

Christmas—it's all about the meaning of the season

My great foray into the kitchen is always at Christmas to make my traditional fudge. I usually make two different types from two recipes because one often flops, doesn't set, and winds up being topping for someone's ice cream. This year I will use one of those never-fail recipes my wife keeps talking about—pride was a barrier before, but no more.

Christmas is a great time of year around my home. I'm fortunate to have a large family—seven kids, and now two more with grandchildren, not to mention extended family. Fortunately I also have a big dining room table. It's a Mennonite table from Pennsylvania. It's so big that we have built additions in our last three homes just to accommodate this massive oak table with 12 leaves. My wife loves to have guests over for dinner, and at Christmastime the table is commonly expanded to seat 24.

Presents, as in most families, are a big part of Christmas Day, and we have worked hard with the kids to put this in proper perspective. For my family, Christ is the meaning of the season. We always read the story of Jesus' birth before presents are opened. Our focus is on God's gift to mankind rather than our gifts to each other. He is the reason for the Christmas season.

In our home Christmas is all about the giving—both to those we love and those less fortunate. My kids are often given money at Christmas from various relatives. Years ago my father suggested that we find a charity we could support at Christmas, so we suggested to the kids that they donate this money to charity, and their mom and I would match it. When World Vision started sending their catalogue showing the opportunities to send everything from

coats to goats to families in the developing world we found a perfect fit for a family active in hobby farming. Each of our children supports a foster child year-round through World Vision with the money they earn on our farm, and this seemed like a natural extension. Each child agreed and each one has always donated the Christmas money they received.

Christmas brings us closer together.

My wife has a riot with the Christmas stockings each year. She starts early looking for those small but meaningful tidbits to stuff into the sock. I think the kids look forward to the opening of the stockings more than the presents themselves because of the surprises they have found there over the years.

After the customary breakfast filled with the croissants and dainties only seen during this season, we have fun playing games such as Monopoly, crokinole, checkers, and chess. A number of us break out the musical instruments and start singing. In fact, the singing of Christmas carols begins early in December. All seven children play piano to a greater or lesser degree, and it takes some time to give everyone a chance at the piano to lead us in singing Christmas carols. Turkey is the order of the day for the Christmas dinner. I'm not sure how big the bird is but as the children grow older it seems to be getting bigger rather than smaller!

It seems like we spend the whole day eating chocolates and candies. One of the great benefits of being a

doctor is being the recipient of so much kindness from my patients in the form of baking and chocolates. Although many of these gifts stay at the office for my staff to enjoy, some make their way home for my family. In some small manner these wonderful baked goods are a way of saying thanks to the kids for their contribution in sharing their dad with so many.

Often Christmas is the time when relationships get renewed attention and priority. Christmas cards are coming in and going out, and friends and family gather to share a meal or a coffee. It's a time when we practise random acts of kindness and thoughtfulness to those we love. And for those in our innermost circle, Christmas is a time of intimacy. Listening to the hearts of our young children as they talk about what gift they are hoping for, trying to figure out ways to be kind and cool for your teenagers, or remembering those who have left home and gone their own way, Christmas brings us closer together. All day long we get to make memories—it's not hard to imagine what that is all about. I am sure that many of us relive those precious memories of when our children were small as the grandchildren make their way into our homes on Christmas Day.

However you celebrate your holiday—whether it's lighting candles, going for long walks, talking long distance with family or friends, or attempting to make fudge—I wish everyone a Merry Christmas. For those of you on call, may it also be a time of meaning and purpose as you serve the needs of others. Joyeux Noel, happy holidays, and a great 2010 to all of you.

—**Brian Brodie, MD**
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