

Toddler on the loose: Case by case

by [Ellen Blue](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



*Congregational life presents a broad range of conflicts and dilemmas in which theological and ecclesial issues are entwined with the complex drama of human relations. Such challenges are also moments in which Christian witness can be clarified. This fictional narrative, which is followed by an analysis, is the fifth in a series.*

Serena Davis had been chair of the worship committee at St. Miscellaneous for about two years, and she enjoyed the task. She and her small committee were primarily responsible for readying the sanctuary for the various liturgical seasons. She quickly came to appreciate what a useful teaching tool the different colored paraments and stoles could be for the children (and adults) attending worship.

Before serving in the field of worship, she'd served on the education committee for years. She asked for a change because her own children had reached junior high school, and she felt that other members should step up and act as role models in Sunday school and youth group. She still gave the children's sermon sometimes, and she volunteered for the Sundays when the colors changed so she could talk about the meaning of the seasons.

Pastor Bob had been at St. Miscellaneous for several years, and he and the congregation had mostly settled into a comfortable understanding about worship. That meant that Serena's committee work was not controversial, which was a big relief to her. She knew that every congregation had occasional conflicts, but Serena was always careful to avoid becoming involved in them.

When Jason and Allison Spicer began attending St. Miscellaneous, bringing their three children with them, it appeared at first to be good news, as the aging congregation often expressed a wish for more young families. The Spicer boys were seven and five, but it was three-year-old Mandy who charmed Serena and many other members. She had big eyes and curly hair and an open, trusting personality. Although she was hesitant the first Sunday to come to the children's moment with her brothers, she soon began to love running down the aisle to participate.

In fact, in some people's opinion, Mandy had become too comfortable in worship. She would leave her family's pew and wander around the sanctuary. Apparently her parents saw nothing wrong with her behavior, and they never tried to prevent her from walking away. Some of the older longtime members made remarks to Serena about Jason and Allison's lax parenting style and complained about Mandy's tendency to roam during the service. One of them, Deidre, might have been called the matriarch in a smaller congregation, but the larger membership at St. Miscellaneous diluted her power.

St. Miscellaneous was in a relatively affluent suburb. Many congregants were retired from successful careers in fields like real estate, medicine or teaching. They were in Serena's view firmly upper middle class. The Spicers, on the other hand, had had a run of bad luck, with Jason losing his job after the 2008 crash and being underemployed ever since. Allison didn't work outside the home and didn't appear to have much in the way of marketable skills.

Though the women never said so in precisely so many words, Serena got the impression that they thought the Spicers had a lower social standing and that the children's lack of discipline was the result. In order to be fair, she told herself that idea could have come from her own memories of feeling somewhat out of place when her boys were younger and more rambunctious, and she and her husband were going through financial difficulties of their own.

One Sunday morning in June, around five months after the Spicers starting attending, Mandy was particularly animated during worship. At one point, while Pastor Bob was reading scripture, she walked up to the pulpit and tugged on his robe. He reached down and scooped her up and held her while he finished reading, without ever missing a beat. About the time he finished the passage, she indicated with her body language that she wanted down. He set her down and went on with the service while she made her way back to her family's pew.

Serena sang alto in the church choir, so after service she headed to the choir room to put away her robe and her music. She heard several positive comments from choir members about Bob's openness toward the little girl's presence at the pulpit. However, Bob's wife was a member of the choir, so Serena rarely heard complaints about him in the choir room.

A few members sometimes caught Serena in the parking lot to offer suggestions about worship, and these were some of the people who had complained about Mandy. Serena knew they preferred a more formal worship style than what they experienced at St. Miscellaneous with Bob. She half expected to see one or more of them waiting near her car that day. She was pleasantly surprised to find that her family was able to leave for her sons' favorite pizza restaurant without the boys having to urge repeatedly, "Let's go, Mom."

During the week, she did have a sense of waiting for the other shoe to drop, but as the days passed and no one called her at work or at home to complain, she thought perhaps Deidre and her friends had decided to ignore the incident. But on Saturday morning, Deidre called to ask if Serena would meet her at a coffeehouse that afternoon. Serena reluctantly agreed. When she arrived, she discovered that a couple of Deidre's friends were with her, and she began to feel ambushed before they even spoke. Sure enough, after very perfunctory inquiries about how things were going, they began to talk about how inappropriate it was for Bob to have picked Mandy up while he was reading scripture.

"Have you spoken to Pastor Bob about this?" Serena inquired. "Because talking with him is definitely what you ought to do."

"Oh, yes, we most certainly did, but he's no help at all," Deidre replied. "He said that Jesus already addressed it when he told the disciples to let the little children come to him."

"But he's not Jesus," her friend Billie put in. "Though really we don't blame him—it's Allison Spicer who's to blame. Children have to be taught how to behave in worship."

"And behaving in worship is so important," Deidre continued. "You have to take worship seriously. Running around and acting foolish—it's sacrilegious, that's what it is. It's not showing proper respect for our Lord."

“It keeps others from worshiping reverently, too,” Karen Kay chimed in. “I try to pray and be holy when I’m in church, but with that little girl running around, I can’t focus on my prayers.”

“It makes me have uncharitable thoughts about her parents,” Deidre commented. “It’s just not right for them to put us in such an uncomfortable position.”

The women made it plain that since Bob hadn’t taken their concerns seriously, they wanted Serena to have the worship committee present the problem to Bob, and then to the administrative board if he failed to put a stop to it. Though she promised to think about it, pray about it and talk to Bob about it the next day, she managed to leave without taking a stand about what should be done.

When she got home, her husband looked up from the baseball game he and the boys were watching and asked, “Was it as bad as you thought it would be?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “And I don’t know what to do. To be truthful, I don’t even know what to think. I like worship the way we have it, but they said we should be more reverent, and I couldn’t think of any reason why we shouldn’t be. And Mandy shouldn’t be running up to the pulpit during the service. But if I say anything to her parents, they might leave church altogether. You remember we thought about going to another church when the boys were younger and we heard that Deidre complained that they scuffed the floors. Maybe I should resign from the worship committee, since I don’t seem to know enough about it to argue with Deidre.” She sighed. “I really hope Mandy behaves tomorrow morning.”

Read [Cynthia G. Lindner's response](#).