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Including People *with*  
**DISABILITIES**  
*in* Faith Communities

A GUIDE FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS, FAMILIES, & CONGREGATIONS

by

Erik W. Carter, Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin–Madison

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Excerpted from *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities:*

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# Contents

About the Author.....	vii
Forewords	
Signs and Invitations <i>Bill Gaventa</i> .....	ix
Belonging, Believing, and Becoming <i>Rud and Ann Turnbull</i> .....	xiii
Preface.....	xix
Acknowledgments.....	xxi
Chapter 1 Lives of Faith: Moving Toward Full Participation.....	1
Chapter 2 A Welcoming Congregation: Signs of Hospitality.....	27
Chapter 3 Welcoming, Including, and Connecting: Becoming a Responsive Congregation.....	53
Chapter 4 Designing Inclusive Religious Education Programs.....	89
Chapter 5 Supporting Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families: The Other Six Days.....	119
Chapter 6 The Contributions of Service Providers: Supporting Spiritual Expression.....	147
Chapter 7 Launching Communitywide Efforts: Partnering Together for Inclusion.....	171
References.....	189
Appendix A Examples of Faith Group Statements Addressing Disability and Congregational Inclusion.....	203
Appendix B Resources for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations.....	209
Index.....	229

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## About the Author

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Dr. Carter received his doctorate in special education from Vanderbilt University in Nashville. His research and writing focuses on effective strategies for including children and youth with developmental disabilities more fully and meaningfully in schools and communities. With Dr. Carolyn Hughes, Dr. Carter co-wrote *The Transition Handbook: Strategies High School Teachers Use that Work* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2000) and *Success for All Students: Promoting Inclusion in Secondary Schools Through Peer Buddy Programs* (Allyn & Bacon, 2006).

## Chapter 2

# A Welcoming Congregation



## Signs of Hospitality

**A**ny given week, millions of people gather together with family, friends, neighbors, and strangers in a local church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other place of worship. What draws people through the doors of their congregation for the first time? What leads them to keep coming back? Every person can tell their own story. They come to encounter the presence and holiness of God; to worship corporately and share in the sacraments. They come for spiritual nurture and growth; to walk alongside and lean on others as they mature in their faith. They come to satisfy deep longings; to discover who they are, to whom they belong, and what they are called to do. They come for a sense of community and belonging; to enrich and be enriched by the lives and experiences of others. They come bearing burdens and vulnerabilities; seeking an anchor in difficult times and support in the midst of uncertainty. People with developmental disabilities also have stories to tell; they are fellow travelers on the very same journey of life. They hold the same desires for worship, growth, direction, and support; they share the same need for community, connectedness, and belonging.

Mirroring the broader movements among denominations and faith groups, as well as affirming the efforts of service and support organizations to promote community involvement, individual congregations throughout the country are taking steps to improve their capacity to welcome and include people with developmental disabilities and their families. Most congregations, if asked, would probably affirm that they are called to be an inviting home and safe haven for people with disabilities. But knowing exactly how to live out this call might seem unclear to congregations initially. What does it really mean to be a welcoming congregation? What does it look like to meaningfully include people with disabilities? What indicators of hospitality and sanctuary will be recogniz-

able to others in the broader community? This is a journey; with each step moving you closer to becoming the sort of congregation you aspire to be. Fortunately, there are many signposts to guide you as you proceed.

## INDICATORS OF A WELCOMING CONGREGATION

Congregations can mean very different things when they assert that they are a welcoming community. For some, evidence for their claim is found in their well-crafted mission statement, a newly installed elevator, or a handful of designated parking spaces. Others point to a special Sunday school class or children's program for people with intellectual disabilities. A few might describe how people with disabilities are helping on the worship team, contributing to small groups, or serving on an outreach committee. What does a welcoming congregation really look like? What features characterize a community in which people with developmental disabilities and their families are participating, contributing, and feel assured that they belong? If inclusion is a journey, how will you know when you have finally arrived? It may be helpful to begin by considering several characteristics of a welcoming congregation, recognizing that these indicators are likely to be evidenced in different ways from one congregation to the next. As you read this chapter, ask yourself the following: *To what extent are these indicators evident in our congregation?*

### Presence

Inclusion begins with presence. It is difficult to welcome individuals when they are not actually present among you. What does a glance across the pews, a peek into your programs for children and youth, or a look at your leadership and ministry teams reveal about the extent to which people with disabilities are currently involved in your faith community?

### Accessibility

Presence is only a starting point, not a signal to stop. Once they come through your doors, people must be able to participate in the activities and programs you offer, as well as have access to the different locations and facilities in which they take place. When a youth group meets on the second floor of a building without elevators, when raised sections of the sanctuary lack ramps, when recreational areas are designed so that only some children can play together, or when transportation is infrequently available, it is difficult for someone to move from mere presence to true participation. Would visitors describe your congregation as barrier free?

*When Brian's parents first visited St. Michael's, they were skeptical that their son's wheelchair would be able to navigate the historic building. Insist-*  
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*ing that Brian's participation was as important to them as every other child's, the youth leaders brainstormed a plan. With guidance from a few especially "handy" members, the youth group pitched in to build a small ramp, raise a couple of tables slightly, and partially renovate a bathroom. While waiting for more extensive renovations to be done in the meeting room, the youth leaders decided that the group would gather elsewhere rather than leave Brian out.*

## Hospitality

Although an accessible building is essential, it is through interactions and relationships with others that welcome is truly communicated. Hospitality can be demonstrated in simple ways: extending a greeting, remembering a name, noticing a new haircut, or asking about someone's week. But an inclusive congregation is known for more than just easy hospitality. Its members invite people to lunch, spend time really getting to know them, celebrate their successes, and stand alongside them in difficult times. Gestures must have authenticity and substance; they must offer much more than just the veneer of welcome. A congregation can *say* all of the right things, but still fail to nurture close relationships and fall short of addressing people's felt needs.

"Hospitality depends on a disposition of love; it has more to do with the resources of a generous and grateful heart than with availability of food or space."

—Christine Pohl (1999, p. 14)

*Not one member of the congregation would have to hesitate when asked to share how Pat had touched their lives. So, when Pat was not seen sitting in her usual seat—fourth row, second seat from the aisle—at the 9:00 A.M. service, it was definitely noticed. By mid-afternoon, five people had already called Pat to find out how she was feeling and whether she needed a meal, a visit, or just some encouragement. Pat wasn't simply absent; she was missed.*

## A Sense of Shared Lives

Sharing lives entails more than just sharing space. A welcoming congregation strives to weave people with and without disabilities into a common community (see Box 2.1). Sometimes, disability ministry efforts originate as separate religious education classes, worship services, or study groups for people with developmental disabilities. However, an

"Alan was a living lesson in authenticity. He was authentically glad to be in community every time he was at church. It never occurred to him to act pious or perfect. He never worried about being liked or loved by the community or by God.

He simply trusted that he was.... Alan was a lesson for each of us in the art of self-acceptance. The gift Alan gave to us was more powerful than anything we gave to him.... What congregation can afford to pass up such gifts?"

—Jim Kasperson, as cited in Carlson (2004, p. 193)

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### Box 2.1 Proximity versus Participation

Across educational, employment, and community settings, research findings echo an important lesson: Inclusion is about much more than location. It is entirely possible for a person to be physically present in a sanctuary, classroom, or fellowship hall, but completely isolated from all of the interactions, learning opportunities, and relationships that energize that setting. For people with developmental disabilities, this possibility is too often the reality. Welcoming a person with a disability into a congregation should not be limited to that discrete moment when someone enters through the doorway of your building. Rather, it should be an ongoing process whereby a person was first welcomed, is being welcomed, and will always be welcomed. This is the difference between being present and having a presence (Granzen, 2005).

even closer reflection of true community is evidenced when people worship, fellowship, learn, and serve alongside, rather than parallel to, each other. An inclusive congregation welcomes people with disabilities into every aspect of congregational life, allowing everyone to learn and live amongst each other.

*Michael was invited to join a small group that met weekly at various homes in the neighborhood. He knew very little about the Bible and had trouble grasping complex theological ideas, not unlike several other members of the group. He could not read, but several others were also shy about reading aloud. He took a long time to put his thoughts into words and he sometimes got distracted, but others in the group knew that their words rarely were very articulate. Still, Michael sure could pray! And everyone recognized that they would all be losing out on something important—something essential—if Michael were not given the chance to be a part of their small group.*

### Different Motivation

In inclusive congregations, it is not legislation or policy that compels the welcome. Their desire is not for filling empty pews or seeking public praise; they are neither responding out of pressure nor acting out of pity. Instead, they are motivated by God's clear call on their congregation to be a community that invites, receives, and embraces their brothers and sisters with disabilities. They recognize that they are missing something vital—indeed, they are impoverished—when this segment of their community is not participating.

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*No one with autism had ever attended Cottage Grove Church. But on hearing that two group homes for adults with developmental disabilities had recently been established in the neighborhood, several members of the church determined that it would no longer be due to the lack of an invitation. After discussing a recent sermon on what it really means to have an impact on their community, members of the young adult class all committed to getting to know the newest residents in their neighborhood.*

## A Recognition of Contributions

*It is next to impossible to enter the sanctuary without a firm, almost knuckle-cracking handshake from Aaron. As a greeter, his confident assurance is always the same: "It is going to be a great day!" It is next to impossible to walk away from Aaron without believing it.*

Everyone wants to feel certain that they are valued; that they matter to others. Historically, people with developmental disabilities have been defined by what they cannot do and, by extension, what they cannot contribute. An inclusive congregation recognizes the gifts of everyone in their community—including those members with developmental disabilities—and they seek to discover and unlock the gifts and talents that each person possesses. In addition to asking what their congregation has to offer people with disabilities, they also strive to discover all that people with disabilities have to offer to them.

"She's touched other lives with her smile and her acceptance. I see it in the eyes and smiles of her Sunday school teachers when they welcome her into the children's worship hour. I see it when other parents greet her in the hallway between services. She's reaching out—and others are reaching back. Others who've looked beyond Sarah's disability to see the child that God created."

—Mary Ann McPherson (2004, p. 28)

## Proactive Efforts

Welcoming congregations have learned to think ahead about emerging and future needs. They prayerfully anticipate the needs of people in their community who have not yet come through their doors. They recognize that if someone cannot enter in or is not welcomed the very first time, there is unlikely to be a second chance to welcome him or her back. If you wait until a person arrives at your door to begin thinking about how you will welcome him or her, you have simply waited too long. When you never encounter people with disabilities, it is easy to overlook the importance of addressing issues of accessibility. If your congregation is not accessible, you are unlikely to encounter people with disabilities. Congregations must be intentional about breaking this cycle.

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"Would we ever plan a new church without providing a children's program? Of course not, even if the people planning the church didn't have children. We'd have a program ready, waiting expectantly for that first family with little ones to walk through the front door. Let's be as zealous in providing for families with special needs. No one should be turned away from God's house; nor should we have to scramble around and offer a quick, inadequate, makeshift program because nothing is in place when the family arrives."

—Louise Tucker Jones (2004, p. 50)

*As Temple Beth Or sought out a new and permanent location for their annual retreat, the planning team began discussing factors to consider, including cost, location, amenities, and, for the first time, accessibility. After all, it became clear that their congregation was aging and, in several years, it was quite likely that older adults would appreciate being able to continue the tradition of attending each year. Moreover, an accessible retreat center would open opportunities for extending invitations to new and future members who have physical disabilities.*

## A Willingness to Learn

Within the vast majority of congregations, the backgrounds and experiences of members are very similar (DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey, & Kim, 2003). Many wrestle with determining exactly what it should look like to welcome strangers—people who have remained unfamiliar and unknown—into the life of their communities. Throwing the doors wide open and extending invitations to new and diverse people can be a very humbling experience. And it is not always clear how to proceed. Inclusive congregations evidence a willingness to learn from others, as well as from their own mistakes. This work is ongoing as congregations strive to do better, to be more responsive, and to live out their call more fully.

*To say that Sarah challenged expectations at First Baptist Church would be an understatement. Her "meltdowns" were never subtle and her fondness for throwing hymnals usually shocked the more senior members. No one quite like Sarah had ever wanted to join the church. So, several members agreed to work closely with Sarah's parents and support staff to figure out what triggered these behaviors, as well as to identify ways that the congregation could help Sarah participate "more peacefully" in worship services and membership classes. It took some time and a willingness to develop some new partnerships, but the congregation eventually learned to welcome and support Sarah as their newest member.*

## Reciprocity

People with developmental disabilities want opportunities to contribute to and make a difference within their congregations. Their gifts are as varied

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as those of people without disabilities; only perhaps more underutilized, less often nurtured, and more frequently overlooked. An inclusive congregation helps all of its members discover their gifts and equips them to use those gifts on behalf of others. This perspective stands in stark contrast to communities in which certain segments of the population always end up on the receiving end of ministry. Inclusive congregations challenge the presumption that people with disabilities must exclusively assume the position of “designated” or “perpetual” receivers of service (Gaventa, 2003; Van der Klift & Kunc, 2002). People with disabilities need more than just care, more than just to be served; they also need the chance to serve others. The roles of servant and served will not always be perfectly balanced in a person’s life, but neither should they remain static.

“Those who take time to know such people speak eloquently of their gifts: One woman is an excellent baker, another is tender and loving with little children. One man loves to hear gossip but never repeats it; another loves animals and is a willing caretaker for them. And one man is described, simply, as bringing joy and peace into other people’s lives.”

—Mary O’Connell (1988, p.8)

*Benjamin always loved attending Vacation Bible School, especially when members of the youth group spent time helping him out as part of a buddy program. Now that he is older, Benjamin wants to find a way to offer something of himself back to this program. Each day, he is responsible for helping to organize and deliver the craft supplies to each classroom, as well as preparing the morning snacks. But his favorite times are when he gets to help out the kindergarteners as a buddy.*

## The Journey Toward Inclusion

The work of welcoming and learning to welcome better is ongoing. Congregations should always be seeking ways of becoming more inviting, more intentional, and more hospitable. Including people with developmental disabilities will be new for most congregations; for others, it has long been an important part of who they are as a community. Many congregations find themselves at the beginning of this adventure; others have traveled much further along. It truly is a journey.

“The question is not how can we help people with disabilities (which is an important question)...a more important question is how can people with disabilities give their spiritual gifts to us and call us to love?”

—Henri Nouwen (1996)

## Movement of Relationships

Congregations are learning to enter into new relationships with people with disabilities. Gaventa (1986) offers one description of the stages

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through which congregations often move as they strive to become more inclusive. This movement of relationships illustrates how congregations are discovering new ways of relating to people with disabilities; shifting away from ministry apart from or exclusively to people with disabilities and toward ministry that is with and by people with disabilities. Eventually, ministry distinctions based on the presence of a disability might vanish altogether.

*Apart* Much of what takes place in congregations throughout the country happens *apart* from people with disabilities. Whether excluded or overlooked, people with developmental disabilities frequently are missing from the pews, not attending religious education classes, absent from leadership teams, not among those potlucking or partaking in ceremonial meals, nowhere to be found in ministry programs, and untouched by outreach efforts. The first step for many congregations is recognizing that an important part of their community is not actually part of their community. Absent this initial awareness, it is unlikely that congregations will be energized to respond differently.

*To* As they consider a starting point for ministry, many congregations begin by establishing special religious education classes, worship services, small groups, or other programs and activities designed exclusively for people with developmental disabilities. For example, a Sunday school class might be started for children with intellectual disabilities or a social club might be started for adults with autism. In such cases, ministry efforts are extended *to* people with disabilities; they primarily function one-way. Only a handful of individuals within a congregation—those serving as leaders and helpers—usually have opportunities to develop relationships with participants with disabilities. And while these volunteers would likely be quick to convey the many ways they have benefited from these experiences, the majority of the congregation still remains disconnected from the lives of people with disabilities. Sometimes, the prevailing view is that a person must receive training or possess a “special gift” to work with people with disabilities. Other times, people conclude that the spiritual needs, faith development, or learning styles of people with developmental disabilities diverge so substantially from the rest of the congregation that their needs can only be met within a specialized program. Neither view is accurate.

*With* Increasingly, congregations are discovering avenues for supporting the full and active participation of people with developmental disabilities in the life of their faith communities. They are realizing the value—indeed the necessity—of worshipping, fellowshiping, learning, and serving *with* people with disabilities. Evidence of shared ministry is

found when people with and without disabilities are seen sharing a hymnal, reading scriptures, passing the peace, kneeling together in prayer, catching up over coffee during the social hour, rooming together on a weekend retreat, or serving alongside each other at the food pantry. Such congregations are convinced that relationships are at the heart of community.

*By* Where intellectual and physical abilities are valued above all else, it can be difficult to imagine how someone with developmental disabilities would have much to contribute. Yet, the powerful testimony of a young man with autism, the faithful help of a teenager with Down syndrome in the nursery, the prayerful encouragement of a woman with cerebral palsy, and the reassuring smile of a child with multiple disabilities offers abundant evidence of the substantial contributions that can be made *by* people with disabilities. Congregations are slowly learning how to equip people with disabilities to engage their passions and gifts in the service of others, as well as demonstrating a willingness to gratefully receive these new offerings. This willingness to receive the gifts of people with disabilities is new territory for many congregations. Yet, anyone who has allowed a person with developmental disabilities the chance to share his or her gifts will likely testify to the profound impact it has had on his or her life. A congregation that cannot find a home for the gifts of all its members simply is not thinking hard enough.

"Those of us who have worked in this field know firsthand that people with developmental disabilities have ministered to us as much as we have ministered to them. Ministry is spirit to spirit. It does not depend on the state of a person's eyesight, hearing, ability to walk, talk or sit still. Nor does it depend on one's intellect. It depends on one's heart."

—Terry Sieck and Rebecca Hartvigsen (2001, p. iii)

"I have learned more about the Gospels from the handicapped people, those on the margins of our society, those who have been crushed and hurt, than I have from the wise and the prudent."

—Jean Vanier (1975, p. 99)

*We* What an incredible testimony it would be if the distinction between people with and without disabilities disappeared altogether in communities of faith. It could simply be *we* who engage in ministry, everyone together. When a congregation no longer thinks first and foremost along the lines of disability, it has probably arrived at its destination.

## Movement of Responses

The journey toward inclusion also might be thought of as a movement of responses, where congregations endeavor to continuously improve and

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broaden their efforts to include people with disabilities and their families in the life of their community. Some congregations are still in the planning stages, others have demonstrated a strong and lasting investment in the lives of people with disabilities. The National Organization on Disability's (NOD's) *Journey of a Congregation* offers one approach for considering where along this continuum a congregation finds itself, as well as where it envisions itself going (see Table 2.1). Early efforts often are characterized by growing awareness of barriers present within the congregation, a stirring among members to remove these obstacles, an articulation of the desire to be more welcoming, and initial conversations about proper starting points. As congregations deepen their commitment, plans give way to actions. New invitations to participate are extended, alterations are made to usual practices, attitudes begin to shift, and growth in the number of people with disabilities in the congregation becomes apparent. Eventually, an entire congregation can be transformed. People with disabilities are woven throughout congregational life, new relationships are forged, and passive participation gives way to true membership. Recognizing the impact on their own community, congregations often begin reaching out to guide others interested in undertaking this same journey.

Most congregations are still in the beginning stages of this journey (LaRoque & Eigenbrood, 2005). But, point of entry is probably less important than the direction and pace at which you are moving. More than two thousand congregations have committed to embarking on this journey, as evidenced by their decision to join the NOD's *Accessible Congregations Campaign*. Each participating congregation affirms the inherent worth of all people as created in the image of God, commits to removing barriers that hinder people with disabilities from participating actively in the life of the congregation, and encourages all of its members to share their faith, gifts, and talents fully in the life of the congregation. Where on this journey is your congregation? Are you still waiting to embark? Can you yet catch a glimpse of your destination?

### **Beginning Your Journey: How Welcoming Is Your Congregation?**

Until this point, this chapter has focused on some of the marks of a welcoming congregation and the ways in which one's welcome might evolve. But, how can you determine whether *your* congregation truly is accessible—structurally, attitudinally, theologically, and programmatically? What signs exist that your community is a place that faithfully and continually welcomes people with disabilities? How can you identify areas in which your responses might be strengthened? Hospitality and welcome are hard

**Table 2.1.** *Journey of a Congregation* self-assessment tool

Level	Examples
Awareness	Recognition exists in some congregation members or the leadership that certain barriers are preventing children or adults with physical, sensory, or mental disabilities from gaining access to a full life of faith.
Internal advocacy	Advocacy is growing within the congregation to welcome people with disabilities as full participants and to remove barriers to this participation.
Discussions	Concerns are raised about the ability of the congregation to meet these challenges and—with input from people with disabilities and other experts—solutions are identified.
Plans	Invitations are extended to people with disabilities to join the congregation as full members, action plans are devised to achieve barrier-removing goals, and formal commitments are made to welcome people with disabilities.
Accommodations	Accommodations are made to improve the participation of people with disabilities.
Welcoming environment	Appreciation is expressed for the changes being made and friendships are extended to people with disabilities and their family members.
Hurdles	Identification of architectural, communication, transportation, financial, or other barriers are made and ways are found to move forward in spite of them.
Inclusion	Increased participation of people with disabilities in worship, study, and service to others is seen, as well as increased comfort levels of members with a more diverse congregation.
Local outreach	Options are explored and action plans formulated for partnership opportunities with local agencies and organizations serving people with disabilities.
Leadership	Lay members with disabilities are recruited for leadership roles within the congregation and willingness to accept and accommodate an ordained leader with a disability is demonstrated.
Transformation	Ongoing transformation of the congregation into a place where children and adults with disabilities are welcomed, fully included, and treated with respect occurs.
External advocacy	An expanded advocacy role is evidenced for congregation members regarding the needs and rights of people with disabilities in the community at large.
Outreach	Successful strategies, insights, and effective practices are compiled and shared with other congregations and communities.
Sharing the story	The story of the transformation of the congregation is publicized through articles, presentations, and/or media events.

From National Organization on Disability. (2001). *The journey of a congregation*. Washington, DC: Author; adapted by permission.

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to quantify; two congregations are unlikely to define them in precisely the same way. The presence of people with disabilities in your congregation is one essential indicator, but certainly not the only one. It will take something more.

Many congregations begin by prayerfully examining how people with developmental disabilities and their families are currently participating, the barriers that may hinder their involvement, and the ways that welcome might be more clearly articulated. This process of self-reflection—sometimes called an *accessibility audit*, *congregational assessment*, *inclusion inventory*, or *barrier survey*—offers an opportunity to consider what is going well and what steps you might be led to take next. It is designed to answer the following questions: Where is your congregation on this journey? What direction are you heading? How swiftly along are you moving?

***Creating a Congregational Team*** This process often begins with gathering a team of people for the purpose of examining the congregation's buildings, activities, policies, and practices. Who should contribute to this reflection process? Involve members who have experience with different aspects of congregational life—from children's programs to adult religious education to outreach ministries. Bringing together people with varied perspectives ensures that every facet of congregational life is considered, ownership is broadened, and creativity and resources are maximized. For example, consider inviting members of the pastoral staff, children and youth program directors, ministry leaders, parents of children with disabilities, and other interested congregational members.

It is not uncommon for people at first glance to conclude that their congregation is completely accessible. After all, you yourself may encounter little difficulty participating in services and programs. Stepping back and viewing your congregation from the standpoint of a visitor—especially a visitor with developmental disabilities—can be a difficult perspective to adopt. Although you may consider your congregation to be free of barriers and most welcoming, would a stranger? Therefore, two additional invitations are important to extend. First, include at least one person with disabilities on your team who is willing to share his or her own perspective on congregational activities. If no one in your congregation fits this description, consider contacting local service and support organizations to identify someone with disabilities willing to assist with this assessment (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1). It sometimes takes a personal experience with disability to recognize the barriers present in a congregation. Second, it might be beneficial to invite someone from outside of your congregation to provide a fresh perspective on aspects of congregational life that invite or



inhibit the participation of people with disabilities and their families. For example, special educators, rehabilitation counselors, therapists, and other service providers who work with people with disabilities have much expertise to share. Moreover, your own denomination (see Appendix B) or a local community resource network (see Chapter 7) may have people willing to contribute to such congregational assessments.

***Tools for Reflection*** Several approaches can be taken to guide your team in reflecting on the facilities and practices of your congregation. For example, numerous organizations and faith groups have developed formal tools to help you know which features of your congregation should receive your attention (see Table 2.2). Some tools include checklists of architectural elements that should be examined, including parking lots, walkways, entrances, restrooms, stairways, and fixtures (also see Chapter 3, Box 3.4). They may prompt you to consider issues related to communication, lighting, transportation, curricula, and attitudes. Other tools list various aspects of congregational life, inviting appraisal of the extent to which people with disabilities are currently involved. These tools can be useful for identifying potential obstacles to the participation of individuals with a broad range of

**Table 2.2.** Examples of congregational reflection tools

Reflection tool	Organization
<i>The ABCs of Access</i>	Anabaptist Disabilities Network
<i>Accessibilities Mini-Audit</i>	Unitarian Universalist Association
<i>Accessibility Audit for Churches</i>	United Methodist Church
<i>Accessibility Checklist</i>	Joni and Friends Ministries
<i>Accessibility Review</i>	Christian Council on Persons with Disabilities
<i>Accessibility Survey</i>	Pathways Awareness Foundation
<i>An Audit of Barriers</i>	National Organization on Disability
<i>Assessment Tool for Congregations, People Who Have Developmental Disabilities, and Those Who Support Them</i>	Bethesda Lutheran Homes
<i>Churches for All: Access Standards &amp; Questionnaire</i>	Through the Roof
<i>How Accessible is Your Church?</i>	North American Mission Board
<i>Inventory on Parish Attitudes</i>	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
<i>Journey of a Congregation</i>	National Organization on Disability
<i>Local Church Accessibility Survey</i>	Center on Aging & Older Adult Ministries, United Methodist Church
<i>Parish Accessibility Survey</i>	National Catholic Partnership on Disability
<i>Signs of an Open-Door Parish</i>	National Catholic Partnership on Disability

Excerpted from *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*

by Erik W. Carter, Ph.D.

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disabilities, including visual impairments, hearing impairments, and physical disabilities. However, children and adults with developmental disabilities often encounter additional barriers that may require consideration. Figure 2.1 displays a self-reflection guide—called *Indicators of Welcome: A Tool for Congregational Reflection*—for communities particularly interested in improving their capacity to welcome and support people with intellectual disabilities, autism, and other developmental disabilities.

The information needed to complete these tools can be gathered in a variety of ways. An attentive walk around the property and facilities is necessary when assessing architectural issues, but it should be coupled with conversations with individuals who use wheelchairs, walkers, and scooters, as well as users of other forms of specialized equipment. Team members also might visit the various events and activities that occur throughout the congregation each week, looking to see how people with disabilities currently are involved in or precluded from participating. Progress is sometimes exceptional in one area but slow in others, so it is important to look systematically across your congregation. For example, it is not uncommon for teachers of a preschool program to do an outstanding job of including children with disabilities at the same time as youth leaders struggle to welcome teenagers with disabilities into the high school group. Finally, blank copies of the reflection tool might be shared with team members, as well as with other members of the congregation, to be filled out individually. Once returned, responses can be examined to identify commonly held perceptions.

These tools should be used flexibly and adapted to address the specific issues present in your congregation. Consider adding or rewording items so that it is easy for people to share their feedback. Remember that these tools are only guides and should be interpreted carefully. They offer only examples of areas a congregation might consider; some issues may be more relevant than others. Moreover, they do not provide a cutoff score indicating when your congregation is “accessible enough”; neither do they include a standardized score against which to compare your congregation to others. Their purpose is simply to guide you in reflecting more deeply.

As an alternative or supplement to more structured tools, consider these other avenues for assessing your congregational practices.

- *Meet with new members and recent visitors to ask about their experiences and impressions on first visiting your congregation.* Talking with families who visited once or twice but decided not to return may help you to understand subtle barriers that exist within your congregation. Ideas for getting these conversations started are displayed in Table 2.3.

<b>Indicators of Welcome</b>					
<b>Perspectives</b>					
Whose perspectives were sought as part of this self-reflection process?					
<input type="checkbox"/> Clergy	<input type="checkbox"/> Person(s) with disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Community members			
<input type="checkbox"/> Children/youth program leader	<input type="checkbox"/> Family member(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> Service or support providers			
<input type="checkbox"/> Adult program leader	<input type="checkbox"/> Other congregation members	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____			
<b>Presence and Participation</b>					
What steps have we taken to identify individuals <i>within</i> our congregation affected by disabilities?					
What steps have we taken to identify individuals <i>beyond</i> our congregation affected by disabilities?					
To what extent are children and adults with developmental disabilities, as well as their families, <i>actively</i> participating in the following dimensions of congregational life?					
	Actively	Some-times	Never	Uncer-tain	Comments
Worship services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sacraments and rituals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Fellowship events	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Adult religious education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Small groups and Bible studies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Children's religious education programs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Youth groups and young adult programs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Summer programs and camps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Greeters, ushers, or other worship assistants	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Choir or worship team members	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Congregational committees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Outreach ministries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Congregation-sponsored schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Leisure, recreation, and social activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
♦Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
♦Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
♦List other activities in which members of your congregation typically participate.					

**Figure 2.1.** Indicators of welcome: A tool for congregational self-reflection. (continued)

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Figure 2.1. (continued)

What barriers seem to be hindering their involvement in these areas?

**Architectural and Physical Accessibility**

Can the following areas of our building and grounds be navigated easily by people using wheelchairs, walkers, and scooters, as well as other adaptive equipment?

	At present, how accessible are we?				Comments
	Completely	Some-what	Not at all	Uncer-tain	
Sanctuaries and other worship spaces	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Classrooms and meeting rooms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Fellowship areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Nursery	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Restrooms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Playgrounds and recreation areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Gymnasium	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Parking lots and sidewalks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Doorways and hallways	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Congregational offices	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Kitchen and eating areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
School building and child care center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Summer camps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
♦Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
♦Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

♦List other locations within your congregation that visitors or members might encounter.

Which three architectural barriers are the most pressing?

1.

2.

3.

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Read the following statements. To what extent does each statement describe our congregation? If you are not sure, mark <i>Uncertain</i> .				
<b>Worship services</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Un- certain
Greeters, ushers, and other worship assistants know how to extend welcome and offer assistance to people with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People with disabilities are supported to sit with friends, family, or whomever they choose.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Faith partners are available to sit with, befriend, and support people with developmental disabilities, if desired.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worship experiences are designed to engage multiple senses and allow for participation in various ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Congregational leaders are willing to explore alternate ways for participating in worship and the sacraments, as necessary.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People with developmental disabilities are contributing to worship services in varied ways, including as greeters or choir members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The congregation expresses comfort with people who worship in different ways (e.g., making noises, rocking, flapping their hands).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The congregation is periodically asked about chemical sensitivities, food allergies, or other environmental issues that impact involvement.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Figure 2.1. (continued)

<b>Religious education</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
Children with developmental disabilities participate in the same activities and classes as their peers without disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activities are adapted and supports are provided so that children with disabilities can participate in activities to the greatest extent possible.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious curricula appeals to children who learn, participate, and contribute in a variety of ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Basic information, training, and support are provided to lay volunteers who work with children with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teachers and helpers are ready to include children with disabilities in their classes from the moment families first arrive.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Topics related to hospitality, inclusion, disabilities, and community periodically are woven into religious education curricula.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Youth with disabilities participate in preparation classes for membership, confirmation, bar/bat mitzvah, and other rites of passage.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adults with disabilities are included in religious education programs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Schools and daycare programs sponsored by our congregation include children with developmental disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Service</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
People with disabilities contribute on planning teams and serve in leadership positions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Efforts are made to discern the gifts of people with developmental disabilities and connect them with opportunities to share their gifts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People with disabilities are serving in varied capacities <i>within</i> the congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People with disabilities are serving in varied capacities <i>beyond</i> the congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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<b>Outreach</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
Intentional efforts are made to invite people with developmental disabilities and their families to participate in congregational life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accessibility symbols and images of people with disabilities are included in our materials and advertising.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transportation to congregational activities is provided or arranged for individuals who cannot drive.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visitation programs are extended to people with disabilities and their families, as well as those who are homebound.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We actively seek out ways to address unmet needs of people with disabilities living in our community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Members are informed of opportunities to support people with disabilities within and outside of the congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>General awareness</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
Our policies and practices clearly communicate our desire to worship and serve alongside people with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our vision to be inclusive is frequently shared with members and broadcast throughout the community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reflection on our accessibility and hospitality is conducted at least annually.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inclusion awareness events are observed each year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Basic disability awareness is communicated through sermons, bulletin inserts, newsletters, religious education curricula, and other avenues.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accessibility and support needs are considered when congregational events are planned.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our resource library includes books and materials about disabilities, as well as resources for family members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our clergy and ministry leaders are familiar with disability issues related to their specific programs, roles, and responsibilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(continued)

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Figure 2.1. (continued)

<b>Families</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
Families feel welcomed and included in the congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Families contribute to discussions on congregational accessibility.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Respite care is available to interested parents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support groups are available to interested parents, siblings, and others within our congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Financial support is available to people with disabilities and their families, as it is to all members of the congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People with disabilities and their families know who to contact to ask for support and assistance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clergy and care ministers feel equipped to provide spiritual care and support to people with developmental disabilities and their families.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Partnerships with community groups</b>	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
We have developed relationships with agencies and organizations serving people with disabilities in our community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We have invited people with disabilities and advocacy groups to provide us with feedback about our materials, programs, and activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff from service and support organizations are helping us to improve our capacity to welcome and support people with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We know where to turn when we need more information about specific disability-related issues.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We advocate for laws, policies, and resources that improve the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Other indicators	Absolutely	Some- what	Not at all	Uncer- tain
We have developed a written plan describing how we will improve our accessibility and welcome.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intentional efforts are made to support people with and without disabilities to develop meaningful social relationships.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A key person or group in our congregation is committed to making sure that the needs of people with disabilities are being addressed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People with disabilities and/or their family members are involved in visioning and planning for the future of the congregation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We have a process for identifying the emotional, spiritual, practical, and other support needs of congregation members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>PLAN OF ACTION</b>				
List up to five goals for improving our congregation's welcome and accessibility. What specific steps will we need to take to realize those goals? When will we aim to accomplish each goal? Who will be responsible for ensuring that each goal is followed through to completion?				

Goals	Next steps	Completion date	Person(s) responsible
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
Comments:			

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- *Survey members directly about their impressions of how welcoming the congregation is for people with disabilities, or for anyone.* Over a period of several weeks, greeters might hand out the surveys or include them in the bulletin. Place slotted boxes at the doorways so that surveys can be returned at any time.
- *Hold a listening session with people in your congregation who are affected by disabilities or who have an interest in making your congregation more inviting and responsive.* Provide coffee, snacks, and an open atmosphere for people to share their own stories and experiences. Members might feel more comfortable sharing openly if this conversation is facilitated by someone not affiliated with your congregation.
- *Meet individually with families of children with disabilities to ask about their ideas for how the congregation can better meet the needs of their child.* Their recommendations can be shared with your team without divulging names or information about families that wish to remain confidential.

**Table 2.3.** Conversation starters for current members and recent visitors

- 
- How long have you been attending our congregation?
  - How did you first hear about our congregation?
  - What initially led you to visit for the first time?
  - Describe some of your first impressions.
  - What specific steps have people taken to make you and your children feel welcome?
  - Have there been experiences that have made you feel unwelcome or uncomfortable?
  - Was there anything that almost kept you from returning?
  - What could we have done to have made you and your children feel *more* welcome?
  - How has your involvement in this congregation deepened over time?
  - Are you involved in congregational programs and activities to the extent that you would like?
  - If not, what stands in the way of this happening?
  - How have people helped you identify ways that your gifts could be used within and beyond this congregation? Your children's gifts?
  - How well have we done in supporting your faith journey? Your children's journeys?
  - What advice do you have for us to be more responsive to the needs of children and adults with disabilities and their families?
  - What needs in our congregation are going unrecognized or unmet? In our larger community?
  - Do you know of other families that might want to share their experiences and thoughts with us?
  - Is there anything else that we should know?
-

- *Make members of your congregation aware of avenues through which they can share disability-related needs or suggestions with the congregation's leadership or those leading the reflection process.* Ideas might include an anonymous "suggestion box" in the foyer, a form on the congregation's web site, or a note placed in the offering plate.
- *Engage youth or college-age groups in the reflection process.* Invite them to take a deeper look at congregational activities, perhaps as part of a service project.
- *Visit other congregations known for their accessibility and hospitality.* As you observe, ask yourself: What do they do exceptionally well? What looks different about their practices? What ideas can you take back to your own congregation?
- *Invite people with disabilities from your community to visit your worship services, programs, and other congregational activities.* Ask about the ways they felt welcomed and the barriers they encountered.

Reflecting on your congregation's hospitality should not be a one-time endeavor. Some congregations commit to an annual review of their accessibility, offering regular opportunities to reflect on and celebrate the progress that is being made. Often, these more formal efforts are linked to awareness events, such as a Disability Awareness Sunday (see Box 3.2 in Chapter 3). However, congregations should always be taking inventory of potential barriers and making efforts to remove obstacles to participation as they arise.

## Reflecting and Responding

The team should meet together to compile and review all of the information that has been gathered. Begin by discussing what already is being done particularly well. Perhaps much or all of your building is accessible, several children with autism or other developmental disabilities currently are participating in elementary programs, families feel comfortable sharing their needs with clergy, and transportation is being provided for several adults with disabilities living in a nearby neighborhood. Celebrate each accomplishment. Then, discuss the barriers that emerged and identify needs that remain partially or wholly unmet. Perhaps your congregation still struggles to welcome young adults with disabilities in fellowship events, teachers remain unsure of how to adapt their curriculum to meet the needs of a child with severe disabilities, or parents express frustration with the leadership's unwillingness to reconsider how children are pre-

pared for confirmation or other rites of passage. At this point, it may be appropriate to share your findings with your congregation's leadership team or governing board. Or, you may decide to first compile a list of recommended next steps before initiating this conversation.

After reviewing your findings, the team can begin prioritizing the steps they will take to make the congregation more welcoming. When there is much to do, knowing exactly where to begin can be a challenge. Consider the following questions as you begin setting priorities.

- *Are there pressing needs already apparent in your congregation?* Maybe an adolescent with autism is not being welcomed into the youth group, an adult living in a nearby group home has no reliable way to get to weekly Mass, a teacher is struggling with how to include a four-year old with Down syndrome in her preschool class, or a mother desperately needs respite from the round-the-clock care she provides to her son with Tay-Sachs disease.
- *Are there barriers that affect a large portion of your congregation?* The absence of a ramp to your education building or lack of accessible transportation may be preventing a large number of people from attending your congregation, including senior citizens and people with temporary injuries or acquired physical disabilities. A poorly planned and unexciting youth program may not be meeting the needs of any middle and high school students in the congregation. Perhaps most people in the congregation find the sermon series to be unengaging and difficult to apply to their lives.
- *Are there important needs not being met within your broader community?* Maybe several other congregations in your city already have banded together to start a respite program, but a support group for parents still does not exist. Perhaps few congregations have made efforts to develop inclusive programs for children with intellectual disabilities, leaving parents with nowhere to go.

Once the team has established its priorities, it should begin developing a plan of action. Decide on the first issues that you will attempt to address. What resources—including people, materials, and finances—do you have available to draw on? What additional resources and relationships will you need to seek out? Who will assume primary responsibility for assuring that each task is followed through to completion? What is the timeline for completing these tasks? At what point will you revisit your progress? Once drafted, share your plan with others in the congregation and solicit their feedback and suggestions for additions or improvements.

---

## CONCLUSION

A welcoming congregation is more than a place where people with disabilities attend, but do not participate; arrive, but are not welcomed; receive, but do not serve. Becoming a congregation that is inclusive of people with developmental disabilities and their families requires an intentional and continuous commitment. The remainder of this book outlines exactly how you can begin breaking down architectural, attitudinal, communication, and programmatic barriers that keep people with disabilities and their families from participating in congregational life. In the next few chapters, you will read about strategies for weaving people with disabilities into worship services and ministry activities (Chapter 3), expanding religious education programs to meet the needs of all children and youth (Chapter 4), and reaching out to have an impact on the lives of people with disabilities beyond the walls of the congregation (Chapter 5).