

# Innovative Eucharist serves All God's Children

By Anne Agostin

An innovative Eucharist at Christ Church, Budd Lake, called All God's Children is designed to spiritually nourish children with special needs, particularly those with autism.

Approximately 50 people attend each service. Roughly 15 are children with autism or another special need. More than half the congregants are traditionally able people who attend to participate in the service's joyful atmosphere and to assist in creating it. And every Sunday, someone attends from another congregation who wants to learn how to start something similar in his or her home church, says the Rev. Darlene Tittle, Christ Church rector.

Each service follows a relaxed plan, the goal being to let the Holy Spirit take the lead, says Ray Bonker, father of two children with autism. Participants are not required to remain seated or to maintain silence. The flexible environment lets the

children express themselves without inhibition, Bonker says. "Kids can be kids, and parents can relax."

Services begin and end with a "cross parade," during which participants proceed around the sanctuary's perimeter singing and holding wooden crosses handed out at the door. A "Mom's Minute," during which a designated parent speaks for a few moments, comes early in the service.

The Gospel reading and the sermon take the form of "Bible Story Time." The rector leads the congregation to a comfortable circle of chairs surrounding a carpet at the back of the room. A short Bible reading is done, in accordance with the lectionary.

Tittle then gives an interactive talk about the day's lesson. When the subject was the disciples on the road to Emmaus after Christ's resurrection, for example, she asked the congregation to say "walk, walk, walk" while clapping in time to the words whenever she said the word. This is especially appealing to individuals with autism as it makes use of rhythm and repetition, and aids in focusing attention on the discussion, Tittle explains.

Next, congregants return to their seats for the *Lord's Prayer*, the Peace and Communion served by the children. Before coming to receive Communion, every participant is handed a dollar to put into the collection plate. This ensures that everyone has an offering without putting any financial burden on attendees. The dollars are reused for each service.

Regular and gluten-free bread are served along with grape juice. Then it is time to make a joyful noise. Each seat is equipped with a musical instrument: bells, tambourines, rhythm sticks. An adult leads a song, sometimes providing visual material to accompany it, and asks for children to help lead it.

While a written order of service is distributed, each portion of the service also is denoted by a visual symbol shown on a screen via overhead projector. The program concludes with a blessing and the closing



Worshippers exchange the peace at the All God's Children service, designed for children with special needs, at Christ Church, Budd Lake.

cross parade, ending for the children in a couch-filled room where a video is played for them while their parents enjoy coffee and fellowship.

## Answering a call

A lot of networking occurs among the parents at this time, Bonker says. They can make connections and share information and resources for meeting their families' needs.

The concept for All God's Children took root about a year ago when Bishop Mark Beckwith met with members of Christ Church. He mentioned a roadside billboard that he had seen about autism. Tittle and Bonker each recount feeling a definite calling at that moment to develop a service to meet the needs of children with autism.

"The spirit of these kids was not being addressed, and needs to be," Bonker says. He hopes they can plant the seed of faith, let the children hear it and let the Holy Spirit take it from there, he says.

Originally held monthly, the service recently increased to two Sundays a month

to give more families a chance to participate. Bonker's oldest daughter often assists in the service or helps her brother and sister, who have autism, to participate. Bonker's son is very verbal; his younger daughter is mute, but writes insightful poetry.

The most surprising outcome of the services, Tittle says, is the effect it has had on the rest of the congregation. Opportunities to sign up to participate in All God's Children are held during the regular weekly service, and 80 percent of the congregation participates in one capacity or another.

On the weeks All God's Children is held, Bonker says, the spirit of the traditional Eucharist service that follows is heightened and more joyful.

All God's Children takes place from 9 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. on the first and third Sundays of the month. For more information, contact Christ Church at 973-347-1866.

Anne Agostin attends St. Peter's, Morristown, and is a certified special-education teacher.

## Me

By Elizabeth Bonker

I sometimes fear  
That people cannot understand  
That I hear.  
And I know  
That they don't believe I go  
To every extreme  
To try to express  
My need to talk.  
If only they could walk  
In my shoes  
They would share my news:  
*I am in here.*  
And trying to speak everyday  
In some kind of way.

(Editor's note: A participant in the All God's Children services, Elizabeth, 10, has autism and is mute. Recently, she began to write poetry as a way to express herself.)

# Churches offer shelter and caring to homeless families

By Liz Keill

Homelessness and hard times seem as certain as death and taxes. Karen Olson of Summit founded Family Promise 20 years ago through interfaith efforts in Essex and Union counties. "Our promise is to link those who need with those who want to help," she said of the nationwide organization.

When she saw how desperately people needed a roof, she turned to churches, with their parish halls and classrooms that often sat idle during the week. Originally called the National Interfaith Hospitality Network, Family Promise evolved through congregations in communities working together.

"At first, I wasn't sure if congregations would want to get involved, but the growth has been remarkable," she said.

Family Promise Chairman Martin Wise has been a volunteer with Calvary Church in Summit for the last six years.

"A friend and I took a group of teenagers to St. John's Lutheran Church to help out," he said. "We didn't even realize this was a national organization."

"What attracted me was the operating model," he added. "What Karen has created is a franchise operation. The community networks hold variables constant, so that kids can stay in their own schools and families face less dislocation."

In October, for the first time, Family Promise's national conference will be in its home state, in Morristown. The conferences provide an opportunity to mingle and share ideas with other networks. "Honestly, the people who come are the best kind of people," Wise said.

## Support in the diocese

Several congregations in the Diocese of Newark have been among the founding members. One of the first to become active with the Interfaith Hospitality Network was St. Stephen's in Millburn.

"I'm very, very fond of this program," the Rev. Cork Tarplee said. "We were one of the founding churches. I came here 16 years ago, and it was going on then. We continue to host IHN families."

Families, most often mothers and children, stay on the premises two weeks out of the year, he explained. Although the congregation at St. Stephen's is small, "about 70 volunteers are involved each time," he said. "That's a huge percentage. As hard times come along, we realize how much this is still needed."

The discrepancy between minimum wage and housing costs is enormous, he said. "In a community like ours, we have no low-income housing. As a society, we've set ourselves up for homelessness."

Some have criticized IHN as "a Band-aid approach" that doesn't get at the root of the problem, Tarplee said. "But each time we've hosted families, we've had first-hand knowledge that homelessness affects real people. It's counter to all the myths about homeless people being lazy and living off welfare. Having supper with these families, you realize that this program gets the message out much more effectively. People need food and shelter."

St. Stephen's member Alex Cole has been with IHN since its inception. "We offer families peace and comfort," she said. A van owned by the network brings families to their temporary home each week.

"It's the most wonderful outreach program a church can have," Cole said. "Although some people were skeptical

initially, others joined our church because of this program. When we started, we thought this would go on for just a few years, but the need is always there."

Dana Longstreet, who has been a parishioner at both St. Stephen's and St. George's in Maplewood, said she and her children had stayed overnight with the guests.

"In Maplewood and South Orange, we have such a diverse population," she said, "from millionaires to poor people. It's been helpful for my kids to see that not everyone is affluent." She often takes her children to play with those who are visiting, she said, and likes being able to contribute in a way that fits both her schedule and her skills.

Claas Ehlers is director of development for Family Promise. He travels around the country visiting congregations, making sure their approach is a fit with the national organization.

"In every faith, whether it's Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or Jewish, everyone agrees that children and families matter. Congregations have more in common than they realize," he said. The interaction of congregations helps build other kinds of bridges as people work together to help those in need. Many networks address practical concerns, he said, such as providing a place to take showers or a stable base for receiving phone messages.

Olson recalled a woman who had fallen on hard times and told her, "My own family wasn't there for me, but I found my family in Family Promise. I now know that so many people care."

In 1992, Family Promise received the President's Points of Light award, one of 20 selected volunteer agencies in the country. To learn more about Family Promise, call 908-273-1100 or e-mail [info@familypromise.org](mailto:info@familypromise.org).

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