

## OUT TO PASTOR: A NEWSLETTER FOR RETIRED PASTORS



### Special Advent/Christmas Edition 2020

December 2020 - David S. Barnard, Editor



**Carols in Advent? The No-Win Choice:** What to sing in Advent worship services???? It's a no win for those of us from liturgical traditions! Seminary taught me well: **Advent** is a season of preparation, focused on the return of Christ in Glory and getting ready to open our hearts for the birth of our Lord at Christmas.

**Christmas** is the right time to celebrate the birth of Christ, not Advent!

So, during Advent, I chose hymns reflecting the season: favorites like, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," and "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates." My first church, where I was an Assistant Pastor, followed that tradition and I just assumed all Presbyterians did. Then I moved to my first solo pastorate and you'd think I had thrown the Baby Jesus out of church when I wouldn't sing Christmas carols on the Sunday after Thanksgiving!

**Wow! What heresy was I propagating to refuse to sing Christmas carols all through Advent? The argument went, “We’re playing them at home; all the stores have been playing carols since Halloween!” and “They just don’t feel special when we don’t sing them until Christmas Eve!” One person even said, “The Baptists sing Christmas carols all through December. We may lose people to them if we don’t sing them here!”**

**How have you handled this, trying to make each season distinct and meaningful in its own right? I decided to bend and started putting one carol in (something not completely Christmas-related, often “Joy to the World”) on the second Sunday in Advent. By the fourth I’d often use a couple. But none of it pleased the old guard who missed the point entirely. What’s a pastor to do?**



**How I Ruined Christmas:** One summer I taught an adult VBS class on “*What We Know and What We Don’t Know*”. It was very well received and led to a lot of great conversations. I supported the reliability of scripture but also acknowledged how much we don’t know. One topic was Christmas and our traditions.

**I told them the history about how December 25 came to be observed** as Jesus’ birthday, and shared that fact that we don’t know when He was really born.

One of our elders, a person of deep and sincere faith, was horrified! She just couldn’t believe that no one had ever told her that. So, the following December, and without fail, every year since then, she has reminded me that, **“You have ruined Christmas for me forever!”** Eventually it was said with a smile, but it took a few years!



**Cantatas – Love ‘em or Hate ‘em:** In every church I’ve served, choir members seem to love cantatas, and love to share them with the congregation and community. Christmas seems to be the favored time to sing a cantata, and it’s next to impossible to say no to their enthusiasm.

**The problem?** A lot of folk hate cantatas: find them boring, way too long, and often poorly presented. And the beleaguered pastor is always in the middle: having to adjust worship plans around the cantata, dealing with temperamental directors, and listening to the grumbling of folk who hate them.

We tried scheduling them at times other than worship services, but the smaller turn-out disappointed the choir folk, who pushed to have them during Sunday worship, or even on Christmas Eve, so there’d be a captive audience.

The congregation loves their choir singers and doesn’t have the heart to hurt their feelings, but never hesitates to gripe to the pastor! So, I guess I really do love them **AND** hate them.

**Just Wondering:** Why do computers/printers/modems/copiers always seem to break down around Christmas?

*(Asking for a friend who thinks it’s the work of satan, trying to make the season even more stressful for pastors).* 😄



**Celebrating Christmas Without Killing Yourself in the Process:** Face it: **pastoring a church through Advent and Christmas is joyful, but often exhausting.** Extra services and gatherings, the desire to create meaningful, touching, worship experiences and excellent sermons for the increased number attending, the surge in people at the church door or on the phone needing food or shelter at the holidays. Add in making time for our own families who also need our effort and involvement so they can celebrate too, and it's rough.

**My first Christmas out of seminary was a real shock** – after four years of college and three of seminary, with a long Christmas break part of my experience through it all – my first year in a church was grueling. (This one day a week off bit was an adjustment!) As an Assistant Pastor who chaired the Board of Deacons (*Senior Pastors get to work with the real power centers by moderating Session and the Trustees!*), I was also in charge of Christian Education and even had to dress up and play Santa for the church-sponsored Preschool kiddos!

It was a whirl-wind of kids' Christmas programs, delivery of food baskets all over the city, planning for worship, and trying to find time to celebrate at home as well. By Christmas Eve, with services at 7 and 11 PM, I had trouble staying awake, feeling drained and grumpy. The real surprise came when the Senior Pastor showed me the full schedule he planned for us on the day after Christmas! Turns out in the real world, Christmas Break is just Christmas Day! Back to reality was all too quick.

**I learned that setting boundaries and planning for time to step back and focus on the joy of the season was my responsibility.** No one would do it for me. It was never perfect, and unexpected needs always seemed to pop up, but over time I

learned to do better in scheduling, planning ahead, and carving out space for family and friends along the way. I actually got to feel joyful on Christmas Eve!

And, when I moved to my first solo parish, I was surprised to find that they long before had gotten tired of the pressure caused by families juggling getting ready for Christmas at home and bundling the kids up in the middle of it all to go to Christmas Eve worship. So, they found a creative solution: **Christmas Candlelight Worship** was always held on the Sunday evening prior to Dec 25.

**What a great idea!** We had the same warm, joyful service, but could also be home with families (or on the road travelling) on Christmas Eve. I recommend it!

Interestingly, we always had a number of non-members at the service, folk who had plans for travel or family gatherings that would mean missing the Christmas Eve service at their own churches.

### Please Share this Newsletter and Your Input

Think about your own history and please email your wisdom and experiences to me at [stanton69@zoominternet.net](mailto:stanton69@zoominternet.net). (Let me know whether to add your name and email, or to post yours anonymously). I will edit as I think best.

**Please pass this along and invite other retired pastors (or not!) to participate.** Your feedback on how to improve this effort is welcomed.

To be added to the mailing list: email me at [stanton69@zoominternet.net](mailto:stanton69@zoominternet.net) and ask to sign on. To stop receiving these newsletters, just email and ask.



**QUESTION:** I am thinking about creating a Facebook group for this newsletter to encourage more dialogue and feedback. Would you be interested? Please drop a note and let me know. David