

**Hospitality and Outreach**  
**November 2018**

**Welcoming Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

Sarah Barton

During the first few months of 2018, I spent many hours visiting churches where adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) were vibrant participants in parish life. I interviewed adults with IDD, as well as their family, friends, clergy and lay leaders to learn their views on belonging, Christian identity and baptism.

Many of the stories I heard were filled with challenge and pain. Adults with IDD spoke of being asked to leave because of disruption, of receiving an initial welcome and then realizing that no one was committed to being in relationship with them, of being excluded from events or programs like Bible studies and redirected to “special needs” ministries.

The stories came as no surprise. Since the deinstitutionalization of people with IDD in the 1960s, the population continues to struggle with significantly heightened loneliness (Gilmore and Cuskelly, 2014), and while more than 80% of adults with IDD report their faith as important or very important, fewer than half attend church regularly (Carter et al., 2015). People with more profound and multiple disabilities and those living in residential settings such as group homes are even less likely to attend church.

**Called to help all God’s people flourish**

But alongside these stories of hurt, I heard others of great beauty – stories of creative avenues for liturgical participation for people with and without disabilities, stories of belonging, of churches that are becoming families of choice for people with IDD and congregations that have become places of empowerment and leadership for these adults.

For those of us in The Episcopal Church, the service of Holy Baptism and baptismal reaffirmation provides strong encouragement to help all the baptized flourish. In the baptismal covenant, the celebrant asks, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” and, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?”

Before responding, we might well consider what practices we could embrace with regard to adults with IDD so that can faithfully answer, “We will, with God’s help.”

## Ways we can welcome and incorporate adults with IDD into our parish life

- Visit group homes and other residential settings in your community. Many adults with IDD living in group homes are disconnected from churches. They may no longer have a local family member who consistently enables their participation in church. Volunteer to spend time with people at group homes, or even better, spend time with them and invite them to church! Group homes typically have transportation options for people with mobility needs and are required to support adults with IDD in meeting their spiritual needs. But this is a two-way road – make it known that your parish is welcoming of people with IDD!
- Seek opportunities for participation, beyond inclusion alone, for adults with IDD. Inclusion recognizes that someone is in the room or attends a church event (a good place for many Episcopal Churches to start!), but that person may not be a participant. Belonging is when someone is missed, when we love and consider them and their gifts as an indispensable part of our community. (Swinton, 2012)
- Focus on opportunities for participation. People with IDD may wish to serve in a number of ways but may never have been asked to do so. Consider pairing someone with IDD with another lay leader to participate in greeting, reading, coffee hour, ushering or acolyting. You don't need to say words to participate in most of these activities! One parent I talked with reflected on the acolyte at her son's baptism: "There was a young adult with Down syndrome who was an acolyte when [my son] was baptized...it was a hopeful thing." Now that child is an adult (who has Down syndrome and does not speak for communication). His mother sees his active participation in his home parish, where he serves as a choir assistant, passing out bulletins and assisting in coffee hour.
- Consider inviting adults with IDD into pre-existing church gatherings – praying together, eating together and studying the Bible together. Special "disability ministries" can often work against encouraging the full belonging and participation in the life of a church for people with IDD. One practice I typically use, following the wonderful example of folks at Reality Ministries, is "circle time." It's a practice for introducing new folks to one another, or to simply do a "check-in." One question is asked to the whole group. For example, "share a single word, facial expression or gesture to share how you're doing today." This kind of practice enables both speakers and non-speakers to engage, and can also offer more concise starts to "get to know you" events and meetings!
- Lean into the liturgy! The beautiful repetition of the liturgy can help people with and without disabilities to connect deeply in worship. It can bring comfort, familiarity and new opportunities for learning. One particular practice that I commend is more frequent occasions for baptismal remembrance/reaffirmation. It is a multi-sensory practice that can get everyone involved – singing a familiar hymn or song at each occasion for baptismal reaffirmation, making sure folks get wet with the baptismal waters, hearing or seeing the water poured out, walking or rolling to the font, repeating the words of the baptismal covenant that remind us of our identity in Christ and the vocation of all the baptized. These are practices that not only include people through a variety of senses (not just cognitive understanding), but also shape church communities, forming a heightened sense of the identity of all the baptized, including people with IDD, as disciples of Jesus. As a lay leader I interviewed said so eloquently, "baptism is a wordless way of preaching." Amen!

- Need more specific ideas for cultivating belonging and encouraging participation among parishioners with IDD? Partner with someone in your local community or even your own parish! Do you know an occupational therapy practitioner or a special educator? Your local independent living association? A self-advocacy group for adults with IDD? Local offices for your state IDD council? A social worker? A community support professional? Working toward the belonging of people with IDD can open up new opportunities for community partnerships, deepening our parish connections with our neighbors.

As we strive to serve all our neighbors in the love of Christ, upholding the dignity of every human being, may our lives be blessed by people with IDD as we together affirm boldly and faithfully: “I will, with God’s help!”

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#### **Resources:**

- [Improving Inclusion—Part 1: Words Matter](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices blog, June 1, 2018
- [Improving Inclusion—Part 2: Engagement](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices blog, June 11, 2018
- [Improving Inclusion—Part 3: Sensory Kits](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices blog, June 22, 2018
- [Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations](#) (1st Edition) by Erik W. Carter
- [Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship](#) by Barbara J, Newman

#### **Let the Children Come To Me**

Jamie Martin Currie

As church leaders, we are called to invite all people in, to help them feel comfortable and loved. Plenty of resources are available on the hospitality of adults, but what about children? Although it will be parents who ultimately decide whether or not to return to your parish, there are ways to specifically welcome young people. The nursery, worship and formation are areas where you can provide intentional hospitality to kids. Parishes that find ways to practice hospitality toward children experience successful results.

#### **The Nursery**

Keep in mind that potential parents and grandparents might keep an eye on the nursery for months before they bring children in. They are checking to make sure it is a safe, clean, uncluttered,

nurturing and welcoming space. Do the caregivers engage with the toddlers, reading and singing to them? Try getting down on the ground where the toddlers are; you might be surprised at what you discover from that angle! If you have a single room for your nursery, consider building a half-wall to divide the infants from toddlers. The preferred location for the nursery is near the nave, but if it is in a separate building, the audio from worship can be transmitted into the nursery so the caregivers and children can enjoy the service.

The need for clear, directional signage is obvious, but so is the need for signage on the nursery door. I once saw a nursery door with a Do Not Enter sign, the day school signage, which could easily be covered with a Welcome to the Church Nursery sign during child care for services or church events. What about posting a greeter near the nursery door to welcome families and assist with sign-in and drop-off?

Walk the campus with fresh eyes, as a visiting or new parent might, to see whether you are doing all you can to welcome young children to your nursery. New parents should be asked to complete a nursery registration form and leave it with the caregivers for the files. This is not an inconvenience! It's what parents expect nowadays. The form should ask for contact information, allergies and special needs. In addition, sign-in/out sheets should be posted at the door each week so that parents can provide information about where they will be and how they may be contacted while their child is in your care. Parents will feel their children have been well cared for if the caregivers provide them with a brief form reporting how the morning went.

Make sure there are changing tables in multiple men's and women's restrooms and stepstools for little ones to wash hands. Depending on your church size, consider designating parking spaces for expectant parents or parents with small children.

## **Worship**

There are many ways to welcome children in church services, and it begins at every entrance to the worship space. If your congregation is truly welcoming families into worship, ushers need to be trained to do that. They can encourage families to sit up front, so they can see what's going on. Instead of assuming parents plan to utilize the nursery during worship, ushers should wait to be asked and then escort parents to the nursery instead of merely pointing the way. It is also helpful if older adults encourage families to sit up front near them. Playgrounds that allow young children to sit comfortably at small tables or on the floor somewhere in the sanctuary have become popular. If there isn't space for that up front, child appropriate tables and chairs with activities can be available in the back of the nave.

Many parishes provide worship or activity bags at entrances in the narthex and transepts. These are bags of quiet toys and activities like board books, sewing cards, colored pencils, cardstock, fuzzy sticks and child friendly bulletins. Offering two choices of worship bags, one for preschoolers and another for early elementary ages, with developmentally age appropriate activities for each takes this idea one step further. What if the children of a visiting family also received a welcome bag like the adults? Just take a worship bag, add a letter from the children's minister, using lots of photos, and include crayons with a church information sticker and information about Vacation Bible School

or other family-friendly parish activities. Some parishes include children's illustrated Bibles in the pews, a children's sermon in worship or a family service.

### **Education Hour**

Children may be hesitant to walk into a classroom for the first time – or even once a month. If one of the adult leaders sits on a chair and greets children at eye level, it can ease some of that hesitation.

Registration offers a good way to capture the information you want to meet a child's needs. In addition to food allergies and any special needs, find out what sports they play and what their schedules are like. If you find you have students with special needs, keeping a basket full of sensory products (such as fidget toys) in the classroom can enhance learning and promote independence. And finally, create Faith at Home bags or boxes with take-home resources to give families seasonally so parents can access resources for sharing their faith with children throughout the week.

### **Communication**

The parish website should include specific information about what to expect on Sunday mornings – times, offerings, locations, procedures. A three-, six-, or twelve-month schedule of classes and activities, including when childcare is offered, should be mailed and handed out. A children's ministry page on your congregation's website describing the curriculum, class routine and pick-up and drop-off times and locations, is important. The following welcome language is found in many worship bulletins around the country:

#### *To the Parents of Our Young Children*

*Relax! God puts the wiggle in children; don't feel you have to suppress it in God's house. All are welcome! Sit toward the front where it is easier for your little ones to see and hear what's going on at the altar: they tire of seeing the backs of other's heads. Quietly explain the parts of the service and actions of the priest, altar servers, choir, etc. Sing the hymns, say the prayers and voice the responses. Children learn liturgical behaviors by copying you. If you must leave the service with your child, feel free to do so, but please come back. As Jesus said, "Let the children come to me." Remember that the way we welcome children in church directly affects the way they respond to the Church, to God and to one another. Let them know that they are at home in this house of worship.*

#### *To Our Parishioners*

*The presence of children is a gift to the Church, and they are a reminder that our parish is growing. Please welcome our children and give their parents a smile of encouragement.*

### **Fellowship**

If food and drinks are served during fellowship, a simple hospitable gesture would be to include child friendly snacks, water and perhaps juice boxes. Welcoming children is much more than just welcoming their parents. It is about attending to them, paying attention to them, to their needs and

their lives. Finally, you will need to get to know the children – and more than their names, seek to learn what is on their hearts. Pray for them, follow up and check in when they have been absent.

Paying attention to the needs of children and parents shows that your church is interested in the needs of all its membership – young and old. Welcoming families requires attention to many details, but without young families, parishes won't remain viable.

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#### **Resources:**

- [Beloved Children of God](#) by Richelle Thompson, ECF Vital Practices blog, May 10, 2016
- [Can Children Understand Worship?](#) by Heidi Clark, ECF Vital Practices blog, February 21, 2014
- [The Church that Plays Soccer](#) by Ginny Anton by Ginny Anton, ECF Vital Practices blog, December 28, 2012
- [Children ARE Welcome. Really.](#) by Richelle Thompson, ECF Vital Practices blog, August 12, 2013

#### **The Vital Outreach and Evangelism Connection**

Frank Logue

When my wife and daughter and I arrived in Kingsland, Georgia, to plant a new church, my driving vision was to create a new congregation so vital to its community that if the church closed its doors in ten years, people who had never attended would miss it and wish it were still open. I had already learned a lot about connecting a church to its community and about how to do personal evangelism and encourage others to do so as well. What I didn't know, is that I was still missing the vital connection between outreach and evangelism.

#### **Lessons in outreach and personal evangelism**

As a seminarian at St. Philip's in Baden, Maryland, I learned how even a small congregation can be important to its community. The rural, historically black church had an average Sunday attendance of 44 when I arrived. The congregation ran the clothes closet and food pantry for the community. They also had received a grant supporting the transportation ministry that picked people up at their homes and took them to doctor appointments and other essential trips. Beyond this, they had created an eight-bed assisted living facility so that frail elderly could stay close to home when they could no longer care for themselves. The church might have been small in attendance, but if its doors were closed, the community would have a sizeable hole to fill. St. Philip's would be missed.

I learned about personal evangelism from the Rev. Roger Schellenberg, while assisting him as he planted the Episcopal Church of the Spirit in Alexandria, Virginia. Roger had a winsome way of talking about his faith in Jesus that came up naturally in most every interaction with people he met. He effortlessly modeled apologetics as he talked about questions of faith with people dealing with obstacles that blocked their return to church or showing up for the first time.

### **Connecting the two**

When starting the work of planting a new church, I set out to learn the needs of the area, and that's how I began in Kingsland – meeting one-on-one with community leaders and knocking on a hundred doors to ask what a new church could do for the community. From this work, I learned of the pressing need for a full-day preschool for families where both parents held jobs. I also saw that the small core group I was gathering had the skills needed to undertake the project. These conversations led to the creation of a full day preschool. In a few years we added thriving scouting programs as God gave us the people with the right gifts and passion. A twice weekly Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting founded by church members followed.

Then came the surprise. I didn't know that I needed to connect outreach and evangelism. Newcomers didn't make that connection for me. I thought our coming in contact with other groups, like the families of preschool students, the Boy Scouts and those who took part in Narcotics Anonymous, was enough. I didn't want to be pushy. What I discovered was that if someone came to a meeting at the church and no one from the congregation actually invited him or her personally to come for church, it was experienced as if we didn't want them.

"I figured you didn't want us to come," was the answer I received when I asked one dad, active in the Scout Troop, why his family hadn't come to worship with us. I only thought to ask when he mentioned that they didn't have a church home. As we talked further, he said that it was almost like being disinvited when the church members he talked with didn't invite him to church. I was knocked off my heels.

We certainly didn't expect everyone who benefitted from the ministries of the church to come and worship with us. That had never been the goal. But we also didn't want to be the church that crossed its arms rather than embracing those who crossed our threshold for preschool, NA or our scouting program.

### **Creating on-ramps into the church**

I worked with the vestry on ways to build bridges, like a "Trunk or Treat" (where adults decorate the back of their cars for Halloween, park in a parking lot and distribute candy to children who come "trick or treating") with the Preschool, and a Low Country Boil and Burning of the Greens with the Scout Troop at Epiphany. At those events, rather than yelling out an invitation to all, we thought it best to talk personally with participants and invite them to join us in church.

Those personal invitations worked surprisingly well. I remember one family that became active in Boy Scouts and then, following an invitation, started attending services and church events. One Sunday, we baptized the whole family of four. Where would they have been without our learning to

make the connection between our outreach with the community and inviting people into our faith and church life?

Canon Stephanie Spellers has a helpful adaptation for a saying attributed to St. Francis, “Preach the Gospel at all times; use words, they’re necessary.” People may not even know that our work in a soup kitchen or at Laundry Love is connected to our faith in Jesus unless we say so. And as I learned the hard way, many of those who come into your church for other activities, won’t feel welcome in worship without a personal connection and an invitation.

*The Rev. Canon Frank Logue is the Canon to the Ordinary of the Diocese of Georgia. A member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, Frank blogs on church development [here](#).*

#### **Resources:**

- [A Ministry of Invitation](#) by Nancy Davidge, Vestry Papers, November 2016
- [What is Episcopal Evangelism?](#) By Alan Bentrup, ECF Vital Practices blog, August 10, 2018
- [The Invitation](#) by Annette Buchanon, ECF Vital Practices blog, June 9, 2018
- [Redefining Outreach](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices blog, May 12, 2018

#### **Sharing the Bounty of God’s Garden**

Bill Eakins

God’s Garden is one way in which St. John’s Episcopal Church, West Hartford, is trying to connect with the people who live in the church’s neighborhood. Since last spring, we have been growing vegetables to give away to our neighbors. Every Tuesday morning, a handful of volunteers have come to the church to pick what is ready in the six raised beds. Then they wash the day’s harvest and display it on a table by the sidewalk fronting the church’s lawn. Kale, chard, spinach, lettuce, broccoli, tomatoes, squash and herbs were among the table’s bounty as the summer advanced.

At first, St. John’s neighbors were shy about coming to the God’s Garden table. Many found it hard to believe that we were actually offering vegetables free of charge. Passers-by often avoided eye contact with our volunteers because they assumed we were selling something. They were surprised when we greeted them and introduced ourselves as belonging to St. John’s – “that big church over there.” It was clear that these neighbors may have walked by the church for years, but had never met any of the congregation. The vegetables from God’s Garden have begun to open their eyes to see St. John’s as people and not just a pile of buildings.

Likewise, our volunteers have learned a lot about St. John’s neighbors during conversations at the vegetable table. We have learned that many of the people living near our church are immigrants who have come from all over the world and speak English as a second language. We discovered that some have learned English in a program offered in our parish house. We have found that a lot of our neighbors do not have cars and find it difficult to get food, particularly fresh food. And we have learned that many have little idea about what happens behind the red doors and stained glass windows of churches like St. John’s, or about what we believe and why we exist.

Like many congregations, St. John's neighborhood has changed considerably since its house of worship was built. When the Norman Gothic church and parish house were erected at the end of a trolley line in a newly developed suburban area, St. John's was very much a part of an affluent neighborhood with substantial family houses springing up around it. Children from the neighborhood filled the large Sunday School, and many members walked to worship. Today the parish neighborhood is much more urban than suburban, its impressive buildings and spacious landscape surrounded by commercial enterprises, professional offices, multifamily dwellings and apartment houses. Most parishioners live some distance from the church and are strangers to the neighborhood around their church.

God's Garden came into being out of a growing conviction that St. John's isolation from its neighbors has to change. If, as Jesus commands, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, surely we have got to begin to know who those neighbors are. And our neighbors have got to begin to know who we are. The relationships that have begun at the vegetable table this summer are a step in that direction. In early September, we did something else. We threw a block party with church tours, bands, food and a kids' bouncy house to welcome the local community. God knows where all this will lead!

When we planted our seeds last spring, we thought we were planting vegetables. What has grown in God's Garden is much more than that. What has grown is a new way of being the Church.

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**Resources:**

- [How Does Your \(Church\) Garden Grow?](#) by Peter Strimer, ECF Vital Practices blog, June 2, 2011
- [Homegrown Communion: Faith, Land and Neighbor](#), an ECF webinar presented by Sarah Nolan, September 26, 2013
- [Tips for Parishes Considering a Food Pantry Garden](#) an ECF Vital Practices tool submitted by Timothy Goldman
- [Missional Mealtime](#) by Alan Bentrup, ECF Vital Practices blog, March 8, 2018