

Churches push Advent Conspiracy to teach real giving

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Sarah
Blakeman
(left) and
sister Elli
Blakeman
are
making
their own
Christmas
gifts by
knitting
scarves.
Their
father,
Clark
Blakeman,
joined the
Advent
Conspiracy
last year
to focus on
relational
gifts and
donating
money to
charity at
Christmas.

Churches push Advent

Conspiracy to teach real giving

By Nancy Haught

Religion News Service

PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS)—The Christmas contradiction gives Pastor Rick McKinley a headache.

Americans will spend about \$475 billion this year on gifts, decorations and parties that many won't even remember next year. They will run themselves ragged—shopping, wrapping and celebrating. And some won't pay off their Christmas debt until March, if they're lucky.



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 - Churches push Advent Conspiracy to teach real giving
- [Fair-trade items offer Christmas gifts with a conscience](#)
- [Christmas brighter for children of military families, thanks to UMHB student project](#)
- [For some, happy holidays means no gifts](#)
 - [International students share Christmas joy](#)
 - [Who were those “wise men from the East” bearing gifts?](#)
- [2nd Opinion: The two sides of advent](#)
- [What if Christmas had not come?](#)
- [Finding the “spirit of Christmas”](#)

“We celebrate Jesus’ birthday by giving ourselves presents,” McKinley said. “We don’t give him anything.”

McKinley is pastor of the Imago Dei Community, a Christian church of about 1,500 members that meets in a high school auditorium here. It dawned on McKinley as he prepared an Advent sermon last year that the call today is to resist consumerism and give gifts like God does.

“These are relational gifts,” he said. God gives himself to people, and God wants people who will give of themselves to the poor.

So, McKinley and a few pastor friends from around the country hatched what they called the Advent Conspiracy. They challenged their congregations: Spend less on Christmas, give relational gifts and donate the money saved to the poor.

Three congregations collected \$430,000—Imago Dei collected \$110,000 on a single Sunday—and gave most of that to Living Water International, a nonprofit project that digs wells in the Third World.

In the following few months, word of the Advent Conspiracy spread over the Internet. McKinley and like-minded people such as Purpose Driven Life author Rick Warren talked about it every chance they got.

This year, about 491 churches from 10 nations joined the conspiracy, said Jeanne McKinley, who directs the program from Imago Dei Community with her husband, Rick. World Relief, an evangelical mission group, has recruited 500 more churches to participate. About 1,700 individuals joined on the Internet, she noted.

Rick McKinley asks one thing of his co-conspirators—that they donate at least 25 percent of their Christmas savings to clean water projects. The United Nations Development Program estimates \$10 billion a year would help solve the shortage of clean water.

“The church needs to be on the leading edge of solving this problem,” he said.

Joining the Advent Conspiracy allowed Jan Carson to “let go of the frenzy of gift-giving and made the run-up to Christmas more peaceful,” she said. Carson wrote short stories for friends and relatives, and she created mix CDs for friends.

Clark Blakeman, another Imago Dei pastor and a conspiracy veteran, and his wife proposed it last year to their four teenagers as a first step toward a deeper understanding of Christmas.

“On Christmas morning, there were fewer gifts, but it was better than I ever would have expected,” Blakeman said. “It was so obvious that the kids took greater delight in the gifts they had made and how they would be received.”

And there was another gift that neither Blakeman nor McKinley anticipated. Families spend more time together as they plan and make gifts. It all becomes relational if people resist consumerism.

“We’re not asking that you don’t spend money on Christmas,” McKinley said, “just that you do it with the poor in mind.”

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