

A Vibrant Oasis in the Midst



STRAINS FROM BAGPIPES

bounce off the intricate woodwork interior of the historic Kemper Center Chapel in Kenosha, Wisconsin, just yards away from Lake Michigan.

A crowd of children dressed in their Sunday best process down the center aisle behind a kilt-clad musician, marking the end of a full morning of celebration for Light of Christ Anglican Church (LOC). The service held in January included a church dedication, installation of the Rev. Eirik Olsen as Rector and nine confirmations.

The bi-vocational clergy and young families that make up LOC tend to make the uncommon customary. Members include painters, writers, musicians and an iconographer who incorporate the arts into the church's vibrant worship, and a slew of special needs children add a unique dimension. Newcomers are intrigued.

"Curiosity often brings them through the doors, and once they visit, the sticky factor is good. Our gift of hospitality draws people back," Eirik says.

A warm church environment is generally enticing, but for parents of special needs children, it's challenging to find a church home. Symptoms such as fidgeting,

outbursts or socially inappropriate interjections give the impression of unruly behavior. Parents spend most of their time distracted as they try to minimize disruptions.

The fact that the pastor's oldest son has special needs means he has intimate knowledge of the challenges these families face as well as the power of love to calm the children and instill them with confidence.

"This is the first church where we've been that expressed the sentiment, 'We're all in this together; we need (your son) as much as (your son) needs us,' rather than, 'Hey, straighten up your kid.' We keep coming back

because our son is not tolerated — he's welcomed," explains Dan Kirk, father of Edmund who has autism. On Sundays, people rotate to sit with Edmund, and he serves regularly as an acolyte.

"If the cross is crooked when he walks down the aisle, we embrace it all the more," Eirik declares. "Edmund knows that we love and accept him."

For Karen Cassiday, a single working mother of a teenage son with Tourette's syndrome and cerebral palsy, LOC is like a drink of water in the middle of the desert.

"The first Sunday we attended, we fit right in and didn't feel like the

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of Uncertainty

by Shelly Miller



(Left to right) A bagpipe procession — just one illustration of vibrant artistic expression. Acolyte Edmund Kirk (center) has autism and serves regularly. Young dancers express an artistic element in Sunday worship. Kenna Campbell's special needs contribute an aspect of vulnerability that is pervasive at Light of Christ. Bi-vocational Rector, the Rev. Eirik Olsen.

weirdest people in the pew. No one even gave my son a second glance, and when we saw Edmund as an acolyte, we knew we were home.” Karen reports that her youngest son — who was wavering in his faith — made a commitment to Christ because of the genuine love and acceptance they experienced.

Karen is an expert in the area of anxiety disorders and appears

regularly on such national television shows as *Nightline*, *The Today Show* and *Animal Planet*. Though in the public eye, she says church is the one place she gets to be herself with flaws and strengths exposed. “We have an amazing breadth of talent at LOC, but everyone is unpretentious and on equal ground.”

Harnessing that talent and finding creative forms of expression motivates Rebecca Engstrom, professional violinist and Worship Arts Director at LOC. Thinking contextually and thematically each week, she combines Scripture, liturgy, music and aesthetics, choosing participants from a gallery of talent.

Whether a special song in Latin, a dramatic reading by a group of teens, or incorporating young ballerinas, the artistic elements foster a sensory experience that invites participation rather than sitting as spectators.

During Lent, Rebecca commissioned a composer to set eight of her poems to music in a concert called “Dust,” performed as an outreach to the

community for a standing-room-only crowd. Through the blending of electronic sounds and strings with a soprano vocalist and readers, listeners were powerfully reminded that we will “return to dust.”

LOC hosts a bi-annual talent show, which draws nearly 100 percent participation. This high level of involvement is a hallmark for the church. “They are not just there to receive — we are all hands-on and active in ministry. It is part of our DNA,” notes Eirik.

Despite a cloud of despair that looms in Kenosha due to severe unemployment in an economic downturn, LOC's creative expression and genuine caring provides an oasis. Special needs children demonstrate a tender vulnerability that offers a living illustration of what it truly means to be poor.

“I love you, I forgive you, be reconciled to Me” are recurrent words God uses to call LOC members and visitors into His arms of love, grace and reconciliation.

“We want to learn how to extend those arms of love — that's our prayer and intention,” says Eirik.



For more information, visit www.lightofchristkenosha.org.