

Golden Retriever Comforts the Congregation

Erika, the Golden Retriever expresses "a compassion that many people do not offer each other."

Pat E. Middleton

The rector believes his dog has a higher purpose. "I believe God uses our pets to speak to us," he says. "I call it a 'Creature Message' of unconditional love. God has been trying to tell us that his love is unconditional. He never stops loving us. Dogs provide the example — we can come home in a bad mood, get the wrong dog food, forget to put out water, and our dogs, like God, never stop loving us."

Erika especially attracts children. Her silky coat and ever-wagging tail provides safe distraction for the little ones while adults converse.

It isn't unusual to see a sullen teenager taking Erika for a stroll down Antioch's main street and returning with a smile and lightened step. The dog worked wonders for a young mother who approached the rector about joining the church. She was worried about her young son, whose shyness and delicate health prompted her to search for a new congregation. She even hesitated to bring her son to the church for a visit, fearing a poor reception would further intimidate him. As the door to the rectory opened, the boy and the dog met with a hug and lots of giggles. Eyes brimming with tears, the mother decided she needed to look no further.

When not assisting in church activities, Erika enjoys a daily 3-mile plus walk visiting with Eckholm's friends in the community, including his eye doctor, whose staff phones and invites her over if she hasn't visited for awhile. At home or in the rectory, she relaxes at her owner's feet beneath his desk. Her favorite toy is a tennis ball. And she has expanded Eckholm's ministry by doing nothing more than being his dog. "Because of my relationship with her, people call me when faced with putting their dog down. They appreciate a dog lover, one who has faced the same loss, who happens to be a priest."