

# Creating a Universally Designed Ministry

## Applying the Universal Design Concept to Ministry

Chapter One, Section B, describes ways to create an access plan utilizing the principles of universal design. Ron Mace, identified by many as the creator of the concept of universal design, defines it as “an approach to design that incorporates products as well as building features and elements which, to the greatest extent possible, can be used by everyone.”<sup>1</sup> *Universal* is defined as “of, for, affecting, or including all or the whole of something specified; not limited or restricted; highly adaptable.” *Design* is defined as “to plan and carry out in a skillful way; to form in the mind, contrive; a thing planned or an outcome aimed at; a working out by plan, or development according to a plan.”<sup>2</sup>

Design is a key element of this concept. As defined above, to design is to plan. The importance of thoughtful and careful planning for any ministry cannot be overemphasized. Planning should likewise be approached with creativity and openness to new visions and possibilities. The following questions can initiate the planning process toward a universally designed ministry:

- What does it mean to create a church community open to all?
- How was Jesus accessible to his followers? How can we share the Good News today?
- How can accessibility features benefit the whole community?
  - an adjustable ambo can be used by a person of short stature, a child, or one who uses a wheelchair;
  - a pew cut benefits a person who uses a wheelchair or crutches or who has a broken leg;
  - accessible meeting space and such accommodations as braille agendas and sign language interpreters allow for full and meaningful participation by colleagues with disabilities;
  - large print materials are enjoyed by elderly parishioners, other people with visual impairment and learning disabilities;
  - a good sound system is appreciated by all.
- What diocesan office or parish ministry could benefit from knowledge of disability?

---

<sup>1</sup> *Housing For The Lifespan of All People*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, 1988, reprinted in 1994 by the Center for Accessible Housing, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1994, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Third College Edition, Webster's New World Dictionaries, Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, 1988.

- Buildings and Grounds;
- Worship;
- Faith Formation;
- Education;
- Pro-life (to name but a few).

The principle of universal design is highly effective in creating accessible environments. It is equally applicable to the design of a ministry which is inclusive and welcoming to all people. A universally designed ministry moves away from “special” and “separate,” rather creating a church community in which all members interact and participate in the various elements of a life of faith. The following statement, made by architect and gerontologist, Edward Steinfeld, D.Arch., in relation to building access, likewise applies to ministry:

Specifying different features for different groups of people will always cost more and require massive coordination and selective judgment about who should be accommodated and where. All of these impossible issues are eliminated by the universal design concept.<sup>3</sup>

The trends in recent years of diminishing fiscal resources, downsizing of personnel and programs, and diocesan restructurings all support a move toward designing disability ministry on the diocesan and parish level in such a way as to make it more inclusive and universal. That is, once it is recognized and accepted that functional limitations are a normal and expected part of the living process, such awareness should be infused into all aspects of the life of a community of faith. Thus, disability ministry is a concern to be addressed by national, diocesan and parish personnel in their respective offices, ministries or committees, rather than by a few caring persons. In their 1978 *Pastoral Statement*, the U.S. bishops utilized this principle when they mandated of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) and the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC) that “each office and secretariat, as it develops its plans and programs, address the concerns of individuals with disabilities.”<sup>4</sup>

On a national level, the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) offers counsel and resources on disability issues to, and places disability on the agendas of, the NCCB and USCC, as well as other national Catholic

---

<sup>3</sup> *Housing For The Lifespan of All People*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereafter NCCB), *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1989), par. 32. The original version of this *Pastoral Statement*, published November 16, 1978, was revised in 1989 to update language used in referring to people with disabilities.

organizations whose mission affects the lives of people with disabilities. NCPD works to infuse disability concerns and language into national level Church documents, and offers resources and training to personnel on the diocesan level.

The same strategy is effective on diocesan and parish levels. Within this schema, the director or consultant of disability ministry (hereafter referred to as “the director”) serves as a consultant and facilitator to diocesan and parish personnel, rather than solely as a provider of direct services. Likewise the person assigned on a parish level to oversee this ministry, whether a parish advocate, parish council member or member of a disability concerns committee (hereafter referred to as “parish advocate”), would offer counsel and resources to parish staff and committees. Detailed information on conducting ministry at the diocesan and parish levels is offered throughout this section.

### **Mission of a Universally Designed Ministry**

The mission of this ministry, whether conducted on a national, diocesan, or parish level, is to facilitate the implementation of the *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities* which calls for “realizing the unique gifts individuals with disabilities have to offer the Church...[and] the need for their integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life.” (par. 1)

The remainder of this section describes the ways in which to accomplish this mission by outlining the foundational principles of this ministry, as well as the essential components, priorities, goals and objectives, and ministry models of a universally designed ministry on both diocesan and parish levels.

### **Foundational Principles of a Universally Designed Ministry**

**•Is Christ-centered, and fits within the mission and ministerial scope of the diocese.**

Christ, who reached out to all people in love and compassion, is at the heart of this ministry. The bishops, in their 1978 *Pastoral Statement*, remind us that, “Concern for people with disabilities was one of the prominent notes of Jesus' earthly ministry....The Church that Jesus founded would surely have been derelict had it failed to respond to His example in its attention to people with disabilities.” (paragraphs 4 and 5)

In addition to being Christ-centered, it is essential that any diocesan ministry be sanctioned by the bishop and conform to the diocesan mission and goals. Parish ministry would likewise be sanctioned by the pastor and conform to the parish mission and goals.

**•Has a broad vision in its coordination and planning.**

Planning for a universally designed ministry encompasses looking at all the possibilities of creating a mosaic of participation by Catholics with disabilities in all facets of the life of the Church. Care must be taken to avoid traditional models or narrow perspectives which tend to isolate people in special programs.

Planning involves this visioning process, combined with setting of priorities, goals and objectives, described in detail later in this section. Planning should be ongoing and systematic, with regularly scheduled evaluations, review, and modifications.

**•Recognizes and values the dignity and uniqueness of each individual.**

In a 1992 address, the Holy Father reminded us that: “Every human person, as international legislation clearly recognizes, is the subject of fundamental rights which are inalienable, inviolable, and indivisible. Every human being is always worthy of maximum respect and has the right to express his or her dignity as a person fully.”<sup>5</sup> This ministry respects and honors the gift of life bestowed upon each of us by our loving God.

**•Fully includes people with disabilities in the life of the Community of Faith.**

As outlined in the mission statement, this ministry is inclusive, calling for people with disabilities to participate fully in the faith community. Rather than advocating separate programs, the director or parish advocate follows Christ's example of welcome and the mandates of the U.S. bishops, who stated, “There can be no separate Church for people with disabilities. We are one flock that serves a single shepherd.” (par. 33) The director provides resources and consultations to all areas of the church to assist in calling forth Catholics with disabilities to full membership and participation. Working within the parish, the parish advocate offers advice and resources to the pastor and other priests, parish council, school staff, committee chairs and members, and others in leadership within the parish.

---

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, “The Disabled Have the Right To Be Accepted into Society and To Assume Responsibility for Their Own Lives,” *Dolentium Hominum: Journal of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers*, No. 22, (1993; 8th year, no. 1): 8.

**•Calls each person forth to share in and contribute to the celebrations and obligations of the faith.**

By virtue of baptism, each person is a vital member of the Body of Christ, and is called to contribute to the building up of the this Body. *The Code of Canon Law* addresses this responsibility of the Christian faithful: "...those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one."<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the U.S. bishops, in their 1978 *Pastoral Statement* urge that people with disabilities be supported in living out their Christian responsibility to serve the community: "Full participation in the Christian community has another important aspect that must not be overlooked. When we think of people with disabilities in relation to ministry, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us...Moreover, they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord's work in the world, according to their God-given talents and capacity." (par. 17)

**•Acknowledges disability and functional limitations as a common and prevalent part of the living process.**

In recent years a shifting paradigm has replaced the medical model which sees those with impairments as patients whose needs must be met in special ways, with a political socioeconomic alternative which conceptualizes the environment and attitudes as the handicapping factors. A new definition asserts that disabilities are the normal and anticipated outcome of the risks, strains, and stresses of the living process itself, occurring *in utero*, at the moment of birth, or at any stage along the life cycle. Therefore, the condition ceases to be merely an individual tragedy and becomes an expectation within any community.

A 1991 Louis Harris and Associates survey indicates that one family in three has a member with a disability.<sup>7</sup> Based on these surveys, NCPD estimates that ten

---

<sup>6</sup> James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, eds., *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) canon 204.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Harris and Associates, *Statistical Report: Public Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities* (New York: Louis Harris and Associates, 1991).

million Catholics in the United States have a functional limitation. In any given parish or diocese, it can be expected that 15-20% of the Catholic population has a disability significant enough to warrant accommodations to increase the individual's ability to participate more fully. In addition, aging individuals who may not report themselves as having a disability often experience diminished mobility, vision, hearing, and mental capacities.

People with disabilities are a part of every demographic classification, although they are often clustered at the outer margins of any particular category: the poorest of those in economic distress; the most unschooled of the inadequately educated, and the most commonly unemployed. Disabling conditions can add one more barrier to overcome for those already members of a minority. However, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* defines those with disabilities as the newest and largest minority in its own right.

**•Identifies human vulnerability as a catalyst in bringing people together and renewing the community.**

The presence of a disability is a normal part of the living process, which in no way diminishes the dignity or value of an individual. In fact, vulnerability may be seen as the catalyst which brings us into community and Church with renewed recognition of our need for each other and our Lord. It is the acknowledgment of this interdependency that weaves the threads of our society and Church together. Even the most severely disabled person is capable of teaching the important lessons of love.

**•Does not generalize about disabilities, recognizing every person's experience of disability, skills, and coping mechanisms as unique.**

Often people with disabling conditions are grouped according to their disability, with no recognition of their individual skills and abilities. The uniqueness of each person should be respected. People should be treated as individuals and given the opportunity to speak for themselves and explain their needs, rather than be defined, categorized, and clustered by their disability.

In 1993, the American Association on Mental Retardation issued a new definition of mental retardation to provide a clearer, more practical approach to diagnosis and habilitation, and to redirect the assumption of mental retardation as an absolute trait to that of a condition which can be improved with the right supports. This important shift in emphasis can and should be applied to any disabling condition, recognizing that appropriate supports lessen many of the limitations faced by individuals.

**•Appreciates accessibility features and inclusion as of mutual benefit to the entire community.**

It has been noted that what is a necessity for one, is a convenience for many. As physical access is becoming the norm in our society, the entire community is benefiting from such accommodations as curb cuts, ramps, widened doors, increased lighting, and improved sound systems.

Ron Mace explains the advantage to society of universal design, “My whole philosophy has been to get away from those labels like ‘special’ and ‘aging’ and ‘barrier free.’ If universal design elements were simply made part of all building codes, it would benefit everyone.”<sup>8</sup>

**•Is open to change and growth.**

Everyone in ministry should expect to grow, and be stretched, challenged and changed. As anyone who has been in ministry for any length of time knows:

- definitions change
- expectations change
- perceptions change
- perspectives change
- policies change
- situations change
- needs change
- skills change
- responsibilities change
- structures change.

To be successful in building an inclusive and welcoming community of faith, personnel at both the diocesan and parish levels need to be willing to respond to such changes with creativity, ingenuity, and flexibility. Ongoing education and other efforts should be made to keep abreast of current initiatives and thinking in order to maintain relevance.

---

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Mary, “Universal Man,” *Mainstream*, Mainstream, Inc.: Washington, D.C., August, 1994, p. 18.

*This resource may be reprinted provided you credit the source:*  
**Opening Doors**, *National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities*