

It's that time of year again. The streets are crowded. The malls and stores are even more crowded. Business analysts are watching retail sales to determine if more will be bought or sold this year than last year.

It's the holiday season.

Each year we know there's going to be crowded streets and crowded stores. We plan our routes to the malls and other stores to avoid getting stuck in traffic, but usually without much luck. We know there will be financial experts telling us we're not spending enough but that we're building up too much credit card debt.

And, each year we somehow find a way in the midst of all the craziness to reflect on the deeper meanings of this season.

There are those who celebrate Christmas, others who celebrate Hanukkah, and others still who celebrate Kwanzaa. Practically everyone has a tradition or a belief that is celebrated this time of year.

Perhaps the greatest part of this celebration, regardless of how it is celebrated, is the unifying sense of coming together and realizing, at least for a brief period, our common hopes and dreams – hopes and dreams found in the human heart, and undefined by our culture, race or creed.

Someone once wrote, "blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love." All things considered, it's nice to focus on this type of conspiracy for a change.

Regardless of your beliefs, it's a good time to be a part of this conspiracy. It's also very easy to become involved.

Gather up some clothes you don't wear anymore and donate them to a local shelter. Buy some food for a soup kitchen, or better yet, take time to serve at one. Visit someone who can't go out. Stop by a nursing home with some flowers or a poinsettia to brighten up a room.

Tune your car radio to one of the stations that's playing holiday music around the clock and sing along without worrying about what the person in the car next to you is thinking. Give yourself an extra 15 minutes to get to the mall or wherever you're going, and don't let the traffic get to you.

Make a gift for a friend; the time and effort you put into it will mean more to both of you. Decorate your house with lights. Buy gifts for a child you don't know and don't worry about being there when they open them; you'll know how they feel.

Remember that it's better to give than to receive.

There are a lot of issues demanding our attention these days. The economy could be in better shape. We're embroiled in an international struggle against terrorism. The balance between work and family becomes more difficult to manage.

This time of year, though, take the time to withdraw from the issues and instead become part of the conspiracy of love.