

WITH OPEN ARMS



A Parish Guide to Welcoming Persons with Disabilities



With Open Arms

Throughout his ministry, Jesus welcomed all of those who approached him with a sincere heart. He did not see disabilities, but rather gifts given to him by a loving Father. His ministry was inclusive, reaching out to those whom society often excluded—the poor, the widowed, the deaf, and those with disabilities. It is in this welcoming Spirit of Jesus that this booklet, **With Open Arms**, is offered. Hopefully, the guidelines included here will challenge all of us to imitate his inclusiveness as we learn to see each other as gifts to be presented to the Father in our faith formation programs, in our ministries, and in our celebrations with each other!

The tradition of inclusion long advocated in the Diocese of Rockville Centre is invaluable to us in our present ministry. It continues to encourage and inspire us both.

Office of Faith Formation

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Introduction

In November of 1978, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops made public a Pastoral Statement on persons with disabilities. The Bishops, recognizing the unique gifts that persons with disabilities offer to the Church, called for their full integration into the life of the Church (1). They reaffirmed this position in 1988 and again in 1998, when they published *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities*. We are, according to this statement, “A single flock under the care of a single shepherd.”(1) The Bishops requested that the doors of the parish be further opened to those with disabilities so that they might more fully participate in the life of the Church (6). The Bishops then welcomed those with disabilities to use their God-given talents in service to the Church.

Called to Welcome

Parishes need to first identify people with physical challenges and disabilities in order to welcome them to full participation in parish life. This can take place through the Parish Census as well as through registration forms. These might include statements such as, “*Please indicate what accommodations are necessary for you to fully participate in our parish community.*”

It would be a great step towards full inclusion if parish bulletins advertised, “*We welcome all people and children with special needs into faith formation, worship, and ministry.*” Contact information, where needs could be assessed and gifts utilized, might be published along with this statement.

Liturgical celebrations and faith formation programs should be fully accessible to all. “Costs must never be the controlling consideration,” the Bishops advise in *Welcome and Justice* (6). Accommodations that allow for full and meaningful participation of all are critically important to the building up of the

Kingdom of God on earth. Many times, when attitudes that contribute to exclusion are broken down, physical barriers are easily overcome.

Pastors are encouraged to be “as inclusive as possible” in welcoming parishioners with disabilities into the rich sacramental life of the Church. Faith Formation is an integral part of this process, and should be open to all so that “...a community of believers known for its joyful inclusion of all” can be developed. *Guidelines for the Celebration of Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (6).

Called to Accommodate

Provisions for accommodations such as the following should be regularly re-evaluated. Physical barriers to inclusion should be removed wherever possible. Modifications may be needed in the following areas:

- Accessible buildings
- Accessible sanctuary and reconciliation rooms
- Accessible restrooms
- Ramps and curb cuts
- Railings
- Parking spaces for the handicapped

- Large print materials
- Braille materials, as needed
- Assistive listening devices
- Sign language interpreters, as needed

- Alternate methods of instruction
- Creativity
- Flexibility
- Peer buddies, where appropriate
- Trained catechists

Called to Advocate

The Parish Advocate for persons with disabilities serves as a liaison between persons with disabilities and the pastoral staff, and between the parish and the diocesan ministry for persons with disabilities. The advocate assists the parish in assessing the needs of persons with disabilities and in advocating to meet those needs. The advocate acts to ensure that all are invited to share in the life of the parish, and to participate fully in liturgical celebrations. One way of doing this is through the establishment of an Inclusion Ministry where the gifts of each member, abled and disabled, are shared as they journey together, in establishing the Kingdom of God among us.

Called to Minister

Many times, we only consider serving people with disabilities without allowing them to use their gifts to serve the community. Persons with disabilities and physical challenges can minister along side of those who are able bodied. They can serve in liturgical celebrations as Eucharistic Ministers, lectors, altar servers, ushers, choir members, ministers of hospitality or in any capacity in which they are able. If modifications are necessary, they can often be made. If special training is needed, it can usually be offered. Inclusion of persons with special needs in ministry helps us to better mirror the Body of Christ!

Called to Inclusive Faith Formation

Students in our faith formation programs should be placed in the most inclusive setting possible so that they can learn to the best of their ability. Options for this might include: placement in a typical classroom (with support if necessary), small groups, and one-on-one teaching. Creativity and flexibility are necessary components of any successful learning environment, particularly those that include children with special needs.

Using the same text as that used by other participants is recommended, with modifications as needed. In many instances, this alone will allow learning to take place. Supplementary materials that focus on the main goal of each lesson may also be used. Special programs, developed for children with special needs, may be incorporated into the program if needed. What is most important is that the materials conform to Catholic doctrine and teaching and be appropriate for the child so that learning can take place. This is particularly true for those children with severe learning delays. Directors, coordinators, parents and teachers should work together on the appropriate placement of the child, which may change over time. Flexibility is suggested.

Catechists with an open mind, loving spirit, and understanding heart make excellent teachers of children with special needs. It is not necessary for them to have a background in special education. Openness to incorporating different learning techniques is suggested. Workshops in this area are available from the Diocese.

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, approved by the USCCB in 1995, reaffirm that, “Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community.” (2) We in Rockville Centre strive to the best of our ability to achieve this goal!

Called to Adult Faith Formation

Many adults with special needs are now welcomed into existing parish programs where their faith can continue to be nourished. For others, special programs that nourish faith formation need to be established. This Office is committed to exploring this endeavor with any parish called to begin this important ministry.

Called to Socialize

While recognizing the importance of full inclusion in parish life for persons with disabilities, we also acknowledge the importance of social activities where adults and children with special needs can enjoy the company of their peers. A wonderful Ministry of dedicated volunteers already provides dances and parties in various parishes throughout the diocese. We encourage more parishes to become involved in this wonderful Ministry!

Called to Celebrate

The Office for Persons with Disabilities continues to celebrate the gifts of persons with special needs at a yearly Diocesan Liturgy. At the same time, we encourage parishes to celebrate the gifts of all their parishioners. This can be done very simply by including all those with special needs and their families in the Prayer of the Faithful on a regular basis. It can be done through parish liturgies that include all those with special needs who share their gifts within the parish. As we recognize more and more the gifts of all of the members of the Body of Christ, we will truly have reason to celebrate!

Resources

Diocesan Office of Faith Formation

Pastoral Ministry for Persons with Disabilities

(516) 678-5800 ext. 540.

<http://www.drvc-faith.org/disabilites.html>

Diocesan Office of Faith Formation

Pastoral Ministry with the Deaf

(516) 678-5800 ext. 205. <http://www.drvc-faith.org/deaf.html>

National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry

1-800-736-1280. www.nafim.org

National Catholic Office for the Deaf

301-577-1684. www.ncod@erols.com

National Catholic Partnership on Disability

1-202-529-2933. www.ncpd.org

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

1-800-235-8722. www.usccb.org

Publications of USCCB

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities. Publication No. 5-425. To order, call 1-800-235-8722

Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities. Publication No. 5-424. To order, call 1-800-235-8722

Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities. Publication No. 5-311 Download from www.usccb.org

Materials

Opening Doors to People with Disabilities: The Resource File, Book A and Book B. National Catholic Partnership on Disability.
www.ncpd.org

The Network of Inclusive Catholic Educators. Call 1-888-532-3389 for a listing of inclusive educational materials available through the University of Dayton.

The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program to Improve Catholic Religious Education for Children and Adults with Mental Retardation. Silver Burdett Publishing Co. 1-800-338-2150

Videos

“Open Hearts Open Minds Open Doors”, A Project of Pathways Awareness Foundation. 1-800-955-2445.
www.pathwaysawareness.org

“Welcome One, Welcome All.” Center for Ministry for Persons with Disabilities. University of Dayton. 1-888-532-3389

Virtual Learning

Spirituality and Inclusive Faith Communities, sponsored by the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives and the University of Dayton. For information call 888-300-8436 or go to <http://vlc.udayton.edu>



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