



By Kathryn Edwards

**C**hristmas is the time of the year when Christians celebrate God's greatest gift to humankind. Ironically, it is also an extremely stressful time for pastors and their families. There are additional worship services, musical celebrations, children's and youth programs, parties held by Sunday School classes, choirs, and other organizations, and end of the year business meetings that consume large amounts of time from November to January. Add to this hectic schedule the pressures of school, dual careers, family events and out-of-town guests, and it is no surprise that pastors and their families begin the new year exhausted.

This year, be intentional about preserving your family's sanity and celebration with these strategies for maintaining a sense of joy, peace, and worship amid a time of chaotic activity.

### 1. Create Moments of Rest

The Psalmist said, "My soul finds rest in God alone." (Psalm 62:1 NIV) Moments of rest are intentional; they do not just happen. Turning off the distractions of the home (telephones, televisions, computers, and video games), taking a walk or some quiet time alone can restore a sense of calm. Attending to one's own

spiritual needs through practices of Sabbath keeping, prayer and spiritual reading help keep the mind uncluttered and focused on God.

### 2. Evaluate Expectations

As a therapist, I often recommend that my clients take stock of self-imposed expectations as a first step in reducing stress. Personal expectations tend to be harsher and more rigid than the expectations of others. Congregants are often more understanding than we expect them to be. They, too, are under added pressures during this busy season, and will understand if you or your family can't make an appearance at every event.

### 3. Plan Ahead

To maintain sanity and good humor during December, it is helpful to have mapped out ahead of time a schedule that includes time for relaxation and family in addition to church events. If conflicting invitations arise (and they will), the pastor can honestly and graciously decline, citing the prior engagement. Whereas a congregant may have one Sunday school party to attend, the minister may be invited to ten different parties. The minister who tries to attend all of these events will have a weary, miserable Advent and Christmas.

### 4. Put the Children First

Families with young children face particular challenges. Babysitting costs make attending multiple adult gatherings cost prohibitive and limit the number of events that can be reasonably scheduled. Be sensitive to not just your wallet, but to your children's perceptions of the church's claim on your time. Children's future attitudes toward the church are often forged by these early experiences. If they perceive church activities as taking precedence over family time, it is unlikely that they will embrace the church as a nurturing community when they are older.

### 5. Make Your Own Traditions

Another schedule trap that can be avoided is maintaining traditions begun by previous pastors. It is not necessary to host an event like an open house or staff party when the demands are already overwhelming. Pastors who are determined to open their homes during the holidays can lessen the stress by accepting the congregation's offers to help, closing doors to messy rooms, and keeping the food simple or welcoming pot luck meals. But better yet, let the pastor's family model for the church the alternative ways of celebrating and giving during this sacred season.

Even with intentionality and planning, the season has a way of growing larger than life itself. The Psalmist said, "Return to your rest, my soul; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you" (Psalm 115:7). Pastors who learn to preserve time for God, family, and relaxation during the flurry of activity inherent in the Advent/Christmas season will find themselves blessed. □



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