

Inclusion in a Faith Community

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LEADERS



What can I be aware of as I interact with individuals with disabilities and their families?

Attitudes in the faith community are largely shaped by its leadership. An attitude of openness and a desire to be supportive and inclusive of individuals with disabilities and their families is built upon the awareness that the ministering occurring is reciprocal. While you are ministering to the individual and their family, they also are ministering to you. You are learning together. With this in mind, a stance that is sensitive and welcoming to a person with a disability and their family:

- Acknowledges that persons with disabilities are *persons* first and foremost. They are not their disability. Their lives are not clinical diagnostic categories nor adjectives. They are not “disabled,” “autistic,” or “wheelchair bound.” They are “people with disabilities.” He is an “individual with autism,” and she is a “person who uses a wheelchair.”
- Treats adults with disabilities as adults. Speak directly to the person with a disability, not just to the people who accompany them.
- Understands that there is a tension between recognizing that all people share much in common and that persons with disabilities have special needs. While all people have various limitations, it is not the same as saying everyone has a disability.
- Is aware that persons with disabilities may have “special” needs, but they also have “typical” needs. Graduations, work placements, and all the milestones of life are joyful occasions that call for recognition.
- Realizes that anger and frustration about having a disability might be present. Recognizing anger and giving it credibility allows for the process of healing. The individual’s or the family’s faith may be tested, and they may have questions about the role of religion in their lives.
- Knows that a disability is neither a gift nor a curse—it just is.

- Is aware that persons with disabilities bring more to a faith community than “pastoral concerns” and needs; they have value and bring gifts and graces that enhance the life of the community.

Why are individuals with disabilities so often absent from faith communities?

Absence from a community may be due to a sense of feeling unwelcome or to the great effort attendance incurs, rather than a lack of need or desire for a community. Become aware of five common barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities and their families from fully participating in a faith community (Carter, 2007):

- *Architectural barriers* that do not allow individuals with physical disabilities to navigate the space.
- *Attitudinal barriers* based in a community’s fears and misunderstandings about disabilities.
- *Communication barriers* such as sight and sound that disallow participation.
- *Programmatic barriers* that do not allow individuals with disabilities an opportunity to share their gifts and talents with the community.
- *Liturgical barriers* such as sacraments or rituals that may not be adapted to meet individual needs.

How might I, as a faith leader, contribute to the relationship?

Too often, families wait for religious leaders and educators to make a first move while the leaders are waiting for the family. Take the initiative by asking an open-ended question such as: “Tell me your faith story.” This allows for an elaboration of the role of faith for the family and can be a catalyst for holding a conversation about the individual’s and/or family’s hope for inclusion. Ask about the interests and gifts of the members with disabilities and then find ways for these interests and gifts to be shared in the community. Check in periodically.

Remember: It is not necessary to always know what to do. It is your presence and willingness to stand with the family in grief, in hope, and in all that is between that is important. You can discover solutions and celebrate victories together.

Certainly, these suggestions are not exhaustive. Hopefully, they will spark ideas and supplement your own creativity as you seek ways to minister with persons with disabilities and their families within your faith community.

Please see reverse for resources



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RESOURCES

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. The following are some of the ways the Center's programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

Disabilities, Religion and Spirituality

This program provides training to current and future religious and spiritual leaders and educators and supports individuals with disabilities and families as they give expression to their religion and/or spirituality. Activities include developing ecumenical educational materials, conducting research, and sharing best practices. Contact courtney.taylor@vanderbilt.edu, (615) 322-5658.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder is a free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish. It connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has over 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities, TN Department of Health, and the TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Contact www.familypathfinder.org, (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

Two Easy Ways to Take Part in Research

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center serves families through research studies. StudyFinder is a searchable database that lists current VKC studies, including ASD research. Studies seek people of all ages with and without developmental disabilities. See kc.vanderbilt.edu/studyfinder, (615) 936-0448. Research Match is a secure place for volunteers and researchers to connect. Once you sign up and get added to the registry, a researcher will contact you if you're a possible match for the research study. See www.researchmatch.org.

Health Library, Jr. League Family Resource Center, Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt

Houses a selection of resources on issues related to disabilities and spirituality available for check-out in their "Community and Faith Supports" section. See www.vanderbiltchildrens.com/healthlibrary or call (615) 936-2558, toll-free (800) 288-0391

National Resources

- **American Association of People with Disabilities Interfaith Initiative** supports people with disabilities and their families as they seek spiritual and religious access. www.aapd.com/what-we-do/interfaith/interfaith-initiative.html
- **Interfaith Disability Network** is a member organization that educates and engages individuals with disabilities and their families and faith communities in cultivating mutually beneficial relationships. www.interfaithdisability.org
- **Religion & Spirituality Division of the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**, a member organization that shares resources that foster opportunities for spiritual growth for persons with developmental disabilities while respecting their religious identities. www.aaidreligion.org

Print Resources

- Carter, Erik. (2007). *Including People With Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Web Resource Links

- **The National Library Service** offers direction on ordering bibles and other sacred texts in special media, including Braille, audio, and large print. See: <http://loc.gov/nls/reference/circulars/bibles.html>
- *On the Road to Congregational Inclusion: Dimensions of Faith and Congregational Ministries with Persons with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families* is a bibliography of resources for clergy, laypersons, families, and service providers. It is available online. See: <http://rwjms2.umdj.edu/boggscenter/products/dimensions.htm>
- **The Tennessee Disability Coalition** has developed an outstanding brochure on Disability Etiquette that is free and available for download: www.tndisability.org/system/files/u1/Disability_Etiquette.pdf

See also:

- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Families
- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Congregational Care Committees
- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Religious Educators

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