

Inclusion in a Faith Community

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES



Inclusion in a Faith Community

Being included means more than being in a community. It means being with a community. To be fully with a community requires that all aspects of the community—from physical space to attitudes—are accessible and welcoming, and that all members have opportunities to share gifts and to contribute to the community. Sometimes accessibility means making accommodations. Awareness, communication, and working together are strategies that can assist in creating the necessary adaptations that build a community where all members can grow and flourish.

Searching for a Faith Community

When searching for a faith community in which you and/or your family may share your gifts and that may enhance your spiritual growth, be aware that some communities may have more experience with including individuals with disabilities and their families than others, and in different degrees. This means having patience and persistence, being willing to initiate a conversation, and communicating openly about yours and/or your family's interests and needs. To get started, you might:

- Request a meeting with the religious/spiritual leaders and educators to introduce yourself and/or your child. Let them know why it is important to you and/or your family to participate in a faith community.
- Talk with leadership about your or your child's disability. Discuss the potentials and the challenges it may place upon full participation. Explain your needs.

This sets up an open line of communication and gives leadership an opportunity to work with you and your family to ensure a meaningful community experience.

You as a Faith Community's Resource

You know yourself and/or your child better than anyone. You know what works and what does not work in terms of meaningful participation. Once you have found a spiritual home, be sure you are proactive in forming relationships with the leadership and with other congregants. Consider:

- Sharing information about your or your child's disability with specific people—teachers, nursery staff, and other congregants. People may have misconceptions or be hesitant to ask questions. While it is a personal matter, sharing experiences about the ways that disability affects and does not affect your life will raise awareness and educate the people in your community.
- Developing a circle of support within the community. Ask for help when you need it.
- Making periodic appointments with the spiritual leaders/religious educators, and/or care committee, using the time to discuss what has worked well and what has not, and to evaluate how needs have changed. Remember that everyone is learning together.
- Finding the areas where you or your child can contribute your gifts and talents to the community. If there are barriers, address them. Don't shy away. Brainstorm with leaders about how to remove the barriers. Remember that you are ministering to the faith community, even as they are ministering to you.

Community Leadership as a Resource

Part of the religious/spiritual leader's role is to assist congregants when they need help. They often are willing and able to provide spiritual as well as other kinds of support and assistance to families; however, they need to be asked. For example, religious leaders and educators can be wonderful additions to IEP teams. They provide a different vantage point and may be aware of strengths that schools may not have an opportunity to see.

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. 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. 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.
- Gritter, R. (1998). *A Place for Me in God's Family*. Colorado Springs, CO: IBS Publishing.

See also:

- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Faith Leaders
- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Congregational Care Committees
- Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Religious Educators

