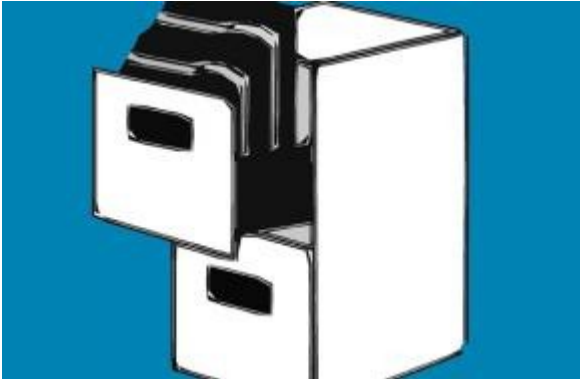


A response to "Toddler on the loose"

Case by case: Case by case

by [Cynthia G. Lindner](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



Read [Ellen Blue's narrative](#) first.

As a mother who raised three children while serving in pastoral ministry, this case awakened many memories, both fond and fraught. I remember the weighty responsibility of parenting young children, realizing that how I practiced my faith would shape the ways my children would make meaning of their world. I remember being torn between the need of many church members for Sunday worship that was a quiet center in their busy lives, and my children's need to wiggle, whisper and occasionally visit the pew of a friend during the service. And I remember my mix of mortification and delight one Sunday as my own three-year-old processed solemnly up the aisle mid-sermon and took her place next to me at the pulpit.

I worried about the congregation's reaction to that event, but it sparked no conversations in the parking lot or the coffeehouse. Today my now grown children describe their childhood in that church with fondness and gratitude, recalling a host of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who were their "church family" not simply in name but in deed, week after week.

Some years before our arrival, the church had chosen to be a community that intentionally welcomed children; nearly 20 years later, it continues to do so. Programming throughout the church's life prioritizes children and youth. Trusted adults serve as mentors to every child between the ages of five and 15, sending

cards and attending students' sports or music events. The mentors offer another person with whom to sit during church gatherings, another guide from whom to learn what it means to live as a child of God. Children as young as Mandy help to lead worship each week, greeting worshipers, making music, reading scripture, serving communion. The children in that congregation are not leaders-in-training: they are leading *now*.

On its surface, the story about Mandy is yet another case of church community conflict, that dance of competing interests and styles of communication that emerges with any intimation of change in a congregation. Readers familiar with issues of church leadership will recognize the anxious stand-off between Serena, the faithful, reluctant church leader who simply wants everybody to get along, and Deidre, the committed, indelicate elder, ever quick to defend the traditions of the church.

Those of us in pastoral roles may wince, recalling our own maneuvers to avoid difficult conversations by applying scriptural Band-Aids, staunching possible conflict instead of airing and treating it. A conflict-avoidant pastor, his well-meaning but disempowered lay leaders and an overly obliging congregation have struck a comfortable but toxic agreement in order to honor their "covenant of comfortableness"; members express fondness for their pastor but do not expect assertive leadership, while a few long-suffering lay leaders maintain the congregation's equilibrium by absorbing the community's anxieties themselves.

Serena, the overwhelmed committee chair-of-almost-everything, embodies these tensions in her relationships with other church members, with her family and internally; she doubts her own ability and worth in the very community to which she has given so much of her time and talent. The price of this coveted communal stability, ironically, is congregational immobility, inflexibility and inauthenticity: St. Miscellaneous's penchant for comfort is constricting any possibility for movement and growth.

It is no surprise that the most active and decisive character in this case, the instigator of this current conflict and the harbinger of change, is a three-year-old. This congregation will be nudged toward new life by one who is herself too new to be indoctrinated by the congregation's covenant of careful comportment.

Sweet toddlers with big eyes and trusting dispositions may not seem like radical change agents at first blush, but children are powerful disrupters of the status quo. They have not been socialized by our routines nor have their imaginations been shuttered by our rituals. They are not impressed by floods of words or persuaded by gratuitous movements. The very presence of children calls our cherished conventions into question, not simply in our services of worship but in all the places in which our common life must speak our faith plainly.

Do not be deceived by those dimples and curls; Mandy is much more than a behavior problem, an indictment of inept parenting or a congregational distraction. Her rush down the aisle that June morning was nothing less than a lively invitation for St. Miscellaneous to grapple with the in-breaking of change, the movement of the Holy Spirit in their midst. This holy visitation in the form of a small wiggly worshiper is a call for energized and creative ministry to renew this congregation's practice of prayer, its sense of identity and purpose, and its outreach to the community it serves.

I am not advocating that adventurous preschoolers be allowed free rein in worship or anywhere else in a congregation's life together. Jesus' command to "let the little ones come" certainly does not mean neglecting to supervise, accompany and instruct children. Ultimately, a worship service that is truly toddler-friendly is one that preserves fellow worshipers' good will toward toddlers while providing a rich and meaningful participation for people all ages.

A little child has indeed led the charge for change at St. Miscellaneous—but now it is time for the adults in this congregation to step forward, imitating her trust, her enthusiasm and her resolve. What new insights and initiatives might emerge if this congregation's leaders were to abandon their passive postures and engage this conflict in open and honest ways? What if Serena, instead of simply "hoping that Mandy behaves herself in church tomorrow," were to sit next to the Spicers in worship, attending to Mandy and her family, extending the community's care to them and perhaps eventually inviting others to do the same?

What if Pastor Bob, instead of responding to Deidre with scriptural truisms, took the time to listen to Deidre, helping her to articulate her concerns in ways that others could receive them and inviting her to attend the worship committee's next conversation as a thoughtful contributor and listener? Her visit might initiate that committee's slow and careful deliberation about the aims of corporate worship, a

prayerful study of what it means for this community to join altogether in praise and thanksgiving.

What if parents of small children in this congregation were invited to gather as a group for fellowship and mutual support of their parenting efforts, and what if they, too, were invited to join in the community's conversations about meaningful prayer and praise?

A favorite pastor of mine is fond of issuing this invitation to life in the church: "You don't need to change in order to be here, but don't leave as you came—and don't leave us as we are." Conversion, transformation, change: these are the movements at the heart of the church's life together—not just for those who enter but for every one of us, regardless of age or tenure. What if congregations embraced change as both our birthright and our business, and welcomed with open arms the children of all ages who are always the occasion for our doing so?