

Inclusion in a Faith Community

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR CONGREGATIONAL CARE COMMITTEES



Congregational care committees and disabilities

An inclusive faith community commits to sharing one another's joys and challenges. Included members love, respect, and treasure each other; nurture and support one another on a journey through faith; and use their gifts and graces in ministry. This commitment does not change with the experience of disability.

A faith community may have a specific committee for the "care" of its congregants. Often, members of this committee want to support, empower, and enable members with disabilities and their families to grow in their faith and to share their gifts and talents. Yet, sometimes important conversations are not initiated. Too often, families wait for leadership in the faith community to make a first move while the leaders are waiting for the family. Take the initiative and encourage the start of a conversation.

Interacting with a person with a disability

- Relax. It's normal to feel unsure. Just be yourself and allow a space for the person with a disability to be himself or herself.
- Learn about **disability etiquette** (e.g., talk to people with disabilities directly, not just to the people with them) and **people-first language** (e.g., "people with disabilities," not "the disabled."). See: Disability Etiquette and Talking About Disabilities resources on reverse.
- Realize that a disability is neither a gift nor a curse—it just is.

What might a congregational care committee do for an individual with a disability and a family?

- Determine and discuss the "vision" of the individual and the family regarding their connection within the larger faith community.
- Encourage an individual's involvement in parts of the worship service (e.g., usher, reader) and on committees. Assist in making connections between the individual's gifts for service and the needs of the community.
- Keep communication open: ask for input, suggestions, and the sharing of family expertise in all areas that intersect with the faith community.
- Assist in building a supportive community around a person with a disability and their family, which may include encouraging relationships with religious leaders and educators, volunteers, peer buddies, and other congregants who will be friends with the family. These relationships will be supportive connections that encourage full participation in the life of the community.
- Coordinate volunteers who will support persons with disabilities during church activities or as respite care for families.
- Coordinate the concrete care often given to families with "typical" needs (i.e., the offering of a meal, looking after siblings).
- Help families make connections with appropriate disability service agencies.

How can a congregational care committee educate a community on disabilities?

- Ask the person with a disability and/or their family to share specific information with the congregation at large (e.g., during a sermon about the diversity of the community).
- Coordinate educational opportunities for religious education staff and for the community on topics such as inclusion, disability awareness and etiquette, and person-first language.
- Take on the responsibility of educating other faith community groups about common barriers and successful accommodations to participation. Learn and then share your insights.

Please see reverse for resources.



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RESOURCES

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. (615) 322-8240, toll-free (866) 936-8852, vkc.vumc.org

Disabilities, Religion and Spirituality

This program provides training to current and future religious and spiritual leaders and educators and supports individuals with disabilities and families as they give expression to their religion and/or spirituality. Activities include developing ecumenical educational materials, conducting research, and sharing best practices. <https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/religionandspirituality/>

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website includes a directory of more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county, topic of interest, and other filters. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, TNPathfinder.org

Two Easy Ways to Take Part in Research

StudyFinder is a searchable database that lists current VKC studies. Studies seek people of all ages with and without developmental disabilities. See vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder. Research Match is a secure place for volunteers and researchers to connect. See researchmatch.org

National Resources

- **American Association of People with Disabilities Interfaith Initiative** supports people with disabilities and their families as they seek spiritual and religious access. <https://www.aapd.com/advocacy/interfaith/>
- **Interfaith Disability Network** is a member organization that educates and engages individuals with disabilities and their families and faith communities in cultivating mutually beneficial relationships. www.interfaithdisability.org
- **Religion & Spirituality Division of the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**, a member organization that shares resources that foster opportunities for spiritual growth for persons with developmental disabilities while respecting their religious identities. www.aaidreligion.org

Print Resources

- Acker-Verney, J., Hattie, B., MacDonald, C., & Lekas, S. (2005). *More Than My Disability: A Handbook for Volunteers With Disabilities*. Halifax, NS: Independent Living Resource Center.
- Carter, Erik. (2007). *Including People With Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Ransom, J. G. (1994). *The Courage to Care: Seven Families Touched by Disability and Congregational Caring*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books.

Brochures

The Tennessee Disability Coalition has developed an outstanding brochure on Disability Etiquette that is free and available for download: <https://www.tndisability.org/materials>

See also:

- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Faith Leaders
- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Families
- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Religious Educators

