

Celebrating Westminster's 157 Years of Children's Ministries

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I spent the last several weeks combing through our archives trying to gather information in order to present an historic overview of our children's ministries here today. As I flipped through over 150 years of files and yearbooks and stacks of pictures, one piece of information kept jumping out at me. I think it's the single most important piece of information about our children's ministry here at Westminster.

It's the fact that our children's ministry came first.

Our Sunday School is not celebrating its 150th year, we're celebrating our 157th year! In 1847, seven years before this sanctuary was built, Jesse Ketchum donated the land on which this institution stands for a Sunday School.

The first vision and purpose of our founding families then, was to bring faith to the children.

Marta King, Sawrie Becker, Carol Timmerman-Yorty and I just facilitated an Adult Education offering called, "Will our children have faith?; not, "Will your child have faith, but will our children have faith. The point being that all of us influence all the children who surround us, not just ones who happen to live in our houses.

As I have written before, it is incumbent upon the elders of every generation to pass along the traditions and truths of the community. It is incumbent upon us to pass along the teachings of Jesus. And we can only do this if we gather our children and keep them close to us. So for 157 years, we have gathered the children here at Westminster in Worship, in Sunday School, in our Early Childhood Programs, in our Energy Programs, and in Fellowship to love and nurture them with the word of God.

And so how are they doing, the Children of Westminster?

Well, let's take a look at what they are doing...

They send loving postcard messages to our shut-ins.

They use their stewardship monies to buy food for our food drives for hungry people in our community.

They join forces for Mitzvah Day.

They raise money for the Heifer Project.

They make quilts for Haven House.

They build birdhouses and run for Habitat for Humanity.

They give a week of their summer vacation and help others in our community and in Maine.

They cook and bake and make Bunny Bags for the Loaves and Fishes food pantry.

They help tutor our Energy kids.

They welcome newly baptized children with Bibles.

They lead us in worship as they sing in choir.

They carry our Communion elements to the Table.

They tell us the Christmas Story.

They lead the procession on Palm Sunday shouting Hosanna to all who come in the name of the Lord!

They carry the light of God into the sanctuary and begin our worship,

And they have established the annual event of Advent Bowling!

Look at our kids here today. They are doing really well!

We would not be here today without the vision of our founding families. We have a debt of gratitude to all of those who came before us and answered the call to nurture our children.

Today I look to Dottie Millard, and Sandy Harwood, and to Grace Rich (Grace could not be here with us because of her frail health), and the vital roles they have played in the education and nurture of our children.

Grace served as our Christian Educator for ten years, Sandy served as our Christian Educator for 25 years, and Dottie has served for over 30 years as our Christian Educator and as the Director of our Early Childhood Programs.

I quote Grace Rich who said, "The children are the future of this church".

I quote Sandy Harwood who wrote, "We are accustomed to knowing that the children need the church...we need to be accustomed to the fact that the church needs the children. We need their openness, gentleness, and spontaneity, and their ability to stand in awe of the very simple things in life. As adults, we can be stifled and wounded. We can hide our need for love while our children seek it with shameless determination".

And I quote Dottie Millard who said, "We need to be politically active to influence programs, regulations, and funding for children in our society. Do you know she said that the Childcare Coalition of the Niagara Frontier, which now occupies two substantial sites on Delaware Avenue, began in a balcony office up in Parish Hall?"

Talk about your big hairy audacious goals!

Under the guidance of Rev. Tom Stewart, Dottie traveled back and forth to Albany and ultimately helped establish a Childcare Council in every county in New York State. These councils create childcare legislation that protects and nurtures children. It was so exciting, Dottie said, because we knew we were making a difference.

To woman who made a difference...

To Dottie, Sandy, and Grace-

On behalf of this congregation, thank you from the bottom of our hearts for answering the call to gather and nurture our children and all of the rest of us along the way!

And Happy Mother's Day!