

Frequently Asked Questions about Opening Doors of Welcome and Justice to Parishioners with Disabilities

This issue isn't relevant to us because we don't have any people with disabilities in our parish. This is a commonly held perception. Yet, for twenty years, U.S. Census and national surveys have consistently reported that approximately 20% of the population—one person in five—has a disability, which limits one or more essential life functions. They further found that one family in three has a member with a disability. The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) estimates that 14 million Catholics in the United States live with a disability. If parishioners with disabilities are not currently active in a parish, the question must be asked, "Where are they, and why aren't they here?"

In some cases an individual has not felt welcomed, and they and their family members have left the parish. In other cases, barriers such as steps, inaccessible restrooms, or lack of transportation prevent participation. Rest assured, Catholics with disabilities will seek out and be grateful to attend a parish that offers access and a welcoming atmosphere. In addition, aging individuals who may not report themselves as having a disability often experience diminished mobility, vision, and hearing which can be greatly enhanced by adequate lighting, hearing enhancement systems, railings and ramps.

How do I find disabled parishioners and assess their needs? Once a parish commits itself to welcoming those with disabilities, it can reach out in many ways. First and foremost,

parishioners should be encouraged to extend an invitation to family members or friends. Other ways to reach out include the following: placing

articles in the bulletin and possibly the diocesan newspaper; indicating accessibility features, such as wheelchair access or sign-language interpreters, on flyers advertising events and on the parish website; visiting residential facilities near the parish to extend an invitation and offers of transportation if possible; and visiting independent living centers and agencies providing services. Parish census or registration materials should include the questions noted in the *Questions to be Included in a Parish Census or Registration Form* found in this parish guide.

How can we afford the ramps, elevators, and other special equipment? Many access features do not require large expenditures of funds. Designating parking spaces, adjusting door pressure, replacing handles on doors and faucets, and large-print bulletins, for example, require minimal expenditure but greatly enhance access. Other accommodations, such as ramps and elevators, will require more planning, budgeting, and likely, fundraising. Planning is key. Anticipated expenditures for such items as large print hymnals, Braille, and interpreters should be included in the parish budget. Renovations should be part of a larger parish plan, and possibly a capital campaign. Local organizations from which funds can be requested

include the Knights of Columbus state and local chapters, Order of the Alhambra, Council of Catholic Women, Knights of Malta, St. Vincent de Paul Society, religious communities, parent groups, civic groups, local corporations and businesses. Local foundations may also provide needed funds.

The U.S. bishops, in their *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* note “While full accessibility may not always be possible for every parish, it is desirable that at least one fully accessible community be available in a given area. Parishes may, in fact, decide to collaborate in the provision of services to persons with disabilities.” (par. 3) The Diocese of Brooklyn, in the pastoral statement *Come to Me: The Church’s Response to Disabled Persons* offers the following guidance: “The parishes in a ministerial cluster should strive to provide a full response to all the needs of all disabled persons. One church building may be able to have a ramp; another church may have the financial resources for an interpreted Mass, etc. Parishes with different facilities should then publish that information, permanently, in the neighboring parishes’ bulletins.”

Am I expected to set up a special program ? No. The enclosed resources offer ideas on how to create welcome and access in your existing parish celebrations and programs. The goal is for parishioners with disabilities to be active, participating members of the parish community. On occasion, a person may need to receive individualized catechesis. Such decisions are made in consultation with the student and family members.

Is there one specific day we should celebrate for the anniversary of the 1978

bishops' pastoral statement on disability? The bishops approved the *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities* in November 1978. One specific day to commemorate this important anniversary has not been designated. Rather, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability recommends that the anniversary year be celebrated from November 2003 through November 2004 in whatever manner is deemed appropriate by a parish or diocese. Commemorations might include a combination of the following: a Eucharistic Liturgy in which parishioners with disabilities are active participants; development of a parish plan for creating access and welcome to be assessed and updated on an annual basis; a special blessing service to acknowledge and celebrate parish access features such as a ramp or elevator; highlighting parishioners with disabilities (or those who minister with them) in the parish newsletter or on signs posted at the entrance to the church; instituting a parish volunteer day with a local program or ministry with people with disabilities; designating a second collection in keeping with the theme. This parish guide is designed to assist with these efforts.

I sometimes have concerns about a person's readiness to receive the sacraments. How do I make this judgment? In 1995, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued their *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, which can be ordered from the USCCB Publication Office or viewed at www.ncpd.org. The Preface describes their purpose as follows: "These guidelines were developed to address many of the concerns raised by priests, pastoral ministers, other concerned Catholics, persons with disabilities, their advocates, and their families for greater consistency in pastoral practice in the celebration of the sacraments

throughout the country...the guidelines draw upon the Church's ritual books, its canonical tradition, and its experience in ministering to or with persons with disabilities in order to dispel any misunderstandings that may impede sound pastoral practice in the celebration of the sacraments." The Guidelines also offer these general principles: "By reason of their baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling" (par. 1); and "Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community. Ministers are not to refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, who are properly disposed, and who are not prohibited by law from receiving them." (par. 2) Specific guidelines are then offered for each of the seven sacraments.

The enclosed resource list provides descriptions and ordering information for curriculum material for religious formation, including sacramental preparation.

One of our parishioners is allergic to the communion wafer. What can we do? On June 19, 1995 the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the following norms: "I. Concerning permission to use low-gluten altar breads: A. This may be granted by Ordinaries to priests and laypersons affected by celiac disease, after presentation of a medical certificate. B. Conditions for the validity of the matter: 1) Special hosts *quibus glutinum ablatum est* are invalid matter for the celebration of the Eucharist. 2) Low-gluten hosts are valid matter, provided that they contain the amount of gluten sufficient to obtain the confection of bread, that there is no addition of foreign materials, and that the procedure for making such hosts is not such as to alter the nature of the substance of the bread."

A 2000 report from the USCCB Committee on the Liturgy offers the following guidance:

"While each person suffering from Celiac-Sprue disease reacts differently to different amounts of gluten, most doctors advise them to adopt a totally gluten-free diet....**Given the need for total abstention from hosts containing gluten, the common advice given to Celiac-Sprue sufferers is to receive the Precious Blood alone.** Priests are thus well advised to clearly teach the doctrine of concomitance, the Church's belief that under either species the whole Christ is received. Likewise, priests should recall the right which each Catholic in good standing has to receive Holy Communion (Canon 843). **In the light of this right, the Precious Blood must be made available to sufferers of this disease who request it, even if it is not offered to the rest of the congregation.**

Additional concerns emerge when the Precious Blood has been 'contaminated' with gluten either by the *fermentum* or intinction. In such instances it is appropriate to provide a separate chalice for the benefit of those unable to tolerate any amount of gluten.

For additional information on this issue contact the USCCB Secretariat for the Liturgy (www.usccb.org/liturgy) or visit www.ncpd.org.

I want my daughter to attend our parish school along with her siblings. The school says they cannot accommodate her disability, which we contend is very minor and won't affect her school performance. What should I do?

Begin by gathering information to share with the principal and pastor. In their 1978 *Pastoral Statement*, the bishops state, "Dioceses might

make their most valuable contribution in the area of education. They should encourage and support training for all clergy, religious, seminarians, and lay ministers...Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers could be provided inservice training in how best to integrate disabled students into programs of regular education." Many Catholic schools throughout the U.S. are successfully including students with disabilities. Inclusion succeeds when all parties are open, and recognize the gifts that any child can bring to the school. Parents should meet with the principal and teachers to discuss their child's needs and the practical ways in which accommodations can be provided. Resources are available to assist parents and educators. NCPD's two-volume set of *Opening Doors to People with Disabilities* offers an extensive section on education. The Network of Inclusive Catholic Educators provides resources and training on this issue. The USCCB Department of Education publishes a *Special Needs Resource Directory*. The National Catholic Educational Association offers "Making Room for Me" Seminars as well as a monthly information column on special learning needs. See *Resources for Opening Doors of Welcome and Justice* for more information. Important life lessons, including acceptance of differences, patience, and empathy are learned when student with and without disabilities share classroom experiences. The mutual benefit of such interaction is invaluable, as evidenced by the letter to the editor by grateful parents, Nancy and Harvey Schrenk.

Letters from Readers

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Grateful for education

Nancy and Harvey Schrenk
Springfield

We want to publicly express our gratitude to the teachers, priests, staff, aftercare ladies and students of St. Aloysius Grade School in Springfield for the education and nurturing of our daughter, Rachel. She has neurological difficulties, which impact her social and educational skills. However, her progress after nine years at St. Al's surpasses most everything we expected of her. She has evolved through appropriate accommodations and some modified grading, but we never felt she was allowed to just "get by."

Rachel is a spiritual girl so we are especially grateful she could receive a Catholic

grade school education with all the unique benefits of a God-centered curriculum. Catholic schools in general are not fully equipped to handle the full range of behavioral, physical, and academic disabilities that our fine public schools routinely and capably serve at great expense. But Rachel's years at St. Al's prove that given a compassionate and caring environment, Catholic schools can and will bend over backwards to reasonably accommodate a child and a family willing to work hard enough to give their special needs child a Catholic education.

We pray God will reward each of you for your kindness, patience, persistence and love.

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