

A SIMPLE FAMILY CHRISTMAS

How many shopping days are there left before Christmas? The very thought of Christmas tends to bring about a variety of responses – those who are excited about time with families, celebrating the greatest event in History with the birth of Jesus. Others who are simply dreading the pressure from children to buy toys and gadgets that they can't afford, expensive food and drink that will be stockpiled and then far too much ending up wasted and thrown in the bin.

In the UK Christmas is recognised as one of periods of greatest stress in the year, which precipitates more marriage and relationship breakdown than any other season. Marriages already under pressure are put into a pressure cooker of expectation, financial pressure, mixed together with perhaps a difficult relative coming to stay, and the fear of January's bills. It's not much to look forward to in many households. How can we in the church help?

Simplify

In the current economic climate, with more and more families under financial pressure, perhaps one thing we can do is to take a lead. Tell your neighbours and work colleagues that you are going to do a simple family Christmas. Set a budget, and cut back on what you spend at Christmas. Plan the menus so that you aren't buying food that will be thrown away. Invite others to share your festivities and share the costs between you. Make a pact with friends and family not to swop gifts, or do a "Secret Santa" with an agreed limit on the cost of gifts.

Budget

One organisation in Northern Ireland that is always ready to help out is Christians Against Poverty, and there are similar groups in the Republic. CAP offers money courses that simply teach people how to budget, getting the principles right so that we don't spend more than we have coming in, and get on top of our finances rather than letting the pressures get on top of us. Find out more at www.capuk.org

Hampers

Some congregations provide Christmas hampers to families living locally who can't afford Christmas treats, and this is a really practical way of loving our neighbours. You might like to encourage people that when 'treats' are on offer, or buy-one-get-one free, the free one could be given away to a Christmas hamper. Ideas to include in hampers would include biscuits, schloer, pringles, chocolates, jams, Christmas cake, mince pies, crisps and nuts – as well as items for a couple of meals including tinned ham, tins of chicken in sauce.

Gifts

What about a toy service, or Christmas tree service, when people bring a new gift to church. Gifts could be distributed by the Rector to families with children where appropriate, or passed to organisations such as the Church of Ireland Board for Social Responsibility NI who make gifts available to organisations working with children who won't get other Christmas gifts.

Invitations to free events

What about holding some special family events in the days before and after Christmas – providing families with special Christmas things to do together which cost them nothing? Christingle services, Family parties, "bring and share meals", or a Church outing with families going for a Boxing Day walk together –all these are great ways of welcoming families, providing a special event, and perhaps helping to ease some of the strain and stress of life.

Article written by Mrs Hilary and Canon David McClay for the Marriage Council