

This is Community

By Karen Jackson
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Community is important and a big part of our lives. We form communities through our schools, places of employment, neighborhoods and organizations, just to name a few. But an extremely important part of many people's lives is their involvement in their faith communities.

Faith communities can be large or small, Christian, Jewish, Muslim or any other, filled with people young or old, but they are, I think, in a special category. Because people who share a faith community often share a belief system that shapes the way they function in society and can heighten their sense of moral obligation to others. It can also be a place of true acceptance, where we can speak and act how we feel without reigning in our religious beliefs, as is often expected in polite society.

As the parent of a child with special needs, I write of faith community from a slightly different perspective. Perhaps it is that I don't take for granted that feeling of acceptance because I have had to face the challenges of including my daughter with autism in the church. It could also be because I am overwhelmed with compassion for other families walking alongside people with disability who face the challenge of being accepted wherever they venture to go. But whatever the reason, God has instilled within me the passion to help those who have often been excluded or misunderstood by their faith communities. This is the heart of Faith Inclusion Network, a ministry with the vision of making all faith communities a welcoming, accommodating and accepting place for all.

My own experience at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Norfolk has shaped many of my thoughts on the subject of inclusion and community. A most recent experience at our Ash Wednesday Vigil Mass sums up the blessings of the past four years of my disability advocacy work in our church.

My 13 year old daughter, Samantha and I were attending Ash Wednesday Vigil Mass on Tuesday evening. As is part of the Catholic tradition, we were there to participate in the receiving of ashes, something that my daughter had never done before. Being slightly averse, like many people with autism, to being touched, I was not so sure that Samantha was going to like getting ashes on her forehead. I whispered my anxiety about this to a friend, a faithful volunteer to our disability ministry at the church, who happened to be sitting near us. She assured me we should give it a try and offered to walk down the aisle with us, to show Samantha how it's done.

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After successfully making it through the "ashes" part of the Mass, we returned to our seats. My sense of relief was short lived as I realized Samantha, having already been down the communion aisle, thought it was time to go. I reassured her that, although we had changed the predictable schedule of Mass that

we still hadn't received communion, but we would be done soon. She happily sat back down and seemed to be enjoying herself- a comfort level my near non-verbal daughter rarely feels anywhere besides at home.

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After the Mass, we went to the social hall to participate in the church's traditional "Mardi Gras" celebration, complete with live Dixieland band. I had hoped but not expected that Samantha would want to stay. She settled right in to listen to the music, however and I slowly began to relax. As Samantha began rocking excitedly back and forth to the beat of the music, I looked around to see how others perceived her. What I found were eyes of acceptance and understanding, people sharing in my daughter's enjoyment of the music.

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The next day, I had the rare opportunity of a quiet, overnight retreat and reflected on the whole experience. As I shared about Samantha's ability to participate in the activities of our faith community with the retreat directors, I realized how important and precious the opportunity of community really is to us all. Being involved and accepted as part of a chosen faith community should not be a privilege of those who fit the norm of society. It should be a priority of every faith community, small or large, young or old, Christian, Jewish, Muslim or any other faith, to make a way for all people, including those with disabilities and their families, to be involved and accepted.

I believe that my daughter and I are not just the recipients of the many blessings a faith community can provide, but also contribute to the life of our diverse parish. Samantha not only provides a ministry of presence that often affects all those around her, but a pureness of faith and love with her participation in the activities of our faith community. As I begin to understand the important role a faith community can play in a family's life, I hope you will . . . reach out and include those who have experienced physical barriers or barriers of communication and attitude because of their perceived "dis-Abilities". You may be surprised at the result because...

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Karen Jackson is founder and director of Faith Inclusion Network, a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization dedicated to providing resources, education and support for faith communities seeking to better include people with disabilities and their families and Parish Advocate for Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Norfolk, VA. For more information about Faith Inclusion Network or the annual "That All May Worship-2011" Conference, please go to www.faithinclusionnetwork.org