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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 which they represent.

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Prayer & Share

A Model of a Faith-Sharing Program for Parents with Children with Disabilities

by Kathy Smalley

Parenting a child exacts a high price physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually even in the best of circumstances.

Adding one or more children with disabilities raises the stakes to a formidable level. The rate of divorce and of domestic or child abuse in these families is an unfortunate indicator of this reality. If parents with children with disabilities are not only to survive but also to thrive, they must have helpful and hopeful opportunities for growth. One such opportunity exists in a Prayer & Share group.

Prayer & Share is a faith-based parent-to-parent support group for parents with children with disabilities. It is designed for parents who desire to belong to a supportive group where they can talk freely about their faith, their family, and the inter-relatedness of the two. The idea for Prayer & Share grew out of the expressed desires of a number of parents with kids with disabling conditions. The parents were asking for an opportunity to meet and share their experiences with others in similar circumstances. But, even more importantly, they were searching for a program where they could express themselves in the context of their Catholic faith.

The Prayer & Share program is

built on the belief that parents can be the best source of support for other parents, if they are given the necessary tools. The goals for the Prayer & Share program are four-fold: to create a strong faith-filled parent support group; to educate parents in a variety of areas including theology, spirituality, family life, and group dynamics; to establish a "place of hospitality" for parents, where new and not so new parents feel welcomed; and to develop a network of parents throughout the archdiocese so that individual parents can find support.

Faith is the key element of the Prayer & Share program. Therefore, each session contains ample time for prayer. A different style and format for prayer is used during each of the four introductory sessions. This diversity exposes the parents to a variety of prayer experiences, allowing them to find a style most suitable for the group. During the first session, the parents and their meeting space are blessed as recognition of the group's sacredness. A candle, which burns during each gathering, is presented to the group as a reminder of this blessing.

Prayer & Share is designed to be a

parish-based program. Unless the parish is very large, it may be necessary to invite two or three neighboring parishes to form a cluster and jointly sponsor the program. Support from the pastor, or pastors, is vital. In addition, the host parish should have a staff member who can attend the initial sessions and assist the group process.

The program begins with a four-session seminar. Four meetings together is usually time enough for

persons to become acquainted, break down barriers, and establish the beginnings of friendship and trust. Once the introductory sessions are completed, the staff member will serve as a transitional leader. This person's role is to continue the formation of a cohesive group and to assist the parents in developing prayer experiences. The length of this transitional period will vary depending on the needs of the group. Ultimately, the parents will choose, from amongst themselves, a group facilitator. It is recommended that the group meet at least once every other month (more often if the participants wish).

A typical Prayer & Share group consists of ten to twelve parents, a staff member from the host parish,

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. . . try to love the questions themselves."

—Rainer Marie Rilke

and the program instructor. The pastor(s) is invited to all sessions, but should attend at least the fourth session. A mixture of couples, single parents, and parents whose spouses choose not to attend is advantageous. Parents with young children and parents with teen-age or adult children provide the group with a variety of experiences; as does a mixture of families comprised only of children with disabilities and other families with both children with disabilities and with typical abilities.

The introductory four-session seminar takes place over a period of two months. Each two-hour session includes opportunities for prayer, faith sharing, group discussion, and personal sharing and reflection. The sessions are designed to build upon the previously presented material. While it is not necessary for a parent to be at every session, it is highly recommended. Consistency is a cornerstone of good group development.

Prayer & Share's first session focuses on the introductory elements necessary for formation of a strong,

focused group. Essential to this session is the clarification of what Prayer & Share is and is not. A clear understanding of the expectations and rules of conduct sets the stage for further sessions. The group is presented with information on listening skills, types of and ways to pray, and on understanding disabilities from a Gospel perspective.

Session Two is devoted to understanding the needs of individuals, the emotional expression of those needs, and the self-nourishment needed to be a caregiver. In Session Three, the focus

turns to the spiritual needs of the individual and the family. Both sessions emphasize the appropriateness of all feelings. Parents learn to accept and express the so-called "negative feelings" of anger and grief without judgment.

The culmination of the introductory seminar takes place in Session Four. The pastor, or pastors, attends the session with parents. The focus is on the Catholic Church perspective of persons with disabilities with emphasis on parish-based ministry with persons with disabilities. While information regarding the Church's documents is presented and the pastor has an opportunity to share his perspective, the highlight of the session is the dialogue between priest and parents. Needs and wants, frustrations and hopes, nightmares and dreams are mutually shared. Parents and pastor(s) find this to be a positive experience and an opportunity to strengthen their relationships.

After the introductory seminar is completed, the parents continue to make Prayer & Share their own.

What PRAYER & SHARE Is:

Sacred space

A place to encounter God

A place to pray and share with others in similar conditions

A place for support and affirmation

What PRAYER & SHARE Is Not:

Group therapy

Spiritual direction

A "how to" group

Rules

RESPECTING Our SACRED SPACE

What is said here, stays here.

Each person will be given an opportunity to share or to choose not to share before someone who has previously spoken shares again.

We will respect each other and ourselves by refraining from making judgments and from giving advice or suggestions.

Prayer & Share

Topics for discussion and opportunities for prayer are decided upon by the group. The local parish staff person monitors the group. Additional assistance is available from the archdiocesan Office of Inclusion Ministry.

An annual day of reflection for all archdiocesan Prayer & Share groups is offered. The purpose of the day of reflection is to foster relationships between individuals and groups, to strengthen the Prayer & Share network, and to provide the parents with an opportunity for further spiritual growth.

Parents who have participated in the Prayer & Share program have reported feeling a greater connection to their parish, growth in their personal prayer and faith life, and a deepening in their understanding of the giftedness of all their children regardless of disability. While Prayer & Share cannot remove the everyday stresses of raising a child with disabilities, it can provide the parents with a time of respite, a supportive environment to interact with peers, and an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Kathy Smalley is the Director of the Office of Inclusion Ministry for the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle. The Office for Inclusion Ministry is dedicated to serving the needs of all persons with disabilities through parish-based ministry. Kathy is also a member of the Board of Directors for the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board for this publication. Currently she is developing a manual of the Prayer & Share program.

PRAYER & SHARE Session Outlines

Session 1

Introductions: of program, of presenter, of each other

Expectations: what it is and is not, rules of conduct

Blessing of space

The Art of Listening

Introduction to Prayer

Prayer Time

Understanding Disabilities from a Gospel Perspective

Session 2

Review of Session One

Introduction to Understanding Ourselves and Others

Prayer Time

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Dealing with Feelings

A Look at Grief

Caregiving: Principles of caregiver self-advocacy,
knowing your local resources

Session 3

Introduction to the Session

Stages of Faith Development

Spirituality and/or Faith

Prayer Time

Anger at God/Forgiving God

Spiritual Direction

Family Ritual and Worship

Session 4

Introduction to the Session

Prayer Time

The Church's Documents Regarding Disabilities

A Pastor's View on Meeting the Needs of
Parishioners with Disabilities

Sharing our Needs/Wants...

Discussion of Future Meetings

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