

Joshua Case leads ministry for today's holy innocents

by [David Paulsen](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue

When Joshua Case and parishioners at Holy Innocents' Episcopal Church bury some of Atlanta's youngest victims of violence, they often do so alone. In many cases, family members are absent from the child's life, lack transportation to the cemetery, or are incarcerated. Sometimes the state forbids them to attend.

For this brief, solemn service, Case, associate rector at Holy Innocents', and the others become the child's "family in mourning."

Since April Case has conducted 16 of these services, a small portion of the roughly 300 indigent burials each year paid for by the county. As he learned more about Georgia's young victims, Case met Cliff Dawkins, the chaplain who oversees the county's indigent burials. Case was stunned to learn that burials of children often were taking place with no family present and no witnesses other than Dawkins and cemetery staff.

"My first response was, 'Not in my county,'" Case said.

Dawkins invited Case to begin presiding over the children's burials, and a small group from Holy Innocents' formed to accompany Case to those services.

Mary Marvin Walter, 69, one of the parishioners who has joined Case at some of those grave sites, volunteered because she was unhappy with her instinct to judge those who caused such tragedies.

"I wanted to get beyond that, just be a witness without any questions," she said.

When that tiny coffin is blessed and lowered carefully into the ground, she resists the urge to ask why.

Holy Innocents', whose name refers to the biblical account of infanticide by Herod the Great, took a step toward answering the call of its name beginning in 2010 by holding an annual requiem mass and prayer vigil. The congregation reads the names of all the children in Georgia whose deaths were "sudden, unexpected, unexplained, suspicious, or attributed to unusual circumstances," according to Georgia law.

“Violence is a very broad category,” said Ashley Willcott, director of Georgia’s Office of the Child Advocate, which oversees the state’s Division of Family and Children Services. “The bottom line is, we need to know: Could it have been prevented?”

Willcott praised churches that are bringing awareness to the plight of vulnerable children and getting their congregations involved.

She said Holy Innocents’ is “really leading the way in combining the knowledge of ‘this is what’s happening to children’ to ‘what are the next steps?’”

Case’s role is to lead the team taking those next steps. One initiative is called Caring for the Carers, which supports Family and Children Services caseworkers. The assistance may be providing emergency clothing for children removed from homes that the caseworkers deemed unsafe. Or it may mean listening to the caseworkers as they recount the trauma of their jobs.

The ministry has had a personal effect on Case, 39, who has two young children.

“I can tell you it’s reshaped me as a father,” he said. “I probably operate with a little more grace with my toddler than I did before.” —Episcopal News Service