

Editorial: The dreaded question: What are we doing for Christmas?

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What are you doing for Christmas?

That's a tough question to answer this year, because many of us are not doing what we traditionally do, what we want to do. We also may find the question tough to answer, because we're not sure what the questioner will think about what we're doing this year.

Harder still is the question: What are *we* doing for Christmas?

As hard as it may be to risk being judged by friends, coworkers or strangers for getting together or not getting together with family this year during the holidays, many are finding the same conversation with their family to be gut-wrenching.

Many of us have not hugged our moms or dads, our brothers or sisters, our sons or daughters, our grandchildren or grandparents in months. We're looking at Christmas, and we know what we need to do. Or, we think we know what we need to do. Or we think we know what some in our family are going to do but others of us are not. And we'd just as soon not talk about what we're going to do for Christmas this year.

But if we skip it, if we avoid the conversation, we will not get to the heart of some things we've danced around for a long time.

Family traditions, family disputes

Families have their traditions. One of those traditions is to assume this year is going to be like last year, and next year will be like this one.

Lord, please don't let next year be like this one. To be more specific, Lord, please let next year be better than this one.

Up until the last few years, some families assumed they were on the same page or that whatever disagreements they had weren't enough to sour the turkey and dressing. They were still talking to each other.

Then, this year.

This year, families have discovered how far apart they are on politics, race, immigration, the economy, conspiracy theories and elections. Some families have cut each other off on social media over these disagreements. Some have cut each other off in real life, too.

Some of those families can't and aren't talking about much of anything anymore, much less what they're going to do for Christmas.

This year, families also have discovered how far apart they are on managing health—if health is even something family members are going to manage. Oh, kids have been telling their parents to watch what they eat for years. More recently, they may be telling their parents not to climb ladders anymore. Parents, for their part, have been advising, too.

But this year, when we want and need to be together in person, many families are talking about their health and the future with a little more passion.

Are we getting together?

As COVID infections soar and hospitalizations surge, many families are having a difficult conversation: Are we getting together this Christmas?

For some families, this question isn't a big deal. They already live together, or they're going to get together no matter what. They ate turkey together on Thanksgiving, and they'll be opening presents together Christmas morning, too.

For other families, this is a no-brainer. Some may not even be having the conversation. They already know they will spend Christmas on FaceTime, Zoom or some other video calling platform. They did that on Thanksgiving, and they will do it again at Christmas. Some of those families—missionaries, military and others—were doing that before the pandemic.

Then there are the millions of families with some members insisting on getting together and other members saying, "No way." These families are engaged in the toughest diplomacy—that of blood relations.

Some conversations are going like this: "I can't take not seeing you anymore. I'm depressed, and you know God didn't make us to be isolated. It's just not Christmas if we're not together."

"I know, and it's really hard, but I couldn't live with myself if we got you sick."

The emotions are intense. Family members may feel a lot of pressure to give in. Those emotions and that pressure may obscure a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

A once-in-a-lifetime gift

Families able to get behind or underneath the surface of a hard conversation—what we're going to do this Christmas—can find themselves talking about what matters most.

This year, in place of making plans to get together, we might talk about what we need most at Christmas. The travel, festivities, meals, presents and family tension of years past distracted us from talking about what we really need. All of that stuff soaked up the time and energy or generated too much friction for us to get to the important things.

This year, many families won't travel, won't engage in social festivities, won't eat together and won't open presents together. This year, their focus will be sharper, not because there isn't any tension this year, but because the tension is inescapable.

Don't avoid the question. Go ahead, and ask each other, "What are we going to do for Christmas?"

Admit getting together in person is really important, and acknowledge that telling each other our fears and hopes is important, too.

Talk about why you insist on being in-person or why you don't want to take the risk of getting together.

This year may be the first time—ever or in a long time—that you say or a family member hears you say, "I care about you too much to take the risk of getting you sick."—"I care about you" being the most important part of that statement, the part perhaps too often left unsaid in the past.

We may not want to talk about it, but one of the greatest presents we've received this year is the question: "What are we doing for Christmas?"

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