

Less Hectic, More Holy

**Advent Workshops for
Staying Centered and Sane**

Written by Tracey E. Herzer

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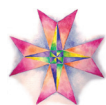
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Advent Workshops

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About Adult Formation

Deciding Where to Begin

Most people live very busy, over-scheduled lives and this is especially true at the end of the year as we approach the holidays. Most of us have neither the time nor the inclination to add “one more thing” to our already-full plates, so where does that leave us in planning opportunities for adult formation in our churches?

Well, in the first place, we need to step away from that “one more thing to do” mentality and really take a look at what we WANT... and what we need.

Take a moment and think: What is the best time you've ever had thinking-praying-laughing-learning? Was it in a Sunday morning class? A discussion with friends? A retreat? What do you think were the critical elements that created such an atmosphere?

What pieces of that experience were the most influential: The people? The leader? The subject? The atmosphere? The time when it took place?

There are many aspects to consider when it comes to adult formation, including:

- The curriculum or materials used
- The targeted audience for participants
- The physical space where you will meet
- The day and time schedule
- Refreshments served?
- Childcare available?

Less Hectic, More Holy

Years ago, when asked what he wanted out of his Advent season, my spiritual director replied, “I want it to be less hectic... more holy.” This story resonated so deeply with me and has become my annual mantra for Advent. This program comes out of my own struggle to create an Advent season in my life where I am not completely driven by the holiday chaos all around me and actually have some time for the Advent waiting and holy anticipation.

Most of us look forward to Christmas every year, but somehow end up completely exhausted by it. One way to combat this tendency is to look at some of the forces that come into play, sometimes without us even knowing it.

We will look at Advent from a variety of viewpoints using different resources, but I want to call special attention to a book that made a huge difference for me and helped inspire these pages: *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season* by Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli. If possible, I suggest you get a copy of this book to supplement the information here. You may even want to purchase multiple copies to sell/give to participants.

Tips for Adult Formation

1. **Plan your work and then Work your Plan** – Advertise early, prepare well and then stick to your plan. Be especially mindful of beginning and ending on time.
2. **Radical Hospitality** – Don't underestimate the power of feeling welcomed. Work to create an atmosphere of warmth and welcome in the room where you will meet.
3. **Transformation not just Information Transfer** – Keep the end result in mind. We want people to encounter and be transformed by God, not just be able to regurgitate a lot of facts. Try to keep your weekly sessions interactive, not a lecture.
4. **Variety really IS the spice of life – and of formation!** Open your mind as you read through the lesson ideas and feel free to add in items you think of as you prepare. The list is virtually limitless: scripture passages, music, video clips, poems or short readings, meditation, prayers, art responses, children's stories, whatever you can dream up... ☺
5. **Just like in school, everyone gets a turn** – As the facilitator, part of your job is to help manage the group. Watch out for people who can monopolize conversation and gently redirect. When possible, invite a response from someone who hasn't said much.
6. **Learning Community, not Lone Ranger** – One of the gifts of being part of a church is that you have the wisdom of the gathered community. Don't feel like you have to do everything yourself and provide all the answers. Just provide some of the structure and some questions to get the ball rolling and then invite all the participants into the process of discussing and answering the issues that come up.
7. **Focus on the Story** – Each of us has a story to tell and each of us is part of God's great story. Christians today come from a variety of backgrounds and they bring different experiences and types of knowledge with them. Honor people where they are, remind them they don't have to be Bible scholars to have an opinion, and encourage everyone to contribute.
8. **Time Management** – Keep an eye on the clock, not just to observe your stated beginning and ending times, but also so you can manage the flow of what you're trying to cover. Be sure to leave enough time for discussion and closing, even if you have to go back and revisit something another week.
9. **Holy Listening** – Show people that they matter! The most successful programs pay attention and deeply listen to what participants talk about, care about and experience.
10. **Faith formation is a process** – It doesn't happen overnight and there are bound to be some bumps along the road, but that's okay. God has promised that wherever "two or three are gathered together in my name, there I will be also." (Matthew 18:20)

Newsletter Articles

ADVENT: LESS HECTIC, MORE HOLY – for November newsletter

This month begins the season of Advent and our Adult Formation class will be discussing what Advent means to each of us. As life gets busier, louder and more insistent, it becomes increasingly important that we find ways to stop and breathe deeply. During Advent, we are going to use our adult formation time to talk about how we can simplify our holidays and focus on what the season is truly about. Come share your joys and frustrations about this special season and let's share ideas together for creating an Advent that is perhaps slightly less hectic and hopefully more holy. The class will meet in ____ (room) ____ at ____ (time) ____, beginning on ____ (date) _____. Please join us!

UNPLUGGING THE CHRISTMAS MACHINE – for December newsletter

Everyone knows Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. And while that may be true in many aspects, a lot of us would also have to admit that the weeks leading up to Christmas are frantic and exhausting, with a ridiculous number of things pulling at our time and our wallets. Come join us as we try to look realistically at the expectations we put on ourselves and discuss alternative ways to deal with holiday stress. We meet in ____ (room) ____ at ____ (time) ____ and we would love to see you there!

Bulletin Announcement

Adult Formation: Creating an Advent that is Less Hectic & More Holy – So much happens in December and although much of it is very joyous, we sometimes still need a break from blaring Christmas carols and incessantly blinking lights. Come meet other adults here who gather in ____ (room) ____ at ____ (time) ____ to look honestly at our expectations and priorities. We'd love to have you come join in our discussion of Christmas – the good, the bad and the ugly! ☺

Second Week of Advent

MATERIALS

- Copies of "Holiday Preparations at My House" & "My Christmas Values" for participants
- Pens or pencils for participant
- Flip chart & markers or chalkboard (optional, but helpful)

INSTRUCTIONS

- Arrive before class to turn on lights/heat, set up chairs, etc. Set up any coffee or refreshments you may choose to serve.
- As people arrive, welcome them and invite them to sit down. When you are ready to begin, you may wish to open with a prayer such as this one:

O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Prayer for the Good Use of Leisure
Book of Common Prayer, page 825*

- Last week was first week of Advent and now we are on a quick free-fall to the fun and magic and chaos of Christmas. Every year the stores seem to put up their Christmas decorations earlier and earlier and it ALWAYS feels like it's too soon to be talking about Christmas...
- Ask each person to think of three words to describe last year's Christmas. After a moment for people to choose their words, ask participants to share some of their words. If possible, record all the words on a flip chart or board.
- As of today, there are 20 days until Christmas. What are the first three words that come to your mind as I say this? (Participants will often express some conflicting combination of emotions. "I'm excited, but I'm stressed out." "I'm joyful, but I'm exhausted." If you have a flip chart or a way to record people's answers, ask someone to scribe those in a place the whole group can see.
- Distribute the handout "**Holiday Preparations at My House**" along with pencils and ask people to mark their sheets according to the directions. Give 5-10 minutes to work and then move on to discussion. Encourage those who need more time to take their sheets home and use them during the week to think more deeply about this topic.
- This exercise often surprises people. We know we are busier at Christmas, but we invariably underestimate the amount of work involved.
 - What surprised you about this exercise?
 - How many things are you trying to do?

- How many things are you in charge of?
 - Did several people in your household feel they were in charge of the same item?
 - Was one person predominantly in charge of Christmas plans?
 - Are you putting time and energy into things that you also marked as holding little value for you?
- Now distribute the handout “**My Christmas Values**” and again ask people to mark their sheets according to the directions. After a few moments, ask for volunteers to share some of their results and/or reactions to seeing these statements.
 - If you were to do this exercise all over again, ranking the statements according to where you spend the most time, energy or money... what would your list look like?
 - Most of us make hundreds of decisions during this season – What should I get for Aunt Barbara? What kind of dressing should I make for the turkey? What am I going to wear? Should I send a card or present to someone?
 - We rarely stop to ask “What am I REALLY celebrating?” We know this season is about the birth of Christ, but is that our primary conscious thought as we rush through the mall? How does your spirituality influence how your time is spent?
 - Is it easier or harder for you to be in touch with your spirituality during the Christmas season? How do we WANT our Christmas season to be??
 - The point of these exercises is to help you focus on what is truly important for YOU. You may discover that you like more parts of the celebration than you realized. You might realize you are doing a bunch of things that really aren’t very meaningful for you. But at least now you have more objective data. This helps give a better idea of where you might want to think about making some changes – in small ways or big.
 - During this next week, think about your Christmas preparations and how much you value different aspects of that task. Begin asking yourself if there are changes you’d like to make to align your task list more closely with your values. We’ll talk more about that next week.
 - Thank everyone for coming and encourage them to come back!
 - Close in prayer, using these words or words of your own choosing:

Gracious God, you give to us of your abundance and we are grateful. Rouse us from a life of mindless wanting and help us recognize what is truly important and what is expendable. Reveal to us unexpected places of peace and simplicity and let our hearts be content in you, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives. Amen.

HOLIDAY PREPARATIONS AT MY HOUSE

1. Cross out any items that are unlikely to be part of your celebration.
2. Add any preparation items not included on this list.
3. Put your initials by the ones where you do most of the work.
4. Put an 'X' by those with little value to you or that you don't have time to fully enjoy.

Creating the gift list

Shopping for gifts

Making gifts

Helping children buy or make gifts

Deciding on teacher gifts for kids

Deciding on gifts for mailman, etc.

Buying wrapping supplies

Wrapping gifts

Figuring out family gift exchange

Mailing gifts

Deciding to have a party

Inviting friends to a party

Shopping for a party

Cooking for a party

Cleaning for a party

Cleaning up after a party

Deciding on stocking stuffers

Making or buying stockings

Making travel plans

Packing for travel

Help with Christmas activities at work

Helping out at church

Helping out at school

Buying or cutting down a tree

Setting up the tree

Putting lights on the tree

Decorating the tree

Making or buying home decorations

Putting up outside lights

Putting up outside decorations

Making family Advent preparations

Cleaning house

Preparing house for company

Cleaning up after Christmas

Planning holiday menus

Doing special grocery shopping

Cooking Christmas meals

Baking special holiday treats

Writing thank you notes

Getting kids to write thank you notes

Putting away decorations

Disposing of the tree

Taking down outside decorations

Planning family reunions

Writing Christmas cards

Addressing Christmas cards

Mailing Christmas cards

Volunteering for charity

MY CHRISTMAS VALUES

Read the ten statements below. If any of these statements have no value to you, cross them out. You can also add or modify statements if you wish. Mark the statement you value most with a '1', then the next highest-valued statement with a '2', etc. until all ten statements are ranked.

I believe Christmas is a time to...

- _____ Be a peacemaker in my family and the world at large
- _____ Spend enjoyable time with my immediate family
- _____ Reunite with my relatives
- _____ Celebrate the birth of Christ
- _____ Create a festive, beautiful home environment
- _____ Show my love and generosity through gifts
- _____ Remember the poor, lonely and needy
- _____ Be active in my church community
- _____ Celebrate with friends
- _____ Relax and be renewed

