



Religion and Disability: Are All Welcome?



Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

(This article focuses on Judeo-Christian faiths, because those are what I'm most familiar with. I hope this article is applicable to other religions, too. The omission of other faiths should not be construed as an intentional act of exclusion.)

Six adults sit together on the front pew at church. The Six have just come from Sunday School—the Fish Class—a special class created just for them (adults with developmental disabilities). At the church's Thanksgiving dinner, they sit quietly together, apart from the camaraderie shared by the children, teens, parents, and elders of the congregation. They're "in" the church—the Six were "adopted" by the church as a group—but they're not really part of the congregation. They are not included.

In another town, Sofia, Robert, and their three children attend Sunday School and worship services every Sunday. The two boys scamper down the hall to their respective classrooms. Sofia drops four-year-old Rebekah at the church nursery—Rebekah, who has Down syndrome, is not allowed to attend the preschool class since she's not yet potty-trained. Sofia's not crazy about this, but she thinks it might not be such a big deal:

**Religion without humanity
is a poor human stuff.**

Sojourner Truth

there's a child in the nursery who's older than Rebekah (a six-year-old who has cerebral palsy). Maybe the church knows best—Sofia doesn't want to cause trouble in the House of God.

Another family no longer attends church together. Mom and one son attend the early service. Dad attends the later service. Someone has to be home with twelve-year-old Jared, who has autism. The Sunday School teachers and the minister said Jared can't come to church anymore—he's too "disruptive."

Eighteen-year-old Ellie likes the people and the services at the synagogue her family recently joined. But she hates that she and her power chair take up half the center aisle—she feels like an "obstruction." Unfortunately, she has only one option: to park herself in the back, out of everyone's way.

Philosophically, churches, synagogues, and other places of worship would seem to be *havens of inclusion* for people with disabilities and other differences. Traditionally, organized religion has been perceived as the helper/rescuer of the "downtrodden"—reaching out to the "less fortunate," helping "the poor," and so forth.

As the examples above demonstrate, however, reality tells a far different story for thousands—if not millions—of children and adults with developmental disabilities and their families. For it seems that the prejudice, exclusion, and isolation that are prevalent in greater American society also live and breathe within our religious houses. And why not? Leaders and members of churches and synagogues are

human beings who are obviously not exempt from the widespread influence of negative and stereotypical beliefs about individuals with disabilities.

The road to hell, it's said, is paved with good intentions, and good intentions abound within organized religion. What can we do when these intentions result in the exclusion or isolation of children and adults with disabilities? What can we do to ensure all are welcome in our churches and synagogues?

We can educate religious leaders and congregations, and boldly ask for what we need! The following suggestions may help create positive change in your place of worship.

- **Involve children and adults with disabilities, and their family members, in these efforts.** Let people speak for themselves about what supports or accommodations they need to participate and be included—don't assume! Then ask the direct question, "Who's willing to help with this?" We need to ask for exactly what we need!

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- **Evaluate the building, meeting rooms, services, and activities.** Identify the physical and attitudinal barriers that may be preventing people with disabilities from inclusive participation in age-appropriate activities.
- **Meet with religious leaders** to (1) educate them about the importance of using People First Language and acquiring new attitudes and perceptions, (2) help them learn that people with disabilities are more like people without disabilities than different, (3) point out the barriers you discovered, and (4) offer suggestions for improvements. (Remember that religious organizations and their activities are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act and other civil rights laws.)
- **Use every “pulpit” available** to reach as many people as possible: the real one in the worship hall (give a guest sermon!), as well by meeting with Sunday School classes, adult and youth groups, etc.
- **Detail how others will benefit** from making positive changes, such as people who may acquire disabilities through the aging process, those with temporary disabilities (a broken leg), and so forth.
- **Demonstrate an attitude of excitement and possibility**, instead of criticism or anger. Believe that most people are not mean-spirited or rude; they may simply be uneducated about people with disabilities and differences.
- **Recommend the adoption of a written “inclusion policy”** that details what the church/synagogue will do to ensure the active participation and inclusion of all people in age-appropriate activities. This policy could include things like: ensuring people with disabilities are involved in leadership roles, with supports as necessary; a Sunday School class (or other activity) will be moved to the ground floor to accommodate a person who uses a mobility device (assuming the building has no elevator); modified texts will be provided; and so forth. Before this policy can be implemented, changes may need to be made in the building or activities. The adoption and adherence of a written policy can turn “good intentions” into reality.
- **Discuss strategies to reach out** to people with disabilities and differences in your community. Promote

your inclusive church/synagogue to the general public. Get the media involved!

Creating a “special needs” committee is not necessary or desirable. The responsibility for including all members should be shared across all existing committees and throughout the congregation. Isolating it to one committee sends the signal that only that committee is responsible and/or knowledgeable.

Examining how people with disabilities are treated in our places of worship can lead to a critical analysis of other activities that, in turn, can lead to positive change. A church in our town held a “sharing day” every three months. The fellowship hall was filled with donated clothing, household goods, and other items. The “poor and needy” were invited to browse and select the items they needed. “Church ladies” attended the tables of goods and roamed the hall to help. Sounds good on the surface, but what did it feel like to the “poor and needy”? They entered a hall where the dividing line between the “haves” and the “have-nots” was clear. The church later adopted a way of helping that didn’t strip people of their dignity: private, individual appointments for the Clothes Closet, meeting one-on-one with a volunteer.

And let’s not forget private church schools. I’m amazed at the number of parents who wish to enroll their children with disabilities in their church’s private school, only to be told no. How, in good conscience, can religious leaders allow this?

Inclusion begets inclusion. Many benefits will accrue to people with disabilities and our communities when churches/synagogues are inclusive. Children who are included can make new friends and enjoy typical (and important) activities of childhood. Adults who are fully included will be networking with others and developing friendships, that can lead to real jobs, independent living, and more. People without disabilities learn that people with disabilities are more like them than different.

An inclusive church/synagogue can deepen and enrich religious experiences and individual faith. And doesn’t God want the welcome mat out for *all*?