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Rev. Kim Kendrick—Making a Difference at Bethany Children's Home



The greater public issue of giving children freedom of choice versus an institutional belief in mandatory worship services became intertwined last spring at Bethany Children's Home near Womelsdorf. The Rev. Kim Kendrick, 48, Bethany's chaplain for more than two years, didn't have a written invitation to the table for communion on the issue. But, in a most significant Christian way, she became a guiding light for a resolution in the community. Kendrick, who grew up in Philadelphia, is a black lesbian who experienced substance abuse and drug addiction and knows what it's like to live on society's margins. She can relate to children with issues of truancy, anger, aggression, violence, self-abuse or drug and alcohol use. "Yes, I've had some lumps and challenges in my life, but this is what I was called to do," said Kendrick, who chose the ministry and landed at Bethany, which serves abandoned, abused or neglected kids. "There is a difference between a calling and a career," she said. "This (children's ministry) is my life's work. This is what I was put on Earth to do."

Bethany, affiliated with the United Church of Christ, has had the mission since the 19th century to provide a safe place of nurturing, protection and supportive care to aid children in their growth and healing. "I think Pastor Kim has a wonderful understanding of where kids come from and the ability to connect with them," said Elaine Gilbert, Bethany vice president of programming. "She has a charisma and chemistry of understanding, a way of making Biblical messages come alive, which helps her relate to youth," she said. "She gets kids; therefore God gets kids. And to children who may feel that God hasn't been there for them, her role is significant." How significant? Last spring, Bethany was notified that its longtime mandatory weekly worship requirement for youth was counter to state education policy of allowing for freedom of choice.

"We were told the worship has to be voluntary, so we no longer made worship required on Monday evenings and set up some programs for alternative activities such a yoga, meditation and study groups," Gilbert said. "Our numbers of kids fluctuate, but we have about 90 on campus now (ranging in age from 7 to 19)." But even after that change, only about 10 percent of the residents opt out of church services. And that, said Kevin Snyder, CEO of Bethany Children's Home, is a tribute to Kendrick. "She has a God given ability to communicate with our youth who have experienced trauma and who have had to endure lives that no child should experience," he said. "She preaches from the aisles, not a pulpit, walking right up to any youth who is being disrespectful and speaks directly to them."

When the policy change was enacted, Kendrick continued leading her worship at 6 p.m. Monday evenings. "I thought we were only going to have four kids show up in the pews," Kendrick said, noting the campus church holds about 150. "But we had 50 kids. I had to stop, shout out and ask, 'Everybody sure they are in the right place?' " They apparently were. Weekly attendance numbers have grown to about 70. This past summer, Kendrick baptized 17 youth at the campus pool, which she guesses could be some kind of record.

"And I really do believe all of that is because of Kim," Gilbert said. At a time when mainstream church attendance is quickly eroding, Kendrick, with the help of other church volunteers – staff, houseparents and musicians – demonstrated that a spiritual worship site is a place to be, a choice for youth not always having the personal history of enjoying the best in life. "Our worship is a time for gathering and sharing," Kendrick said. "We celebrate together people's joys and pray for their concerns." Plunging into a communal and participatory service, Kendrick doesn't preach, so much as give a message while interacting with her young parishioners, immersing herself in the concerns of youth. "The reason why Christ was here is that the word had to be made flesh," she said. "We rarely saw Jesus within four walls or staying within the synagogue. Jesus put his faith into action; he was with the people. And I believe that's where we need to be, even out with people who have no faith. "People are looking for tangible ways to help others and better themselves. "

- excerpts from a Reading Eagle article by Bruce Posten

Read the whole story at : psec.org/kendrick.