



Special Report

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Disabilities in Parishes Across the United States: How Parishes in the United States Accommodate and Serve People with Disabilities

JONATHON HOLLAND, M.A. | PATRICK GILGER, S.J. | THOMAS P. GAUNT, S.J.

“We are familiar with the objections raised to a life characterized by serious physical limitations. It is thought that sick or disabled persons cannot be happy, since they cannot live the lifestyle held up by the culture of pleasure and entertainment.” These challenging words were spoken by Pope Francis at a recent jubilee Mass celebrated in Rome for people who are sick or live with disabilities. He went on to talk about the pastoral role of the church to people with disabilities, “Think of a priest who does not welcome everyone. What advice would the pope give him? Close the doors of the church! Either everyone or no one.”¹ Perhaps more striking than the pope’s words, however, was the fact that several altar servers with Down syndrome assisted him during the Mass, and that the readings were done by people with disabilities—including some who read from a Braille text.

KEY FINDINGS

- 96 percent of parishes have a wheelchair accessible entrance
- 43 percent of parishes have a list of resources to refer people with disabilities for professional help
- 72 percent of parishes have people with disabilities who volunteer for the parish
- 93 percent of parishes offer accommodations to allow those with disabilities to participate in parish social events
- 63 percent of parishes adapt their current resources for students with disabilities

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that nearly one in five Americans—over 55 million—has a disability.² In other words, despite being considered unusual, disability is in fact the norm for many Americans. Individuals who have developmental differences, persons with intellectual and physical disabilities, and people who are blind or Deaf are among the most marginalized and vulnerable members of American society. Recognizing this, the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued their 1998 statement “Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities” in which they reminded American Catholics that “there can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities” because they are “a single flock under the care of a single shepherd.”³

It might come as a surprise, then, that until now there had not been a comprehensive study of Catholic parishes in the United States to document how parishes are responding so that people with disabilities can access and participate in the sacraments and parish life. In response to this need, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) was commissioned by Potomac Community Resources Inc. (PCR), National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), the Department of Special Needs of the Arch-



Cardinal Wuerl at the Archdiocese of Washington’s White Mass for people with special needs (Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Washington)

diocese of Washington, and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington to conduct the first-ever nationwide survey of how Catholic parishes, dioceses, and Catholic Charities are incorporating individuals with disabilities and their families into the single flock of the Church (the diocesan and Catholic Charities study is to be released at a later date).

This *CARA Special Report* presents findings from its survey of a national random sample of Catholic parishes, providing a snapshot of the extent to which efforts to include persons with disabilities in parish life have been successful and identifies room for improvement. In addition, the survey gathered information about the parish activities in which people with disabilities participate, the resources parishes use to teach children with disabilities, and the extent to which parish buildings accommodate people with disabilities.

For the purposes of this survey “disabilities” includes sensory (e.g., blindness or deafness), physical (e.g., cerebral palsy or arthritis), and intellectual (e.g., Down syndrome) impairments. In addition, those with autism, mental illnesses, chronic illnesses, age-related disabilities, and veterans with a war-related injury were all categorized as “persons with a disability.”

The study finds that while more than nine in ten pastors are aware of someone with a disability in their parish, there are two primary factors that influence which parishes attend to and include such persons: size/location and participation. The study demonstrates that the size and the geographic location (the urban, suburban, or rural location) of a parish correlates strongly with the likelihood that it will make accommodations for parishioners with disabilities.

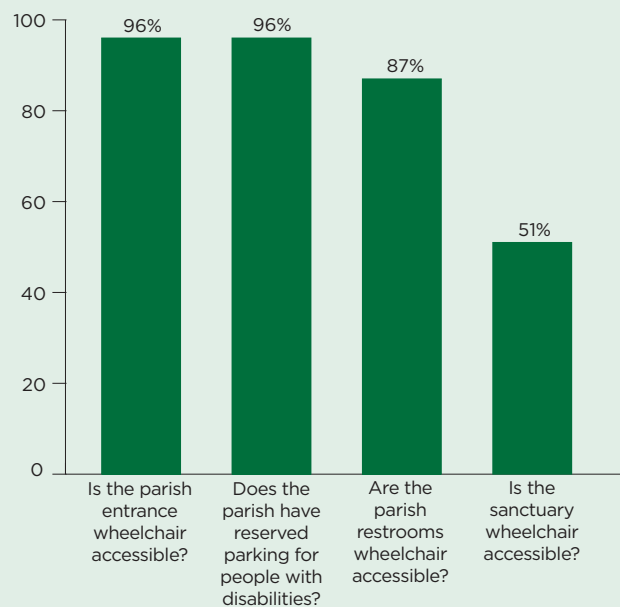
The second major factor is the level of participation of parishioners with disabilities in ministerial roles or on committees in a given parish. The study finds that parishes who have the most accommodations for people with disabilities are also most likely to have at least one person with a disability serving on a parish committee or filling a ministerial role. It seems that active inclusion of those with disabilities in decision-making positions or positions where their perspective can be heard has a high correlation with whether the parish will accommodate parishioners with disabilities.

Physical Accommodations: Space and Sensory Accommodations

As noted, most U.S. pastors are aware that their parishes include people with physical and sensory disabilities: 96 percent of pastors know someone in their parish with an aging-related disability, nine in ten know of someone with a physical disability or chronic illness in their parish, and 79 percent know of someone with a sensory disability. About nine in ten also report that parishioners with disabilities at least “somewhat” regularly participate in Mass and the sacraments.

In response to these people with disabilities, CARA finds that the physical buildings of most U.S. parishes are accommodated to help people with physical disabilities enter into the building. Almost all of the responding parishes (96 percent) have a wheelchair accessible entrance and/or reserved parking for people with disabilities. In addition, 87 percent of responding parishes have wheelchair accessible restrooms. However, only half of parishes have a wheelchair accessible sanctuary, which limits how much parishioners with disabilities can serve in ministry roles at Mass. Parishes in the United States have not always been as inclusive to physical disabilities. When asked if the church building was originally built to accommodate people with disabilities, 36 percent say it was and when asked if it was ever renovated and better accommodations installed, 78 percent say that their church building has been renovated for these accommodations. Pastors report that parish offices are similar, 34 percent were built to accommodate people with disabilities although 24 percent were later renovated to install better accommodations.

FIGURE 1. **WHEELCHAIR ACCOMMODATIONS**
PERCENTAGE RESPONDING “YES”



When asked what the best resource/accommodation the parish provides to people with disabilities, four in ten pastors note that such physical accommodations are the parishes’ best resource. One pastor noted that his parish building was “extremely accessible,” and that in his parish “we try to be aware of where we may need accommodations.” Other pastors note the following as particular points of strength in their parishes:

- *Accessible, ADA complaint, church and parish buildings*
- *Handicapped parking spaces*

- *An elevator in our social halls and buildings*
- *No stairs (or “ramps for stairs”)*
- *Access to building and hearing aids*
- *A hearing loop . . . a device that many people have taken advantage of and have enjoyed the Mass much more. Some individuals even attend Mass here because of the Loop, being able to hear the readings, homily and songs.*
- *Gluten free hosts*
- *Designated seating*
- *Place for walkers and wheel chairs in our worship space*
- *Projecting lyrics and liturgical texts for visually impaired*
- *Special classes for faith formation*
- *Assistive listening devices in church and in the confessional*

Accommodations to the physical plant are not the only strengths that pastors note with regard to their parish’s efforts to accommodate parishioners with disabilities. Most parishes describe their best resource for accommodating persons with disabilities with words like “access,” “care,” and “compassion.” Some of their responses include:

- *Compassion, for example a young man with severe autism has occasional outbursts during Mass, but our community is very supportive of his family and the family searched for a long time to find a welcoming parish.*
- *A general attitude of acceptance on the part of the parishioners which allows those with disabilities to not be set apart but actively incorporated into the life of the parish.*
- *A small and caring community that personally welcomes and accommodates anyone with a disability.*
- *We offer Mass for families with children of special needs.*
- *Opportunities for the Deaf to receive sacraments, religious education, and Mass in ASL. We also utilize a Deaf priest from the Archdiocese.*
- *Accessibility to our building and general pastoral awareness and sensitivity. We adapt as needs arise.*

Given the fact that people with a physical disability are present in at least 90 percent of responding parishes, the physical building is very important. The two factors identified in the CARA study that most affect the building is the size, location, and participation of people with disabilities in ministerial/committee roles. Larger, suburban parishes are more likely than rural parishes and urban parishes to have these physical accommodations. Similarly, parishes that have people with disabilities participating at least “somewhat” in parish committees are also more likely than those who do not to have physical accommodations that welcome those with physical disabilities.

Training and Resources for Making a Parish Inclusive

Most U.S. pastors are aware that their parishes include persons with disabilities and accommodations have been made to their

parish’s physical plant, although only 11 percent of responding parishes have a paid staff member whose position description includes such responsibilities. Seven in ten parishes do not have a staff member who is responsible for parish efforts to serve people with disabilities. The findings show that this lack of staff for attending to disability is ever greater in smaller parishes. Although 65 percent of large parishes do not have a staff member responsible for including people with disabilities that number grows to 87 percent among small parishes.



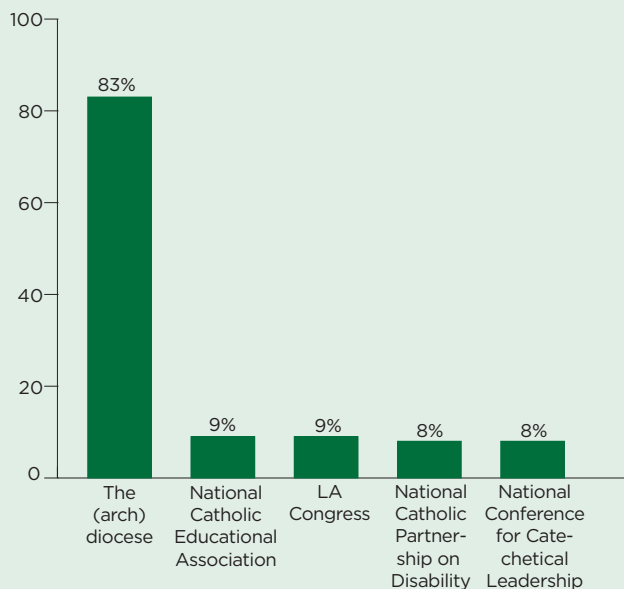
Training Session for Parish Staff and Volunteers (Courtesy of Ozinnovation)

Since most parishes—whether large or small—do not have a staff member responsible for including persons with disabilities, CARA asked pastors whether they are aware of training opportunities that might help their staff learn how to better accommodate persons with disabilities. Slightly less than half of pastors, 48 percent, respond that they are aware of opportunities within their diocese for parish staff to access such training and 22 percent are aware of conferences/training offered with another organization. Despite the number that know of conferences/training available 28 percent of pastors report that members of their staff have attended such trainings regardless of whether it was offered by the (arch)diocese or another organization.

Although the number of parishes that send staff to trainings is small, it is notable that 83 percent of those who have staff/volunteers that attended conferences/trainings say that such trainings were at least partially sponsored by the (arch)diocese. This seems to indicate that, while parishes are unlikely to have staff attend disability trainings, when they do attend, these trainings are often provided by the (arch)diocese. One such pastor, in fact, notes that his diocese has “an excellent director of our Office of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities” who provides “education, retreats, seminars, [and] support groups” for parishes in the diocese. Another pastor notes that his diocese has “an active Office for People with

FIGURE 2. **WHICH ORGANIZATIONS SPONSOR THESE CONFERENCES/TRAININGS?**

PERCENTAGE RESPONDING WHICH ORGANIZATION SPONSORED THE CONFERENCE THEY ATTENDED



Handicaps,” that has provided “much support and some resources for accommodating people with handicaps” within his parish.

Notwithstanding the efforts of some (arch)dioceses to provide trainings, when asked what resources their (arch)diocese could provide to help the parish better include people with disabilities into parish life, fully half of all pastors surveyed say that they need more educational support and training. The training would be helpful not only for their volunteers and staff, but also for their parishioners who have a family member with a disability. Such support, they suggest, could come in any number of ways: through conferences, workshops, online training; even through email. When given the opportunity to express their need these pastors request:

- *Guidelines for minimum expectations for accessibility*
- *Lists of contacts and resources available within diocesan boundaries*
- *A better understanding of how disability assistance fits into Catholic social teaching*
- *Classes or workshops on inclusivity of people with disabilities*
- *Education about the plight of people with disabilities*
- *Continuing education for people working in a faith environment with people with disabilities*
- *Scholarships to attend conferences, online training, and workshops*

Some pastors suggested that training on how best to accommodate persons with disabilities be included in seminary formation itself.

One pastor, for example, noted that he received “no training in the seminary [which] refers to people with disabilities,” and would like “information on how we can adapt facilities, many of which were built a hundred years ago, to become handicap accessible.”

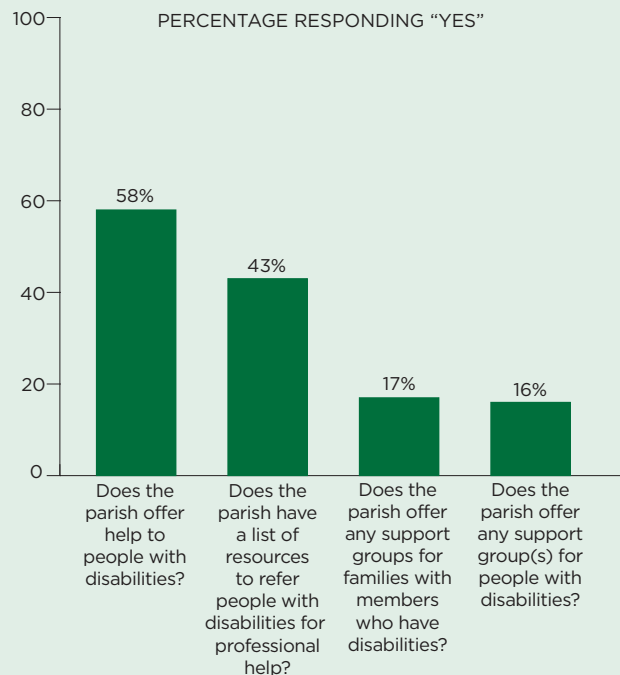
“One pastor, for example, noted that he received no training in the seminary [which] refers to people with disabilities.”

Along with training resources some pastors also note a need for a list of resources for people with disabilities, as 43 percent of parishes have a list of resources to refer people with disabilities for professional help. A minority of parishes also offer support groups for people with disabilities (16 percent) or families with members who have disabilities (17 percent). Given the chance to describe the kind of support programming offered, one pastor noted that his parishes included “a Health Ministry, which offers programs for mental illness, sexual addiction, . . . care for the elderly, and a variety of health and wellness programs.” Another parish notes that they have “held retreats for persons with disabilities.” There is more of a focus on people with addictions, as 58 percent of parishes offer help to people with addictions.

Finally, as with awareness of disability and physical plant accommodations, the two key factors of size/location and participation

FIGURE 3. **RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

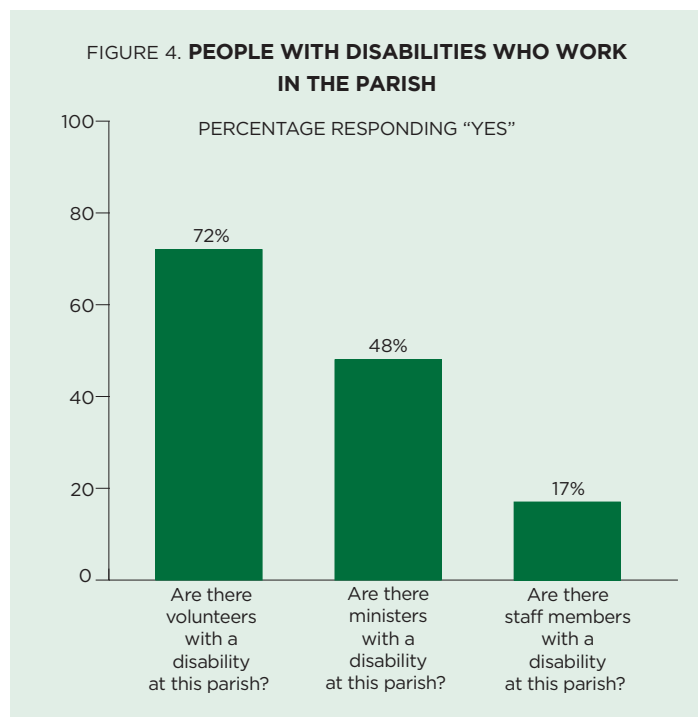
PERCENTAGE RESPONDING “YES”



also hold with regard to staff training/resources for people with disabilities. Larger, more suburban parishes are more likely than smaller, rural parishes to have staff that attend such trainings and resources for people with disabilities. And parishes that have people with disabilities who participate at least “somewhat” in ministry are more likely to have their staff attend conferences or trainings to help them learn how to better accommodate people with disabilities and have resources for people with disabilities.

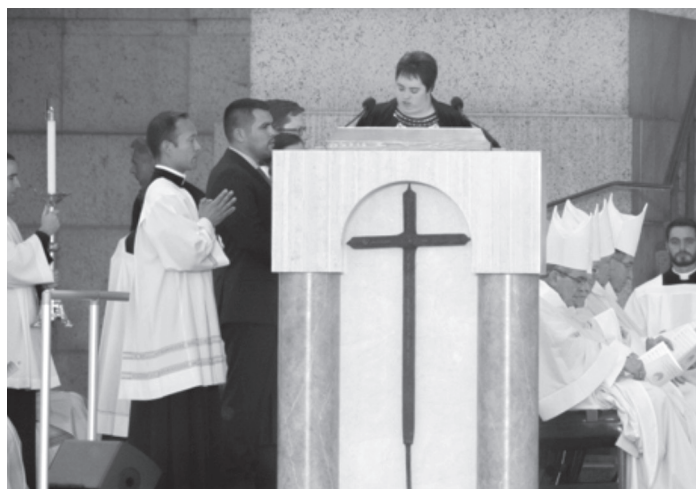
Staff Members and Parish Ministers with Disabilities

Although fewer than two in ten parishes have a paid staff member with a disability, nearly half of U.S. parishes have persons with disabilities who minister in the parish. Fifty-three percent of U.S. parishes, in fact, have some parishioners with disabilities who serve in the choir, as lectors, or as altar servers. One pastor, for example, reported that in his parish there are “Down syndrome adults who serve as greeters.” The majority of parishes (72 percent) also have a volunteer with a disability, although only 17 percent of parishes have staff members with a disability.



There is a strong correlation between whether a parish includes staff with disabilities and the inclusion of parishioners with disabilities in ministry or committee roles. Parishes that have people with disabilities participating at least “somewhat” on parish committees are far more likely to have someone with a disability working or volunteering in the parish.

In other written responses pastors noted some of the accommodations that have been made in their parishes to allow staff and



Meghan Jones lecturing for the Papal Mass Canonizing Junipero Serra (Courtesy of Jaclyn Lippelmann/Catholic Standard)

volunteers with disabilities to engage in ministry. These included similar physical accommodations as those described above, along with others more particularly suited for a work environment, such as “work communication through email” and “ADA compliant rest rooms,” “hearing devices” and “a readable telephone,” “provision with a driver,” and “a computer which has . . . a video phone” for a Deaf staff member. Other responses indicate that some parish efforts at accommodation are more personal than systemic or institutional. Responses of this type include:

- *We involve persons with disabilities in areas where they feel comfortable to serve*
- *We provide personal help for those who need it as helping them see, hear, or understand better*
- *Modify duties and assignments as necessary*
- *Because it is mental illness, task remain simple and we provide housing on campus*
- *Extra support from other volunteers*
- *Provision with a driver, or whatever is necessary for their participation*

Making Sacraments and Parish Events Inclusive

The study also explores the extent to which U.S. parishes are welcoming and supporting parishioners with disabilities, not just in providing access to physical spaces, but in providing access to what happens within those spaces: the sacramental and relational life of the parish. Results from this survey show that U.S. parishes are very likely to make special sacramental accommodations and quite likely to make accommodations to allow persons with disabilities to attend parish social events. Fully 93 percent of all responding parishes at least “somewhat” offer such accommodations for parish social events, for example, and over three quarters of responding parishes offer accommodations to facilitate the participation of those with disabilities in parish youth ministry programs.

Sometimes such accommodations mean reaching outside the parish rather than allowing access to parish spaces. Virtually all responding parishes (98 percent), for example, have ministers who travel at least “somewhat” to bring the Eucharist to people who cannot come to the parish for Mass. And although fewer than two in ten parishes “always” assist parishioners with transportation to Mass, 62 percent of parishes offer such assistance some of the time.

Additionally, 36 percent of parishes report that they have assistive listening devices that parishioners can use. As seen previously, larger parishes are significantly more likely than smaller parishes to have assistive listening devices for parishioners to use. The study also found that parishes who have people with disabilities participating at least “somewhat” in their adult formation programs are much more likely than those who do not to have assistive listening devices available for parishioner use.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR SACRAMENTS AND PARISH EVENTS		
Percentage responding		
	“Somewhat” or “Always”	“Always” only
Does the parish have ministers who travel to bring the Eucharist to people who cannot come to the parish for Mass?	98%	86%
Does the parish offer accommodations to allow those with disabilities to participate in parish social events?	93	64
Does the parish offer accommodations to parishioners with disabilities who participate in faith formation for adults?	83	50
Does the parish have a way to include those with a gluten intolerance during Communion?	80	66
Does the parish offer accommodations to allow those with disabilities to participate in youth ministry?	78	47
Does the parish assist parishioners who cannot get to the parish on their own with transportation to Mass?	62	18

In addition to the parishes that offer assistive listening devices, a further one in five pastors state that additional audio and or visual resources is something they would like to provide their parishioners. In light of this, pastors were given the opportunity to specify what kinds of resources might be most helpful for them. Their responses included the following:

- *We’d like to do better outreach to hearing and sight impaired parishioners*
- *Audio machines for better hearing*
- *Braille programs for Mass. A braille lectionary for lectors who are blind*
- *Materials in multiple formats. A website that uses the principles of universal design*
- *Financial resources for a new sound system*



Priest and ASL Interpreter (Courtesy of the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids)

The increasing frequency of intolerance to gluten is another, specifically sacramental, area that is being addressed in parishes across the United States, as fully 80 percent of responding pastors report having ways to include gluten-intolerant parishioners during Holy Communion. While the difference between larger and smaller parishes might be expected at this point (larger parishes are more likely than smaller parishes to make gluten accommodations), what is perhaps less expected is that Catholic parishes in the Northeast are more likely than parishes in the South or the West to offer gluten accommodations.

It is evident from written responses that some parishes are doing an excellent job making access for parishioners with disabilities. In one such response a parish writes of offering an Open Hearts Program that is “staffed by volunteers who have training with people with disabilities,” and meets “monthly for meal, prayer, music and fellowship.” This same parish also has a group that offers “caregiving support for anyone caring for someone with a disability or illness” and “provides resources to share for respite for caregivers of those with disabilities.”

Additionally, the vast majority of parishes make special accommodations so that their parishioners with disabilities can attend adult faith formation or youth ministry programs. And 93 percent of U.S. parishes offer some kind of accommodations that enable parishioners with disabilities to participate in parish social events. Parishes that include parishioners with disabilities on their parish committees are more likely than those who don’t to offer accommodations to parishioners with disabilities who participate in parish social events.

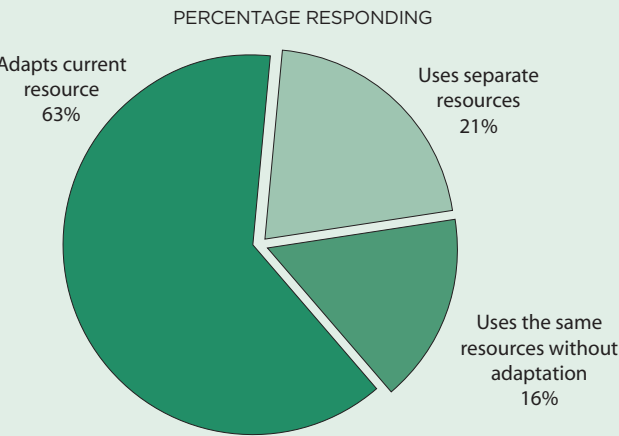
Catechetical and Educational Accommodation
Another way to examine the extent to which parishes across the U.S. are currently including people with disabilities is to look at

their catechetical and educational practices. CARA asked pastors whether their parishes utilize specific catechetical resources for persons with disabilities, adapt their current resources to better accommodate such persons, or do not adapt their current resources. The study found that almost two-thirds of parishes adapt their current resources to accommodate students with disabilities and 16 percent use the same resources without accommodation.

The study also shows that parishes who do not have anyone with a disability participating in ministry roles or sitting on parish committees are less likely to use their current resources without any adaptation or adopt separate resources to accommodate students with disabilities. When prompted about resources from their (arch)diocese, some pastors mentioned that their parish benefited from “diocesan provided resources” and the “Office for Pastoral Services” in their (arch)diocese. Other pastors reported that their parish would benefit further from:

- *Better suggestions and best practices for Faith Formation for Children—especially regarding children with autism*
- *Consultation, perhaps a specialist from Archdiocesan Office could help us in preparing a child for First Communion*
- *Much more help in religious education or in implementing differentiated learning in the school*

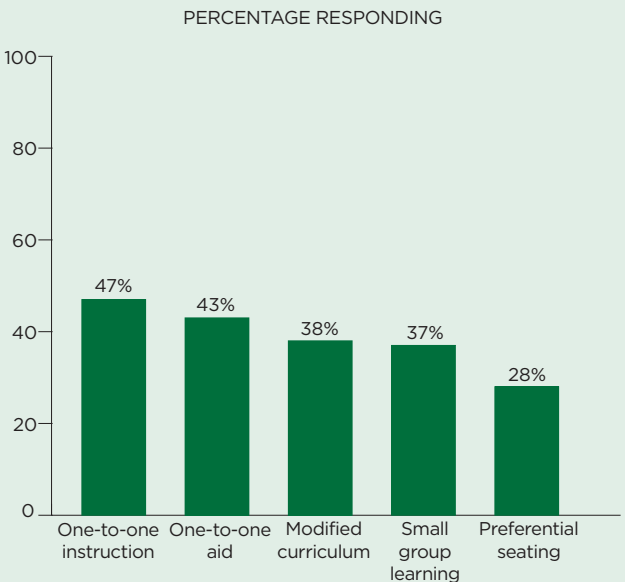
FIGURE 5. PARISH USE OF CATECHETICAL TEXTS/SERIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



When it comes to educational accommodations, parishes tend to focus on giving children/youth more individualized attention. The chart below shows the five most popular accommodations parishes use for children/youth with disabilities. Three of the top five (one-to-one instruction, one-to-one aide, and small group learning) focus on more individualized attention for children/youth with disabilities. The two most popular methods (one-to-one instruction and one-to-one aide), which slightly less than half of parishes use,

separate the children to make sure they understand the material being presented. The two methods that do not give individualized attention (modified curriculum and preferential seating), which are used less, modify the way the student is taught so that the material can be made clearer another way.

FIGURE 6. EDUCATIONAL ACCOMMODATIONS THE PARISH USES FOR CHILDREN/YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES



Similarly, parishes that have people with disabilities participating at least “somewhat” in ministry roles are much more likely than those who do not to provide one-to-one instruction or small group learning accommodations. Interestingly, the inverse relationship holds here as well—that is, parishes that make educational accommodations are significantly more likely to have parishioners with disabilities sitting on parish committees. In other words, with regard to education as elsewhere, the greater the participation of people with disabilities in the parish structure the more likely it is that the parish will implement key educational accommodations.

Conclusions

The results from this study of the accommodations that Catholic parishes across the United States have made presents a useful picture of American parishes. While parishes in the United States have made large strides to include people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities, there is also a lot of work to be done. Large, suburban parishes and parishes that include persons with disabilities in ministry roles or on parish committees are more likely to offer significant accommodations. Those in smaller, rural and urban parishes sometimes offer accommodations not measured in this survey, although they are somewhat captured with

AREAS PASTORS SAY ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ARE NEEDED

- Audio/Visual Resources
- Renovations for People with Disabilities
- Group support/training programs
- Training at the Seminary level

the open-ended comments. These parishes often adapt to needs as they arise since the parish is small and may not have the resources larger parishes can utilize.

It also seems that there is a chicken and the egg paradigm occurring in parishes. Parishes that have people with disabilities participating in parish life, especially committees and ministry roles, are more likely to be more inclusive to people with disabilities. This begs the question, do parishes that are more inclusive have more people with disabilities participating because of their inclusivity or do people with disabilities take the initiative, becoming more involved, and make suggestions about how the parish can become more inclusive?

When asked what would help them improve the accommodations at their parishes, pastors regularly ask for financial and informational resources. Their written responses include items like the following:

- *Financial help for renovations to buildings to accommodate people with disabilities*
- *Information on what we should be doing and how to implement it. Also, how to invite and welcome people with disabilities*
- *Information regarding disability awareness and resources to support us*
- *More resources to train staff on how to assist people with mental disabilities*
- *More sensitivity training in working with people with physical disabilities more resources to help children with a variety of disabilities to attend our Parish School*

While pastors seem to be well aware that increased resources would assist them in accommodating persons with disabilities in their parishes, they seem less aware that including persons with disabilities on committees or in ministerial roles in their parishes

may be another way to increase the likelihood of their parish making needed accommodations. Alert to such issues, one pastor commented that he was “sure there is greater need than we are presently aware of.” The proactive inclusion of persons with disabilities on parish committees and in parish leadership roles is a tactic that can be taken regardless of the resources available.

About the Study

Potomac Community Resources Inc. (PCR), National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), the Department of Special Needs of the Archdiocese of Washington, and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to learn from parishes across the nation about their current activities/inclusion of people with disabilities. The project was designed by CARA in collaboration with PCR, NCPD, and the Archdiocese of Washington. The project consisted of a survey for parishes in the United States.

CARA, PCR, NCPD, and the Archdiocese of Washington designed the questionnaire to measure the parish activities in which people with disabilities participate, resources parishes use to teach children with disabilities, how the parish includes people with disabilities into the sacraments, evangelization to people with disabilities, and how the parish building is constructed to accommodate people with disabilities. CARA programmed the survey into an online format and hosted in on the CARA website.

To distribute the survey, CARA created a mailing list of a stratified random sample of 7,002 parishes in the United States. Questionnaires were emailed and mailed to the pastors or the person entrusted with the pastoral care of the parish. There were 1,760 bad email and mailing addresses so 5,242 parishes were successfully contacted. After repeated follow-ups, CARA received a response from 789 of 5,242 pastors for an overall response rate of 15 percent providing a margin of error of ± 3.22 percent.

Endnotes

- 1 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/06/12/pope_francis_homily_for_jubilee_of_the_sick_and_disabled_/1236700
- 2 United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html
- 3 http://www.usccb.org/_cs_upload/8104_1.pdf



CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

CARA at Georgetown University

2300 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20007

Phone: 202-687-8080 • Fax: 202-687-8083 • CARA@georgetown.edu • <http://cara.georgetown.edu>

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