

NATIONAL APOSTOLATE FOR INCLUSION MINISTRY

Quarterly Publication

Volume 33 / Number 2

1-800-736-1280 • www.nafim.org

Summer-Fall 2001

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Cover: Image from Conference 2001 Publicity

Photography: Thanks to Stan Shatz, Jim Dickson and Sister Mary Alice Mannix, OP

The National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry Quarterly Publication (ISSN-1534-5297) is published in the spring, summer, fall and winter by the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry. The points of view expressed within the Quarterly are those of the writers themselves and do not necessarily represent the individual or collective opinion of the officers and members of the National Apostolate.

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Articles for publication in the Quarterly should be sent to Barbara J. Lampe, P.O. Box 218, Riverdale, Maryland 20738. Postmaster: Send address changes to National Apostolate, Box 218, Riverdale, Maryland 20738.

Notice to Librarians: Due to administrative and funding difficulties, in both 1998 and 1999, only two Quarterlies were published during each of those years. Thus, volumes 30 and 31 each have two published issues, rather than four.

The publications of the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry advocate use of language which preserves and encourages the dignity of and respect for all people. The language used by submitting authors is sometimes used to preserve the integrity of their message and the organizations and people that they represent.

Aspects of the Inclusive Faith Community

by Jack Green

A parish must be prepared emotionally, physically, spiritually and financially to accept and welcome people with disabilities.

In the beginning, it is necessary to enlist the full support of the pastor and the bishop. In their leadership capacities pastor and bishop need to commit to change and to be there for the long haul.

When a faith community actively seeks to invite people with mental retardation and their families to participate in the parish, the issues will involve a different kind of accessibility and will require changes in hearts, attitudes and effort. What needs to be done first, is to make a commitment to an evolving plan beginning with concrete situations. This means that persons with mental retardation and their families will not be told what they need to do in order to be a part of the parish community. Rather, the parish community will commit to assisting in the development of an inclusion plan for the family.

Including persons with mental retardation and their families and caretakers in parish life does not

require a comprehensive major program at the outset. Each member of the Body of Christ possesses unique dignity and, as such, has gifts of the spirit as well as human and spiritual needs. In responding to individual needs, a "ministry" or "program" will be launched. As people with disabilities are welcomed to share their situation, they will be teaching themselves and the parish how to minister, and the business of building relationships will begin.

The availability of resources, volunteers and funds will vary. Each situation will be as unique as the people involved. It may not be possible for a parish to initially respond to every need or demand. However, it would be in the best interests of everyone involved to know what resources are available in the community at large and be able to help the circle of persons around the person with a disability through the maze.

A vital aspect of inclusion is the support and encouragement of leadership by all persons with disabilities. This is very important. When persons with disabilities are made visible in the faith community, their fellow parishioners will appreciate their contributions to the life of the parish. When parishioners can personally recognize



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the person with a disability for his or her gifts and talents, they will find themselves most aware of the powerful love of Christ for us all.

Trained Volunteers

Volunteers need to be recruited and trained. Recruitment and training should be specific to a situation. Some people with disabilities need a ride; some people need a committed friend. The volunteers should be fully informed about what commitment of tasks and time is needed. Volunteers should be given spiritual, emotional, educational and physical preparation. The better a volunteer understands the situation of the person and his or her needs,

Aspects of Community

the better the volunteer's response will be. There is nothing more disheartening for a volunteer to have no job or a misunderstanding of what time or task needs to be accomplished. Preparation for volunteers should encourage relationships, increase knowledge, reduce fears and expand comfort zones. Dioceses and deaneries can be very helpful in coordinating such training for parish volunteers.

Existing groups within the parish community should be encouraged to welcome people with disabilities. Groups of men, women and youth in the parish, if given the opportunity, will assist in responding to the needs of people with developmental disabilities. Each group is unique in its gifts and talents. Proper matching of the group to persons needing welcome in the parish enables all to grow in Christ.

Physical Accessibility

Parish spaces need to be physically accessible. Many recent laws and building codes provide guidelines for including people with a variety of disabilities. Sanctuaries can be a stumbling block, but many faith communities have found creative ways to allow for full participation of their disabled peers with minimal cost. Moreover, accommodating the disabled historically has provided accommodations for the wider community. For example, aging people and parents with infants in strollers have found curb cuts and

automatic door openers increase their own accessibility to community services. And, the accessible parish is not only concerned with physically facilitating the reception of the Eucharist, but is also concerned about creating and maintaining welcoming attitudes as well.

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The Sunday Mass or service is the place to begin to build the welcoming atmosphere for the inclusive parish. For Catholics, the Eucharist is the Source and Summit of Christian life. The Sunday celebration is the primary gathering place where parishioners can interact and build relationships. All parishioners should enter the sacred space with preparation. People with developmental disabilities should be encouraged to express how they feel about Mass and they should be encouraged to help the parish identify what it needs to do to be a place where they feel at home. Well-planned and executed inclusive liturgies or services will promote inclusion in other parish activities.

The Bible, especially the Gospels, needs to be read, taught and preached with an "inclusive" spirit. Homilies as well as other traditional parish activities can

become forums for inclusion. Our God in the creation story found EVERYTHING was good and the people He created were very good. Scripture study and sharing should encourage spiritual growth while avoiding an attitude of pity; it should bring out issues of justice and the response of discipleship. Then, following the example of Jesus, parishioners can expand their horizons to those who are even more marginalized and treat them as the beloved children of God that they are. All ministries should be open to those who have gifts and the ability to develop the skills to serve. It is important to note that there is no benefit in putting people in places of service if they cannot learn to do the job.

Remember, changes do not usually happen overnight. It is important to emphasize the importance of education, awareness and sensitivity. A variety of programs, such as Welcome to my World help us to do this. It is important to share stories and to be available to speak to parish groups. Even better, encourage people with developmental disabilities to tell their own stories. Be willing to take time to build relationships. Creating an inclusive faith community is a lifetime effort. Envisioning this goal, working for this goal makes it happen!

Jack Green is Director of Sun-Up and former Director of Disability Ministry at the Schott Center in the Archdiocese of Miami.