

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.

See reverse for resources

Inclusion in the Faith Community

How We Can Help

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be both a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center.

Disabilities, Religion, and Spirituality Program

This VKC Program provides training to current and future religious and spiritual leaders and educators, supports individuals with disabilities and families as they give expression to their religion and/or spirituality, and encourages disability service providers to consider the religious and spiritual interests of the individuals they serve. As a liaison with faith communities, the Program develops ecumenical educational materials, conducts research, and shares best practices. Contact courtney.taylor@vanderbilt.edu, (615) 322-5658.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

This free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has 1,600 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. See the "Disability Resource Library" and search the "Interfaith Resources" section, as well as exploring other topic pages. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. Contact www.familypathfinder.org (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

Vanderbilt Kennedy Family Outreach Center

This center provides families with help in finding clinics and services, provides advocacy and support, and offers social work services. Contact familyoutreach@vanderbilt.edu, (615) 936-5118.

Other Vanderbilt Resources

Health Library, Jr. League Family Resource Center, Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt

Houses a selection of resources on issues related to disabilities and spirituality available for check-out in their "Community and Faith Supports" section. www.vanderbiltchildrens.com/healthlibrary (615) 936-2558, toll-free (800) 288-0391

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/Interfaith/Interfaith.html

Interfaith Disability Connection 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/index.php

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.

Contact the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center
Nashville (615) 322-8240
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See also:

- *Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Faith Leaders*
- *Inclusion in a Faith Community: Tips and Resources for Congregational Care Teams*

