

Chapter 4

Designing Inclusive Religious Education Programs



Among the many important aspects of congregational life are the opportunities provided to help people mature in their faith, learn the teachings and practices of their tradition, and develop meaningful relationships with others on the same journey. More than 90% of all congregations offer some form of religious education opportunities to their members and attendees, whether Sunday or Sabbath school classes, children's and youth programs, men's and women's groups, confirmation classes, small group studies, or retreats (Woolever & Bruce, 2002). Yet, many congregations struggle with exactly how to include children and adults with developmental disabilities in these activities. This chapter affirms the importance of designing religious education programs that both welcome and engage every member of a congregation, including those with developmental disabilities. A commitment to respond, coupled with the resources and creativity that already reside within your congregation (perhaps still untapped), is all that you need to begin inviting children and adults with disabilities in the life of your congregation.

INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children's programs are integral to the vision and the life of most congregations. Many adults can trace the beginnings of their faith journeys to key experiences within such programs, which lay important foundations for later spiritual growth. Parents want quality, dynamic programs for their children and many choose a congregation based largely on this factor. Although the desires of parents of children with developmental disabilities are no different, they often encounter great difficulty in finding a congregation willing to include their child. When activities and programs are not open to their children, it is unlikely that families will return to your congregation.

The call on congregations to serve children with disabilities often raises many questions. *How do we teach a child who may not read or speak, see or hear? How do we include a child whose behaviors may challenge our expectations or try our patience? How do we meet the needs of a diverse group of children within the same classroom or program?* Schools have long wrestled with these same questions and have discovered many effective strategies for including an increasingly diverse group of children. Does your congregation approach these questions with a sense of challenge and a willingness to explore new answers? Or, do these questions signal a stopping point in the conversation, in which efforts go no further?

“When their son with autism was three, the parents explained, he attended children’s worship for the first time. After class, a weary worker returned their son and said, ‘Please don’t take him back to this class. We can’t handle him.’ For the next four years, his parent took turns attending church. Too old to qualify for nursery but unable to sit though the service, their young son, they felt, had no place in their congregation.”

—Barbara Newman (2001)

Casting a Vision For Every Child

Building an inclusive program begins with prayerful examination of your congregation’s heart for children. Ask yourself: *Is there really a place for a child with autism in our kindergarten class? Do we truly believe that our youth group is less than it ought to be when a teenager with disabilities does not feel welcome to attend? Are our teachers willing to welcome only those children who learn most quickly, speak most eloquently, behave most predictably, or work together most easily? Is our congregation committed to nurturing the faith formation of most children or all children?* Revisit your mission to ensure that it really encompasses every child, regardless of disability label. Consider the following example:

The vision of the children’s ministry of Fellowship Congregation is to partner together with families in nurturing each child’s spiritual development and lifelong relationship with God. We welcome every child, including those with special needs.

You may see only glimpses of this vision right now, but it should still describe where your congregation is headed. This purpose should fuel your work, compel your volunteers, and captivate your congregation. If your congregation has not always demonstrated a willingness to include children with disabilities, it may be necessary to clearly state to parents in your mission statement that your welcome really does extend to them.

To truly catch hold, a vision must be both articulated *and* shared with others. Make sure that it is communicated broadly to everyone in your congregation so that inclusion becomes the expectation. Place it on your brochures, hang it on your walls, and share it at volunteer trainings.

Parents should be confident that their child with autism is welcome in your programs for children and youth. Teachers, helpers, and other volunteers should anticipate that children with disabilities might be in their classes. This vision also should be shared widely beyond the walls of the congregation.

Concerns of Congregations

As you begin taking steps to develop program offerings that support children and youth with disabilities, expect to encounter some of the following challenges.

- *We tried inclusion once and it just didn't work!* It often takes time for new initiatives to find their place. Try again. Let any challenges you encountered push you to muster more creativity, ask better questions, seek more advice, and, perhaps, approach things differently. Remember that the potential impact of your efforts is too important to give up on.
- *I would like to help, but I just don't know how.* Even while affirming the importance of inclusion, lay volunteers may still feel unprepared to support a child with disabilities in their class. Religious education classes typically are taught by people who, unlike special educators and adult service providers, have not received formal training in disability-related issues. Reassure them that the gifts and passions that they bring to these efforts, when coupled with some basic strategies and good teaching, are more than sufficient. Dispel the myth that formal training or a specialized degree is required to welcome children with disabilities.
- *Children with disabilities will not be accepted by their peers.* As inclusion becomes the norm in elementary, middle, and high schools, most children already count their peers with disabilities among their classmates. So, do not be surprised when children express greater comfort with their classmates than do many adults. Moreover, adults can play an important role in creating classroom environments that promote acceptance and encourage positive relationships among all children.

Designing Inclusive Children's Programs

Most efforts to include children with disabilities begin just as they should continue: *one child at a time*. A need is recognized and a congregation responds. For example, a long-standing member has a son with Fragile X syndrome who now is old enough to enroll in the preschool class, the congregation hires a new staff person who happens to have a teenager with

severe cerebral palsy, or a new family with a sixth-grader with autism starts attending your congregation for the first time. As your congregation demonstrates its commitment to welcoming and supporting each of these children, trust that word will spread among other families in your community. As new families arrive, thoughtful and proactive planning will ensure that you are ready when they arrive at your door.

Establish a Planning Group Many congregations find it helpful to gather a planning group to begin assessing needs and next steps for including children with disabilities into their programming. Identify a core group of interested people who are willing to meet together and brainstorm both where and how to begin. This team should include at least one person who is very familiar with program offerings and activities for children and youth in the congregation, such as the children’s ministry director, youth pastor, curriculum coordinator, or a seasoned teacher. In addition, consider inviting members of the congregation who have experience working with children or adults with disabilities (e.g., special educators, therapists, health care workers), parents of children involved in the program, and a member of the congregation’s leadership. The size of the group will, of course, depend on the scope of the efforts you intend to undertake.

Identify a Program Approach Every person is unique. Thus, the specific strategies used to include one child in congregational activities might look quite different from those used to support another. Still, it is still wise to decide from the outset on the general approach you will use to include children in congregational life. This book argues for the importance of an inclusive approach that supports children to participate fully and actively in existing programs, rather than creating separate programs specifically for children with disabilities

“We must be conscious that ‘special’ must not become a euphemism for segregated programmes.”

—Simon Bass (2003)

(see Box 4.1). From this perspective, inclusion is much more than just being present in the same building. Rather, it is evidenced when children worship, learn, serve, and fellowship side-by-side. Commit to embracing a ministry model that affirms that every child belongs with his or her peers and that the only thing standing in the way of that happening is the resolve of your congregation.

Identify a Coordinator Numerous congregations have demonstrated that hiring new staff is not a prerequisite for including children with developmental disabilities in their programs. As more children become involved in your congregation, however, it may be beneficial to identify someone whose role is to ensure that informational and support needs related to inclusion are being addressed. With all of the other things vying

Box 4.1 Choosing a Curriculum

As you outline your curriculum for the upcoming year, seek out ways to meaningfully include children and youth with developmental and other disabilities in every lesson and activity. By considering the needs of all children from the very outset, teachers and helpers will encounter less difficulty adapting lessons throughout the year. Select curricular materials that engage children in multiple ways and provide teachers numerous ideas for delivering lessons. Every time you design a lesson with children with disabilities in mind, it is likely to improve learning and engagement for every child. Unfortunately, religious education curricula offered by only a few publishing houses address how lessons and activities might be adapted for children with developmental disabilities or other special needs. Instead, most resources for people with disabilities often are designed to be used in separate classes. These resources, however, may still offer planning teams helpful ideas for how lessons and activities might be adapted in creative ways (see Appendix B). Remember, it is important to explore how the existing curricula for a given class can be modified to include a broader range of children, rather than introducing a special curriculum just for children with disabilities.

for the attention of children's program staff, designating someone to serve in a coordinating role can ensure that the needs of children with disabilities are not overlooked. This person might assume responsibilities for extending invitations to families within and beyond the congregation; coordinating or directly providing training to teachers, helpers, and other lay volunteers; maintaining communication with families; seeking out helpful resources for teachers; developing new avenues for meeting the needs of children and families; and keeping the leadership informed of emerging needs, inspiring successes, and future plans. In addition, this person would advocate on behalf of the needs of children and families with disabilities to the congregation's leadership. Some congregations identify an existing staff person to assume this role as part of their other responsibilities, such as an early childhood ministry leader, director of religious education, or youth director. As responsibilities increase in response to growing needs, some larger congregations eventually do choose to hire a staff person devoted specifically to disability issues.

Seek Out Supports and Resources As you pursue efforts to include children with disabilities, make certain to draw on the gifts, expertise, and passions of others already within your congregation. Perhaps your congregation counts special educators, job coaches, early childhood specialists,

paraprofessionals, behavioral specialists, psychologists, or social services providers among its members. If they are not already involved in planning efforts, share with these individuals the steps you are undertaking and seek out their advice. Invite them to participate in brainstorming sessions or to assist in problem-solving any challenges that may arise. However, think more broadly than just traditional service providers. Perhaps there are artists, carpenters, engineers, hobbyists, and other creative or “tech savvy” individuals whose skills could be drawn on to make a particular classroom, activity, or lesson more accessible to children. Maybe there are people who just love trying new experiences, are full of energy, have a great sense of humor, like to “go with the flow,” or are especially sensitive to the needs of others. Most people have never considered how their talents could readily be used to support the participation of children with disabilities.

Revisit Program Procedures As with all programs for children, you should have already developed procedures for responding to accidents, injuries, or other unexpected incidents. For children with developmental disabilities, many of whom may have related special health care needs, clear procedures are especially critical. Similarly, procedures for screening volunteers and protecting the confidentiality of children should be firmly in place. When beginning any new endeavor involving children, contact your congregation’s legal counsel or insurance provider about issues related to liability.

Identifying Children’s Support Needs

Preparation to welcome children with disabilities into your programs should occur on at least two levels. First, you will want to be ready to welcome every child from the moment that they arrive at your classroom door. For example, a child with disabilities and her family may be visiting your congregation for the very first time or a regular member may be accompanied by a relative with disabilities visiting from out of town. It sends an incredible message to families when you were ready to receive their child whenever they arrive, instead of turning a child away because you feel unprepared (see Figure 4.1). Second, when families make the decision to call your congregation their permanent home, you will want to take steps to ensure that your teaching leaders or other volunteers are prepared to support the long-term participation of children as they grow up in your program. To do this effectively, consider taking the following steps.

Listen to Families Scheduling time to meet with parents is one of the best ways to get to know their child and the supports that he or she might need. Share a conversation over a cup of coffee or offer to visit their home.

WE WELCOME KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS!

We are committed to welcoming children with special needs into our programs and activities. We believe that every child is created and loved by God. We are excited to have the opportunity to meet and minister to your son or daughter. In order to best meet the needs of each child, we ask that families follow these steps:

1. Tell the welcome person at the registration desk about any special needs your child might have.
2. You will be introduced to your child's classroom teacher. Tell the teacher a little bit about your child. How best can we support your child? What are his or her gifts and needs?
3. If you feel your child needs one-to-one support, let us know. We will try to identify an additional person who can help your child in his or her class today.
4. If you decide to make this your congregational home, please contact _____ . We will set up a time to meet with you to find out more about your child and the steps we can take to welcome and support him or her in our programs.

We are glad you have joined us!

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask!

Figure 4.1. An example of a sign for welcoming first-time visitors. (From Spencer, S. [2005, May]. *Blackhawk Church procedures for kids with special needs*. Madison, WI: Blackhawk Church; adapted by permission.)

Reassure parents of your commitment to welcoming their child into congregational activities and explain that the purpose of your time together is to explore together how best to accomplish that goal. Ask parents to share what they have learned about how best to help their child adapt to a new setting; participate in various activities; and feel welcome, safe, and loved. Invite parents to tell you about strategies that have worked particularly well (and not so well) in other places throughout the week, such as in school, at home, or during other community activities. Allow parents to share their concerns and apprehensions as well. Your conversation is aimed at gathering information that would be helpful for adults who will interact with the child as teachers and other lay volunteers. Thus, the meeting should be informal, encouraging, and focused on gathering ideas for supporting the child. Parents should feel confident that you are looking for ways to include, rather than exclude, their child.

"Parents of children with special needs have experienced a great deal of rejection. It seems they have to fight for everything that their child needs—and they do not want to have to fight for their child in church. It is too easy to simply stay home and avoid the fight. So we must communicate to these families that we want their child in our programs and will do whatever it takes to make it work."

—Cheryl Rosenberg (1999)

Figure 4.2 offers sample questions that you might ask during your conversations with parents. In fact, many of these questions would be useful to pose to the parents of *any* child who has unique needs, whether or not those needs are related to a developmental disability. The information

How long have you been attending our congregation? What first brought you here?

In what ways would you like to see your child involved in this congregation?

What has been your child's previous experience in other congregations?

Tell us about your child.

What does she enjoy doing? Not enjoy doing?

What are her gifts and talents? What does she do well? What does she love to "show off"?

How does she communicate with others? How does she express excitement? Frustration?

Tell us about your family.

Tell us about your child's disability.

How might her disability affect her involvement in congregational activities?

Are there any treatments, interventions, or services that she is receiving that we should incorporate into our programs?

Is there any special equipment or adaptive devices that we should consider acquiring to help your child participate more fully?

Are there any environmental issues that might make your child uncomfortable and agitated?

Figure 4.2. Sample questionnaire for parents of children with disabilities.

Does she have any allergies or food restrictions we should know about?

How can we best support the positive behavior of your child?

Are there things we should definitely avoid doing or saying?

Are there things we should absolutely do?

What does she find most rewarding?

What is the best way to respond when your child becomes upset?

How would you describe your child's faith? What are the best ways to communicate spiritual truths?

Are there important goals that you have for your child as she participates in our program this year? As you look into the future?

What could we do to make our children's program the most exciting time of the week for your child?

How would you like us to respond when other children or adults ask us about your child's disability?

What do you see as the biggest challenges to including your child in congregational activities?

How can our congregation help support your family as you raise your child? Can we _____ [offer specific examples]?

Is there anything else that you would like us to know about your child or family?

you gather may be sufficient to get you started or it may be compiled into a more focused “religious education plan” or a brief “biography” to be shared with those adults who will interact with the child. Of course, parents may express various degrees of comfort with the information they are willing to have shared about their child. Therefore, it is essential that you ask parents about what they would and would not like relayed to volunteers and other children. An attitude of respectfulness and confidentiality are absolutely essential.

Developing Religious Education Plans

Individualized planning has long been a core principle of educational and adult services for people with disabilities. Recognizing that every person has unique aspirations and different needs, such plans offer personalized maps that sketch out a person’s goals and detail the supports and resources needed to help him or her realize those goals. Religious educators and lay volunteers can draw on the best aspects of this planning process to ensure that every child with disabilities is meaningfully included and well supported in the life of the congregation. The outcome of this process—sometimes called a *religious education plan*, or *inclusion plan*—should be a plan tailored to address the specific needs of each child. In other words, these plans help you become an expert on how best to welcome a specific child, rather than on the specific disability condition. It is not important to know all of the details of a child’s diagnosis, just how to support him or her best.

The starting point for developing a religious education plan is a meeting with the child’s parents (described previously). It often is helpful to involve the adults who are (or will be) serving as the child’s teacher or helper. Some congregations invite others who know the child well, such as a favorite teacher, neighbor, or family friend. As a group, consider the following questions when developing a child’s support plan.

- *How does the child learn best?* It is a good question to ask of any child, but particularly children with disabilities who may appear to learn differently. Ask parents to explain the avenues and modalities (e.g., seeing, hearing, doing) through which their child seems to learn best. Discuss those instructional strategies that seem to work well at home, at school, and in other settings. You may discover new ideas that will benefit every child in the class.
- *Are there any health or medical issues that should be considered?* Some children with disabilities have special health care needs beyond those that teachers typically encounter. Find out if and how those needs can be addressed during the Sunday/Sabbath school hour or other children’s activities. For example, a brief tip sheet might need to be given to

adults working with a child who sometimes has seizures. Or, an emergency plan might need to be periodically revised as a child's health condition changes.

- *How does the child communicate with others?* Does he or she use any type of assistive technology to interact with others or his or her environment? For example, a child might use an augmentative communication device to talk to peers, an electronic switch to make basic choices, or modified sign language to express when they are hungry or need to use the restroom. Ask parents to demonstrate for you any unfamiliar technology or communication strategies.
- *Are there behavioral issues that will need to be considered?* Ask about the extent to which the child engages in challenging or atypical behaviors. Such information should not be used as a reason to exclude the child, but rather to assist you in being proactive in identifying ways of reducing the likelihood that such behaviors will be displayed (see Box 4.2).
- *What goals and key spiritual concepts are most important?* Teachers often express hesitation about including a child with developmental disabilities who may struggle to learn the same curricular material in the same ways as others in the class. But most parents are probably not expecting that their children will learn exactly the same things as other

Box 4.2
**Separate Programs for Children, Youth,
and Adults with Developmental Disabilities**

Even a cursory look at the history of people with developmental disabilities confirms society's propensity to segregate people who seem different. This same inclination is evident within many faith communities. Although national data is not available, the most common response in congregations appears to be to establish separate religious education classes, recreational activities, and worship services for children and adults with developmental disabilities. However, relegating children and adults with developmental disabilities to separate programs is neither welcoming nor necessary. Indeed, separate programs lack one very critical aspect of congregational life: *community*. As schools throughout the country are discovering, children with developmental disabilities can be served just as well—sometimes even more effectively—when they are included among their peers. When considering some of the arguments for inclusion described in Chapter 1, it is clear that the congregation misses out on something vital when they lose the opportunity to worship, learn, serve, and fellowship alongside their friends and neighbors with disabilities.

children. For many parents of children with more severe disabilities (and children without disabilities), it is most important that their children feel welcomed and valued in the classroom, as well as feel assured that they are loved deeply by God. For these parents, it might be most important that their children develop friendships with their peers, be accepted by others, and fulfill important roles in the class. Other parents may be working at home on learning important character traits—such as honesty, responsibility, or compassion—and would like to see those same traits reinforced in class.

- *What should the child's participation look like?* As you devise a support plan, think broadly about what it really means for a child to participate *fully* in your congregation and brainstorm strategies for supporting this type of participation. Although inclusion in Sunday/Sabbath school classes often receive the most attention, consider how you will help each child participate in the many other activities of your congregation, such as children's time during the worship service, choirs and musical groups, holiday pageants, summer programs, day trips, service projects, and other ceremonies and rites of passage (e.g., baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation, Shabbat services). Also recognize that even though some children may only be able to participate partially in certain activities, their involvement still should be supported.
- *What can you learn from others?* Most children with developmental disabilities will be receiving specialized services in other settings throughout the week in places such as early childhood centers, schools, or community recreational programs. Ask if there are support strategies and adaptations used in those settings that might also be helpful for the child as they participate in your congregation. For example, parents might be willing to share a copy of their child's behavior support plan from school if it is relevant. Ask parents about whether there are other individuals who work with their child (e.g., a respite worker, former teacher, or paraprofessional) with whom it might be helpful for teachers or helpers to talk.

"I talked with a father last week about his son, Brian. Brian just turned nine and is enjoying the new school year. The father was excited because this is the first year that Brian is in a class with other students who do not have a developmental disability.... The father expressed feelings of relief, excitement, and encouragement—finally his son had a place at the table. He then paused, thought for a moment, and said, 'I wish it was the same at our church.'"

—Scott Landes (2001/2002)

Figure 4.3 displays one possible format a religious education plan might take. The first section is an overview used to gather information, and then the Participation Planning form in section II of the form will help to

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PLAN FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

I. Overview

We are excited that your child will be involved in our programs! We would like to ask you to provide the following information so that we can ensure that our programs meet the needs of your child.

Date:

Name:

Date of birth:

Parents/Caregiver:

Address:

Telephone:

E-mail:

If absolutely necessary, where can we find you during the time we are with your child?

Main sanctuary _____ Classroom: _____ Other: _____

What are some things that your child really enjoys doing?

In what ways does your child learn best? Are there teaching strategies that work particularly well?

How does your child communicate with others?

What types of assistance (if any) will your child need with eating, getting around, or using the restroom?

What behavioral challenges might we encounter when interacting with your child (if any)?

-
-
-
-

For each challenge, what are some strategies for responding that seem to work well?

-
-
-
-

Figure 4.3. Sample religious education plan.

(continued)

How would you describe where your child is right now in his or her faith journey?

What are the most important goals and concepts that we should be focusing on?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Other information:

Describe any allergies that we should know about.

Is your child on medications that may impact his or her behavior? If so, describe.

Is your child at increased risk for getting sick from other children? How can we reduce this risk?

Are there other medical issues of which we should be aware? If so, how should we be prepared to respond to these issues?

Do you have any other specific concerns that we can try to address?

Figure 4.3. (continued)

organize the plan. Of course, it can (and should) be adapted to reflect the unique aspects of your congregation. Other formats have been presented in other resources (e.g., Carter, 1999; Mose, 2001; Newman, 2001; Pierson, 2002; Tada & Miller, 2002). A religious education plan does not have to be so comprehensive as to cover every conceivable situation that might arise. It simply offers a starting point for including a child; one that can be built on as others get to know him or her better. An overly extensive plan that is “time intensive” is likely to either discourage people or go unused. Plans also should be revisited as often as needed, such as when the child transitions to a different class or teacher, becomes involved in a new activity, encounters unexpected challenges, or experiences a dramatic change related to their disability. However, an annual review and update of the plan is probably sufficient.

Creating Biographies

Simply passing on information about the causes and characteristics of a particular diagnosis is generally much less helpful than sharing information about the interests and needs of a specific child. Although children sharing the label of autism or Down syndrome may have many things in common, there still remains incredible diversity in strengths and needs from one child to the next. It is far more important that teachers understand exactly what Tamisha, Sophie, or Madeleine need than to know what children with a particular disability generally need. Although it is usually hoped that a disability label will communicate helpful information, it can also have the opposite effect. Being introduced to a child through their label (e.g., Stefan has autism) often evokes only images of what he or she cannot do, leading people to feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped before they ever have the chance to get to know the child.

A biography offers a more informal approach to introducing a child with disabilities that can be used in conjunction with or in lieu of a religious education plan. A biography offers a brief, but informative, description of a child, accompanied by examples of ways that he or she can be supported to participate in children’s activities. An example biography is included in Figure 4.4. Biographies can take many forms and might contain general information about the child, including their interests and strengths; ideas for how a child can participate, even partially, in typical activities; and tips for making the child feel welcome and safe. The biographies should also include information about who to contact when more information is needed.

One advantage of biographies is that a substitute teacher, new helper, or occasional volunteer can easily pick one up and quickly review it to pro-

II. Participation Plan		
Describe the strategies and supports that will be used to involve the child in the following aspects of congregational life:		
Activities	What will the child's involvement look like?	What supports will the child need to participate?
<i>Small group activities</i>		
<i>Large group activities</i>		
<i>Summer programs and camps</i>		
<i>Other programs for children and youth (children's choir, recreational activities, etc.)</i>		
<i>Worship services</i>		
<i>Rites of passage, preparation classes, and other activities</i>		
<i>Service and outreach opportunities</i>		

Figure 4.4. Sample biography of Sam. (From Spencer, S. [2005, May]. *Blackhawk Church procedures for kids with special needs*. Madison, WI: Blackhawk Church; adapted by permission.)

Who is Sam?

- Sam is 12 years old and in sixth grade; he has been attending our program for three years.
- Sam has three siblings: Meredith is 7, Wesley is 9, and Eric (his twin) also is 12.
- Sam's parents are Tim and Sandy.
- Sam has a genetic condition called Williams syndrome.

What does he like to do?

- He loves country music, race cars, and any kind of crafts.
- He enjoys drawing and is very good at doing portraits.
- Sam sometimes likes to rock back in forth. It keeps him calm.

How does Sam communicate with others?

- Sam is incredibly social and loves to talk with anyone he meets; he tends to interact more with adults, but he really wants to make new friends among his peers.
- When he is frustrated, he sometimes raises his voice or paces around the room.

What are some ways that you include him in activities?

- Sam has great difficulty reading, so ask him questions orally or pair him with a peer whenever reading is necessary.
- Find alternative ways to help him to participate, such as having him pass out worksheets and supplies, turn pages in the readings, or call on classmates during discussions.

What are some of the goals you can be helping Sam work toward?

- His parents are working with him on the importance of telling the truth and taking responsibility.
- Sam is noticing differences related to his disability. His parents would like us to find opportunities to reaffirm for Sam that God loves him very much.

How might you encourage Sam when he is doing something well?

- He loves adult attention and that is usually sufficient. An occasional "high-five" goes a long way.
- Sam loves going out for sub sandwiches after church; this can be used to encourage good behavior when he seems to be a bit agitated.

What should you keep an eye out for?

- Recently, Sam has had some behavioral challenges. They tend to occur when he feels rushed to finish something. Providing him cues that the class is almost over often helps.
- If he starts to pace, it is a sign he is about to lose his temper. Offer him a break to regroup.

Is it okay to talk about his disability?

- Sam's parents definitely want to increase understanding and acceptance among his peers, so it is okay to explain to other children about Williams syndrome to dispel any myths they may hold. Attached is a brief information sheet about his disability. Sam also is comfortable with answering questions from peers.

If you need any addition information, do not hesitate to ask Sharon Paulin (Room 108) or Sam's parents (555-1212).

vide a starting point for supporting a child. It is not uncommon for a volunteer to be absent some mornings. Having basic information ready and available for a temporary substitute can ensure that the child does not have to miss activities that week or have his or her parents leave worship services or classes to stay with them. As you get to know the child better, periodically update his or her biography to reflect the new information and strategies that you have learned. As children grow up in your congregation, their goals will certainly change, new needs will often surface, and new avenues for participation will emerge.

Conducting Ongoing Communication

It is essential that the lines of communication between program leaders, families, teachers, and volunteers always remain open. After a child has been involved in activities for several weeks, follow up with his or her parents, teachers, helpers, and other volunteers to find out how everything is going. Discuss additional questions and challenges that have arisen as everyone has accumulated experience working with and getting to know the child. Often, it is during these follow-up discussions that teachers raise more specific questions about the disability and its impact on the child.

EQUIPPING LAY VOLUNTEERS TO SERVE ALL CHILDREN

Most activities within programs for children and youth are carried out by lay people who volunteer their time and who likely have had little, if any, formal training in issues related to children with disabilities. Some may feel unequipped to include a child with disabilities in their program. Others may respond initially with hesitation or reluctance to your request to include a child with disabilities in their class. Equipping children's workers to meet the spiritual needs of every child, including those with developmental disabilities, is an incredibly important task.

Roles of Lay Volunteers

There are many different avenues through which members of a congregation might contribute their time and gifts toward including children and youth with developmental disabilities. Teaching comes quickly to mind because teachers assume responsibility for leading activities for a class or group of children—one or more of whom might have a developmental disability or other special needs—on a regular basis. In addition, it may be necessary to identify people who are willing to provide any additional

assistance that may be needed. Finally, there is an important role for other lay volunteers whose involvement will be more occasional and short-term. The following section describes roles people may assume in supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities. Because the titles attached to these roles vary from one congregation to another, consider how these responsibilities might be met in your faith community.

Lead Teachers Lay people working as teachers and leaders in religious education programs feel called to nurture the spiritual development of children in their congregation. Some teachers may have less confidence in their ability to carry out this call with children who happen to have disabilities. Your efforts can go a long way toward assuring teachers that they really do know more than they think they do and that they and their class have much to gain from welcoming a child with disabilities. Help teachers learn to communicate lessons in multiple ways to capture the attention and promote the learning of a wider range of students. Teachers often rely too heavily on reading and writing activities. Equip teachers to vary their teaching methods by incorporating storytelling, drama, music, skits, role playing, games, activities, crafts, and other interactive approaches. Adapting activities to meet the needs of every child is a key quality of good teaching, but it is absolutely essential when working with children with developmental disabilities. Using such a “universal design” approach, in which curricula and activities are designed with all children in mind right from the beginning, serves to increase the participation of children with disabilities and keep teachers from having to adapt activities at the last minute or not at all.

To support teachers to meet the needs of the children and youth in their care, let them know that you will invite additional people, such as helpers or “buddies,” to assist them in their efforts. This extra assistance is especially important in larger groups, where it would be difficult for the teacher to provide extra attention to a single child or when a child has more substantial support needs.

Helpers Many children with developmental disabilities will benefit from having additional support to participate fully in activities. Identifying a helper who will accompany the child is one avenue for providing this support. Often called an *assistant*, *companion*, *mentor*, *shadow*, or *support*, helpers accompany the child during programs and provide one-to-one assistance, as needed. Helpers seek out creative ways of including a child in ongoing activities and facilitating interactions with classmates. Although their primary focus is to ensure that children with disabilities are well supported and meaningfully included, helpers should view their role much more broadly by helping the lead teacher to address the needs and

participation of every child in the group. During times when a child with disabilities does not require one-to-one assistance, helpers should also be interacting with other children in the class. This “only as much support as is needed” approach will help children fit in better and enjoy increased independence.

Buddies Other children can play a vital role in welcoming children with disabilities into religious education classes and activities. For example, older children might serve as buddies (e.g., *friendship partners*, *mentors*, or *peer supports*) to younger children with disabilities, providing the help they might need to be involved in various activities. Moreover, as children get older—particularly during middle and high school—they often desire less dependence on adults. Adolescents with disabilities may prefer not to have an adult accompanying them all of the time, especially because the constant presence of an adult can make other youth reluctant to interact with them. With just a little instruction and guidance, teenagers often prove to be quite capable of providing support to their peers with disabilities (Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005). In fact, they often turn out to be even more creative than adults at discovering effective ways to include their peers with disabilities.

Substitutes As more children with disabilities become involved in your congregation’s programs, it may be wise to devise a backup plan for when helpers or buddies must be absent. Identify others in your congregation who are willing to serve as an occasional substitute when the usual helper is unavailable or an unexpected child visits for the first time. Having someone you can call on at the last minute can keep a child with disabilities from being turned away because necessary support is not available. For example, you might compile the names of several members of the congregation who would be willing to provide additional assistance in a classroom on very short notice. Often, there are people within a congregation who would like an opportunity to work with children in your program, but are only available occasionally. Perhaps they are involved in their own class or they frequently travel out of town. Participating as a substitute allows them a way to contribute to your congregation’s vision. Of course, a parent of the child also may be willing to occasionally fill in, but generally you should rely on family members only as a last resort. Remember that your ministry is not just to children, but also to their families.

Identifying Lay Volunteers

Prior to identifying individuals to serve as teachers, helpers, buddies, or substitutes, it is important to outline your expectations for volunteers. In

what capacities will you be asking them to serve? Some congregations develop written descriptions of these ministry roles. If you are unsure of what to include, consider describing the nature of the commitment you are asking people to make (e.g., one month, one summer, one year), the types of interactions they will have with children with disabilities, and the ways in which you will equip them to serve effectively in their new roles. As you gain experience, you can tailor these descriptions to reflect the ongoing lessons you are learning.

As with any position, your goal is not simply to find *any* volunteer, but rather to find dedicated individuals who recognize this role as an opportunity to use their gifts to meet the needs of children in their congregation. Prayerfully seek out people who have gifts and passions that would advance your congregation's vision for welcoming and nurturing every child. Explain that past experience with people with disabilities is not the most essential quality; anyone can learn how to offer support. When a person brings both past experience and related gifts, it is a wonderful combination. However, many people have either never considered or not yet found an opportunity to share their gifts in this way and their contributions should still be encouraged. Distinguish between skills a person can learn with help and qualities they should already possess. Seek out people who express a willingness to learn, who love children, who are willing to be flexible, who enjoy thinking creatively, and who recognize this as an avenue for connecting their gifts with needs.

Finding helpers who are consistent and reliable sources of support is essential, particularly when first welcoming a child into your program. In addition to adults in your congregation, consider college-age young adults and mature high school students as potential helpers. Some congregations try to identify more than one person willing to provide support to a given child. This ensures that someone is always available to provide support and it reduces the commitment required by any single person. Some children, however, have difficulty adjusting to frequent changes in routines, so it is important to consider the needs of the particular child.

Several approaches can be used to identify people to serve in the roles of lead teachers, assistants, buddies, and substitutes.

- If your congregation distributes a survey as part of its awareness efforts (see Chapters 2 and 3), make sure that the survey includes a place for members to indicate their interest in volunteering with children.
- Some congregations have developed other approaches for connecting gifts and opportunities within and beyond their congregation, such as time and talent surveys, skill inventories, or spiritual gift questionnaires. As gifts are identified, make sure that supporting children with

disabilities is included among the many avenues offered for engaging those gifts.

- Ask parents if they can suggest people who have shown a special interest in their child with disabilities.
- Keep an eye out for members of your congregation who seem to make extra effort to seek out and interact with people with disabilities.
- Buddies can be identified from among peers within a child's class or by approaching older children in other classes. For example, some congregations invite high school students to serve as buddies to elementary students with disabilities.
- Post opportunity announcements throughout your building, on your web site, and in bulletins and newsletters. Consider interviewing a teacher, helper, or buddy who currently is working with a child with disabilities. Write up a summary of their thoughts and distribute it for others to read.

Educating Religious Educators

The approach you take to train and equip children's ministry workers to welcome and support children with disabilities will be influenced by many factors, including the number of children with disabilities, the nature of those disabilities, and the specific activities in which the children will participate. As you seek to tailor training opportunities to meet the specific needs of your congregation, several issues should be considered.

Who Will Lead the Training Sessions? For just one or two volunteers, it may be sufficient to meet with parents and the child's lead teacher to brainstorm inclusion strategies. Parents often are the best source of information about their children, so it is wise to turn to them for ideas and strategies. Invite past helpers or buddies to meet with the new volunteers to share strategies they have learned over time.

As additional children with disabilities become involved in your programs and your inclusion efforts broaden, consider offering more focused learning opportunities for lay volunteers. Look within your congregation to find current members who can contribute to training efforts. For example, an elementary school teacher from your congregation could share ideas for adapting activities and curricula; a doctor, nurse, or other health care professional may be willing to talk about how to address basic medical issues or strategies for responding to specific concerns (e.g., toileting, choking, seizures); a counselor could talk about strategies for promoting

positive peer relationships among classmates; and a clergy member could talk about creative ways to communicate important spiritual truths.

It also can be helpful to bring in people with specific expertise from another congregation, organization, or agency. Extend an invitation to one or more of the following individuals: disability consultants from within your denomination or faith group; members of other congregations involved in disability ministry; special educators, paraprofessionals, and related service providers (e.g., occupational, physical, or speech therapists) from your local school system; professors from local colleges and universities working in departments that address disability-related issues (e.g., communication disorders, counseling, elementary/secondary education, rehabilitation psychology, social work, special education); or staff from organizations that serve people with disabilities. Many of these people would be excited to partner with you in your training efforts. Have them come to your yearly kick-off for volunteers to set the tone and introduce themselves as an available resource.

Who Should Be Involved in Your Training Efforts? Training needs will vary depending on the role that each person will play in supporting children with disabilities. Lead teachers will benefit from broader training on quality and creative teaching strategies that are likely to capture the hearts, minds, and attention of the diverse group of children in their class. Good teaching will be good for every child. Helpers will need information that is focused more directly on the specific child or children whom they will be supporting. Buddies usually only need basic information about their classmates, as well as general strategies for interacting with and assisting them to participate in ongoing activities. Often, other information is provided on an “as needed” basis.

What Information Should Be Shared? Some of the topics you will want to cover can be woven into the general training activities provided to all children’s volunteers (see Table 4.1). Begin by explaining the focus and importance of your children’s program, drawing on the vision you have articulated (e.g., to assure children that they belong and are loved by God; to nurture their spiritual formation; and to help them discover their needs, gifts, and place in the world). Teachers, helpers, and others should understand the ways that their efforts can contribute to and be fueled by this vision. To help others catch hold of this vision, share God’s perspective on disabilities, drawing on scriptural passages and other theological and doctrinal teachings of your faith tradition (see Appendices A and B). Remind volunteers that their efforts will not only affect children with disabilities but also the family members and classmates of those children. In fact,

Table 4.1. Topics to address when training teachers, helpers, and other volunteers

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- Describe the mission of your program and how each person contributes to that mission
 - Share insights into God's perspective on disabilities (see Appendices A and B)
 - Talk about the impact of inclusive programs on children with disabilities, peers, family members, and lay volunteers
 - Answer questions about how to interact with people with disabilities and offer tips for using affirming language
 - Present basic strategies for adapting lessons and activities
 - Offer ideas for facilitating relationships among children with and without disabilities
 - Share relevant information about the specific children who will be participating (e.g., interests, strengths, communication strategies, unique needs)
 - Discuss any emergency procedures or expectations about confidentiality
 - Offer basic strategies for managing children's behavior
 - Communicate your expectations for volunteers and address any other information specific to their roles
-

they should expect their own lives to be affected by the relationships they develop.

Share general strategies for adapting activities and programs for children with disabilities (see Table 4.2). In fact, these general strategies are useful for any teacher to know when working with any group of children.

Table 4.2. General strategies for adapting activities and programs for children with disabilities

Adaptation area/type	Comments	Examples
Curricular	Begin with the existing curriculum, identify the main concepts, find out how the child learns best, and adapt the materials and activities accordingly. Lessons and materials may need to be simplified or supplemented, but they should always remain age-appropriate.	Augment the lesson with pictures, videos, or other concrete examples. Reduce the amount of reading required. Supplement the lesson with additional activities.
Participation level	Allow children to participate in multiple ways and at various levels. Some children may only be able to participate partially in some activities, but their involvement should still be valued and supported.	Add motions to songs to include children who are nonverbal. Have a child cut out pictures and symbols to describe a concept or story. Allow a child who cannot read to turn the pages and or act out part of the story.

Adaptation area/type	Comments	Examples
Instructional level	Vary your teaching methods, rather than relying exclusively on reading and writing activities. Connect lessons with students' life experiences. Communicate concepts clearly and in multiple ways, using repetition to reinforce important concepts.	Use a variety of approaches to communicate lesson truths, including drama, stories, puppets, music, and role-playing. Rephrase a story so that it is more understandable at the child's level of cognition.
Expectations	Be clear about your expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the classroom, remembering that expectations may have to be adjusted for students with specific needs. Encourage good behavior by reinforcing it often.	Allow a child who has difficulty sitting still for extended periods to move around the classroom. Use a picture calendar to help a child anticipate the next activity. Use a token system to support positive behavior.
Environmental	For a child to participate fully, it may be necessary to change the classroom setting in some way. Providing physical accommodations, removing distractions, and providing special equipment all may enhance the learning environment.	Rearrange a classroom to accommodate a wheelchair. Purchase adapted writing/drawing tools, scissors, or tables to enable a child to complete crafts and other activities.
Supports	Providing the child with additional assistance from an adult or pairing the child with one or more peers who can support participation in class activities.	Have children work together in groups to present a Bible story as a skit. Ask a classmate to help a peer with disabilities paint a mural about loving others. Recruit a college student to help a youth with disabilities serve coffee during fellowship time.

Remind teachers that there are many different ways to communicate a lesson and children may grasp the message different ways. However, the most important lessons often are not even contained in the written curriculum, but are communicated through the relationships that develop among children and teachers. Demonstrate some of the different ways that activities might be adapted for children who learn somewhat differently.

Because every child with disabilities is unique, some of the information and strategies that you share will need to be child specific. Additional training might be provided individually to the teachers and helpers who will be working with a particular child. Draw on the information that you

have learned from conversations with parents and your previous experiences including other children. The goal is not to make teachers and helpers experts in every aspect of a particular disability, but rather to provide them with the information and strategies they will need to begin supporting a specific child. *Is there special equipment that she uses? Does he communicate in alternative or different ways? What adaptations might be helpful to use during certain activities? With what activities might she need extra help?* Behavioral issues are likely to be a primary concern of many volunteers, so make certain that strategies for preventing and deescalating challenging behaviors are addressed (see Box 4.3). If disability specific information is important, helpful information sheets and resource guides can be downloaded for free from the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (www.nichcy.org).

Box 4.3 **Addressing Behavioral Challenges**

The issue of challenging behavior often emerges as one of primary concerns voiced by teachers, helpers, and other volunteers. Every program should establish clear procedures for how adults are to address disruptive behaviors exhibited by any child. For most children with developmental disabilities, these procedures will be sufficient. However, some children may engage in behaviors that are especially challenging, and additional considerations may need to be addressed. Consider the following general strategies for supporting positive behavior among children and youth.

- Model the behaviors that you expect children to display.
- Convey your expectations using clear and simple language; set understandable limits.
- Break down complex directions and tasks into smaller, more manageable, parts.
- Offer frequent opportunities for children to experience success; catch students being good and let them know it.
- Remember that inappropriate behavior may stem from many different causes, including not understanding classroom expectations, difficulty communicating preferences and needs, unexpected changes in routines, or the effects of medications. Try to determine the root cause of the behavior when deciding how you will respond.
- Find out what people, activities, or settings seem to anticipate behavioral challenges. Then, brainstorm ways of addressing those triggers. For example, a child may struggle when the room gets crowded, noises get loud, or routines are disrupted unexpectedly.

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- Visiting a congregation (or any new place) for the first several times can be stressful and unpredictable for children with disabilities. Recognize that it may take some time for some children to settle in to a new place, different routines, and unfamiliar people.
- Talk with parents about their recommendations for handling specific behavioral concerns that you are encountering. They can be key allies.

When challenging behavior persists, consider drawing on the expertise of a behavioral consultant, special educator, or other professional who works with the child in other settings. These individuals may be able to offer keen insight into approaches for reducing the occurrence of challenging behaviors. What seems unpredictable at first glance may be readily understandable by someone with more experience. Several published books may also be helpful (see Janney & Snell, 2000; Koegel, Koegel, & Dunlap, 1996; Luiselli, 2006). Your goal should be to develop a plan so that parents are called out of worship services only as an absolute last resort.



The support needs of some children with more severe disabilities can be quite substantial. The more a helper can learn about a child, the better equipped and more confident he or she will be to provide support. With a parent's permission, consider arranging a time for a teacher or helper to spend time with the child during school or at home. For example, a helper might observe the child during several class periods at school, talking with a special educator or paraprofessional about the support strategies they have found to be effective. Parents may even be willing to have a helper spend some time interacting with the child at their home or watching the child participate in a therapy session. These approaches not only serve to acquaint the helper with strategies others are using to include a child but they also serve to increase the child's familiarity and comfort with the person who will be providing support. It is not unusual for some children to need extra time to warm up to a new person. Other approaches might include inviting a staff from the child's school to visit your congregation to offer hands-on guidance or having the child's teacher or helper observe at another congregation where people serve in similar support roles. Sometimes, the best way to learn something new is by watching other people doing it.

Supporting the Contributions of Lay Volunteers

Any new undertaking can be accompanied by challenges, and inclusive children's ministries are certainly no exception. Some children will exhaust

you and some days will leave you feeling unsuccessful. Yet, this work is deeply rewarding. Most volunteers express great satisfaction with their contributions and recognize that they are making an eternal difference in the lives of children and their families. It is essential that everyone working in your program be well supported and encouraged as they use their gifts and engage their passions to welcome children and youth with disabilities. The following strategies can be taken to support the ongoing work of volunteers.

Encourage Open Communication Lines of communication between program leaders, volunteers, and parents should be kept wide open. Encourage teachers, helpers, buddies, and other volunteers to ask frequent questions, share their apprehensions, and offer suggestions. It is critical that teachers know to whom they can go for support. Everyone has much to learn from each other about how to include children in meaningful ways. In addition, make sure that families and volunteers both know whom to contact when they will not be in attendance on a given week. It also may be helpful for teachers and parents to share a periodic e-mail or conversation after class to keep communication lines open.

Extend Learning Opportunities Nurture the gifts of volunteers by offering occasional learning opportunities. Consider holding monthly or quarterly workshops that explore different aspects of serving and meeting the needs of children with and without disabilities. Partner with other congregations in your community to attract a larger audience and divide planning responsibilities. In addition, let volunteers know about regional, state, and national conferences that include sessions or strands on inclusive ministry. Because conferences can be expensive, set aside funds to help to defray the expenses associated with attending these learning events. Finally, compile print and video resources into a lending library for teachers, helpers, and others who want to seek out more information on their own (see Appendix B for a list of books and other resources that might comprise this library).

Recognize Efforts Celebrate the contributions that each person is making to the lives of children and their families. Reassure everyone that the efforts that they are making really matter, even when success seems hard to recognize. Write notes of appreciation to staff, volunteers, and others who contribute their time, energy, passions, and creativity to these endeavors. Hold an annual dinner to reflect on the successes of the past year and cast a vision for the upcoming year.

Share Stories As you hear stories from parents, children, and other members of your congregation, share them with your volunteers so that

everyone recognizes the impact that their efforts are having. For example, a child with autism who rarely spoke now excitedly sings along during music time, a member of the congregation who always felt like she had little to offer found an opportunity to use her gifts through serving as a helper to a first grader with autism, a middle school student who serves as a buddy to a peer with disabilities in his youth group begins advocating for including that peer in his school, or a parent shares of how her daughter with Down syndrome received her very first invitation to the birthday party from a peer in her confirmation class.

HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO WELCOME THEIR PEERS

When first including a child with disabilities in activities within your congregation, other children naturally will be curious. Adults can prepare children and youth by addressing their questions and concerns as well as by helping them to consider ideas for interacting with their peers with disabilities. As schools increasingly adopt inclusive practices, children are enjoying more opportunities to develop relationships with their peers with disabilities. You might be surprised at just how welcoming most children can be, especially when provided with just a little guidance.

The following strategies can be used to guide children in welcoming peers with disabilities into their class or program:

- The most important step you can take is to model the behaviors that you expect children to display. Children will be watching how you interact and, for better or worse, they will follow your lead. This includes how you speak to (and about) children with disabilities. Make sure your language is age-appropriate and affirming.
- Some children initially might be uncertain of how to interact with their peers with disabilities. Offer children some specific ideas, such as helping someone to complete a craft, follow along in a workbook or songbook, play a musical instrument, participate in a game, pass out snacks, relate a lesson to his or her own life, or get around the building in a wheelchair.
- Involve children in brainstorming ideas for helping their peers with disabilities “fit in” socially and become more involved in the class. Ask them: *How can we help Thomas talk with us more? What can we do to make Sharon feel more welcome? When Zora gets anxious and upset, what do you think we could each do to make her feel okay?* Children often are among the most creative problem solvers.

Children are likely to have many questions and usually are not shy about asking them. Answer honestly and respond directly to their reactions to disabilities. Such situations present great learning opportunities for everyone in the class. Think carefully about whether these conversations should happen with or without the child with disabilities being present. Talk to the parents of the child with disabilities to find out what information they are comfortable having shared with the class.

- Explain to children that there are certain roles they should not assume. Your goal should be to foster friendships among classmates, not to promote relationships that resemble those of a tutor and tutee.

Even if a child with disabilities is not yet participating in your congregation's programs, you can take certain steps to increase children's awareness of disabilities (Miller & Sammons, 1999; Newman, 2001).

"I have found that *accurate information* is one of the most powerful tools in creating a successful program for including children with special needs in classrooms at school or in church. I believe that educators, children, and parents of peers need to be given the right glasses in order to practice greater acceptance and understanding."

—Barbara Newman (2001)

- Talk with children about their experiences with people with disabilities in their families, schools, and neighborhoods.
- Invite people with disabilities to come to your class and talk about their life experiences and faith journeys. Parents or siblings of children with disabilities also may have much to share.
- Have conversations about the gifts and needs that each person has. Stress the idea of interdependence and illustrate how everyone has times when they give and receive support.
- Incorporate stories about children with disabilities into your lessons to jumpstart conversations. Draw on scriptural passages and existing children's literature (see Dyches & Prater, 2000; Kupper, 2001) to find such stories.
- Involve children in an accessibilities project within the congregation or in the wider community. For example, a youth group might build a ramp to the fellowship hall, volunteer to help out at a community respite program, or offer to do yard work for members of the congregation with disabilities.
- Disability simulations may inadvertently reinforce wrong stereotypes about people with disabilities (Brew-Parrish, 2004). Think carefully about the messages that your awareness efforts will send.

INCLUDING ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

As children grow up, the need for adult programs that are responsive to the needs of people with developmental disabilities will only increase.

"My church is very welcoming. It has a warm setting where you feel you have friends and family in the congregation that you can turn to. The people in my congregation don't treat me any differently than they would treat anyone else. They listen to me. They come up to me, hug me and talk to me. I also have a best friend I met through church. She emails me and I email her back."

—Kelly Barnes (2005)

Anticipate these needs and begin planning ahead of time by keeping adult education leaders in your congregation abreast of your efforts and involved in future planning. Although many of the strategies and considerations presented in this chapter remain relevant when supporting the participation of adults, several additional issues should be addressed.

First, the process of getting to know the support needs of adults might differ

somewhat. The involvement of family members in the lives of adults with developmental disabilities may not be as prominent as it is for children. If asked, many adults will be able to tell you about the types of supports they will need to be involved in your programs. For others, it may be helpful to have conversations with service providers or adult siblings to discern how best to support a person's participation. Second, parents are less likely to be involved in advocating for the inclusion of their adult children. Therefore, congregations will have to be especially intentional about connecting with and extending invitations to adults with disabilities in their community. Several strategies for communicating these invitations were described in Chapter 3. Third, many activities designed for adults take place at various times throughout the week, including small groups, social events, and outreach projects. Leaders will need to make sure that information about these events is communicated to adults with disabilities and those who support them, as well as helping to ensure that transportation is made available. Fourth, the faith partner approach described in Chapter 3 seems to offer a more appropriate strategy for supporting the participation of some adults with developmental disabilities. Consider identifying one or two people who would be willing to serve in this capacity. Finally, many people with severe disabilities continue to live in restrictive living situations, such as long-term care facilities, nursing homes, and institutions. When people experience great difficulty coming to your congregation, think creatively about how you might bring the community to them.

CONCLUSION

A wonderful opportunity awaits your congregation when it commits to opening its doors and hearts to every child. Communicate boldly that people with disabilities are integral to the life of your community. However, your commitment must be much more than a symbolic one. Strive to be known by what you do and how you do it; rather than by a well-worded mission that has found no place in members' hearts.