

From Rights to Relationships: Social Inclusion in Faith Communities

Questions not addressed at the close of the session because of time.

Q: How can a congregation respond to members' complaints about an individuals' inability to remain silent during a worship service?

(Bill): I think there are any numbers of way to approach this, and, coming at it from both directions, so to speak. You need to respect all parties involved in order to move toward an accommodation. First, what is the "culture" of that worshipping community? How do they deal with other sounds, like babies and young children? A key component is the modeling done by the pastor in terms of recognizing or welcoming the sounds that come from participation, if that is the direction the community wants to move. But second, also look at what the sounds are saying. Is a person bored? Do they need or want something to keep their interest, like a pictorial guide to what is happening in the service so they can follow along? How might people work with them to "teach" the "unspoken" rules of the congregation? Are the sounds they are making related to responses to the liturgy and service? Is there a school resource person in positive behavior supports who could provide some consultation? Finally, it could be very important for the parents or the person to have a chance to tell a bit of their story to the congregation so everyone has a chance to hear what it means to them and/or their family member to be part of the service.

Q: Do you feel that separate ministries have an overall positive or negative affect on awareness and inclusion of members with disabilities in a congregation?

(Bill) First, I am not sure what is meant by "separate ministries?" Meaning within a congregation, or outside of one? "Separate," to use the format in the PowerPoint, is a whole lot better than nothing at all. And then I don't think the choice is between overall positive or overall negative. It depends. It does not have to be an either/or. Sometimes a separate class is what a congregation feels best able to do, what parents want, with people willing to do it, etc., but then the question is how to explore ways for people in the class to get to be with and know others, and be known by them. Congregations have all kinds of separate ministries...youth, children, singles, divorcees, etc..It varies from congregation to congregation. But hopefully they also work on ways so that those separate or focused ministries relate to one another and the congregation as a whole. But having a class at the end of a wing of a church for 20 years without wider interaction is not so good. As said in the webinar, do others in the congregation know their names? How might common interests and passions bring people together? I started off as a chaplain in a very segregated old institution. The tragedy there was not the disability but the lack of connection and community. Smaller programs, both in service providers (group homes) and congregations (separate classes or programs) can become institutions as well that build walls, often because of fear, rather than always looking for ways to break them down.

Q: Do you have suggestions on how to help service providers help get adults with disabilities to faith services? Challenges include staffing not available on Sundays and not letting volunteers provide transport due to regulations set in place.

(Bill) Those are the hardest and most frequent issues I see and hear about. I do know that some agencies have figured out ways to unravel those Gordian knots. I think it needs to start with some collaborative planning with a congregation, so the congregation gets to know the staff as well as the people who want to come. In other words, build some relationships and trust. Liability issues often get

raised as a vehicle for the anxiety about doing something new. Talk them through. That is good risk management. But they are also issues that apply to everyone else as well. So called vulnerable or limited people should not become the scapegoats for our fears about risk that can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone. That is true for both the congregation and the agency.

Then, partially, it comes down to whether an agency wants to practice what it preaches about choice and community inclusion and make it possible for enough staff to be present. For example, Heritage Christian Services in Rochester, New York, a very large provider, works hard with the direct care staff and congregations and has figured out that close to 90% of the people they support are connected to and/or involved with congregations on Sundays. In fact, the agency has a way for DSP's to let higher administration know what kinds of neat or successful community interactions happened over the weekend. For information, contact Lida Merrill, the director of their three person pastoral services office, at lmerrill@heritagechristianservices.org

I don't know what they do with volunteers picking people up, but this is where agencies together have to challenge the regulations and regulators. If we are talking community inclusion, the "normal" thing to do is that people give others rides to church or synagogue. It seems to me that a congregation should be able to affirm or back the trustworthiness of people within their congregation who might like to do that in ways that address agency issues with regulations about who can go somewhere with someone else. If someone can only go with staff, there will never be real opportunities for friendships. And volunteers should not have to go through background checks, etc. if their congregation has vouched for them. Regulations were written by someone. They often started because of one bad incident. They can be re-written. I know some agencies have figured this out, and I would love to hear their strategies for doing so. Bill.gaventa@umdnj.edu.

Q: What do you think of ministries such as "Rejoicing Spirits?"

(Bill) This is also a question I get fairly frequently. Again, what I think is that community based, collaborative services between congregations for children and adults with disabilities, their families, friends and others are often very effective and a great start. Again, it is not an either/or. One can be involved in an inclusive, not-happening-at-typical-worship-times service like Rejoicing Spirits (a once a month model that can move around among congregations or be based at one) and still be involved in a "home" congregation. There are other reasons it can be very effective as a pathway to more options:

- For some parents, who have been burned by congregational responses, or feel like they always have to be on guard with their family member, a service like this is a relief, a way to relax, enjoy worship together.
- It also is a time for people who have not had much experience in being involved in worship to "practice." People learn how to participate in worship services by practicing. For me as a child, over and over again! We sometimes blame unusual behavior in a congregational setting on someone's intellectual disability when they simply are anxious, don't know how to read the unwritten or unspoken rules, and have not had experience practicing!
- And they can be opportunities for individuals with disabilities to take leadership roles and practice them there as well, hopefully with the chance to do the same things elsewhere.
- And finally, it can be a place for "typical" folks to get invited and learn as well.

All of those possibilities depend on attitude and vision. If this is the "only place" they can go, then that is a real critique of the so called "typical" congregation. But they can be ways to help people come back

who have been left out, rejected, or wounded in the past, and that is huge. Then, with healing and learning, on everyone's part, then hopefully it can lead to other options as well, and other ways to interact with people in their "home" congregations. The goal, ultimately, could be real membership in specific congregations of people's choice. Rejoicing Spirits is not a denomination, nor do they pretend to be.

Finally, I would simply note with both this question and the one on separate ministries above, the world of inclusive ministries and religious supports reflects what happens in the wider system of services. Inclusive education is a dream and goal but way too often not practiced in reality. Integrated employment is a preferred vision, but way too many people are in segregated employment programs. The vision of inclusive participation is one where the gap between "preaching" and "practice" is huge in almost any arena related to people with disabilities. As some say, "the perfect should not be the enemy of the good," or the "better than it was." Both religious and secular visions and dreams can become dogma that dis-empowers rather than empowers others to action. What we really need are people committed, one by one, to helping that inclusion happen. There is a lot of irony when someone criticizes something like Rejoicing Spirits when perhaps they have never been or they have not worked on inclusion in their own congregation.

So, your fault. You got me preaching.