The Redeemer Little Chapel Service: How We Did It

by the Rev. Emily J. Garcia

The Sunday School program at the Church of the Redeemer has been through a few iterations. When I arrived, there was still a memory of the time when “children’s chapel” met in a big airy classroom with its own altar, acolytes, robes, and children’s choir on risers.

However, the current set-up when I arrived was a nursery (below 3yo), and two Godly Play classrooms (3yo-K and 1st-3rd) which began the day from 9:40-10:05 in one big room with goofy active Christian songs led by John M. Spressart [link] and his trusty guitar.

Returning to the old sunny classroom for a chapel would mean moving up to 40 kids through the building (a harrowing task!), so instead we moved the tiny altar into the music/gathering room. Our main sanctuary’s altar and worship is ad orientem (East-facing), so I positioned the altar close to the only window, with a little space between it and the wall.

Finding a time to celebrate the Eucharist together was simple, because once a month the main sanctuary service is Morning Prayer instead of Eucharist. This meant that on those days, the Sunday School would stay in their classrooms the entire morning, instead of going up to take Eucharist together. So Morning Prayer mornings became Little Chapel Eucharist mornings.

On those days we still gather with music while children arrive, from 9:40 or so until 10:05. Before they arrive, the altar candles are lighted and the chalice, paten, and small linens are set out. As they arrive I choose two children to carry up the elements: a little basket with homemade communion bread, and two small cruets. (We practice holding the cruets by the handle, not the lid!) After our usual singing, we pause and I explain that we’re about to celebrate the Eucharist together and have communion, “just like we do upstairs on Sundays.”

An important part of giving instructions is the guidelines for standing around the altar. Unlike the one at St. Peter’s, here are there are things to knock over—two tall wooden candlesticks, and the little wooden back of the altar. So I say, “When I say, we will all gather around the altar together. You can stand anywhere you want, and you can touch the altar, but you cannot touch the candles (so that we don’t knock them down). You can fidget or move around as you want, but should you bump into people? [Resounding “No” from the crowd.] Should you poke or bother people next to you? [Same.] No—but you can fidget and move as much as you want in your space. Are you ready? Okay, let’s begin!”
Children gather and find a spot to stand (all around the altar, often). We transition to
the Eucharist with the Doxology to Old 100th, which John plays on his guitar and
leads a couple times through. I put on my stole, and wave the two children to bring
up the elements as we sing.

In contrast to the St. Peter’s Family Service, this Eucharist is often interrupted by
exclamations (“That’s not a cracker like upstairs!”) or questions (“Why are you
saying that?”) or affirmations (“I love the ‘evil’ part of that Father prayer.”) I think
this is in part because these students see each other almost every week and sometimes
for playdates—and they know that I’m a soft touch when it comes to observant or
confused comments. Sometimes, if the answer is short (“It’s different, but it’s still
bread!” or “I like that part too.”) I’ll whisper it to the student. If the answer is longer,
I’ll either look approvingly at the student as I gesture “Later,” or I’ll whisper “Hold
on to that good comment until after we’re done.” Taking these questions and
comments seriously is part of how we show students that we take them and their faith
seriously.

I’ve been delighted to find that many parents are happy to stay and celebrate with
us; sometimes they even stay for their child’s lessons, afterwards. Otherwise it is often
hard to convince parents to join us and see what Sunday School is like! This has been
very meaningful for many. Some are surprised that I offer them communion too—but
if we’re doing Eucharist, every Christian gets some! It would lack integrity to give
some only to students, and it would suggest that it’s “fake” somehow (which is one of
their main concerns about this different service).

Because the Church of the Redeemer is both more traditional and more conservative
than St. Peter’s, this liturgy and its Eucharistic prayer are also more traditional.