Creating Personal Supports for Religious Education

Everyone needs a little support to be part of a community. Support for young people with developmental disabilities often has to be a bit more intentional, intensive, or lasting.

This is especially true within religious education programs. According to a recent study, more than half of parents said their child could not participate in a religious activity because support was not provided.1 Religious education classes are important places where young people learn about their faith and develop relationships within community. Arranging for others to help provide some supports for young people can be good for everyone involved. The person offering support could be a same-age peer, an older mentor, or an adult. While having a consistent person to provide this support is often preferred, rotating systems can also be successful.

Practical Strategies

• A recurring lesson of inclusive education in schools is that it enhances the learning of all students, not just students with disabilities. Cast this same vision throughout your congregation.

• Look for opportunities for peers to support one another before turning to adults. Many children and youth are used to working together in school and are quite effective at providing supports.

• Offer training and guidance to ensure volunteers understand how to best support the young person and feel confident in their roles.

• Emphasize to adults the importance of providing “just enough” support so that the student is able to participate, but independence and social connections are not hindered.

• Create a “circle of support” by finding two or more people who work in tandem to provide the breadth of supports that would enable a person’s active participation.

Online Resources

The Inclusive Church (http://theinclusivechurch.wordpress.com)

For Further Reading


In some communities, efforts to make changes to existing worship services so they are more inclusive of people with developmental and other disabilities are met with initial hesitation.

In response, some congregations have planned additional worship services specifically with the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities in mind. For example, the service might include more visuals and illustrations, allow for more movement, encourage more active participation, or incorporate other modifications. For families wondering whether their child will be truly welcomed in a faith community—as well as for residential staff serving adults with disabilities—these services may feel like a safe initial entry point into the congregation. Rather than replacing existing services within a faith community, these services should be designed as an additional venue in which people with and without disabilities can worship, serve, and fellowship together. However, it is important to remember that such venues for worship should not be the only place where people with and without disabilities encounter one another. Strong efforts should be made to ensure every aspect of congregational life is open to and supportive of people with developmental disabilities. Everyone in a community should have the opportunity to receive the gifts, friendship, and faith of people with disabilities.

**Practical Strategies**

- Consider first how additional supports would make it possible for people with disabilities to be part of existing congregational activities before deciding to start something new.
- Talk with people with disabilities, their families, and others in your community to understand their views about the benefits and drawbacks of launching new worship activities.
- Avoid designing any worship services for people with disabilities and instead think about efforts to design accessible worship services for anyone in your congregation or community.
- Make sure people without disabilities are also invited and encouraged to be part of these services.
- Involve people with disabilities in leadership roles throughout all aspects of the planning and carrying out of these new activities.

**Online Resources**

- Rejoicing Spirits (www.rejoicingspirits.org)
- Friendship Ministries (www.friendship.org)
- Young Life Capernaum (www.younglife.org/ForEveryKid/Capernaum)

**For Further Reading**