

ST. MARK'S IN-THE VALLEY

CHILDREN IN CHURCH

“THEN JESUS TOOK A CHILD
AND HAD HIM STAND IN FRONT
OF THEM. HE PUT HIS ARMS
AROUND HIM AND SAID TO
THEM: “WHOEVER WELCOMES IN
MY NAME ONE OF THESE
CHILDREN, WELCOMES ME; AND
WHOEVER WELCOMES ME,
WELCOMES NOT ONLY ME BUT
ALSO THE ONE WHO SENT ME.”
— MARK 9:36-37

ST. MARK'S IN-THE VALLEY EPISCOPAL CHURCH & PRESCHOOL

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WITH THANKS TO ST. COLUMBA'S CHURCH, WASHINGTON, DC FOR
PERMISSION TO USE THE BASIC OUTLINE AND TEXT OF A SIMILAR
BROCHURE. CHANGES AND ADDITIONS HAVE BEEN MADE BY THE
REV. RANDALL DAY AND OTHERS.

- Children enrich the faith community gathered at worship. They bring new ways of seeing old familiar rituals, they often understand the wonder and mystery of the sacraments lost to many adults. They take nothing for granted.
- Children also bring noise, awkward questions, loud toys, confusion, and sometimes donuts. Yet their presence is essential to the present reality as well as the growth and vitality of the church.

CHILDREN ARE THE CHURCH'S PRESENT.

- Only in the church's welcome at its most sacred moments can children learn the truth of St. Paul's assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And only by worshiping together with its children can the community pass on its traditions for praising God through the sacraments, the music, hearing the Word, and the prayers.
- Often children have profound religious and spiritual experiences because they are not as “defended” intellectually as adults, who may block awareness of God's presence with thoughts. Children are frequently available to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Many adults have been surprised at what children absorb when it seems they are in their own world, playing, drawing or coloring.
- St. Mark's-in-the-Valley welcomes children at all services and programs. For pre-schoolers, parents are asked to decide which is more appropriate: participation in the liturgy or the available childcare. We value the presence of all youngsters in church on Sunday mornings.
- How can parents, caregivers and other interested adults help our children come to understand and participate in the Eucharist, our central worship service? What are our chances of sitting with our kids without hearing the word “boring” a dozen times on Sunday morning? Is it possible to increase attention with an acceptable din? Some suggestions follow here.

- The sanctuary is a sacred place, where each child is one of many people gathered to experience the presence of God among us, within community. Before or after service, parents and caregivers can talk to their children about how the sanctuary differs from other familiar places (like a playground, movie theater, or classroom).
- Come early to get a good seat, *preferably in the front* where children can see the liturgical action. The front pews are particularly good for seeing. Even adults get fidgety when seated too far away or behind a lot of people blocking the view. It's fine if little ones stand on the kneelers to get a good view. The chapel is a great space to gather and families are welcome to let children enjoy the carpet and soft toys – you can use the chapel door if you wish.
- Before the service begins, once you have claimed a seat, you can quietly talk or walk a bit with your child, pointing out the scenes in the windows, special decorations or features of the sanctuary. Look around together – this is an interesting place, and most areas or furnishings have special names (font, lectern, nave, etc.).
- It helps everyone when you are clear about the behavior you expect once church begins. Consider developing a set of “church manners” for your family.
- During church, offer reminders in a positive way (“We all stand when we sing.” “This is the quiet time: you can talk after the next song.”). Resist the temptation to add “OK?” or “All right?” If your youngster replies “No!” you are stuck! After all, you aren't asking for consent. You are simply letting your child know how you expect him/her to act in this special place. TIP: try speaking to your children in a whisper close to the ear – they may copy you by responding in the same quiet way.
- Set goals that are important and reachable for your family. If having quiet surroundings during the Great Thanksgiving is crucial for you, concentrate on helping your children recognize and observe that special time in the service.
- Be realistic about limits. Little ones cannot be expected to sit still all the time. However, children in primary/elementary grades are old enough to participate in the liturgy with your help. The services are increasingly being designed to fit the attention spans of young children. Take time at home to memorize some common prayers and responses to help these younger church members feel included and involved. (“*The Lord be with you.*” “*And also with you.*”)

- Follow the lessons, provided in the bulletin, as the lector reads them. Bible storybooks are welcome in the pews, and good editions are available for home as well.
- Sometimes children enjoy sitting with “adopted” grandparents, aunts or uncles. If they become little angels with others, why not let others in the worshipping community be active participants in the formation and nurture of your child?
- We all know kids who are gifted noise-makers without a single thing in their hands. However, for those who do bring play things, help them choose quiet, soft toys. Too much noise, or too many little noises, can pose real barriers for hearing-impaired parishioners.

CHILD NOISE IS A NORMAL PART OF LIFE
AT ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY.

REMEMBER THAT YOUR CHILD MAY SOUND
LOUDER TO YOU THAN TO ANYONE ELSE.

- Food, except for nursing or bottles for infants, can present a real hazard for the parishioners who sit in the same pew at another time! A quick drink of water (plus a stop in the restroom) usually forestalls the need for snacks in church.
- Sometimes, despite our best efforts, children act up and seem to bother everyone around them. *Please don't feel embarrassed if you need to take your child out of the service for a few moments – everybody has a bad day or a bad moment occasionally.* You can listen to the service from the narthex and return when your youngster seems calmer. *A small amount of movement disturbs no one.*
- Childcare is typically available in Stacy Hall; consult the ushers for more information. In the worst possible case and if nothing will do but to go home, know that the church will be here tomorrow, and next week, **always ready to receive you and your children.** You do not leave the worshipping community when you attend to your young child's needs.
- Children belong in church. They are part of this parish family, and we share responsibility for nurturing their spiritual needs. They will thrive with our loving acceptance of them as partners in the faith of Jesus Christ.