

Did Your Family's Christmas Focus Shift Away From Christ? Here's Hope and Help for Christmas 2021

Did your Christmas shopping get out of hand this past year? In the midst of COVID-19, online sales exploded. In fact, many people have confessed to shopping till their fingers dropped in a failed attempt to make up to friends and family for the many losses of the pandemic and lockdown.

No matter what our excuse, it seems we can find plenty of reasons to take our focus off the true meaning of Christmas. And that's what Allison Hottinger found was happening several years ago with her five children. Appearing on a recent episode of the Family Matters series on Charisma News with her sister and co-creator of the Giving Manger set, Lisa Kalberer, Hottinger tells host Marti Pieper, "When my children were younger ... they were just making Christmas lists like all kids do. But the list just kept getting longer and longer. And I just felt like that's what they were mostly focused on; Christmas was just what they were gonna get. And they wanted to be good so they could get presents.

"And I remember turning to my husband one day and just saying, 'This is not what I want Christmas to be about in our home,'" Hottinger says.

Hottinger relays that over the next few weeks, God brought to mind a childhood memory of a friend whose family kept a simple manger on the mantel at Christmastime. The friend told her, "Each time we do something nice for somebody else, we get to put a piece of straw in the manger; we try to make a soft bed for the baby Jesus.' And I said, 'Well, do you put a baby

Jesus in at the end?' Hottinger says. "She said, 'No.'"

Hottinger she recalled none of this until 20 years later, when she was searching for ways to make their own family Christmas more meaningful. She couldn't find what she wanted online, so her husband made the very first Giving Manger. Hottinger and her husband began their own tradition of placing a piece of straw in the manger to create a bed for baby Jesus each time anyone in the family did an act of kindness.

"And that Christmas, my kids weren't super excited," she says. "But slowly over that Christmas season, as we gave and I served them and then they served others, their hearts really shifted and completely changed our Christmas season. And it's changed it so it's better and the way I want it to be every year since then." Hottinger says their tradition grew to include family acts of kindness and that, as the tradition continued, her children began planning their own ways to serve others.

The Hottinger family's experience with their Giving Manger soon expanded to include Hottinger's sister, Lisa Kalberer, and more and more of their friends wanted a Giving Manger of their own. But expanding the idea seemed impossible. "It really wasn't the best timing, because I had recently been diagnosed with MS. And Allison had five little kids," Kalberer says. "We prayed on it a lot."

Still, the sisters couldn't let the idea go. "We both just really felt this call to do it," Hottinger says. "And it's been such a blessing in our lives. It's hard; it's been so challenging. ... It's really the emails that we get and the comments and the pictures that are sent of people giving and their Christmas is being changed. It's blessed our life more than I could ever imagine."

Before long, the two partnered in a business that eventually culminated in the Giving Manger set, which includes a book to

help draw children into the project; a wooden manger; a bundle of straw, with pieces to add to the manger after each individual or family act of kindness; and a sturdy baby Jesus figure to place in the manger on Christmas Day. Today, the Giving Manger project has become an entire online community, the sisters say. Members exchange photos, praises and ideas about how they are using this set to help keep their family's Christmas focused on Christ.

If you'd like to help ensure your family's 2021 Christmas stays focused on Christ, listen to this episode of the *Family Matters* series to hear the entire story of the Giving Manger, and connect with the Giving Manger family at and on Facebook and Instagram. {eoa}