes and props), using readings from Luke and Matthew and pausing to sing traditional Christmas carols at appropriate times.

Teach your children the story of St. Nicholas (from which the story of Santa Claus evolved), the fourth-century Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, who was known for giving anonymous gifts to the poor. Take your children on a “St. Nick” adventure during Advent: identify a financially fragile family in your congregation or neighborhood; purchase a bag of groceries; leave it at their doorstep with your anonymous note; then knock on the door and run back to your car and drive away before they see you.

Get your congregation to sponsor a special festival which focuses on the ways Christmas is celebrated in various parts of the world. Invite international students and others living in your area who grew up in another country to participate. Focus on the unique foods, rituals and customs in these areas.