

Attitudes

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• We are a single united flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate church for persons with disabilities.

• Persons with disabilities should be offered forms of evangelization and liturgy that invite and allow them to participate actively in the ecclesial community.

• Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities at appropriate times, and in accordance with their capacity.

• We share the common mission to advance the Lord's work in the world. We must recognize and call forth the contributions persons with disabilities can make to the church.

"We've been working at all of these for several years, and this is an affirmation of what we've been doing," Zyla said of the statement.

"The challenge for us is to take this statement into the community," Pickering added.

One initial challenge is helping people in parishes understand just how many people are affected by disabilities, they noted.

"When I go into a parish and talk to a pastor, they will say we don't have many persons with disabilities," Zyla reported. But, she observed, "This is not a small population of people."

Those people include not only the developmentally disabled and people in wheelchairs, but people who have had strokes or have cerebral palsy; people with emotional and mental problems or learning disabilities; and seniors who can't ne-

gotiate stairs, open heavy doors, hear very well or even get to church due to lack of transportation or inability to walk far.

Pickering noted, for example, that while a church building may be accessible to the outside, the altar area may not be. Thus some people are prevented from taking part in liturgical ministries.

Even worse are situations in which people with disabilities and their families are made to feel uncomfortable.

"I've talked with a number of parents who have children with developmental disabilities who don't attend services because they get stares, or the person with developmental disabilities shows behaviors that are not seen as acceptable in church," Zyla said. "As one parent said to me, 'My daughter knows that people are giving us dirty looks.'"

Parish efforts

While such problems do exist, Zyla and Pickering pointed out that there are many communities that are open and welcoming, often thanks to informal efforts.

At a number of parishes, they observed, individuals or groups regularly pick up seniors and shut-ins to bring them to church for activities and services. Some parishes take a more formal approach.

St. Michael's Parish, Newark, for example, has an advocate for people with disabilities, Regina Krolak.

Krolak has created an ecumenical song and praise group that meets twice a month at St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Sessions attract 15 to 35 people, she reported.

At St. Michael's, Krolak noted, two people with developmental disabilities now serve as lectors at the parish, and others help to distribute materials at Mass.

Getting people involved in such public activities is important, she said, "to let people know that just because they have a developmental disability, that doesn't prevent them from participating."

She also successfully lobbied to increase the number of handicap parking spaces at the back of the church, giving people access to an elevator to get into church.

On at least one occasion, Krolak has also taken matters into her own hands.

"We kept asking that the confessionals be accessible for people in wheelchairs," she recalled with a laugh. "Finally, one of the other ladies in the social ministry committee (and I) went in with a crowbar and we removed the kneeler. It's now portable."

Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford, meanwhile, has created a Disabilities Awareness Ministry, headed by Sam Consol — and to which Hellem's belongs.

"The parish has been pretty sensitive to these things, but it's amazing, when we began actively pursuing it, how much awareness is needed," Consol observed.

The ministry has provided input into the design of the new church the parish is building. It distributes literature and speaks to parish groups. Consol, Hellem's, and another member, Rob Tortorella — who also uses a wheelchair — addressed the parish men's group Nov. 30, for example.

Meanwhile, a woman with developmental disabilities now serves as a lector, and another is preparing to become a greeter.

And the parish is launching Parish Partners, a program that matches people with disabilities with individuals to help them participate in ministries and activities.

Consol noted that one of the key areas for study is ways that well-intentioned people help to "disable" others.

"I think the basic misunderstanding is that people with disabilities have to be ministered to, as opposed to thinking about people with disabilities as just being members of the parish fully capable of using their gifts," he said.

But once the parish made it clear that it welcomed the involvement of people with disabilities, it has opened the doors for more involvement, Consol suggested.

"I think one of the things that's happened, it's allowed some of the people to come forward who weren't comfortable coming forward," he said.

"I just feel strongly that the church of all places should be a community kind of thing, just as you would do anything to help a member of your family, it's the same thing," Hellem's suggested.

Getting started

Those involved in such ministries say that efforts don't have to be elaborate.

"Start small," Consol said. "Don't take on too much too quickly."

Zyla suggested looking at physical accessibility beyond just getting into the church.

"Can you get up to the altar to be a eucharistic minister or a reader?" she said.

She also recommended that parishes regularly include in their bulletins information about people with disabilities, hold information nights and incorporate awareness education into catechetical programs.

Hellem's suggested patience when dealing with people with disabilities.

"Give people time. That's the biggest gift," he said.

"Probably the secret is to just get in there," Hellem's concluded.

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