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WHOEVER WELCOMES ME

What does it mean to include *all* of God's people?

BY NELLA UITVLUGT

The stories I hear from families I encounter in my work for Friendship Ministries all have the same theme running through them. One mother from Peru wrote, “I prayed for 20 years that my daughter would have a place in church. Now she attends *Amistad* (which means “friendship” in Spanish) class and there is a place for her to grow spiritually.”

Another mother called to say that even though her husband was a pastor at their church, their daughter was not allowed to attend the “threes” program because she was not potty-trained. They left that congregation and church-shopped for 10 years (and as many churches) before finding a small congregation that would embrace their daughter, who has autism.

When David, a young man with Down syndrome, decided he wanted to be confirmed, his family was told that he didn’t know enough. So they waited until a new pastor arrived who was willing to help David through the process to full membership.

Sometimes a congregation will say, “Sure bring your child with disabilities to church. We will find a babysitter for him.” Imagine the heartache of realizing that whether your child learns to know Jesus is not considered important. While many congregations have created *physical* access to their buildings, the *psychological* barriers to inclusion have yet to be broken down. These barriers range from ignoring the needs of children with disabilities to lack of inclusivity in worship services.

Image-bearers of God

First, we need to renew our commitment to seeing *everyone* as image-bearers of God. For church educators, this means seeing each child as an individual, uniquely made by our Creator. As we consider different types of intelligences and learning styles, we also need to pay close attention to the learning skills of children and adults with cognitive impairments or autism spectrum disorder.

Many congregations still think that offering “day care” for children with disabilities is enough to qualify them as inclusive. They create a special room so the child can be away from others and “safe.” But this is the exact opposite of what it means to be inclusive and does nothing to meet a child’s spiritual needs.

When children are seen first as image-bearers of God, then as members of their families and churches, and their disabilities are seen last, a vital change in thinking occurs. The idea that faith is equated with knowledge begins to break down. Salvation is not dependent on our knowledge—it is a gift from God. When we put too much emphasis on the importance of knowledge, it is easy to tell people they don’t know or understand enough to be confirmed. But when we embrace the gift of salvation, we can celebrate with each person who receives this gift.

The Power to Include

As we push this whole idea farther, we begin to realize that inclusion in worship and activities is not enough. As the body of Christ, we need to do more than just tolerate the presence of persons with disabilities. Instead we need to embrace them as contributors to the congregation. This will happen only if we learn to know them as our friends and fellow believers. We must see their gifts, not just their disabilities.

One dangerous pitfall in any conversation about including people with disabilities is that we are actually claiming the *power* to grant or deny inclusion. This implies that people with disabilities are not naturally part of the congregation and we, as able-bodied folks, graciously allow inclusion to occur.

I must confess, this is difficult for me to acknowledge, because I like to think of myself as an inclusive

person. I want to bring my friends with disabilities to church. But, why? Sometimes it is for reasons other than just simply enjoying them as fellow believers. I like the feeling of being empowered to make things happen. And their presence says to others, “She gets things done,” or “Isn’t she special! She cares about people with disabilities.” In this way, inclusion can become patronizing or self-promoting.

The key to overcoming this is mutuality. If we get to know people with disabilities as, like ourselves, uniquely gifted, image-bearing children of God, and members of the body of Christ, then they become our friends and fellow travelers on the journey.

So, how do we worship, fellowship and grow spiritually together?

Church Education Programs

Church education programs need to be intentionally adapted to meet the needs of individuals rather than groups. If a child with a disability comes to your program, the first step is to set up a meeting with the parents. Learn about this child as an individual with likes, dislikes and abilities. Learn what makes the child feel comfortable and safe. See the side bar for some excellent books on how to create a plan for each child. Take advantage of consultants who have expertise on strategies for including children with disabilities into church education programs. And be sure that the church school teachers know that they will not be required to become special education experts; rather, their job is to nurture each child.

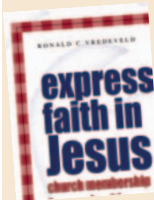
An effective church education program will lead to the question of church membership, whether that is through confession of faith or confirmation. For people with cognitive impairments, this should follow



More About Friendship Ministries

Friendship Ministries is a not-for-profit organization that

exists to help churches and organizations around the world share God’s love with people who have cognitive impairments. Extensive consultation is available free of charge for congregations interested in starting a Friendship program. In addition, on a fee-for-service basis, a congregation can call Friendship Ministries for help setting up support systems within the congregation, or creating a profile of a child or adult that will allow inclusion to be more intentional and successful.



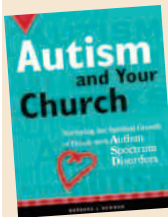
Expressing Faith in Jesus

is a book and resource kit from Friendship Ministries that helps pastors, elders and church educators assist someone with cognitive impairments through the process of confirmation and making use of his or her gifts in the life of the church.



Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities

by Barbara Newman, is an excellent book for church educators. Barbara is a consultant for Friendship Ministries.



Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

by Barbara Newman, is a new resource from Friendship Ministries, available in the summer of 2006.

To learn more about Friendship Ministries, or any of the resources listed above, or to receive a copy of their print or online newsletter, contact Friendship Ministries, 888/866-8966, friendship@friendship.org or www.friendship.org.

similar patterns to that of other members in the church. The materials used may need more visuals, as well as simpler explanations. A mentor may need to be selected, a rehearsal of the day of celebration should be included and opportunities for the individual to share his or her gifts with the congregation and life-long spiritual growth should be sought. See the sidebar for resources to lead you through this process.

Worship

Growing up as a preacher's kid, I attended immigrant churches in Canada where Dutch was the primary language. Those experiences gave me insight into how difficult it is to worship if you do not understand what is being said. However, those worship services had rituals and a repetitiveness that allowed me to learn what was coming next. For example, I learned to say the Lord's Prayer and to sing some responses in Dutch.

Inclusive practices in worship benefit the entire congregation and any visitors who come. Many of today's worship practices assume literacy. Those who cannot read or are learning English as a second language will need to have some markers or sign posts in the service as clues for participation.

Liturgical phrases (such as "The Lord be with you," and the response, "And also with you") can provide these markers. Repetitiveness encourages participation. My friend Marilyn, who is cognitively impaired, wiggles with joy when she can respond to these phrases in worship. In fact, if she can beat the rest of us in saying it, she glows with confidence.

Having an order of worship is essential for some and helpful to

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me"

(Matthew 10:40).

many other people. It may allow them to prepare for getting up from the pew if they have difficulty standing. For people with autism spectrum disorder, this can give them a sense of security by knowing where they are in the service. Change is difficult for some people, and giving them clues to change can provide comfort in an uncomfortable situation.

When it comes to liturgy, sermons and other words for worship, keep in mind that simple, clear language is the best way to connect with the congregation. This is especially true for children or people with different learning abilities. For people who think in concrete terms, the obscure symbolism or some of the more unsettling images found in scripture can be confusing (sometimes frightening).

Good Intentions


Many tweaks and changes to the way we worship are initiated with the best of intentions, but actually make inclusive worship more difficult to achieve. For example, some congregations have begun using PowerPoint projection to display liturgy or lyrics, in an attempt to encourage participants to look up from their bulletins and hymnals. But people who are shorter than those around them, people who are visually impaired or blind, or people who remain seated in wheelchairs may not find such projections helpful because they cannot see the screen.

Likewise, when art is added to enhance the words displayed in a PowerPoint presentation, it may make words more difficult to read.

Plain dark blue or black backgrounds provide contrast to white words, dramatically increasing readability. It may also make sense to provide printed copies

of the lyrics and music, in addition to a PowerPoint presentation, to provide a level of comfort for those unfamiliar with the songs. Even persons who don't know how to read music can recognize when the notes go up or down and when there are pauses in the music. And knowing what to expect will pave the way for more confident and joy-filled participation, as opposed to muttering through an unfamiliar hymn.

For visual art to be effective, it needs to be understandable. Have you ever looked at a beautiful banner in church and wondered what it was meant to tell you? Sharing a few words about the color choices and symbols used in the art, both orally (perhaps a brief explanation given during worship) and in written form (in the bulletin or in a hand-out available in the back of the sanctuary) allows more people to appreciate the artist's intent.

The list of suggestions goes on and on, but the bottom line for any individual or congregation seeking to be inclusive of *all* of God's children is to remember Christ's definition of hospitality—"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (*Matt. 10:40*). 

Nella Uitvlugt has been executive director of Friendship Ministries for nine years. She has a degree in special education from Calvin College and leads a Friendship group in her church. Nella consults with pastors and congregations, and gives presentations in both the United States and Canada on topics dealing with the spiritual needs of people with cognitive impairments.

ONE FAMILY'S STORY

After the birth of our first son, my husband and I, like most new parents, went into a period of hibernation. Meals and naps were the only “musts” in our days together. Everything else fell by the wayside as we navigated our new roles as parents and cared for the new life in our midst.

Two years later, when we learned that our son had some developmental delays, we entered a different kind of hibernation. In addition to sleeping and eating, our energies were now directed toward evaluations, therapy and the constant vigilance that is required of parents who put their child in “the system.” We quickly learned that when your child has no words, the only way he can/will receive help is if *you* ask for it.

It was difficult enough to get through the “musts” of those days—meals, errands, therapy, not to mention our jobs—so we couldn’t even imagine going to church. We tried a few times, but when we took our son to the nursery or a children’s program, the only interaction we received from church members and workers was a smile. We knew we were welcome (in the broadest sense of the word), but they had no idea what our son needed in order for them to truly welcome our son into their midst.

Another year passed, our son’s needs shifted—lessening in some ways, increasing in others—and the little cave we’d created for our family began to shift, too. What was once familiar and comforting, some days felt lonely and confining. Bible stories and prayers before meals were no longer enough, and the God whom we thanked daily for the blessings we received felt so very far away.

Then, I had the opportunity to attend the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) event in St. Louis last February. Among the many displays of materials, I saw something about Friendship Ministries and the resources they offer to help congregations interested in intentionally welcoming *all* of God’s children. After returning home, I called Nella Uitvlugt, executive director of

Friendship Ministries, and exchanged a few emails with her, eventually sharing my family’s story and struggles. Nella offered to check her database and see if anyone in our area was using the materials from Friendship Ministries. She responded that no Presbyterian church in my area was, but a Presbyterian pastor from my city had spoken with her while attending APCE, and Nella offered to contact her.

Our initial emails were filtered through Nella, so the church didn’t know my name and I didn’t know which church it was, providing some anonymity as we sorted through whether this church was up to the challenge and whether my family was ready to take this plunge. When the church and my family decided this was a good fit, we discovered that this congregation, offering limitless support and a desire to welcome *each member* of our family, was the congregation we’d wandered away from two years earlier—where we worshipped throughout our pregnancy, where our son was baptized when he was six months old and where members met us with “smiles,” trying to welcome us the best way they knew how, when our struggles began.

It’s been a long journey and perhaps a necessary one, in order to fully appreciate all that lies before us now. Three years ago, although I knew we needed *something*, I didn’t know what help we needed or what it might look like. Now I can spout clinical jargon with the best of therapists and do not hesitate to ask for what my son needs (over and over again, if necessary).

My suspicion is that this congregation has more families like ours. Although each situation is unique, so many of the adjustments to worship and church education programs can be universally helpful. My prayer is that the good work this congregation is now doing to prepare the way for our son and our family will bring other overwhelmed parents out of hibernation and into the arms of a supportive church family.