

## **Star on a Stick- by Lee Donahue as printed in the La Crosse Tribune Dec 2010.**

This is a story about a boy, a family, a new home and a star on a stick.

Six years ago my family left Germany where we lived off and on for 15 years. It was December; soon we would move to a new unseen home in La Crosse. A house we saw on the Internet. My husband's sister bought it for us, in our absence. Her husband helped the movers fill our new garage with belongings we shipped in October. Our son would celebrate his fourth birthday; Christmas was barely weeks away.

It was Sunday morning, so we ventured off to church. We entered the vast nave, genuflected and sat down in the pew. Our son, still fighting jet lag, was sound asleep. We wrapped him in his blanket and let him sleep on the pew between us. The service wore on, we went forward for communion, our son slung across my shoulder sleeping soundly. The service ended, we gathered our things and left. Could this be the Christmas season - a season of love, hope, peace and joy? We were disappointed, neither welcomed, nor noticed among many that filled the pews. We left feeling bereft.

We missed our tiny chapel in Darmstadt. We were welcomed there years ago, by an eight year old girl named Sarah. She connected with our toddler son and made us feel welcomed and at home. We worked day and night to unpack the boxes stacked to the rafters in our garage. I wondered, did we make the right decision, should we really have retired and moved? We celebrated our son's birthday, his first family birthday in the U.S., surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins. Then it was Christmas Eve, we opened the phone book, selected a church and said a prayer. "Please God, let this be the one".

It was snowing heavily when we entered the church. Our eyes could barely behold the sight. Pews festooned with pine boughs, candles glowing in every stained glass window, it exuded warmth and welcome. A red haired freckle faced girl, reached out to our son and offered, "Here, wanna a star on a stick?" It was a dinner plate sized metallic star mounted on foot long dowel. She stood by her mom, one of two women near an over sized crèche who welcomed us. They explained this was a Christmas Eve "children's service" which included the Nativity story. Children would bring forward figurines from the crèche joined by stars. Our son happily took the star on the stick and proceeded to a pew. Christopher happily bounced the stick up and down in the air throughout the service and joined the others on the altar for the story. Strangers reached out and shared the Peace of the Lord with us. Older families smiled at the bouncing star on a stick, sharing the exuberance of a small child on a magical night.

I would later find out the girl who welcomed us was named Sarah. Like the Sarah at our old church in Darmstadt. A girl who welcomed a child, a family and let us know we were truly "home". That was six years ago. We come every Christmas Eve now, to the church where we were welcomed, and made to feel like family. This year our son will forgo the "star on the stick" to carry a cross, as he serves with father, mother and friends on the altar. Where we will meet again, to welcome new and old as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, at Christ Episcopal Church in downtown La Crosse.