



In Advent of 2013, Pope Francis and the evangelicals agreed on something. Consumerism is overcoming our faith. I suppose Jesus said something like this when he said we can't love God and money. But many of us live with such a blend of Advent and holiday shopping, that we cannot tease them apart.

"Advent Conspiracy" is a simple program helps a parish take back the spiritual intentionality of the Advent season by directly addressing the cultural zeitgeist of the "holiday shopping season." In 2013, St Luke's Madison joined with two ecumenical partners (Lakeview Moravian and Lake Edge UCC) for Advent Conspiracy. Each church ran the program in its own way on Sundays. Lake Edge showed the 15 minute DVD session at their adult forum followed by a 45 minute discussion. They also showed a 1 minute DVD "commercial" for the program on Christ the King Sunday, but we are not accustomed to having multimedia at Sunday morning announcements. At St Luke's I used the topics for preaching themes (much helpful conversation ensued) and offered the DVD (but only one adult showed up). It's a busy season. Teachers used the children's materials in both classes (age 4-2nd grade, and 3rd grade-11) (children's materials available for free on www.adventconspiracy.org.) The website proposed using the DVD with children but we felt it would go over their heads, mostly. Our teens watched the DVD during their class and discussed with their leaders. I also wrote about some of the themes in my regular column. (Parents and grandparents really do care when their children move from wanting to make advent art projects to wanting to receive ipads for Christmas. People who "don't need anything" also care when they are able to contribute to someone who has real pressing needs – whether it is in our own city or the Anglican communion. Integrating this movement into our own gift-giving, however challenging, deeply honors Christ.) The Moravian church did less on Sundays. On four Monday nights, individuals from all three parishes came together to watch the DVD and discuss a brief chapter of the [Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change The World](#) book. We promoted the group at all three parishes and had fascinating discussions about how to live more simply and intentionally in this season of consumerism. (I should note that my ecumenical partners wanted to start the

Monday *before* Advent, and it proved to be a perfect time: days before Black Friday. However, at St Luke's we used the first four Sundays of Advent, for obvious reasons.)

What we learned. I admit, it was a surprise to find out that the megachurch in our neighborhood was offering the same curriculum. But St Luke's is a parish that takes materials on their merits, and is not allergic to learning something from evangelicals (and the Pope). All three churches we were amazed how well the questions and observations of the curriculum fit this season of being a Christian, when the "religion of consumerism" has taken over our high holy day. I really do not mean that anybody needs the mall to tell us "Merry Christmas" – we are mostly glad that our capital has interfaith symbols. I mean how can we celebrate the Feast of Christ's Nativity without indulging in so much shopping, so many piles of gifts, things we can't remember, don't necessarily use, some of us go into debt to acquire. In the Monday group, many believers who had walked long years in their own faith tradition shared specific suggestions about how to observe a meaningful worshipful Advent, while spending less, giving more of themselves, and loving more.

In terms of planning and preparation, some promotional materials are available for free online but we purchased books and DVDs. I made simple posters and a sign-up sheet with the logo above (I like it better than the upside down Christmas tree and four icons they have switched to using.) Early on, used books were available for a dollar or two on www.half.com. The latecomers had to make do with Amazon, and paid more for new ones shipped quickly. Having an ecumenical sponsor team eased the leadership burden (we each led one session, our own Sundays, and 15 minutes of the closing evening.) The discussion questions in the book in no way require a clergy person to lead. Having ecumenical participants also lessened the critical distance we all felt about some of the evangelical language because none of us expected the curriculum to perfectly fit our faith tradition. There was very little to ignore. We primarily discussed the challenges this season poses to our souls. I would definitely use this program again, and I believe they offered what was promised:

"How to substitute consumerism with compassion by practicing four simple, but powerful, countercultural concepts: Worship Fully; Spend Less; Give More; Love all" (from promotional material).

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