

It's coming on Christmas

It's that time of year when all conversations begin with 'are you organised for Christmas yet?'.

Everyone seems to be thinking about who to buy gifts for, how much to spend, and where the dinner will be held. The debates are starting about who gets to put the star on the Christmas tree. How to split the day between his family, and hers. The planning about where to put the cousins coming up from Wellington, and which child has to share a bedroom for three whole days. Finding the family member who will be the sober driver and pick up and deliver other members of the whanau to and from dinner. The development of a new strategy to make sure that the favourite uncle gets enough wine to remain merry but not so much that he falls asleep during dinner and upsets the favourite aunt. The discussions about who will host the grumpy family member who lives alone but welcomes the opportunity to come to Christmas dinner and find the chicken too dry and the pudding too sweet.

It happens every year, and every year, somehow, hopefully, we make it through with relationships intact, and maybe even some special new family memories.

Christmas for our team at the Mission has the same challenges, but on a larger scale.

Our 'house' for Christmas Dinner has been the Town Hall for many years, which comfortably held the 1500 members of our Mission family. But our family is growing. This year we expect to host around 2000 people so our Christmas Dinner will be held at a bigger 'house', the Vector Arena.

We're dusting off all our Christmas trees and our table decorations so the Arena will look beautiful. We're wrapping presents for children for whom the present they get at our Christmas dinner might be the only present they get all year. We're planning how to make sure the older members of our Mission family get to dinner, those elderly Aucklanders whose families live far away, who might otherwise spend the day alone. We're worrying about how many chickens are needed to feed 2,000 people, and how many tins of fruit salad.

We want to give our family, all the people we work with during the year, a day which brings the best spirit of Christmas to life.

It's always a big day, and with the help of my team and hundreds of volunteers we get through it. It is a great joy to see a child, who might have woken up in a house in which ordinary life consists of too little food, too little attention, and too much exposure to violence and alcohol and drugs, have a special day with plenty of food and fun and even a present or two.

To sit with an elderly person sharing a meal with others for the first time in a year is a humbling experience and to watch homeless people join with families to celebrate Christmas reminds me of the meaning of Christmas. That's what keeps us all coming back to our family dinner, year after year.

These are still uncertain times. What is certain, is that it is worth putting the effort we put in each year to make Christmas happen. Christmas reminds us that as long as we have people in our lives that we care about, we are rich. It's time to celebrate.