

Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors Inclusion Awareness Day
Creating Access and Inclusion in Worship

On the weekend of September 28, 2008 parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Chicago will celebrate the many ways we reach out to include parishioners of all abilities in worship, ministry, fellowship and religious education. Inclusion is offering the same respect and opportunity to participate to all people regardless of physical and mental abilities.

Since 1996 the Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors initiative has been a partnership between Pathways Awareness and the Archdiocese of Chicago. Visit www.inclusioninworship.org for more information.

Seven Ways to Open the Doors

“The creation of a fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical accommodations to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners toward persons with disabilities.” Call forth the gifts of all in your community. Each person can follow these suggestions in some way, according to his or her gifts and capacities.

1. Initiate both a personal and parish examination of conscience. What has your parish done to live the Beatitudes by becoming more accessible to those with physical, sensory, cognitive or psychological disabilities? How can you further this process? If you or a family member has a disability, you have a special opportunity to extend a generous offer of your experience in helping in that process. Be an advocate.
2. Survey other parishioners to identify which of the following would help them to participate fully in all aspects of parish life:
 - Transportation
 - Large print worship aids and/or bulletins or audio-taped bulletins
 - Assistive listening devices or American Sign Language (ASL) signing
 - Easily grasped door handles; appropriate door pressure
 - Handrails at step
 - Wheelchair seating; elevator
 - Pastoral services for those unable to attend services
 - Accessible washrooms

3. Encourage commissions, committees and groups in your parish to evaluate the accessibility of all of your parish programs in order to welcome people of all abilities. Keep in mind that accessibility goes beyond physical access- it includes those who have sensory and cognitive disabilities.
4. Make your liturgies accessible. This might include ensuring physical access to your altar, ambo, and reconciliation room or confessionals; offering Braille and/or large print missallettes and hymnals; and offering ASL interpretation at Mass and other sacramental celebrations. Lack of access for the sacraments of Reconciliation is particularly painful for those who use mobility aids or require ASL or assistive listening devices. The precious Blood should be made available at all times for those with severe sensitivity to gluten (Celiac- Sprue disease).
5. Search your local community for people who live in assistive living settings or nursing homes and offer companions and transportation for Mass and other parish gatherings. If you have a disability, make your parish aware that you need to attend liturgies and seasonal services.
6. Encourage your parish to offer accessible training sessions for anyone interested in becoming Eucharistic ministers, lectors, cantors or altar servers. By offering training sessions that create access for people with disabilities to participate in the liturgy, parish can reflect the rich diversity of God's gift of life.
7. Welcome Catholics with disabilities who have stayed away because they have felt marginalized. The steps outlined above can extend a hand of welcome- as can helping fellow parishioners to educate themselves so that they can reach out to their brothers and sisters with disabilities, and their families. Or if you or a family member have a disability and have felt disenfranchised, consider responding to initiatives that seek to bring Catholics with disabilities and their families home to the Church. When parishioners reach out they may be uncertain about how to welcome someone who has needs that they never experienced themselves. Be generous and help them to learn. Give them time to grow. To risk it, even more time, is well worth the effort.

* USCCB Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities (Washington DC: USCCB, 1995), no.6

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