

Blue Christmas gives people space to lament

BY MARIO TONEGUZZI, CALGARY HERALD DECEMBER 17, 2011



From left, Rev. Sheena Trotter-Dennis, congregational care co-ordinator Donna Christie and Rev. John Pentland participate in an Advent wreath lighting ceremony at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary.

Photograph by: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

Merry and joy are a couple of words that are synonymous with Christmas. But for many people there is nothing merry or joyful about this time of the year.

Christmas is hard for many people. It can be stressful. It can be sad. It can also be a time of grieving as people remember people they've lost in their lives through death, divorce or other circumstances. Or a time that is overtaken by feelings related to mental illness, loss of job, financial stresses, illness, estranged family.

Many Calgary churches have recognized in recent years that many people just aren't merry at this time of year and the churches have organized Blue Christmas services to help these people cope with their emotions and what they are feeling and experiencing.

Rev. John Pentland, of Hillhurst United Church, says Blue Christmas is associated with the longest night of the year, Dec. 21.

"It's a dark time of year for lots of folks and the darkness is symbolized by some people by tough situations at home, or having to return home to places they don't want to go, relatives who are stressful, financial challenges," Pentland says. "All the Christmas carols you hear. Some people don't feel connected to them. They're not feeling - because of unemployment or poverty or illness or loss, death in particular - connected.

"So it's an opportunity to say that's OK. It's an opportunity to not have to be merry . . . to connect in a faith perspective to the reality that for lots of people Christmas isn't merry."

Hillhurst United Church in the Hillhurst neighbourhood is an example of what some churches are doing this year. On Sunday at 7 p.m., a Blue Christmas service will be held in the sanctuary.

Pentland says the service ties in with the biblical Book of Lamentations. "Lamenting is part of our faith. The Book of Lamentations is a short book. . . . It talks about the poetry of pain. Or a funeral dirge where people are really lamenting life's situations that are real. And sorrow, suffering and loss are real. And they shouldn't be glossed over. We shouldn't be pretending that they don't exist.

"So this service really isn't about complaining. It's really an opportunity to faithfully lament. Jesus lamented. Jesus was in touch with people's suffering."

Rev. Sheena Trotter-Dennis, congregational care staff person at Hillhurst, says the evening is a worship service with space for a time of silence, a time of prayer and a "ritualistic way" of honouring the lament of people.

Lighting candles will also take place as well as a time set aside to hear people speak of their own time of lament. "They will be bringing to the table their own stories of why this time of the year is difficult. But also giving them some hope for the future," she says. "There will also be some singing of Silent Night.

"Communion is important. It's a time of being in community and sharing. The United Church of Canada has a statement of faith about we are not alone. The idea is that we share that with God and with one another even in the midst of lament."

Donna Christie, congregational care co-ordinator at Hillhurst, says the service is a chance for people to acknowledge and honour their losses in a safe place.

"Because we often don't have that. People can cry. People can do whatever they need to do to stop the hustle and bustle of the season and pause and reflect and really honour their losses and their challenges," Christie says.

Pentland says churches are connecting to the culture and the culture is seeking a space and a place where "they don't have to have it all together."

"So that church should be a place that welcomes people whose life isn't going great. It's a place that welcomes people whoever they are. . . . The culture is recognizing that things aren't great and the role of a faith community should be to be there for people at that time," Pentland says.

"Some people feel like they don't need it and then they're often the ones that are showing up. So we see it as just another opportunity in this season to step out and step into a worshipful space. And that's really valuable.

"We want the church to be a place that's real. You don't have to pretend. It's really a place where people are honoured to not have to pretend. There's a great joy actually strangely enough in knowing that others know suffering, too. You're not alone. It's a fabulous way of thinking about how we are as a community."

Pentland says the whole story of Jesus is of one who knew suffering and who was with people in that suffering and knew the suffering of the cross and the power of resurrection.

"So it's like an Easter service at Christmas in lots of ways. . . . It's a very important message to the community that in these times it's important to come together."

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