

Pastoral Ministry with a Preschool

Rev. Rex Umbenhauer

Jesus!" said the little girl with wide, searching, blue eyes and beautiful blond hair as she looked at me. I was passing by on my way up the aisle toward the front of the nave to lead our preschool chapel. And then, when I turned around, I saw at least eighty other little children along with their teachers all looking at me, waiting to be greeted, waiting for what Jesus would give them: the faith of child. What a joyful and humbling privilege. How thankful I am to be blessed with a preschool as part of my ministry.

It wasn't always this way though. When I first arrived from the seminary, there was no preschool; there were no children in the parish other than those of my own family except one. Those were good days, but now, just over six years later, four since we started the preschool, my ministry is enriched with the addition of more than one hundred thirty preschool-aged children and their families. What a wonderful opportunity the Lord is giving us to reach out with His love and grace.

The Lord instructed His disciples more than once regarding the importance of children and their place in the Kingdom. During His Galilean ministry, Jesus used a young child's humble position to illustrate who would be greatest in the Kingdom, and then the Lord let His disciples know that to welcome a child in His name is to welcome Him. Then, further stressing that the little children not be overlooked or thought of in a lesser way, Jesus says, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 18:10). And later, after the Lord had entered into Judea, His disciples received another lesson. Little children were being brought to Jesus, and the disciples rebuked those bringing them, which immediately brought Jesus' response, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14).

It is easy for the young children to be overlooked as Jesus' disciples demonstrated, and as we can so easily do, and yet ministering to the little children of a preschool is filled with blessing upon blessing. The Lord wants the little children to

have the love and grace He has for them, and one way to feed them is in our chapel services. To hear such young children pray the Lord's Prayer and learn to recognize the Bible as God's Word, the place from which God speaks, is edifying to the faith of all present, including the teachers and any parent present. There are some parents that attend the preschool chapel fairly regularly, and one might think that they're just checking up on the nature of what is taught, but the frequency of attendance betrays them. I know that several haven't heard the Word taught for many years, and I can see in their faces a joy for being there.

Having a preschool as part of my ministry provides opportunities to meet and create relationships with many more parents than I would otherwise have a chance to. Through various activities sponsored by the preschool for the parents, their children, and for our church members, such as special breakfasts and lunches (e.g., Mother's Day, Father's Day, and many others) held at the school, I get to meet parents in a casual way. Such occasions open the door for the parents to get to know me and for me to learn of ways I can minister to them. Additionally, we have preschool and church get-togethers (e.g., dinners, lectures, and other activities).

A bright spot each month is when one of the preschool classes comes to sing in church. It opens the door for many more to hear the Gospel, since not only do the little children sing of God's grace in Christ, but they and the congregation have an additional opportunity to have the Lord come to them in His Word as I teach the children the Gospel reading for the day. And then we have all the children join our Sunday School teachers so they may hear more from the Lord, while their parents, with no distractions, are fed the Word of the Lord themselves. What joy I feel when parents come and tell me how their children are repeating at home things they learned in our preschool chapel, either through my lesson or through song. For many, this is their only exposure to the Gospel.

Having a preschool as part of my ministry is not only pleasing to the Lord, but it is a special joy for me and for the rest of my congregation. I love seeing the upturned faces covered with smiles and warm greetings each time I enter the preschool, when they come for chapel, or when we see one another out in the community, for in doing so these little children are really greeting the Lord. How true our Lord's words are: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

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