

Inclusive Faith Practices for Children with Autism

By: Anne Masters, M.A.

A central tenet of the "Abrahamic religions," Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is that each person is created by God and therefore part of one human family. However, when a person is marginalized because of autism or any other disability, that marginalization seems to deny this gift from God and our shared human dignity. This has significant implications for the person with autism, his or her family, and the faith community. For these families the pain of rejection by others can be overwhelming, particularly when that rejection comes from their faith community, a place where we gather to celebrate and draw strength from God's presence in our lives.

Inclusion of children with autism in the religious education and communal prayer life of a community is the focus of this discussion. However, the process could easily be applied to teenagers and adults, because the human need for inclusion lasts a lifetime. I am writing out of the Catholic tradition, but am grateful for the review of this article by Jane Eisen-Abesh MS, OTRL, Special Needs Coordinator for Congregation M'kor Shalom and Maysaa S. Bazna, EdD, who specializes in the area of learning disabilities and Islam.

When we exclude people from our faith communities because their needs or behaviors are "too different," we must ask ourselves what we are teaching our children about the validity of those central tenets of faith that form moral behavior. Most likely, what they will learn is, "Follow those teachings... when it is easy". Is that the message we really wish to teach? Our religious education settings have the opportunity to be apprenticeships of faith that allow for the development of behavior informed by faith. For this to be really effective, children need to see this behavior modeled by the adults in the community. The saying, "Children will do as we do, not as we say," applies just as easily to the faith community as to the family. Is the public prayer life of a community professing welcome for all?

So how does a faith community welcome and educate people with autism into its life and mission? The long answer to this question is to make use of the resources recommended in this booklet and talk to communities who already do so successfully. However, the short answer is, "**Welcome one.**" Instead of worrying about starting an entire program to welcome people with autism and their families, begin by welcoming one. Many faith communities that have successful programs for inclusive religious education began by determining the needs of the *one* child first presented to them. Then, child-by-child, they learned how to respond to the needs, and after a period of time, they had a "program."

Families and teachers of children with autism can be the best source of information and ideas for religious educators and congregational leaders. In learning the needs of the child before you, begin with inquiries about his or her interests and gifts, what makes him or her unique, and then proceed to the particular needs for support. We are all people first. Particularly in a faith community, different abilities and disabilities do not determine our personhood, though they do influence what each person is able to do. In this conversation, demonstrate an attitude of openness and support. Assure the parent(s) that your questions are motivated by a sincere desire to provide the most supportive environment for the child and that privacy will be respected. The information will be shared only with whomever the parent and child allow, which should at least include the people working directly with the child. This will help to explain different behaviors, leading to awareness and improved understanding.

After you have a good understanding of the child, determine what the parent(s) want and the level of inclusion they hope for. There are many possibilities, such as being incorporated into a "mainstream" religious education group with appropriate support in place, spending some time with children in "mainstream" groups and some time in a more specialized setting, or in a totally separate group. However, even when religious education occurs in a separate environment, the goal is always connection with the larger community in some way, as often as possible.

Further, the strategies and goals of religious education should reflect the particular needs of the person and the values and traditions of your faith community. One of the basic tenets in the autism community is that *when you understand one person with autism, you understand one person with autism*. Another is that they often have difficulty applying and using what they learned in one situation to another, even if the two are nearly identical. For example, being familiar with worship in one location may not translate to worship in another. In Catholicism, participation in the Mass is very important, so it is important to include comfort and familiarity with the church space, as well as comfort with the actions, words and rhythm of the Mass. In addition if a child with autism is in a "special religious education program," there also needs to be a strategy for participation in the worship of the community.

Some families are able to bring their son or daughter with autism to worship. Other families may need more support from their congregation. Again, the child's teachers in school could be very helpful. Because teaching specific behaviors is typically part of the education of a child with autism, some teachers will include behaviors for successful participation in the family's faith community as part of a child's education plan, because this experience, together as a family, is so important. If that is not possible, he or she may still be willing to guide you in the process; or you may be able to find a special educator or behavioral consultant who is happy to assist. If we accept that all people have a right to be welcomed into faith communities because we are all created by God, then we are morally bound to support the education that leads to participation in the full life of the community. In fact you might envision learning how to participate in the worship life of the community as the beginning curriculum.

While parents have valuable insight into their child(ren)'s needs, they should not be expected *to be* the solution. Be sensitive to the parents' need for support, affirmation, and spiritual growth as well as their children. Do not expect them to design and run the program. There are always exceptions. Some parents may take on a lead role, but do not require it. There may, in fact, be other places in the faith community where they would like to participate or their gifts could be shared.

When parishes are not welcoming, it is usually not from a lack of desire, but from a lack of understanding or knowing what to do. Good information can empower effective caring and action, leading to quick results. Religious educators in particular have a unique opportunity to embrace a family and model effective inclusion for the whole community.

The more challenging situations are those in which hearts and minds are closed to what we are called to be as children of God. Information alone is not enough. To open hearts and minds, we must remember the theological foundations of our calling as created in the image of God. We must be willing to recognize new possibilities for celebrating God in our world; the gifts that God has given to each person; and the ways that the whole community can benefit from being open to including and receiving gifts that might come in unexpected and atypical packages.