

Parents, pastors wrestle with place of Santa at Christmas

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(RNS) When the Rev. John McCausland crafted his Christmas Eve sermon at his Episcopal church in Weare, N.H., he always followed a basic formula.

There had to be a brother and a sister in the story. Jesus and the holy family played a prominent role. And there was always an appearance from Santa Claus.

"If we never mention Santa Claus, then you create a parallel universe," said McCausland, who retired in June. "What I try to do in this story is to tie the two together, but not make Santa Claus primary."

McCausland kept the Jesus-and-Santa story tradition for 14 years at Holy Cross Episcopal Church. Children would carry the figures to the creche display and sit for McCausland's story, in which Santa often joins in the adoration of the Christ child.

Just where to place the jolly elf in the original Christmas story can be a perennial dilemma for both parents and pastors. This year, two new products draw on educating kids about the origins of Santa, or inspiring them to become Santas themselves.

Phil Vischer, creator of the popular VeggieTales characters, has launched a DVD that answers the question, "Why Do We Call it Christmas?" The video, hosted by Vischer and featuring puppets and animation, spends 45 minutes detailing the origins of

Christmas traditions, including Santa Claus.

One puppet on the DVD credits American TV shows and movies that "mushed up Christmas" by melding stories of St. Nicholas and the Nativity. "How did this guy become such a big part of Jesus' birthday party?" Vischer asks as the video opens.

In an interview, he said he hopes to diffuse tensions between Christian parents who want nothing to do with Santa and those who think there's room for both Jesus and Santa.

"We have the ability to get kind of paranoid," Vischer said. "I think it's easy for some Christians to say there's got to be some plot, there's some evil organization, that is foisting Santa upon us to steal Jesus."

Vischer's video trip back through history details the celebrations of Christ's Mass (which became Christmas) to mark Jesus' birth, and the Feast of St. Nicholas that recalls the giving saint who helped poor children.

"I think it would be awesome if Christian parents could bring back a more overt celebration of St. Nicholas because, effectively, you can have your Santa and Jesus, too," Vischer said.

Kelly Moss, author of the new book "The Santa Club," is doing just that by encouraging children to join "millions of Santa Clauses" around the world in being generous givers modeled after St. Nicholas, who she considers the first Santa as well as a follower of Jesus.

Her book was inspired by the answer her mother-in-law gave to her older son, Jonathan, when she and her husband were flummoxed about how to handle his inquiry about Santa. He stayed up that night with his grandmother and helped place

gifts for his younger brother, Jameson, under the Christmas tree.

"The following year, when Jameson asked (about Santa), Jonathan said, 'I'll handle this, Mom,' and he welcomed him into The Santa Club," Moss recalled of her sons, now 22 and 20.

Others make only one choice, focusing on Jesus rather than Santa.

Michael Chanley, the former parenting minister at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Ky., said he stuck to the Bible and never intentionally taught about Santa.

"When children have asked, as they always do, I simply ask them what they believe. Regardless of what they say, my response is, basically, the same," said Chanley, now the executive director of the International Network of Children's Ministry.

"I tell them Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Christ. Then, I share with them the story of the real Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, and how his generosity inspired many of our traditions."

Gerry Bowler, author of the 2005 book, "Santa Claus: A Biography," said discomfort with Santa has been around for centuries, even as some opposition has waned, with an image of Santa kneeling at the creche that's become popular in recent years.

"The warming really took place about 150 years ago and there've been frequent outbursts of resistance and then a gradual accommodation," he said.

Still, there are a range of holdouts, from Jehovah's Witnesses who don't celebrate any birthdays, to the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., which changed the lyrics of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" to "Santa Claus Will Take You to Hell."

"You'll find a rationalist streak that says I must not tell my kid a lie: If this is a lie then when I tell them about Jesus, well, that's just like Santa," adds Bowler, who teaches a course on the social history of Christmas at the University of Manitoba in Canada.

But McCausland, the newly retired New Hampshire vicar, doesn't buy it. The father of two grown daughters and grandfather of two can't recall a child who concluded Jesus didn't exist if Santa does not.

"I think literal grown-ups worry about that," he said.