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Equipping Special Needs Ministries in the Church and/or School

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A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Abstract

Inclusion of children, teens, and adults with various disabilities within religious settings, private schools, and church is less common than that of a public school or work environment. Inclusion reaches far beyond just invitations to events or places, it requires physical adaptations, attitude changes, and/or environmental changes. This review of literature provides a leader or educator with relevant research as well as how to start an inclusive religious program. It discusses how to include these individuals within the church setting as well as what the role of said leader or educator could or should be. It also provides numerous teaching strategies and curriculum design or ideas a leader or educator could utilize to have the greatest impact on these individuals.

Equipping Special Needs Ministries

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines inclusion as the following: “a relation between two classes that exists when all members of the first are also members of the second”. When a public school thinks about the word inclusion, the educators and staff within it will most likely think about how to integrate all their students regardless of race, culture, ability, and age into every aspect of the activities within the building. The act of including those with varying abilities and disabilities is a simpler process for the public school as it has the resources it needs through special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. However, inclusion must go beyond the public-school walls and into the church or private school because “outside of the school and work settings, church was identified as an important social setting for persons with disabilities” (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 118). In a study about parental perceptions about congregational supports Ault, Collins, and Carter (2013) report, “findings from a recent interview survey of a national cross-section of 1,001 individuals with disabilities or their proxy indicated that people with disabilities (50%) were less likely than people without disabilities (57%) to attend religious services at least once a month” (p. 49). When a church or private school thinks about inclusion, it will most likely think about how little training and resources it has to be successful at including members into their building, in regard to different disabilities. Barbara Newman (2011) states, “I’ve observed that many persons with disabilities feel more support and inclusion from public schools and government agencies than they do from the body of Christ” (p. 9). The feeling of more support in a public school is because there is a “specialized program and a network of service providers ensuring that each one’s individual needs are met” (Newman, 2011, p. 9). So, how does a church or private school change that feeling of less support into a more fully supported member for each member?

While there are several ministries and groups for a church or private school to reach out to for training and materials, do these groups provide adequately for a church or school to know enough to get started? Barbara Newman (2011) shares, “most churches don’t set out to exclude or isolate an individual... in different situations, the problem was not a lack of acceptance - rather, the church simply didn’t know what to do” (p. 9). This is where the role of a ministry leader or educator is vitally important. A ministry leader needs to be able to educate his/her congregation and staff on how to work with individuals with various disabilities because “the Bible completely affirms the worth and value of each individual created by God” (Newman, 2011, p. 16). Behind every leader and the training that leader provides needs to be a guide or curriculum for the leader to utilize, showing that “inclusion is not simply an issue of placement” (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 107). This curriculum needs to be more than just topics to teach and videos for each topic; it needs to include a variety of materials and strategies that a leader or educator could utilize so all people can access the content.

Review of Literature

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was put into place by the United States government with the goal to “prohibit discrimination against individuals with physical or mental disabilities” (Battaglia, 1994, p. 58). This act put together rules for “public services, public and private transportation, telecommunication services and employment” (Battaglia, 1994, p. 58) to follow. “While the ADA does not prescribe any specific accommodation that must be made, it does provide examples of reasonable accommodation” (Battaglia, 1994, p. 58). By implementing these rules, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is providing citizens with disabilities the same rights as every other citizen through various accommodations and modifications to the environment. One right that citizens with disabilities have is to be included

and to have access to content wherever they are. This right is more easily met in government run facilities such as public schools, workplaces, and public transportation because such places have access to resources to make them more inclusive. Privately funded organizations can provide general access through accessible entrances, handicap parking spaces, telecommunication services, and many more physical accommodations to the actual building. While ADA does require all publicly funded and privately funded organizations to follow ADA rules, privately funded organizations such as private schools and churches do not always have the resources to provide appropriate access to the content within the organization. Ault (2010) states, “in the area of spirituality and religion, the right to access and be fully included in places of worship may present a challenge for persons with disabilities and their families. Results from several studies indicate that people with disabilities are not participating in religious activities in ways and rates that are comparable to persons without disabilities” (p. 186). Ault, Collins, and Carter (2013) report, “spirituality and religious participation are considered a fundamental human right, there are also well-documented benefits associated with these expressions for people with disabilities and their families” yet “despite these potential benefits, people with disabilities may participate in religious activities substantially less often than people without disabilities” (p. 49). In fact, research shows that “56% of parents of children with disabilities had kept their children from participating in a religious activity because support was not provided and 32% of parents said they changed their place of worship because their child was not included or welcomed” (Carter, Boehm, Annandale, & Taylor, 2016, p. 373). This poses the questions of how do we include people with disabilities in the private school or church, what are the roles of leaders or educators in this inclusion process, and what kind of curriculum or training do these leaders or educators need in order to provide the most access to the content presented in a church or private school?

Inclusion in Church and/or School

Going back to the definition of inclusion which states, “a relation between two classes that exists when all members of the first are also members of the second” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), the first step in including individuals with disabilities into a church or private school is to simply create relationships between both parties. This can be a challenging task for a church or private school because so many people within the building are unsure how to create relationships with people with disabilities; however, “as a church we must not allow fear or uncertainty to rob us of enjoying and delighting in God’s gifts to our community. By excluding those in the body of Christ who have a disability, we cheat our faith communities out of some of God’s gifts for us” (Newman, 2011, p. 18). It can also be a challenging task for those of different cultures to include members with disabilities. In 1998, King states, “the lack of visibility of African Americans with disabilities as a ‘target’ population for church outreach may be a function of cultural values, such as the value of African American families to ‘take care of one’s own’; the tendency to place greater trust and reliance on the extended family structure for support, rather than social service systems; and cultural perceptions of disability that may include avoidance of public exposure of a disabled family member” (p. 37). For people with disabilities, “those with established friendships are more likely to have positive self-esteem, a sense of belonging, better communication skills, better emotional functioning, positive coping strategies, improved problem solving ability, a strong sense of self, a better grasp of life skills, and reduced behavioral outburst” (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 108). Having simple relationships with those with disabilities not only benefits the church, but also is a benefit for these individuals.

One of the first steps a church or private school needs to take in including those with disabilities is to look at how accessible the physical building is that these individuals will be entering. Haythorn (2003) states “simply welcoming people with disabilities into a congregation is not enough, often because the structure of the congregation is inaccessible” (p. 344), so a church or private school needs to look at how to make everything they do accessible to those with disabilities. “Accessibility extends beyond entryways to worship spaces and classrooms, to bathrooms and communion rails, to social halls and kitchens, even to playground equipment and parking lots. Door handles and door widths are often overlooked, as are the angles of ramps or the surfaces over which someone must move with a wheelchair or walker. Braille and large print editions of hymnals and bibles as well as sign interpreters and amplification devices are important modifications congregations can make. Some members may complain that no one in the congregation currently has need of those supports, but the complaint begs the question as to who has not come because the support wasn't made available” (Haythorn, 2003, p. 344-345). Because “without provision of essential adaptations, an individual with disabilities may become isolated” (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 108). When thinking about the various accommodations a church or private building would need to make, it would be vital that a leader or educator would take on the role of assisting in making worship and the building more accessible for all. While “specialized services and physical supports are necessary components for successful inclusion, these alone may not be sufficient. Often, additional informal supports such as friendships and other social relationships are required” because “social relationships and interactions are critical to the emotional, social, and physical well-being of individuals with disabilities” (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 108), which would be an important piece to a ministry leadership role in finding and fostering those needed relationships.

Martha Bess states, “in many ways, the structural and physical accommodations that a church makes in order to be hospitable are the ‘easy’ tasks. Greater challenges face congregations when they work to shape their worship, education, and mission practices in ways that engage the gifts of all” (Haythorn, 2003, p. 344). One way to include individuals and their gifts is so provide opportunities to people with disabilities to serve within the church or private school. In 1998, King stated, “providing an opportunity for church members with disabilities to serve as fully - included resource persons for the congregation - rather than being treated as pitiable objects or as heroic symbols - would be a major step toward dispelling myths and creating a more inclusive climate” (p. 45). Opportunities for people with disabilities within the church could include being an usher, greeter, a member of the praise team, or many other jobs the church asks its members to complete weekly or daily. “In finding areas of service, take into account the abilities and interests of the individual” (Newman, 2011, p. 56), which is where the importance of having relationships comes into play because the congregation got to know each individual and is able to ask which job or service sounds best to them. Haythorn (2003) states, “relationship and hospitality go hand in hand, for when we know the members of our congregations and welcome them as they are, we can also plan and prepare for their full participation” (p. 345). By providing opportunities to serve, people within the congregation will begin to cultivate relationships with one another, which will lead to a more inclusive environment for all. Collins, Epstein, Reiss, and Lowe (2001) state “although intentions may be good, the religious community sometimes engages in practices that result in segregation, such as having separate classes for persons with disabilities, furnishing modes of transportation not used by people without disabilities, or setting aside a special seating section of the worship service for people with disabilities” (p. 56). It is important for a church or private school to be aware of how

they are including these people within the building and in which positions they may be serving within the building. By serving alongside and with individuals with disabilities, members of a church or school building are also fostering relationships and creating an inclusive environment for all.

Role of Educators or Leaders

The role of an educator or ministry leader is an incredibly important role because they set the tone for how families view inclusion within the church, how the church or school body views inclusion, how the volunteers and ministry function, how persons with disabilities feel, and so much more. In 2001, Collins et al. report, “just as a successful transition to the work community is a goal of the school system, the goal of religious education programs should be the successful transition of students with disabilities to the religious community. Thus, teachers in religious education programs should work with families to involve their children in activities like church choirs, mission experiences, scripture or book study groups, youth groups and activities, and volunteer activities that result in interactions with members of their faith that can continue into adulthood” (p. 57). Family involvement is an important first step for leaders or educators to establish when beginning a ministry in the church or classroom in the school, especially for school aged children. Carter, Boehm, Annandale, and Taylor (2016) report that “potential supports that may be valued by these families include respite care, spiritual counseling, individualized supports within worship services and religious education, and programmatic adaptations and accessibility” (p. 373). Involvement with the family is not only important for the student or adult, but “family involvement in the religious community may be especially advantageous because it offers a support group for the family, as well as opportunities for inclusion in its activities” (Collins, Epstein, Reiss, & Lowe, 2001, p. 53). Additionally, this

type of inclusion helps provide a family with a way to “mediate the stress of parenting a developmentally disabled child” (King, 1998, p. 37) and “help them cope with their [child’s/sibling’s/own] disability” (Specht, King, Willoughby, Brown, & Smith, 2005, p. 52). However, “the considerable diversity in parental needs...should challenge congregations to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting families and instead consider avenues for individualizing their efforts to meet felt needs among the individuals and families present within their community” (Carter et al., 2016, p. 385). Because each individual has differing needs, a family will also have differing needs for support. When a leader is providing a large group or a small group training, it is important for that leader to emphasize that each person and family are different, so they will need varying supports. Families are also often an individual’s biggest advocate, so they can be an incredible resource for both a program and for other families. An individual’s family can help provide training, be listening ear, or be an advocate in the community; which shows the importance of a leader or educator building relationships with the families of individuals they will serve.

In 2013, researchers Ault, Collins, and Carter conducted various interviews with parents who had a child that lived with a disability and the supports that they received from the congregation for their children. Within their research they found that far fewer individuals with disabilities were attending a formal church service because parents “perceived that congregational staff were not competent or held negative attitudes toward including their children, the formality of worship services might set the occasion for their children’s behavior to disturb others, training provided to congregation members was inadequate, and the groups in which their children were included were not age appropriate” (p. 49). The researchers found that when congregations recognize “the need and desire of families to participate in their faith

communities, the benefits that such expressions hold for both them [parents] and their children, and the right for people with disabilities to make choices about their spirituality and religious participation, it is essential that people with disabilities have the supports and opportunities to be included into their faith communities to the extent they wish to be” (p. 49). The parents interviewed for this research and the researchers conducting these interviews looked towards what a school does for including all people.

Recommended educational policies and practices emphasize the importance of ensuring that children and youth with significant disabilities have access to the same range of opportunities available to their peers without disabilities and are provided the opportunities to make their own choices and to set their own goals regardless of their disability. Within congregational contexts, adopting this same principle should lead to individuals who are provided the opportunity not only to participate in activities others have deemed as appropriate for them, but also to participate in those activities they personally prefer (Ault, Collins, & Carter, 2013, p. 57).

Activities within the church that these individuals could participate include children’s messages, youth groups, Sunday school, missions’ trips, and other service opportunities within the church. “Although some parents reported their faith community was a place of acceptance for their child, a similar number of families indicated their children were not accepted and lacked the support needed to participate fully in religious activities” (p. 49). As a leader or educator for a special needs’ ministry, it is important to interview and connect with families, to know what supports work best for them, and to work alongside families to best support their individual needs. It is important work to mend the gap between separation and inclusion.

Just as family involvement is important, so is the individual's involvement in his/her education or worship. Ault (2010) states, "participation of an individual in spiritual or religious aspects of life has the potential to affect the quality of life in terms of emotional well-being, physical well-being, interpersonal relations, personal development, self-determination, and social inclusion" (p. 177), which are all skills individuals with disabilities tend to need to work on to be successful within the community that they are in. "Educators and clergy should not be afraid to ask people with disabilities what might be helpful for them and what they find most meaningful. As we come to know those with whom we serve, we can adapt and imagine ways of sharing the Story in ways that transcend words, that invite new insights, and that make room for all worshippers" (Haythorn, 2003, p. 345). By including the person in the discussion of how they want to be involved they will "be able to self-determine if this is an area that is important to them and be allowed the opportunity to participate to the extent they desire (Ault, 2010, p. 177), just as a typically developing student would get to choose. Additionally, "persons with developmental disabilities who experience inclusive settings are the most competent informants on this topic" (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 111) so they should be sought out to share experiences of what may or may not have been successful in their past.

Trace Haythorn interviewed a religious educator named Martha Bess who was an advocate for religious education for those with different disabilities. In the interview with Martha, Haythorn (2003) stated, "she doesn't expect the community to know how to respond on their own. As an educator within the congregation, she believes a part of her role is to give prophetic voice as the congregation works to make room for people with disabilities" (p. 343). It is important for the educator or ministry leader to know that they are going to be the biggest advocate for inclusion within the church and private school. As an educator, "Martha Bess

understands her responsibility is to be available to help creatively and imaginatively adapt the plan to meet the changing needs of the child, the family, the class, and the church” (Haythorn, 2003, p. 342). One important way leaders can incorporate inclusion into their ministries is the option to “adopt the policy that all students with disabilities are included in classes that serve students of the same age. This enables children to form friendships in the religious education program that may carry over to activities (e.g., school, sports) outside of the religious community” (Collins et al, 2001, p. 53). By adopting a policy or idea like this, the leader or educator is also providing “learning and social opportunities for their children in natural settings” (Ault, 2010, p. 177) as well as ways for inclusion within the building to grow through children.

Another important role of the leader or educator is to provide training and materials to volunteers that will be helping within the classroom or ministry. “Because religious education programs often depend on volunteers to teach classes to children, teachers in religious education programs may or may not have a background in education or experience with children with disabilities” (Collins, Epstein, Reiss, & Lowe, 2001, p. 53), so it is important for leaders or educators to take the time to educate, train, and set expectations for the ministry or classroom. Training can look different for each community and leader, but it is vital to a successful ministry and integration for people with disabilities. Carter, Boehm, Annandale, and Taylor (2016) report,

we were struck by the strong affirmation parents gave to more general investments in congregation-wide disability awareness efforts (i.e., more than 70% of families considered this to be somewhat to very helpful). Barriers of knowledge and attitude have long been

cited as principal impediments to the inclusion of people with disabilities—both within congregations and in other school, work, and community settings (p. 384).

Volunteers and the community can be trained through lectures, hands on activities, and through outside speakers at the beginning of the ministry or inclusion movement but a leader will need to provide continuous training for the volunteers to ensure the program's success in the building. Because family involvement is such an important piece to a ministry or religious education program, a leader or educator may turn to the family for specific training on their child and/or general training on children with disabilities as a training option.

In 2003, Michael Foster did a study within his own church on how to include those with disabilities in worship, in Sunday School, in small groups, and the general life of the church congregation. He first started with inviting people to the services through various agencies, group homes, and caregivers he had met. Immediately afterwards, he held training sessions for volunteers within the church who wanted to help with including those with disabilities into their worship time. He states,

my main intention with the [training] sessions was to ensure that when a person with a learning disability (and his or her carer) attended a church service, a member of the congregation who had attended one of the training sessions would be able to sit with them and help them find their way through the service with confidence, or help in other ways, for example, by making them a cup of coffee (Foster, 2003, p. 17).

With adequate training through multiple sessions, he noticed that the people within the congregation seemed more willing and apt to sit with their visitors. This one example shows the importance of training members of the congregation or volunteers in the ministry as it created a more inclusive environment within the worship service and church congregation.

An important part of providing adequate training is knowing the people that will be served and if a student struggles with behavior management. A leader or educator may have a student or adult with difficult behaviors enter the doors, so it is important to have a plan in place to best meet the individual's needs. First, a leader needs to "find out what behavior plan is already in place" and then "visit and observe an environment where that plan is working well" (Newman, 2011, p. 80). It will be important for the leader to know the plan well and to see it being carried out in different environments so that it is consistent, and the individual knows what to expect. After learning about and observing the plan, a leader should train the volunteers "until all the volunteers feel comfortable and equipped for their task" (Newman, 2011, p. 81), which can take some time for certain volunteers. Next, it might be important for a leader or educator to "invite someone who already works effectively with the individual in another setting to attend the church with him or her for a few weeks" (Newman, 2011, p. 81) as this individual will be able to help problem solve any issues and be a model to volunteers working with the individual. Lastly, in regard to behavioral issues, it would be important for the leader, family, and church leadership to have another plan in place should the individual's behavior escalate. In their discussions with parents, Ault, Collins, and Carter (2013) reported that "some individuals on the autism spectrum can exhibit challenging behaviors (e.g., not sitting still, making noises), it may be that faith communities are uncomfortable with or untrained in working with those individuals, resulting in parents not feeling the support of the community" (p. 58). As a leader or educator, it will be vital to get as much information from the individual's family or caregiver to help make the individual as successful as they can be in the religious setting, then train volunteers how to best work with that individual.

Another training option for a ministry leader or educator is to reach out to the students' teacher(s) and/or caregivers for additional information on how to most successfully include the specific child in worship, Sunday School, and the church congregation/building as a whole. "Many special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and other school staff are themselves members of faith communities. Their knowledge about the needs and experiences of families could provide a catalyst for their congregations to consider new—or better—ways of supporting families already involved to their faith community" (Carter, Boehm, Annandale, & Taylor, 2016, p. 387). "Both private and public-school staff are generally eager to share information that will enhance a child's experience in worship and church education" (Newman, 2011, p. 33). These teachers may "share insights and techniques they've found helpful" (Newman, 2011, p. 33) for both a specific individual or as a whole. When educators share information and strategies that they have found useful for the specific student, it "could enable congregations to design modifications or supports for a child that enable more active participation in religious education programs, worship services, or other congregational activities" (Carter, Boehm, Annandale, & Taylor, 2016, p. 387). However, "to be able to effectively deliver these services, special educators must be informed about the topic" (p. 177) of religion or spirituality. Educators will be less effective if they do not know anything or much about this area. Additionally, it might be helpful for the leader or educator to reach out to those either within the congregation or with a background of special education to assist in providing training, leading a group, volunteering, and/or adapting materials for the ministry or classroom as these people will be able to provide helpful strategies and tips that they have utilized in a more general sense. "Professionals committed to opening up the full range of community

opportunities for their students can serve as powerful advocates in support of inclusion in all aspects of life,” (Carter et al., 2016, p. 387) including religious education.

Special Education Ministry Curriculum Needs

When people with disabilities are included in the church or school and when leaders or educators know their roles, it is important to provide access to the content shared in church or lessons. Collins et al. (2001) state, “all children should have equal access to full inclusion in religious education programs, regardless of their faith or their disability” (p. 53). While there is no one correct way to provide this access, as each person is different and will need different supports, there are many widely known strategies and supports that a ministry or classroom can put into place as a starting point to provide access. Access to content also starts with a curriculum that leaders or educators can use and has a variety of strategies and materials to make their ministries most successful. A curriculum for special education ministries needs to be adaptable for the variety of disabilities a church or school might encounter, and the curriculum needs to be age appropriate for which ever age group it is serving.

A church or private school will encounter a wide variety of disabilities, both high incidence disabilities and low incidence disabilities, when they open their doors for inclusion of all. For children, teens, and adults with a high incidence disability such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, a curriculum usually does not need to be adapted as much to provide access. Teachers or leaders can use strategies such as “presenting the content of each lesson in a way that is meaningful and shows application to everyday life”, “using a hands-on approach... present lessons through oral presentations; activities that center on art, music, and drama; and physical activities and games”, and “brainstorm multiple ways to reach the same outcome” (Collins et al., 2001, p. 56). Not only do these strategies enhance the understanding

and participation for students with disabilities but will also enhance understanding for the student's nondisabled peers. Burton, Paroschi, Habenicht, and Hollingsead (2006) state, "through manipulation of the materials, children are able to represent in a sensorimotor form what they are not yet able to do in abstract thought" (p. 7). Lastly, a leader or educator can use repetition as a strategy because "repetition improved children's detailed understanding of these stories" (Burton et al., 2006, p. 10), which benefits not only the disabled student(s) but every student within the lesson or classroom. By utilizing strategies such as the ones listed, teachers or leaders are ensuring that the students are actively engaged with the lesson and can apply the lessons to their everyday lives. Students with a high incidence disability may not need as many supports or accommodations to be successful in the ministry, but it is important to have those supports so that they are as successful as possible.

The next group of individuals a church or private school may encounter is people with low incidence disabilities. Individuals with these types of disabilities may include people who are nonverbal, people in a wheelchair, or people with behavioral or low cognitive understanding. A church or private school will need to be prepared to provide access to these people but will need to have a wider variety of accommodations to the curriculum to be successful. Providing access to people with low incidence disabilities can look very different for each person. Downing and Eichinger (2003) share the strategy of "helping the teachers with materials like worksheets or items for science labs provides an opportunity for a student with moderate or severe disabilities to learn many skills: handle items appropriately, follow directions, work on math skills, engage in social interaction skills" (p. 28). The simple activity of passing out materials allows a student to work on a wide variety of skills while still participating in the content or lesson going on.

For a student with a low incidence disability to fully participate in the curriculum, the leader or educator may need to make more intensive accommodations to the curriculum. “A student with moderate or severe disabilities may be able to pictorially represent the topic of study” (Downing & Eichinger, 2003, p. 29), so the leader or educator may need to create materials with images or show images in a lesson. These images can be used through “powerpoint, videos, portraits, slides, overhead projectors, or real objects” (Newman, 2011, p. 67). By having images embedded into the curriculum, the individual will be provided with the following learning opportunities: making decisions, learning vocabulary, and gaining general knowledge (Downing & Eichinger, 2003, p. 29). Each person may need different types, sizes, and styles of images for them to really connect to or understand. A leader or educator may be able to use real life images, stock photos, or picture symbols representing the content of the lesson. Which images to use will depend on the group of people that the leader or educator has and the level of cognition of the people within the group. “Several types of visual supports have proven effective and are typically available to young children with ASD” (Meadan, Ostrosky, Triplett, Michna, & Fettig, 2011, p. 30). Barbara Newman (2011) states, “some children are so tuned in to the visual environment that your words may be overridden” (p. 69), so it is important to incorporate visuals into the religious curriculum. “By providing children with an accessible, visual reference guide, you can enhance children’s independence and decrease or eliminate adult prompting” (Meadan et al, 2011, p. 33) making these individuals more independent within the special needs ministry group and life in general.

When a church or private school encounters a student or group of people with low incidence disabilities, the ministry will need to provide much more accommodations to be successful in providing these students access to the content. For example, a person who is

nonverbal and wheelchair bound is going to need a wider set of accommodations than simply making the material related to his/her everyday life. Collins et al., (2001) state, “One strategy that researchers have shown to be an effective way to teach children with mental disabilities is the system of least prompts” (p. 56). In applied behavior analysis, there is a prompting hierarchy that the teacher or leader can follow to ensure that the least amount of prompts are being used. The prompts are the following: visual/picture prompt, verbal prompt, gestural prompt, model prompt, and physical prompt (Gaunt Ma & Karpel, 2017). When following these prompts from least to most prompting, an individual can learn the skills they need to complete tasks as independently as possible.

Many individuals with disabilities thrive off a routine and knowing what is coming next, especially those on the Autism Spectrum. A curriculum for a church would need to have a way to display or show a routine for individuals to see throughout the entire worship service and/or lesson. “Most of us use visual supports to navigate our days (calendars, maps, watches, to-do lists—even high-tech versions of these supports), so why not provide similar supports” (Meadan, Ostrosky, Triplett, Michna, & Fettig, 2011, p. 28)? One strategy for establishing a routine in a worship service would be to simply have a printed order of worship for individuals to read and know what is going to happen next. These individuals could read it throughout the service or their day and would have the ability to cross things off when they are complete or keep an eye on what is coming next. However, not all individuals are able to read printed words, so a picture schedule would be important for these individuals to utilize. “Many classroom teachers use picture schedules... by placing pictures on separate cards, teachers can turn over one picture as an activity is completed” (Newman, 2011, p. 53). Seeing a schedule posted “gives a person the

security of knowing what to expect” (Newman, 2011, p. 55). Again, each individual’s needs are different so which pictures to use would have to be specific for the individual.

In many religious beliefs, the language used can be confusing and challenging for those with various disabilities to understand. Barbara Newman (2011) states, “our faith language is also filled with interesting phrases. Interpreted literally, these things can be scary and create confusion” (p. 25). For example, 1 Peter 3:19-20 says, “after being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water”. When reading this passage, it can be confusing to teach what a spirit is where these spirits may have gone for so long. To adequately teach those within the church, leaders and curriculum needs to be equipped to “translate” these confusing passages and phrases so that all will understand.

A formal curriculum is a high need for a special education religious ministry as there is little to nothing available for ministry leaders. Morse (2001) states, “specially designed instruction, in turn, refers to the content, methodology, and delivery of this instruction” (p. 6). Many organizations provide a couple books, leader guides, topic ideas, a few worksheets, and some videos to watch, which is not enough for a leader to use and expand upon throughout a year or longer. While these materials are a positive start to developing a curriculum, a curriculum needs to go more in depth and provide an even wider variety of materials for the various needs and skills of individuals a church or private school will serve. A school receives a formalized curriculum, which serves

as a frame-work for the scope and sequence of a particular topic or content area.

Typically, school districts publish and direct teacher use of scope-and-sequence

guidelines that build a framework - within grade levels as well as across grade levels.

These frameworks typically address the developmental needs of children, prevent unnecessary overlap in student curricular experiences, and lead to district goals and outcomes for schooling (Sands, 1995, p. 78-79).

While a special needs ministry is not a school district and runs very differently than one, a curriculum that incorporates a scope-and-sequence for the people that are served is needed so that materials are not repeated and so the learners are getting the instruction that they need.

When thinking about a formalized curriculum for special needs ministries, it would be important to think about all the aspects it would need to incorporate for the greatest success for the individuals both within the church and outside the church. For individuals with disabilities, a “curricula designed to develop skills in the areas of basic skills, communication, social/interpersonal skills, vocational skills, self-help and independent living, the arts, civic and community responsibilities, and recreation skills” (Sands, 1995, p. 70) is important as these individuals tend to struggle with the above skills. Popham (1969) states that “curriculum materials which are designed to be reproducible permit the developer systematically to improve the materials over time by testing their effects upon the intended learners” (p. 320), so including reproducible materials within a curriculum could enhance learning for an individual. A special needs ministry is a natural and different environment for individuals to work on these skills so that they can be generalized and practiced across multiple settings.

Analysis

From the research it is clear to see that many people with disabilities and/or families with a child with a disability are not attending church or religious functions due to a variety of reasons, often because of a lack of support or a feeling of not being welcomed. Many churches

and leaders within a church have a motto of “everyone is welcome” and yet “56% of parents of children with disabilities had kept their children from participating in a religious activity because support was not provided and 32% of parents said they changed their place of worship because their child was not included or welcomed” (Carter, Boehm, Annandale, & Taylor, 2016, p. 373). As a church and/or educational leader within a religious group, having a motto or belief that “everyone is welcome”, and truly wanting to live out this motto or belief, these supports need to be put into place because “as a church we must not allow fear or uncertainty to rob us of enjoying and delighting in God’s gifts to our community. By excluding those in the body of Christ who have a disability, we cheat our faith communities out of some of God’s gifts for us” (Newman, 2011, p. 18).

To effectively live out the belief and motto of “everyone is welcome”, a church or religious group may need to turn to or hire a specific leader who can work alongside families and individuals to create an atmosphere of inclusion. This leader needs to have experience working with individuals with disabilities, to be personable and willing to work with families, be professional in their work, and to train or teach volunteers or the church congregation in worshipping alongside brothers and sisters with disabilities. An important first step for a leader is to work alongside families and the individual as much as possible to ensure they are getting their specific needs met to be successful in worshipping with the church. This can look like creating a support group, starting a disability ministry group, or including the person or child into the church’s activities such as Sunday School, choir, or other activities within the church. When a family and individual is welcomed and serving, relationships with those within the church will begin to bloom. Another important piece for a leader or educator to do is provide adequate training for the congregation and volunteers seeking to work and worship alongside

these families or individuals. Trainings can come from personal experience, families or individuals with a disability, and/or a member of the congregation with experience.

Additionally, the leader may want to reach out and have an educator, paraprofessional, or other professional who works with the individual provide training and attend activities or services with the individual as they feel comfortable. A leader cannot expect members of the congregation to jump right in and feel comfortable worshipping and working alongside these individuals without some form of training.

Lastly, to truly be fully included into the church or a religious organization, the individual with a disability needs to be able to access the content taught within the church and/or lessons. Having access to the content can look very different depending on the individual and the severity of his/her needs. Some individuals may simply need an outline of the sermon or a bulletin outlining the whole worship sessions. Other individuals may need more intensive adaptations such as less lighting, preferred seating, pictures relating to the content, or many other forms of adaptations. A specialized curriculum that has adaptations already created for a leader or educator is crucial for the success of an individual in understanding the content. A leader or educator may need to spend time creating or adapting materials or parts of the worship session to make these individuals most successful. Research shows that a curriculum is most successful when it provides a scope and sequence for a leader and can be related to all areas of a learner's life.

Application

When thinking about starting a disability ministry or “revamping” one that is already in place, an incredibly important first step would be to start with training. Within my professional practice, I would create several different training sessions to better educate church staff and

volunteers on different strategies, tips, and how-to. These trainings would incorporate both research and hands on activities so that the attendees would gain as much knowledge as possible. For these various trainings, I would invite families with individuals with varying disabilities so that the family and potentially the individual could share stories and strategies to help make the church a more inclusive environment. Additionally, I would create a smaller group of individuals such as a leadership team and meet with them more frequently throughout the year so that the ministry would continue to run as smoothly as possible and provide ongoing training. I would also meet with this leadership team to discuss ways in which the church could incorporate individuals with disabilities into our worship and problem solve any situations that including these individuals would bring such as lighting, hand shaking, or loudness of the service. Within Barbara Newman's book, she has created several handouts a church could utilize to get to know the individuals within it so that they are most successful in the religious setting. In my own personal training, I have completed an "important to and important for" worksheet for my nonverbal students, which could be created by families and/or caregivers of individuals for a disability ministry to use to get to know the individual.

Another important piece towards beginning a special needs ministry or to becoming a more inclusive church is to sit down with the individual and/or the families of the individual with a disability. Having a conversation about what supports are needed to be successful within the church setting is an important discussion to be had. Within the research above, there are many circumstances where family members reported a feeling of no support because their various needs were not or could not be met within that specific church setting. Knowing what a particular individual or family needs to be successful within the church helps create the feeling of inclusion for all. I would also make sure to have a meaningful conversation with the

individual as well because these individuals go through a lot in their lives and could be closed off to different environments. It would be crucial to get as much information from the individual so that he/she would be comfortable in new environments. As a special education teacher, this piece tugs at my heart because I am a huge advocate for my students on a daily basis, alongside the family. Reading the research from Carter, Boehm, Annandale, and Taylor (2016) that “56% of parents of children with disabilities had kept their children from participating in a religious activity because support was not provided and 32% of parents said they changed their place of worship because their child was not included or welcomed” (p. 373) has also challenged me in thinking about how important it is to have a relationship with the family and/or individual. Seeing and reading these statistics is overwhelming and disheartening both as a special education teacher and a Christian. Reading this research made me feel like both myself as an individual and myself as a member of a whole congregation is completely failing those with disabilities when it comes to including them into our worship. Within my professional practice, I would like to be that advocate for an individual and/or family within the church and also offer advice to families who may not attend my church, should the opportunity arise.

To help individuals have access to the content shared within a worship service, a Sunday school lesson, or small group meetings, I would find and create materials that an individual could utilize based on his/her individual needs. Some individuals might need a simple outline to follow to either take notes or to stay focused, while others many need more hands-on materials to learn. Some products that could be created to help individuals be most successful could be file folders, writing/note taking journals, slide shows, visual schedules, and the list could go on. When thinking about structuring a disability ministry meeting, it would be important to utilize a wide variety of materials and styles of learning as well as preferences. As I think about my

personal preferences in church, I know that music is my favorite part of a worship service but not all people value that first. So, it would be important to have a variety of activities or materials that individuals could utilize and learn from within a meeting or worship service. Just the same, I learn best from hands on practice, but that is not true for everyone else. It would also be important to create and use a variety of strategies to teach individuals with disabilities about Jesus. When there is a variety of activities and strategies put into place, the chances that everyone is engaged and have access to the content only increases.

After meeting with a family to see what supports are needed, training volunteers, and working towards making a more inclusive environment, one of the next items on my list would be to simply create a more inclusive congregation. Researchers Irvine and Lupart (2006) studied different areas and their views on special education, inclusion, and individuals with disabilities in the community. One interesting piece of their research comes from a rural community and they report that “there is not necessarily a need for special programs; rather, an attitude shift is more effective. This attitude shift comes with increased awareness within each community. As individuals with disabilities are more visible in the community, other community members begin to experience and understand the benefits of inclusion and the contributions persons with disabilities can make to the community. With increased visibility comes increased acceptance” (p. 121). These words really stuck out to me because at my current church we have one service called “Friendship Sunday” where the individuals who were apart of Friendship Ministry that year get to lead us in worship, and that’s all we hear from them. They meet on separate days and rarely, if ever, attend our church. Through this research and learning, I have come to realize that yes, it is amazing that we have this ministry, but it is beyond sad that our friends only attend one service a year with us. We are doing a complete disservice to them because we are putting them

on a pedestal rather than incorporating them into our worship and congregation. As I have been reflecting and thinking about this research and this idea, I have come to realize that rather than creating a specialized program, we need to focus on creating an inclusive church or school. Yes, a Friendship Ministry is important and yes a disability ministry is important, but a fully inclusive church or body of believers is far more important. One way to increase or create this type of church is to simply start inviting people to church, to sit with them, and to be their friend.

Conclusion

In looking over and reading the research, there are several key elements a church or private organization needs to have in place to create a more inclusive environment for individuals with disabilities. First, individuals need to be welcomed into these places and experience different parts of their community. “As individuals with disabilities are more visible in the community, other community members begin to experience and understand the benefits of inclusion and the contributions persons with disabilities can make to the community” (Irvine & Lupart, 2006, p. 121). Second, a leader or educator needs to reach out and support families and individuals with disabilities to ensure supports are in place so that everyone feels welcome. This leader also needs to train volunteers and members of the congregation on how to interact with and support these individuals. Lastly, a curriculum or other supports need to be set in place so that individuals can have access to the content being shared with them either through a lesson or through a worship service.

The current research on inclusion of all individuals in the religious setting is growing but not in high rates like many other research topics. While there are current pieces of research outlined, there are a few articles that were written much earlier. These older articles were and are important to the research because they show how much is being studied from year to year and

where the research on this topic started. In future studies, it would be important to interview and talk about inclusion with individuals with disabilities because their voices and thoughts need to be heard and held in the highest regard. Additionally, it would be important for researchers to interview and observe current disability ministries and leaders on how these people started and what they see their role is. Others who have started this process in the church can offer important insights and share success stories that they have experienced with individuals desiring to do the same work as them. Most research found came from a parent or family's perspective, which is an important perspective to hear and understand; however, hearing from an individual and a leader can be equally as important to this research.

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