

“In that moment, so pregnant with hope, pride, excitement, joy, nervousness, and expectation, we find our everyday sacrament.”

### **Sacraments: Those Visible Signs**

Christians of many denominations recognize sacraments as central aspects of the faith. In the Episcopal tradition sacraments are defined as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 857). In addition to Baptism and the Eucharist (Holy Communion), Episcopalians recognize five other sacraments as spiritual markers in our faith journeys. These include:

- Confirmation (adult affirmation of our baptism vows)
- Reconciliation of a penitent (private confession)
- Matrimony (Christian marriage)
- Orders (to deacon, priest or bishop)
- Unction (anointing with oil those who are sick or dying)

The church may explicitly define 7 sacraments, but what about other moments of God’s grace? As parents and Christian educators, we see such sacred moments all the time - those small glimpses of grace, where God breaks through. These times of shared hope and joy can be almost impossible to articulate, but it is important that we name these moments, especially with children. By doing so, we can share with children the sacramental grace in everyday life.

### **Celebrating Back to School at Church**

One opportunity to share a moment of sacramental grace occurs every fall, when young people head back to school. For a number of years, our church has done a large Blessing of the Backpacks. We combine this event with a project to gather school supplies for local children in need. Blessing of the Backpacks has been, by all measures, a successful church event: people are engaged, connected to the worship and liturgy, and they generously participate in outreach. But at first, something was missing.

One of my church responsibilities is choosing artwork for the weekly worship bulletin cover. A few years ago, as the day of the Blessing of the Backpacks approached, I had an idea. I

recalled that I had seen numerous 'first day of school' pictures posted by parishioners on social media. On a whim, I emailed our Sunday school parents asking them to send me back-to-school pictures of their kids. Within minutes (minutes!) I was inundated. I knew I was onto something important.

### **The 'Sacrament' of Back to School**

Imagine a child, strapping on a new backpack, and marching off to the bus stop, waving at the door. Imagine the child's parents or grandparents, teary-eyed, smiling and blessing that child forward. In that moment, so pregnant with hope, pride, excitement, joy, nervousness, and expectation, we find our everyday sacrament.



**Idea: Share Back to School Pictures through Church and Social Media**

Since that first year, I still get choked up looking at all of those dear first-day-of-school pictures - from muppet-faced preschoolers to graduating seniors posing by their cars. Now for our Blessing of the Backpacks service, I print back-to-school pictures on the bulletin cover. If this is not possible at your church, a poster or a slide show during the service would also work.

Depending on your social media policy and families' permission, churches could also share pictures with a prayer request on social media. For me, these gestures are my way of saying to our families that the church cares about their children. The hopes they hold so dearly - the church shares them. The secret fears and anxieties parents have - the church holds them in prayer. We, collectively as a faith community, want to help our children grow and move forward in love, learning and grace.

**Conclusion: Grace in the Moments**

God is always at work around us - even captured in the faces of our children as they once again head back to school. Let us always find the grace in these moments. What are other moments of grace in the lives of your parish families? How can your faith community share in those 'sacraments'?

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*Lisa Brown recently accepted a position as the Director of Digital Ministry with [Membership Vision](#). Building on her work in Children's Ministry and Communications at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, PA, she helps churches connect to people and to God in the digital space. An active member of Forma and Girl Scout leader, Lisa is passionate about enriching the spiritual lives of people. Her book "The Best Do-It-Yourself VBS Workbook Ever" will be published in early 2017.*

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