

Change Your World at Christmas

A pastor shares how his congregation takes the true meaning of Christmas to their community every December

Christmas is a loaded word for most of us. For followers of Jesus, of course, the deepest sense of the word has to do with God coming to earth in the form of a baby: “Immanuel,” as the prophet Isaiah put it, “God with us.” Many other pleasant images also come to mind when we say *Christmas*. A word-association quiz might come up with such thoughts as family dinners, candlelit services, firesides or carols. But let’s face it: Christmas does have its other moments.

A second quiz might call to mind different images—things like crowded malls, traffic gridlock or irritating relatives.

Despite all the glorious aspects of the celebration of Christ’s birth, there also is a tension in most of our lives about the Christmas season. Many of us suffer with a sense of guilt—brought on, I believe, by the selfish focus that has been built around the holiday season.

I’m not just talking about all the attention that’s given to greed, gifts and gorging. There’s also the less obvious inclination we have to think the Christmas story is just “for us.”

The church’s pure and joyous call: “Rejoice! Christ has come to us!”—while it is wonderful news to be celebrated—is only part of the message of Christmas. Immanuel, “God with *us*,” means God also wants to be “with *them*”—through us.

A New Tradition

For several years, people from the Vineyard Community Church

in Cincinnati, which I pastor, have built a new tradition into their hearts. They have explored creative ways to take small deeds of love to the people in our city during the holidays.

We have continued to seek creative ways to gain an audience with the unchurched by serving our way into their lives year-round. We call this approach to sharing Christ *servant evangelism*.

At Christmastime, when people seem to be particularly vulnerable to thinking about spiritual issues, much can be done to build bridges to the unchurched. We started when one of our members, a housewife, got the idea that everybody needs their gifts wrapped at Christmas. "We could go to the mall and wrap presents for free!" she challenged.

We approached mall management about our gift-wrap "outreach." At first they were skeptical. "Tell us again," they asked, "why do you want to do this for free?" We had several meetings before they finally gave us the nod. We invested about \$3,000 in paper, tape, scissors and bows and were enthusiastically on our way.

To the management's surprise, the project was a smashing success. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, we wrapped presents for more than 10,000 customers. The mall received good publicity, and we were able to talk to a lot of people about why we were wrapping for free: to show God's love in a practical way!

For six holiday seasons, we have wrapped presents at that mall. Our credibility with the management has slowly risen each year.

Last Christmas season, when we wrapped 25,000 presents, the mall insisted on paying for the wrapping supplies. Now it pays for the materials—and we share with shoppers about God's love for them. What a deal!

The Power of Incarnation

When we talk about God sending His Son to the earth at Christmas, we are talking theologically about the Incarnation: God becoming man, God coming among us. Through the Incarnation, God was conveying three simple truths, I believe.

First, He has come to us. In His wisdom, God knew that we would never “get it” spiritually until He personally brought the message of the kingdom. Simply sending the message wouldn’t do. God came from heaven to earth to bring His very presence to us.

Second, He wants to come through us to the community where we live. To receive the gift of God and keep it to ourselves is totally antithetical to “God among us.” He desires to fill the entire earth with the knowledge of Himself.

God’s intention is to have a people who would see themselves as vessels of His life, not only restored by His love but willing to allow His restoring life to flow through them to the world. The psalmist captures it well: “God shall bless us, and all the ends of the earth shall fear Him” (Ps. 67:7).

Third, simple acts done with great love will change the world. Who would have thought that God would come in the form of a baby, of all things? Perhaps as a conquering king, a warrior or at least a prophet—but a *baby*?

Apparently God’s plan was to underwhelm the earth with His first coming. After all, He was building a kingdom that would be entirely different from any human kingdom—His would go forward on the basis of small things.

I have been a Christian for about 20 years. Most of that time, I didn’t understand this idea of small things. In fact, I was convinced that God had called me to do big things.

But the harder I tried to do big things, the more stressed I

became and, tragically, the less God's love flowed through me to others. The story of God coming to earth as a man tells us clearly that small things done in love are the most effective approaches to bring the kingdom to earth. It's so simple!

There are hundreds of simple acts of kindness that you and a few friends could do with little preparation to make a strong impression on the unchurched in your community.

In addition to a big undertaking like gift wrapping, our church has ventured into many other smaller projects. Through the process, we've identified some of the most common questions Christians ask before taking on an outreach:

What if people don't respond to our offer? Some won't respond—and that's OK. There is great power in the simple offer to help or give aid, whether people allow you to serve them or not. Many are touched by your willingness to give, even though you may not see a response on their faces. Believe that your small seed will be nurtured by the Holy Spirit as He continues to show His love to them.

What do we say when we interact with people? Simply respond: "We are doing a free community service project to show you God's love in a practical way." That's enough of a statement to get a conversation going if someone is ready to talk.

Will we see immediate results from these projects? Realize that your act of kindness may seem small to you, but the Holy Spirit is fully capable of taking that small seed and making it grow in a hungry heart. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:6 that evangelism is a process that involves planting and watering before harvesting.

Be at peace that you have done your part, which most of the time probably will be either planting or watering. God will bring about a harvest as the Holy Spirit begins to draw the people to Himself.

Are these projects best done alone or by a group? There is a strength in numbers—and encouragement, too. All of the servant evangelism projects listed with this article are done best by groups, such as Bible study groups, home groups or even families.

Registering God's Love

What happens to people when they are served? As they are touched in a practical way, their hearts register that God is real and that He loves them.

As I was served at a local restaurant, I had a brief conversation with the waiter. He asked what I did for a living. When I told him I was the pastor of the Vineyard Community Church, he responded: “Oh, *that's* what it's called. I though it was called the ‘Grapevine Church.’ I know all about you guys.”

“Really?” I asked. “What do you know about us?”

“You're the ones who wrap presents to show God's love in a practical way. I know all about you. You wrapped a present for me a couple of Christmases ago.”

When I heard those words, I was stunned. I thought, *This guy remembers a small encounter we had with him—just a minute or two—a few years ago!*

That little deed of kindness had registered deeply in his heart. He had our name wrong, but he remembered a simple act done with great love. A small seed of the kingdom had been planted, and I have faith to believe God is nurturing and growing that seed right now.

Christmas is all about Immanuel—“God with *us*.” I am thankful He is also Immanuel—“God with *them*,” too.

Steve Sjogren launched the Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati in 1985. He offers more ideas on servant evangelism in his book *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Vine Books) or at www.vinebooks.com.

Giving Love at Christmas

During the holiday season, people in neighborhoods, stores, malls and elsewhere can get a taste of God's love through "giving" outreaches. At little cost, your church group can plan to stock up and give away items such as:

- Christmas cards, candy canes, poinsettias or wreaths
 - Hot chocolate or cookies
 - Firewood, kindling or pinecone fire starters
 - Gift boxes, bows, transparent tape or tissue paper
 - Large shopping bags with handles
 - Photo prints
 - Christmas tree disposal bags
 - Batteries for smoke detectors, remote controls and toys
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Serving Your Way Into Hearts

Here's a sampling of simple projects you could organize to serve those in need this Christmas season

- Wrap gifts at the local mall or department store. If your church is just getting started in servant evangelism, consider starting with just a day or two of wrapping.

- Offer a coat-check service to shoppers at the mall
- Feed parking meters for area shoppers. Leave a card on the cars briefly explaining what you have done. Ours says, "Your parking meter looked hungry, so we fed it!" Include your church's phone number and service times, and a map for shoppers who want to look you up.
- Offer to dispose of used Christmas trees. A day or two after Christmas, rent a grinder and go door-to-door asking people if you can take care of their old trees.
- Spread salt and sand on porches and walkways in snowy weather, or offer to shovel snow.
- Set up a child care service at the church for parents who need to do Christmas shopping.
- Rent a community room in the mall and hold a "movie hour" for children while their parents shop. (Be sure to define the parameters of your child care.)
- Help carry packages for shoppers from the stores to their cars.
- Help parents of needy children make gifts for their own kids, or "adopt a family" and provide Christmas gifts.
- Provide a "Lamb's Lunch" by taking provisions for an entire hot meal into a park or homeless shelter. Typically, those present are receptive to conversation and prayer.
- Collect coats, hats, gloves or long underwear and give them away. Most suburbanites won't appreciate long underwear, but the homeless are thrilled to receive such a gift in cold weather.
- Give away Christmas trees. A day or two before Christmas owners of tree lots often give away trees that haven't sold. Pick up a few trees and some ornaments, and start knocking on

doors in a needy part of town.

- Collect used bikes, fix them up and give them to families in need.