

The story of our first St. Nicholas Day food delivery celebration, now an annual event:

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Asheville, NC, congregation organizes “St. Nicholas Day” activities

ASHEVILLE, NC—Members of the Circle of Mercy Congregation in Asheville, N.C., have long been concerned about the commercial effects of Christmas, especially on the spiritual lives of their children.

So to counter the corruption of holiday, and to revive one of the oldest traditions behind the modern figure of “Santa Claus,” the congregation organized St. Nicholas Day activities by delivering food to people in need—and doing it anonymously.

“We’ve always been very ambivalent about Santa Claus in our house,” said Colleen Burnet, a congregation member and organizer of the day’s activities. “Giving our children another story to associate with Christmas—that of St. Nicholas—helps us retrieve the holiday from the habits of consumerism.”

St. Nicholas, a fourth century Christian leader from the Middle East (what is now the nation of Turkey), was known for giving gifts to those in need — anonymously, without taking credit for the gift or letting them know who he was.

The idea for the St. Nicholas Day activity came from Ken and Nancy Sehested who, along with Joyce Hollyday, serve as co-pastors of Circle of Mercy.

“We did this with our kids when they were young,” the Sehesteds said. “It was a great adventure to load up our car with boxes of food, take it to the houses of people we knew were living on the financial edge, ring the door bell and then race back to the car. Our kids loved the drama. And it was a great way not just to perform charity but, more importantly, to provide spiritual direction and focus for our daughters.”

Each box of food delivered contained a printed note explaining who St. Nicholas was and saying: “Our church believes this tradition is more in keeping with the Christian story of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. To encourage our children to think of Christmas this way, we honor St. Nicholas on his feast day, December 6.

“That’s the reason we give this box of food, secretly delivered by our children. Please accept it as a sign of God’s generous love, freely given, without need for recognition.”

The Circle of Mercy Congregation is pursuing affiliation with the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ and is also affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists.