

GENEROUS LIVING

Advent Conspiracy and Other Ways the Church Can Challenge Consumerism and Resource Missions

“The fastest-growing religion in the world is not Islam or Christianity; the symbol of this rising faith is not the star and crescent or the cross, but a dollar sign. This expanding belief system is radical consumerism. It promises transcendence, power, pleasure, and fulfillment even as it demands complete devotion,” write pastors Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder in *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* “Many American Christians have decided they can, to put it bluntly, love both God and money.

“It makes our mouths drop and our stomachs turn when we realize that the amount of money we spend on Christmas in America is close to 45 times the amount of money it would take to supply the entire world with clean water,” they continue.



“It is now clear that the primary threat to true Christianity in America is consumerism.”

“The heart of what we’re truly searching for—hope, peace, love, rest, worship—is in Christ, but each time we try to meet our desire for fulfillment at the mall, we take another step away from the nativity,” they realized. So when these three pastors admitted to each other half a dozen years ago how much they hated the masquerade of Christmas, [Advent Conspiracy](#) was born.

Christmas seemed to be a logical time for a “conspiracy” that would challenge the grip of consumerism by refocusing on worship, spending less, and giving more to those who have the least. Without any idea of how people would respond, the pastors challenged their congregations to replace buying presents with giving gifts of time and then to contribute the funds saved toward wells in Africa.

The response was gratifying: People expressed how uncomfortable they had been with the way they were celebrating the season; they seemed genuinely relieved that someone was giving them “permission” to do something different. It was as if they were unleashed by coming together around the decision to refuse to be defined by their culture.

Largely via word of mouth, Advent Conspiracy has become an international movement. A website and informal “home” are provided by Imago Dei Church in Portland, but there is no staff or official “program.” Advent Conspiracy remains primarily a concept supported by some videos, resources, and shared stories. Churches are encouraged to adapt the model to their situation and direct the resulting funds to local and/or global ministries as they feel led. Therefore, any church can engage, and any agency can encourage church participation and offer projects.

This Postings is not exclusively about Advent Conspiracy. We want to address the larger issue of how we confront the pervasive materialism of our culture and its drag on Western churches’ global engagement. To that end, we have interviewed a number of pastors who have taken up this challenge. Not all have used Advent Conspiracy.

Postings: How does consumerism impact your congregation and their view of giving, especially to missions?



Jake Schwein, Pastor of Worship and Justice, Grace Chapel, Wilsonville, OR: Consumerism is the lens through which American Christians view everything. They base all decisions, including their choice of church or involvement in global outreach, on “Do I like it?” They don’t see what they’re doing; it’s just their subconscious worldview.

Consumerism is really a discipleship problem, not just a matter of changing how people celebrate a holiday. Our message is, “If you follow Jesus, then you will do things differently. It will change your mindset and decision making.” We use Advent Conspiracy as a way to get people to think about their traditional responses at the highest consumption time of year. But if it ends on January 1, then it didn’t change anyone’s life. We want to replace the lenses that people wear all year long.

Aaron Catlin, Global Outreach Director, Fellowship Bible Church, Topeka, KS. In the United States, we have a constitutionally mandated pursuit of happiness, but ultimate fulfillment is guaranteed only through relationship with the Father. Consumerism is a problem not so much because it reduces available resources but because it robs people of the opportunity to be disciplined. We need to help them understand that material wealth is not automatically God's blessing. We have a crafty enemy who uses money to control us and blind us to the reality of the gospel.

Jim Bzdafka, Senior Pastor, Providence Evangelical Free Church, Avon, OH. It goes both ways: As people grow in discipleship, they will align their resources with kingdom purposes. But beginning to trust God with their money will also further discipleship and lead to a deeper relationship with Christ. In a very tangible way, it tests His promises.

Dave Stewart, Global Outreach Pastor, Savannah (GA) Christian Church. In America, everything screams at you that to be happy, you need to buy something. Christians must understand that message is a lie. People want to give, but from their excess after the bills have been paid. We need to help them understand that God has blessed us materially for His own purposes.

There ought to be things we would like to do and cannot do because our charities expenditure excludes them.

CS Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, Pg. 86



Postings: Is the challenge of consumerism different for younger generations?

Ken Weigel, Pastor of Ministry Development and Home Communities, Imago Dei, Portland, OR, and Director of Advent Conspiracy: It gets played out in different ways. We can look at younger people and say it is iPhones and designer clothes. But the real issue is, what is the story or the meta-narrative that we are walking our children into? Consumerism in our kids is a result of how the story of the family plays out.

There is a dominant story being told in our culture, so if you don't have another story for children to live into, materialism becomes their story. But by and large, children are eager to live into a story bigger than themselves. We have watched youth groups get behind Advent Conspiracy as kids say, "I don't want all this stuff. I want to add value and do something meaningful."



Catlin: It's a heart issue that tempts every age bracket. My grandparents' generation were good money managers and savers, but materialism crept in subtly if they found their security in providing for themselves. Children today are bombarded with sophisticated marketing. One three-year-old was watching an ad on TV and asked her father, "Daddy, do they want

me to want that?"



Clark Frailey, Lead Pastor, Coffee Creek Church, Edmond, OK: We have a lot of 30s and 40s folks, and I see a desire among them to make a difference in the world. But we have to help them connect the dots and figure out how to give them a role.

Postings: How does your church challenge people to give?

Stewart: You can't talk about giving just once a year at your missions conference. We unashamedly teach tithing for our church's ministry and faith promise for global outreach. Then at least once a month, before we take our offering, we talk about what we give globally and how it is making a difference. As our senior pastor says, "We will always multiply what we edify." If you talk about giving as a core value, then the blessing seems to flow.

Frailey: The church in Acts 2 was meeting needs as they saw them, and we have more possessions than they ever dreamed of. Since we are a very young congregation with a lot of new believers, I can't teach once a year on generosity and expect dollars to start falling out of peo-

ple's pockets. We need to create baby steps toward generosity—one less pizza, one less coffee.

We have some one-Sunday things: "Hey, bring two cans for the food pantry." We break big projects down into do-able pieces. Sometimes we join with other churches to attack a problem together.

Postings: If you use the Advent Conspiracy model, how does it work? What do you do?

Schwein: We do a preaching series with it because we want to show from Scripture and Jesus' life why this is important. It's not about a program at Christmas time. It's Jesus. You can't read the gospels without thinking that we do Christmas a little weird. He gave the greatest gift ever, yet we consume more at that time than any other. Our concept of Advent has been turned upside down.

For us in an affluent community, one of the important elements is to challenge people not to buy all of their presents as usual and then also give to our Advent Conspiracy challenge. It's about reallocating. Parents have to struggle with not wanting to make their kids angry. We push families to sit down and talk about it. We say, "Have a strategy about how you want to do Christmas, and make it a family decision." Advent Conspiracy can stimulate life-changing conversations.



Weigel: We ask our people, “What if this Baby changed everything? What if, for one month, we lived like we really believed there was another reality—if it consumed our hearts so much that we lived out of a focus of worship? Christmas isn’t the story of Walmart. It’s ours, and we have been doing

a really poor job of telling it. How can we communicate this story through how we live, what gifts we give, how we spend our time, etc.?”

Frailey: We revised the Advent Conspiracy model so that rather than suggesting our people not buy any gifts, we just asked them to buy one less gift and redirect the money saved toward our project offering. We wanted them to know that one less Christmas present doesn’t seem like a big sacrifice but in reality it can accomplish huge things overseas. We don’t want to leave them at the one-less-gift level, but generosity has to be modeled and caught. People catch passion. Now we want to nurture that response and move away from event-based giving to Acts 2 generosity.

Postings: What continues the impact after Christmas is over?

Weigel: If you make it a list of things people do or don’t do, you have to have an ongoing checklist. Rather, it’s a lifestyle of being aware of who God is and how the world is competing for that space.

Catlin: We have struggled to connect people with the project that our Advent Conspiracy funds have benefitted. Our church has sent short-term teams to locations where wells were dug, but since these were in different countries, we didn’t see longer-term impact. Our youth have served at a camp for physically handicapped children where they were partnered one-on-one with a camper for whom they were responsible. That could include feeding and/or changing diapers. That was wildly out of their comfort zone even for adults, much less for teens, but it was good for us. Such experiences become a refining process that’s not about our own agenda or how cool we are.

Schwein: We have added a “May Justice Reign” emphasis during the month of May. This effort was started by our youth, but now we have decided to involve the whole congregation each year. Since it is about half-way through the calendar year, it is a good time to revisit the issue of giving. This is one way we can keep it in front of them so that when they go to the store and make decisions about what to buy, they have been reminded to have the Father’s heart for those who are suffering.

Bzdafka: Since generous living is a core principle for us, I look for every opportunity to personally include it in messag-

es, in my congregational prayers, in announcements, etc. I constantly remind our people that God has been generous, gracious, and kind to us, and our generosity to others is a reflection of Him.

Over time we have begun to see people wrestling with the implications. Some of our home groups have covenanted together to work through these issues. A number of our young couples sold vehicles or downsized to smaller homes. They recognized their poor stewardship and made some significant decisions to honor God with their first fruits. That created good traction and a core value within our congregation. But like every church, we still have a long way to go.

Postings: Do stories play a role?

Schwein: We totally share stories. We are always talking about what people did, how their family has been impacted. Kids share why this was the best Christmas ever for them. Sometimes we have a panel of people who share. When people hear a story of how it looks for someone else, they get a better picture of what they can do.

Bzdafka: The first year when we introduced Advent Conspiracy, I explained to our congregation how distressed I had become over the consumerism that drives us to buy things we don’t need to give to people who don’t appreciate them. I talked about how my wife and I had decided to end

the tradition in our large extended family of sending gift cards all over the country to our nieces and nephews. I admitted that we wondered what would happen when we called our siblings to tell them that instead, this year we were giving that money to help buy a van for an orphanage in Kenya. From week to week, I told our congregation little stories about how those phone calls went.

They were encouraged by our experiences and our honesty.

We also tell lots of stories about what the money is accomplishing for our missions project. The year we bought the vehicle for the orphanage, we discovered that one of the orphans had been praying for a van. He had even hung a paper on the wall asking God for a van. Hearing that God had already stirred the hearts of children in Kenya confirmed the faith and resolve of our people. Giving has become a great joy for us. When we stand in front of the congregation and hand a check to our missionary, half of the people are crying. They really do want their lives to count for something.

Stewart: We spend a lot of time trying to make our partners real people to our congregation—and that involves telling their personal stories. There is power in video stories. We also produce and show clips on tithing and tell stories of people trusting God with their finances. Stories are powerful.

**With a wartime mentality,
we will not look at our
income as God’s call
to spend more
but rather as his provision
to invest more in the cause.**

Randy Alcorn, Managing God’s Money



Postings: What other steps have you taken to nurture giving?

Schwein: One of our values is radical generosity. You can't be radically generous and have unlimited consumerism. When we take our offering, we take the time to say, "We are offering Jesus all that we have—the rooms in our house, our clothes, etc." We know we have to talk about it on a regular basis so that it continues to disturb and disrupt people's consumerism mentality.



Stewart: As part of our ministry focus in Guatemala, we built a realistic replica of a poor Guatemalan's hut made from rusted tin and bamboo shoots, and put it in our main

foyer. What I didn't expect was how many families would stand in front of it as parents tried to explain it to their children. What we saw and heard was a softening of hearts. God worked on parents as they explained it to their kids.

Our project was building houses there, and each cost \$3,000. Our kids raised almost enough to build two houses. Later a father came in and gave me a \$3,000 check for another house. He saw his daughter's passion, and said he and his wife decided they had to do this.



Bzdafka: About five years ago we put together a generous living team of four to five people with various backgrounds in finance who had all personally wrestled with God over His ownership of all they had. This group began meeting a couple of times a month, read books, and eventually put together a series of sessions that included among other things an adult Sunday school module on Alcorn's *The Treasure Principle* and another on biblical perspectives on macro-economic issues.

We didn't have any grand strategy but just kept asking, "What's the next thing we should do?" We continue to run these workshops and sessions, even though the generous living team no longer meets.

For several weeks in early January each year, we distribute a bulletin insert presenting a challenge to establish an annu-

al giving plan. It lists three types of giving: **Percentage**—As Scripture teaches us to tithe **Privation**—By sacrifice; giving by giving up certain things **Promise**—Giving all or part if God blesses in a certain way

I explain these categories and give illustrations—maybe your privation gift is giving up lattes or new Wii games. Maybe your promise giving is committing half of whatever raise at work God gives you. The challenge is to give creatively and

trust God to work in personal circumstances. We suggest they make the commitment with their children so that some of the items are tied to the kids, helping them learn to be givers too. We don't collect the commitments but rather encour-

age people to take them home, sign them, and keep them in their Bibles.

We don't ask for money all the time. If we did, it would become white noise. We bundle projects and make an "ask" a couple of times a year.

Postings: How can missions agencies help make such efforts effective?

Schwein: Report well and soon. We partner with Living Water International because they do a phenomenal job of sending us pictures and write-ups. They even gave us GPS coordinates of the locations where our investment provided wells so that we could zoom in on Google Earth and see the area for ourselves. They told us about people who came to get water, heard the story of Jesus, and got saved.

Frailey: Advent Conspiracy provides free, downloadable resources. Things like this are a great help for smaller churches like us. Give us a theme to rally around. There is so much information coming down the pipeline, but help pastors connect our people to practical ways they can help.

Regardless of how much you have, you can be a ten-talent steward. But for this to happen, you must be intentional and live purposefully, to be a tool for advancing God's Kingdom on earth.



Chris McDaniel in *Igniting a Life of Generosity*

Generous Living Resources

Advent Conspiracy. A short book (ebook, DVD, and print versions), videos, poster and brochure templates, children's curriculum, and more.

The Cost of Discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoffer. A classic well worth reading and sharing with the next generations.

Eternal Perspective Ministries. www.epm.org Randy Alcorn's site with resources such as *Managing God's Money*.

Generous Giving. www.generousgiving.org A website by and for donors with an extensive resource list.

How to Be Rich. Andy Stanley's 4-part sermon series available as CD, DVD, MP3 and **Fields of Gold**, his book on generous giving.

Igniting a Life of Generosity. Chris McDaniel. An excellent, 21-day study built around powerful stories and practical questions that will challenge individuals or groups of any life phase to build a lifestyle of generosity.

Living with Less. Chad Hall. Blog post on what living and leading with less looks like.

Radical, the Radical Experiment, and Radical Together. David Platt. Each of these builds on the challenge to adopt a biblical perspective on possessions and priorities.

Church Dialog

Many issues for church discussion are suggested by the article content, but a couple of additional ones:

1. If you are not the pastor of your church, what would be the best way to engage senior leadership in a discussion of these concepts?
2. In challenging economic times, it is easy to accept that generosity must be curtailed. How can you help your congregation to exercise faith and expect God to make it possible for them to expand their generosity?
3. Money can be a taboo subject in many Western cultures. How can your church tell stories of generous givers in a way that makes the concept tangible yet doesn't glorify an individual?

Agency Dialog

1. Is there a difference between asking for financial support and encouraging a life of generosity? Describe the difference. Which does our organization do most often?
2. Are our stewardship efforts aimed at older constituents with larger amounts of discretionary income? What is our responsibility to nurture generous giving in younger generations? How could we invest intentionally in developing lifelong generosity in 20s and 30s?
3. Should we encourage churches to consider engaging in an Advent Conspiracy? How could we communicate the concept and challenge?
4. What projects could our organization as a whole or our individual fields or workers present as appropriate for a church's Advent Conspiracy offering? How could these projects underscore the key concepts of worship and generosity? Are there ways we could design our projects to help both giver and receiver embrace more biblical attitudes about material possessions?
5. How can we proactively nurture generosity in our candidates and appointees? Should we ask them to do the *Igniting a Life of Generosity* study?
6. Are we telling high-impact stories of churches' generosity? Are we presenting stories that show how parents, pastors, teachers, and other church leaders are setting an example and leading others in commitment to generous lifestyles?
7. Do we report results quickly and well? If results are more long term, how can we help donors understand in a timely manner where their gift has been invested and how it is in the process of making a difference?
8. In light of the last comment in this article about so much information in the pipeline, how can give pastors tools and manageable communication?

Interchange Postings

Catalyst's *Postings* e-newsletter is a monthly publication designed for mission agency personnel and local church leaders involved in collaborative global efforts. The practical articles highlight what church and agencies are doing to mobilize believers, especially those of younger generations, to expand the Kingdom.

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