

A small, wonderful mistake

By [Diane Roth](#)

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One Sunday at worship, a very small, wonderful thing happened. During the closing hymn (a rousing rendition of "How Firm a Foundation," by the way), we carried the cross and processed to the entry of the church, as always. The people turned to face the cross, as always (or at least as they have begun to do during this past year). We stood there, continuing to sing, as always.

And then, three little girls, about three or four years old, began to dance.

They boldly entered the aisle and moved to their own graceful rhythms. A fourth little girl, who had turned around to follow the cross, looked at them with wide and wondering eyes—and then ran out to join them. Soon there were four little girls, dancing in the aisle.

I wished I had my camera, because I was perfectly situated to take a video of the scene. I also secretly wished I could join them. I was a little afraid, I suppose, of what people would think. I was a little afraid that if I started dancing, they might stop. And I didn't want them to stop.

During the past year, we have messed with our worship services some. We are a congregation in redevelopment, which means we are re-learning what it means to be the body of Christ in this place and in this time and for these people, some of whom we are convinced we have not met yet. So we are talking to each other and asking questions and trying some different things, with various degrees of success.

For this year, we have (for example) gone from two services to one. People are worshipping together who never worshipped together before. We are trying to get beyond the catchphrases "contemporary" and "traditional" as well. For some, the experiment has been a resounding success. For others, well, the jury is still out.

Our Sunday School schedule has changed as well, at least for this year. We are trying some intergenerational projects, and a short children's church. In the past, the children always started church with the whole congregation, and then moved to

their classrooms. This year the children are in Sunday School at the beginning of worship (hence no children's message this year), and they come to join us after the sermon, either at the prayers or the peace.

I have to admit that I do miss seeing the children with their families at the beginning of worship. Though I have mixed feelings about the children's message sometimes, I do miss those opportunities as well. We probably won't keep the same schedule next year. It was an experiment. Some people might think it was a mistake. We shouldn't have done it. We should have left well enough alone.

Perhaps.

Two things struck me, though:

1. If we were worshipping the same way as we did last year, we would have never had this small, wonderful moment. The children would be safe in their Sunday School classes, with parents hurrying to retrieve them. This moment was made possible by our 'mistake.'

2. No one who saw the tiny dancers tried to stop them. No one told me, "They shouldn't have been doing that in church." One person even said, "That was an Alleluia moment."

I am not sure which of these two things gives me the most hope. Perhaps it is the first one, to think that out of our missteps and miscalculations can come such grace.

But the more I think about it, it is the second thing that strikes me as most hopeful for our redevelopment. One of the things a redeveloping church must learn is to create a space, to embrace a wider welcome for people who do not worship in exactly the same tones that we do. We don't need to give up liturgy, but we do need to recognize that it's a skeleton that can be fleshed out in many ways, some of them even unscripted.

One of the tasks of a redeveloping church is learning to welcome the stranger. We might as well start with our children.

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