

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Unwrapping Four Myths About Christmas



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Introduction

- Hang the lights, get a tree, find the perfect gift for the relative you see once a year, bake cookies, and find a Christmas sweater...*
- Decorate the house, go to all the parties, host your own party, build a gingerbread house, go caroling...*
- Thank your mailman, reminisce and grieve the loved ones no longer present, and squeeze in the candlelight Christmas Eve service...*

December is often a task list of to-dos that tumble us headfirst into Christmas morning, disoriented amidst a pile of wrapping paper.

Are the four weeks of Advent just a countdown to Christmas, crossing days off the calendar as they rush past in a blur of activity? How can our holiday traditions and gatherings prepare us for Jesus' arrival and reorient our attention to the peace and justice found in the Kingdom of God?

Join us as we practice a new liturgy for Advent 2023. Unwrap four common myths we encounter when we think about pursuing justice during Christmas, and uncover the precious gift of the peace of Christ's presence in our cities. We invite you to slow down, take a deep breath, and use this weekly devotional to find new ways of unburdening yourself from the pressure of common Christmas myths. Envision a new Advent season, in which the love of Jesus is present in our relationships with our neighbors, with creation, and with our world.

Our prayer for you is that after this Christmas season, you are surrounded and satisfied by Jesus' presence, having practiced a liturgy of worship, service, welcome, and peace. May you exchange the harried rush of preparation for spending quality time in the presence of God and your neighbors.

NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Author Unknown

'T'was the night before Christmas
and all through the town
Not a sign of Baby Jesus
was anywhere to be found.

The people were all busy
with Christmas time chores
Like decorating, and baking,
and shopping in stores.

No one sang "Away in a manger,
no crib for a bed".
Instead, they sang of Santa
dressed-up in bright red.

Mama watched Martha Stewart,
Papa drank beer from a tap.
As hour upon hour
the presents they'd wrap
When what from the T.V.
did they suddenly hear?
'Cept an ad.. which told
of a big sale at Sears.

So away to the mall
they all flew like a flash...
Buying things on credit...
and others with cash!

And, as they made their way home
From their trip to the mall,
Did they think about Jesus?
Oh, no... not at all.

Their lives were so busy
with their Christmas time things
No time to remember
Christ Jesus, the King.

There were presents to wrap
and cookies to bake.
How could they stop and remember
who died for their sake?

To pray to the Savior...
they had no time to stop.
Because they needed more time
to "Shop til they dropped!"

On Wal-mart! On K-mart!
On Target! On Penney's!
On Hallmark! On Zales!
A quick lunch at Denny's

From the big stores downtown
to the stores at the mall
They would dash away, dash away,
and visit them all!

And up on the roof,
there arose such a clatter
As grandpa hung icicle lights
up on his brand new step ladder.

He hung lights that would flash.
He hung lights that would twirl.
Yet, he never once prayed to Jesus...
Light of the World.

Christ's eyes... how they twinkle!
Christ's Spirit... how merry!
Christ's love... how enormous!
All our burdens... He'll carry!

So instead of being busy,
overworked, and uptight
Let's put Christ back in
Christmas and enjoy
some good nights!
Merry Christmas, my friends!

Myth #1

A GREAT CHRISTMAS REQUIRES A BIG EVENT



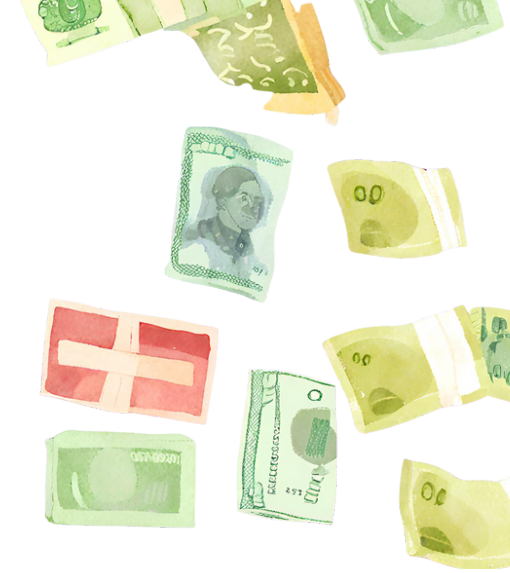
A large pine tree wrapped with lights, shimmering ornaments, and flowing tinsel stands over a mountain of presents. A family gathers around a table, a group of old friends swap stories, a church congregation puts on a nativity pageant. The Christmas season is possibly the paramount of western calendar, the crowning holiday of the year.

These traditions can represent the love and joy of the Christmas season. But oftentimes, we face pressure to do these things in a bigger, more elaborate, more expensive way, which leads us to overspend. Research finds that the average American host will spend over \$750 on their Christmas party. Even more shocking, 44% of hosts feel it's likely they will go into debt because of this expense.

Christmas is done up to be a picturesque holiday requiring lots of decorations and people and food. Here's the myth: a great Christmas requires a big event.

Let's unwrap that.

Our culture, both in the secular and religious realms, has learned to portray success as big productions with big results. We are conditioned to see success in things and people that reach a large audience—influencers, celebrities, athletes, name brands, blockbusters, and Fortune 500s. A good event is defined by the number of people who show up, the number of people reached, or how many gifts were distributed.



Our religious world is hardly exempt. Much of the Western Church has agreed to this bigger-is-better value set. The pastors we look up to have the biggest congregations and write the most books. Christmas is a time when the emotional, cultural, economic, and religious forces all align, allowing for some of the biggest events in the calendar.

Let's look at Luke 2 and note the type of celebration that happens when Jesus is born.

LUKE 2:4-20 NIV

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. **5** He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, **7** and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Note the size, location, and invitations to this “party.” It is a small gathering between a teen mom, a frightened stepfather, and a few blue-collar shepherds from the fields nearby. The wise men will not arrive until years later, missing the party entirely. This is a small gathering of newly acquainted people eager to greet the newborn King. Strangers are brought together because of the extraordinary announcement of peace coming to rest on God’s favored people. Imagine the shepherds’ amazement at their inclusion in this family gathering.

If Jesus’ premiere celebration was small and quiet, how does that inform our values of size and grandeur?

For the rich to the poor, for those with large homes to those without homes, this is good news! The birthday that Jesus celebrates does not require money, going into debt, large banquet halls, or a keen sense of holiday decor. To celebrate like Jesus, we simply need to open our hearts to our neighbors. We welcome the strangers who, like us, are seeking the Savior.

EMBRACE A NEW REALITY

1. Make an intentional space of quiet for you and your family in this busy season. How can you give over to God whatever burdens are associated with your idea of the perfect Christmas? Can you stay with God quietly long enough to receive God's peace?
2. Invite someone outside of your inner circle to a family meal or gathering. Can you expand your table to someone who is a different class or culture than your own?
3. Cut your party budget by 10% or more and use that money generously towards an organization that is advocating for justice in your city.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

In prayer response, start by imagining yourself in front of Jesus' manger. Imagine the sights, smells, sounds, and sensations around you. Holding that image in your mind, repeat this simple prayer:

"Jesus, thank you for inviting me here."

Each time you pray this, notice something else about the scene. Engage all your senses. Who do you see there with you? What does the place smell and taste like? What do you hear?

Further Learning: [9 Ways to Celebrate a Simple Christmas This Year \(OFH Soup Kitchen\)](#)

Myth #2

CHRISTMAS IS THE **MOST** **WONDERFUL** TIME OF THE YEAR

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” Andy Williams famously sang about Christmas. In a recent survey, however, nearly 88% of adults called the holiday season the most stressful time of the year.

In 2022, patients made the most appointments for depression and anxiety on November 28th (the Monday after US Thanksgiving), giving it the new nickname “Blue Monday.”

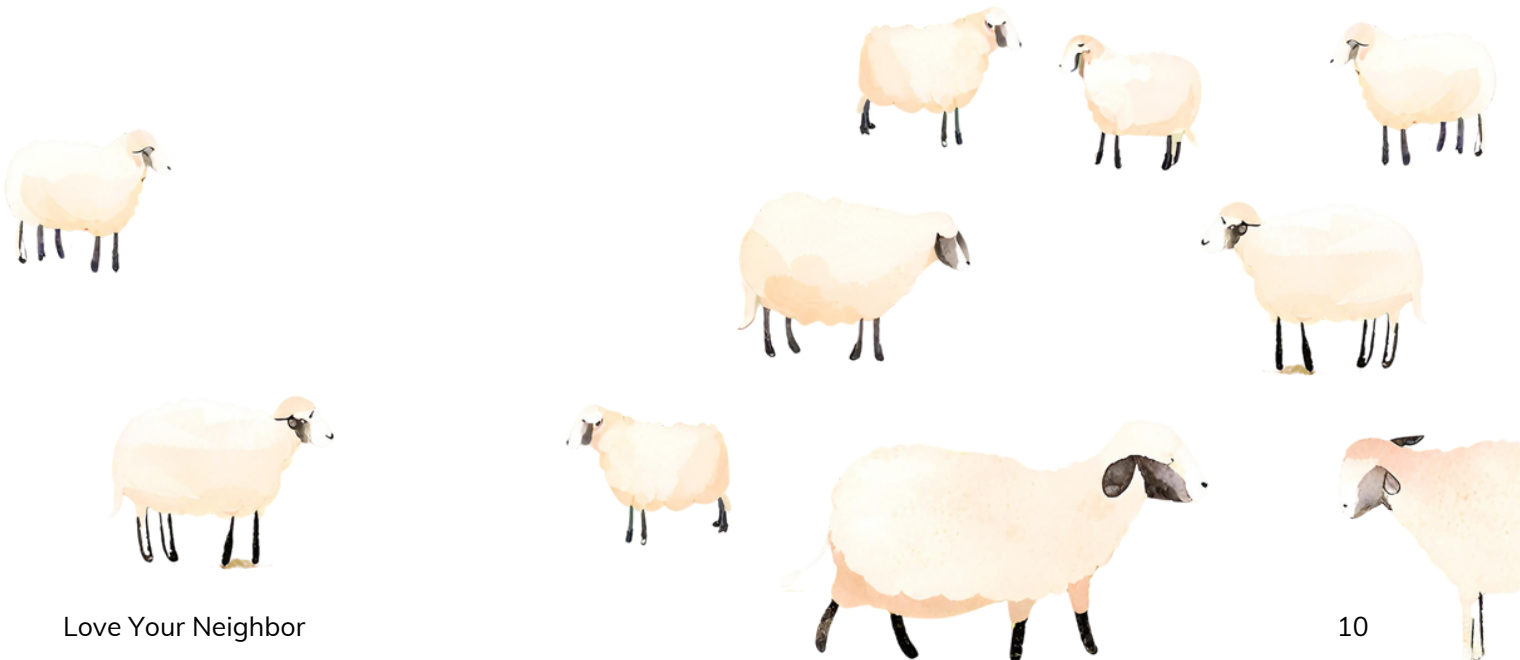
Christmas may be full of excitement, anticipation, and a flurry of activity for some who genuinely see the season as the happiest time of the year. But for many, this season is a reminder of family and friends who are no longer around to celebrate. Broken relationships and disappointments can leave many acutely lonely and isolated during the holidays. In the rush and fuss to create a memorable holiday for our immediate loved ones, we may be tempted to narrowly focus on our close circle and forget the isolated and lonely right next door.

MATTHEW 25:34-40 NIV

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ 40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Christmas is when we reflect that God came in the form of a person, so we wouldn't be left alienated from God. Jesus' life and teachings remind us that God sees us and wants to be with us. Celebrating His birth is a time for us to “be with” the lost and lonely, just as He did with us. We can look around and see the hungry, thirsty, and sick around us who might need extra attention and care around the holidays. We can visit those in prison and those who are homebound. We can show hospitality to those who might not have friends or family to celebrate with.



EMBRACE A NEW REALITY

1. Set aside time to intentionally check in on a few friends that you know are struggling. Is there any way they can be a part of your holiday celebrations this year?
2. Consider the categories from the passage: hungry, thirsty, the stranger, those poorly clothed, the sick, those in prison. Who do you know who might be in one of those categories? Do you live close to a stranger who is struggling? Consider how you could take an afternoon and share your space with them or connect where they are.
3. Gather a few local mental health hotline numbers, so that you have them available to give to those struggling with their mental health.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Try out this prayer written by Saint Teresa of Avila in the 15th century.

Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Further Learning: [Grief Resources \(Our House\)](#).

Myth #3

CHRISTMAS CHARITY WILL ADDRESS THE WORLD'S INJUSTICE

“Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice, which make philanthropy necessary.” – Martin Luther King Jr.

Our weary world is groaning with injustice. Food bank use rose to the highest levels in Canadian history in 2023. The conflict in Israel and Palestine, the invasion of Ukraine, and other ongoing wars around the world raise our awareness of severe global atrocities. Communities around North America are struggling to recover from increases in catastrophic weather events.

With the groanings of the world, we turn to charities to guide us in how to respond. December is full of philanthropic opportunities: bell ringers stand outside mall doors, asking for cash. Everywhere you look, drives for food and toys abound. Charities raise 25% to 33% of their budgets in December. There's no shortage of requests for our time, compassion, or money. Navigating generosity this month can overwhelm us, from gifts to our family to the charitable needs with which we are confronted. Let's take a moment to unwrap this myth that Christmas charity is our saving grace.



Charities are institutions of mercy. They address immediate needs, and without them, people would suffer greatly because of the injustices that exist in our society. But for a fairer and more healed society, we need to challenge the rules and ideas that keep injustice going. Justice digs deeper, aiming to fix the root causes of problems, like not having enough steady income and a shaky social safety net. Charities are required to fix the immediate effects of larger systemic problems. When we don't address the root causes, we're allowing injustice to stick around while simply trying to ease its effects. If charity is the band-aid, justice is the comprehensive health plan for recovery. When faced with requests to give of our time and money this December, how do we do so with a soft-heart, responsive to Spirit and aligned with who God has created us to be?

MATTHEW 5:17-20 NIV

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Servant Partners staff all around the world live in solidarity with the marginalized. We have found our wellbeing and joy in God as we work alongside our neighbors for greater justice. Our acts of charity and mercy are grounded in relationships, giving to friends and soon-to-be friends because we can run into each other again. Acting with local relationships builds even deeper bonds of friendship when we advocate for global issues. When we see our whole lives as dedicated to building the Kingdom of God, our daily lifestyle choices, relationships with our neighbors, and particular skills and passions can align our giving all year long, not only in December.

EMBRACE A NEW REALITY

1. Set aside time as a family/household or small group to talk about what injustices are breaking your heart these days. Take time together to learn more about it and what groups are responding. What charities are on the front lines doing mercy work and which charities are helping dismantle the injustices at a root-level? (Ex. food bank donations vs. donating to groups working on laws addressing food insecurity in your city.)
2. Consider diversifying your giving to both charities and advocacy groups this season. Make a commitment to give beyond the holidays, and commit to one cause for a year.
3. In 2020, Canadians give 0.54% gave of their aggregate income to charity and Americans gave 1.97%? What lifestyle changes could you consider beyond this month that would help you increase your ability to give generously all year long?
4. Ask your neighbors what causes are important to them at this time. Is there an upcoming opportunity to work together to donate time or money to a local family, charity, or advocacy group?

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Pray this Franciscan Blessing for yourself this week.

May God bless me with discomfort,
at easy answers, half-truths,
and superficial relationships
so that I may live
deep within my heart.

May God bless me with anger
at injustice, oppression,
and exploitation of people,
so that I may work for
justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless me with tears,
to shed for those who suffer pain,
rejection, hunger, and war,
so that I may reach out my hand
to comfort them and
to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless me
with enough foolishness
to believe that I can
make a difference in the world,
so that I can do
what others claim cannot be done,
to bring justice and kindness
to all our children and the poor.

Amen



Further Learning:

- [Research-Backed Benefits of a Generous Lifestyle \(Full Focus\)](#)
- Find U.S. Advocacy Groups: [Charity Navigator](#)
- Find Canada Advocacy Groups: [Canada Helps](#), [Tamarack Institute](#)
- [The Great Chasm by Derek Engdahl \(SP Press\)](#)

Myth #4

THE NICER THE WRAPPING, THE BETTER THE GIFT

Americans use 4.6 million pounds of wrapping paper each holiday season, to the tune of 9.6 billion dollars—representing about 10% of the total US paper market by revenue.

Gift wrapping is a long-established tradition spanning cultures, holidays, and centuries. However, the annual tradition of throwing away millions of pounds of mostly non-recyclable, one-time-use paper, ribbons, and bows is a modern practice that started in 1917.

Like holiday calories, holiday trash doesn't magically "not count" or disappear after January 1. Our holiday merriment often ends with trash bins overflowing with packaging, wrapping, wasted food, and shipping boxes. Annually, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and other industrialized countries each spend billions of dollars buying wrapping paper, shipping materials, tape, gift bags, bows, and ribbons that end up in the garbage. That spending isn't going toward the gift—just the gift's coverings! In addition to the money spent, our consumptive habits have a direct impact on our

environment, both globally and locally. Those who live in urban marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by climate change, often experiencing illness and insecure housing as a result of pollution and extreme weather. How are we loving our neighbors well when we do not change our lifestyles to reflect a larger concern for our environment, and by extension, for their wellbeing?

What could happen if we redirected those billions of dollars to support charities pursuing justice, instead of on things that end up in landfills? How might we use money to make a lasting impact in our neighborhoods?

1 JOHN 4:10-12 NIV

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.



God expressed his love for us through the gift of His Son, Jesus. The greatest gifts we can give one another cannot be wrapped. Acts of sacrifice, care, and presence build lasting relationships that carry on into eternity. Our world is full of things that 'moths and vermin' can destroy, but the relationships we build and the ways God's love is made complete in us last into eternity. The 'wrappings' of Jesus' birth were humble and centered on celebrating the gift of Jesus to humanity. How might your gift-giving this year focus on celebrating the gift of Jesus in community, together? For many, gifts end up dusty and unused in the back of a closet, forgotten. Friendships and memories created together last beyond the lifespan of a material thing.

And when we do want to give material gifts, we can choose to practice creation care. Reducing the amount of waste we create and practicing simplicity in our gift-giving has two impacts: stewarding our money and resources well, and caring for the health and longevity of God's creation. Choosing non-material gifts and reusable wrapping materials directly reduces the amount of trash entering landfills annually, reduces drain on the resources required to produce the products, and declares that love is so much more than a nicely wrapped gift. Clean and green campaigns remind us that small actions of reducing consumption, reusing products, and recycling add up to a large impact. How might we reduce waste and reuse what we already have?

EMBRACE A NEW REALITY

1. Give experiences as gifts (hiking trips, bowling, a day at the beach, etc.) instead of material goods.
2. For the material gifts you do give, go on a scavenger hunt throughout your home to find creative alternatives to wrapping paper. Make cloth wrap bags out of old clothing, dish towels, maps, magazine pictures, or cloth shopping bags.
3. Set aside time to repair, reuse, and recycle wrapping materials and any well-loved household items you may have planned to throw away.
4. Spend time in nature appreciating God's creation.
5. Set a goal: How might you have an empty trash bin this Christmas?

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Father, please help us to spend wisely and not excessively. Please break the bondage of conspicuous consumption over our nation. Help us to be better stewards of the resources You have blessed us with. Holy Spirit, please help us to be more disciplined with our lifestyles. Father, help us to learn to be content with what we have instead of always wanting more. Help those who are in financial trouble. Many need a miracle in their finances and we ask for Your intervention.

Further Learning:

- [Give a Gift to the Planet by Reducing Holiday Waste \(Neef\)](#)
- [Holiday Tip: Don't Recycle Gift Wrap \(Earth 911\)](#)
- [Gift Wrapping Products Market Report \(Grand View Research\)](#)
- [Learn Furoshiki, the Japanese Art of Cloth Wrapping \(Japanese Ministry of the Government\)](#)



Want to Learn More?

On the darkest nights of the year, we gather to celebrate the Light of the World coming to us as a newborn. Glory to God in the Highest! On Earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. In what ways did you experience His favor resting on you as you tried new practices and shed Christmas myths? What new practices of building more love and justice with God do you want to hold onto and remember throughout the next year? Were there new relationships with neighbors that you want to build upon in 2024?

We show what we believe about Jesus' birth through how we celebrate and gather together during the Christmas season and beyond. We can increase our joy by welcoming the lonely and isolated to marvel and remember the birth that changed the course of history. Our gatherings can be simple and full of love for one another, sharing meals and stories, and our presence with one another. We can set habits of service and pursuing justice that last well beyond the holiday season.

Do you want vision and support to pursue that throughout 2024? Register for a [Community Transformation Certificate cohort!](#)



COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION CERTIFICATE

The Community Transformation Certificate (CTC) is a community of practice designed to train participants in the biblical foundations of community organizing and the basic skills of listening to a community. Participants join each other virtually in a two Saturday intensive followed by monthly meetings and individual coaching. They practice those skills in their own neighborhood and communally reflect as they complete listening projects.

- Join global leaders focused on holistic urban transformation and justice to listen to God and their neighbors.
- Be trained in the concepts, spirituality, & processes of community transformation
- Develop a community-led seed project with individualized coaching support in your own neighborhood



Understand the theology of Shalom and the biblical call to urban community transformation



Design and facilitate a community listening project and a seed project alongside your neighbors



Engage spiritual practices that sustain incarnational community transformation



Practice deep listening (to God, Neighbors, and Self) as the central posture for community transformation

- The CTC is designed for:
 - Leaders who desire mutual transformation with marginalized neighbors, instead of adopting a charity model
 - Leaders ready for hands-on learning, co-creating innovative ministry approaches with neighbors
 - Leaders discerning long-term work alongside urban marginalized communities

Learn more at www.servantpartners.org/certificate.

If this is something you can't do yourself, consider funding the project so that others can receive this training with a scholarship.

Give in Canada at www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/69092, or in the U.S. at www.servantpartners.org/donate.

Contributors



Liz Fung is the Director of Mobilization for Servant Partners USA, and resides in Monterey Park, CA. She has also served with Servant Partners in South Los Angeles, California, and Bangkok, Thailand. She gets excited about walking alongside developing leaders as they discern their call and deepen their relationship with God. She spends most of her time with her husband and their cats.



Matt Hayashida has recently joined Servant Partners East Los Angeles team and is on staff with First Love Community Church. He also works with the Mobilization department with interns. Before that, he interned with SP in the Middle East, and with InterVarsity at Cal State Long Beach. He has a passion for discipleship—especially discovering people's dreams, and walking with them through scripture to empower those dreams. He also loves talking about visual arts, stories, and video games/technology—and how those interact with our spirituality.



Krista-Dawn Kimsey is of Ukrainian-German Canadian prairie heritage, a mostly pleasant wife to Joel, and an often spontaneous parent to her two teenagers: Judah and Gabriella. She currently serves on the executive team to lead Servant Partners Canada, as Director of Learning and Innovation. For 25 years, her vocational passion has been to facilitate creative and transformational learning experiences to disciple, coach leaders and pursue greater justice around the world. She is currently seeking God's shalom alongside her Pleasant Hill neighbors on Treaty 6 territory in Saskatoon, SK.

Designed by Daniel Sunkari



SERVANT PARTNERS USA

Servant Partners is a nonprofit organization and movement centered on Jesus Christ, planted in urban poor communities, and empowered to pursue community transformation. We plant churches, organize communities, and partner with local leadership towards individual, communal, and systemic transformation. Learn more at www.servantpartners.org, and follow us at @servantpartners on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).



SERVANT PARTNERS CANADA

Servant Partners Canada seeks God's shalom by pursuing holistic transformation of urban poor communities alongside our neighbors. Visit www.servantpartners.ca and follow us @servantpartnerscanada on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) for more stories of pursuing God's peace alongside our neighbors in Canada.

Resources Used

Myth #1: A Great Christmas Requires a Big Event

Millennials Will Shell Out Nearly \$1,000 Hosting December Holiday Parties ([Lending Tree](#))

Myth #2: Christmas is the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

From Thanksgiving to New Year's: Protecting Your Mental Health During the Holidays ([American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#))

What's the Saddest Time of the Year? ([ZocDoc](#))

Myth #3: Christmas Charity Will Address the World's Injustice

Food Banks Across Canada Experience Overwhelming Demand with Almost Two Million Visits in One Month ([Cision Canada](#))

10 Year-End Giving Statistics Every Fundraiser Should Know for 2023 ([Neon One](#))

December Giving Makes Us Human ([National Giving Month](#))

Generosity in Canada and the United States: The 2020 Generosity Index ([Fraser Institute](#))

Myth #4: The Nicer the Wrapping, the Better the Gift

Holiday Tip: Don't Recycle Gift Wrap ([Earth 911](#))

Gift wrapping ([Wikipedia](#))

Climate change and health of the urban poor: The role of environmental justice ([Chaudry](#))