

## Alternative worship services extend welcome to special-needs children and their parents

By Sharon Sheridan, November 30, 2010



[Episcopal News Service] Crucifer Scott Collins stood at the front of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Harrington Park, New Jersey, and lifted high his cross. "Who's ready for a cross parade?" he asked.

About a dozen children and adults holding small wooden crosses lined up behind him, waving blue pom-poms and shaking noisemakers as they marched twice around the nave before returning to their seats. A few minutes and a brief Scripture lesson later, they left the pews again, gathering in the center aisle to grasp a "prayer rope" and recite, or listen to, the Lord's Prayer. After a gluten-free Communion, congregants ended the 30-minute service as they began, parading behind the cross before turning in their bells and plastic clackers and heading to the parish hall for snacks, children's videos and adult conversation.

It's not your typical Episcopal Eucharist. But it is part of a growing trend of alternative worship services geared to special-needs, and particularly autistic, children. The Harrington Park service, held every other week since October, follows a liturgy called [All God's Children](#) launched at Christ Episcopal Church in Budd Lake, New Jersey, three years ago.

The Rev. Audrey Scanlan, a Connecticut Episcopal priest, and Linda Snyder, missionary for children and adults in the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, developed another model called [Rhythms of Grace](#) that has been replicated in several states and is starting in the United Kingdom. Last summer, Morehouse Education Resources published the first volume of their three-year curriculum.

Monthly Rhythms of Grace services last longer, from an hour to an hour and 45 minutes, and employ a "gathering activity" such as placing paper-doll cutouts on a mural of a church, plus sensory art activities based on each day's theme, Scanlan said. The biblical storytelling time might employ play-acting, call-and-refrain or a felt board. The congregation might play "Red Rover" or dance the Hokey-Pokey before sharing Communion.

Both liturgical models strive for the same goal: to offer worship, acceptance and community to special-needs children and parents who often feel unwelcome in traditional church services.

"I've been looking for a church home," said David M. Rice, attending his second service at St. Andrew's with his 5 1/2-year-old autistic son David Jr. "We've been kicked out of church a few times because he's kind of rambunctious and a little loud."

Baptized in a Baptist church and raised Presbyterian, Rice said he'd found a home with All God's Children. "I will be a devoted parishioner."

In Connecticut, Scanlan was a newly ordained curate at Trinity Episcopal Church in Torrington with a background in special education when a parishioner with an autistic son e-mailed the rector saying: "I can't come to church anymore because my son is too disruptive in our Sunday school class and in church, and he's too old to hang around in the nursery."

"I said, 'Let's see what we can do for them,'" recalled Scanlan, now rector at the Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Plainville. "To this day, the format is really the same. It combines biblical storytelling with what we call therapeutic crafts and then a time of Communion, which is extremely informal. We sit on the ground around an apple crate covered with a fair linen and share Communion."

The program is in its eighth year, drawing everyone from toddlers to teens to a boy with Asperger's syndrome who's "got the Gospel of Luke memorized" and likes to recite parts of the service to children who are mostly nonverbal and some with significant mental retardation, she said.

All God's Children evolved after Bishop Mark Beckwith of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark visited Christ Church and spoke to the vestry about identifying the church's need for a unique ministry. When he mentioned seeing a billboard about Autism Awareness Month during his drive to Budd Lake, "the room went dead silent," parishioner Ray Bonker recounted. "The Holy Spirit filled the room. ... Everybody else in the room knew I had two autistic kids."

Bonker spoke up, describing how he'd ended up spending Sundays in the church basement with his children instead of participating in the services and how he had been dissatisfied with worship that didn't speak a "language" they understood. The bishop's offhand comment proved a catalyst, as Bonker spent the next few months trying to see church through his children's eyes and design a service that would "let them know that they are as much members of the church or as much God's children as anybody else."

"I wanted the service to be designed in a way that makes sense to somebody who's maybe not literate, who's maybe got some disabilities that get in the way of doing church the way we traditionally do church and might have a very short attention span, and yet at the same time was not trivial," he said. Aiming for a child of 5 or 6, biologically or mentally, he created an order of worship that uses 11 pictures to depict the elements of each service, beginning with the "cross parade." Each component lasts a few minutes, with the whole service ending in half an hour. Youngsters are encouraged to move around, and the priest assures parents at the beginning, "The only rule is, there's no rules."

"Anything short of physical violence is okay," Bonker said. While the service initially was marketed for special-needs children, he added, "it happens to work really, really well for kids who aren't special needs."

During All God's Children services, ushers give a \$1 bill to each person attending to place in the collection plate. This reassures parents that they needn't contribute financially to attend and gives children a lesson in giving back, Bonker said. The services' goal is not to make money or to attract people to the Episcopal Church -- although some families have formally joined Christ Church -- but to meet the spiritual needs of special-needs children and their families, he said.

But such services do draw people into the church.

"What we're doing," Scanlan said, "is really responding to a pastoral need that was identified, not by us, but by the parent. We also have found this to be really a program of evangelism. We're finding parents who have been disaffected or feeling uncomfortable or in some cases unwelcome in other churches ... who are still hungry for a church community."

Parenting a special-needs child, especially if you're a single parent, can be isolating, said John [who asked that his last name be withheld to protect his son's privacy], whose e-mail sparked what became Rhythms of Grace. "What we want to do is connect with people. ... I think the fact that people have

made a real effort to accommodate special children and welcome them in is a unique thing. It's a rare thing."

The monthly services, he said, address the question: "How do you bring a child with special needs into the whole concept of the kingdom of heaven?"

"If they can be in this place where they have a good feeling and there's a ceremony and everybody is involved and the grape juice is passed around, they know that they're a part of something and they know that this is good," he said.

Churches in several states, including Texas and Massachusetts as well as Connecticut, have started Rhythms of Grace services, Scanlan said. Churches in Scotland and Northern Ireland plan to use the program as well.

Christ Episcopal Church in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, launched a Rhythms of Grace service two years ago. Children from toddlers to a 12-year-old attend -- typically four special-needs and about five "typical" children participate with families and volunteers, said Katherine Gould, director of children's education.

"Music is a very important part of it," she commented. "We do have somebody play the guitar, and that [has] the most calming effect on the children. During the Eucharist, it's just a nice, beautiful thing to watch everybody finally relax."

"The most beautiful part is watching the parents watch their children receive Communion, because usually they won't take them to the altar in church because they're scared [of] what they'll do," Gould said. "I cry just about every time with the expression on the parents' faces. It's just beautiful to see them as part of the body of Christ."

*-- Sharon Sheridan is an ENS correspondent.*