The *Diocesan Lifelong Faith Formation Framework* in Practice

Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

Office of Lifelong Faith Formation

Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland Maine

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LAMB: Inclusive Participation Assessment Tool, National Catholic Partnership on Disability, Washington, DC: 2020. Used with permission.

Funding: grant from the Lay Continuing Education and Formation Endowment established through the diocesan-wide *Strengthening the Heartbeat of the Church* campaign in 2008 and administered by the Catholic Foundation of Maine. Office of Lifelong Faith Formation funded through donations to the Annual Catholic Appeal.

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INTRODUCTION

Lifelong Call to Holiness

Family sightseeing in beautiful Maine

All persons are made for relationship with God. As we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God" (n. 27). Jesus tells us "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Accepting the gift of faith and growing into the abundance of life Jesus offers is a series of daily, lifelong responses to God's grace freely given to all. That is why both initial catechesis and ongoing faith formation are so important in the Church and the lives of her people.

As Pope John Paul II stated and the Magisterium repeats again and again in guiding the Church, "the definitive aim of catechesis is putting people not only in touch with, but in intimacy and communion with Jesus Christ" (*Catechesis In Our Time*, n. 5). Such an aim requires more than completing a class or a limited formation program.

The international *Directory for Catechesis* sets out a scaffolding for forming, educating, and nourishing people in holiness: "At the

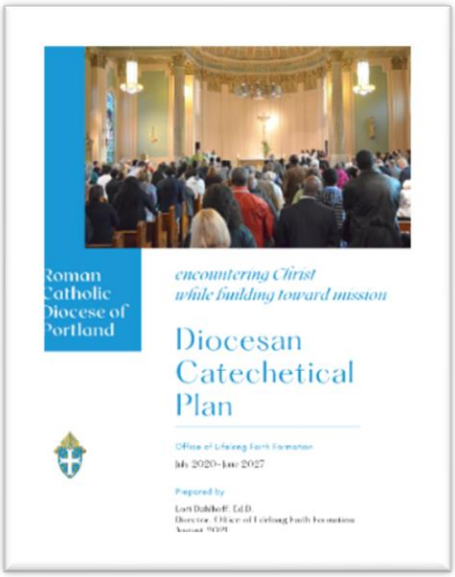
center of every process of catechesis, is the living encounter with Christ. The encounter with Christ involves the person in his totality: heart, mind, senses…catechesis therefore pursues the following tasks: leading to knowledge of the faith, initiating into the celebration of the mystery, forming for life in Christ, teaching prayer, and introduction to community life" (n. 75-89).

This approach is what is referred to as evangelizing catechesis. It stresses that God reaches out first and each person is free response to the gift of revelation. "At the heart of the Church's mission to all people, an evangelizing catechesis seeks to deepen a personal encounter with Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit: It proclaims the core message of the Gospel, the kerygma; it accompanies people to a response of faith and conversion to Christ; it provides a systematic exposition of God's revelation within the communion of the Catholic Church; and it sends out missionary disciples as witnesses to the good news of salvation" (Institute on the Catechism, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops).

The vision for evangelizing catechesis in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland is that every Catholic in Maine accepts the gift of faith in Jesus Christ and wants to keep unpacking that gift for themselves and others, especially through participating in the sacramental life of the Church and serving one another in the world. With this horizon in the journey to eternal life, the Office of Lifelong Formation (OLFF) assists our local bishop in

developing the leadership, guidelines, and structures for evangelization and catechesis that echoes the Gospel to the ends of the earth in harmony with the Church as she baptizes, teaches, and makes Christian disciples.

Diocesan Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation



One of the objectives of the current diocesan catechetical plan (2020-2027) is for the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation to articulate a general framework for outreach and lifelong faith formation efforts aimed toward the living encounter with Christ and participating in the mission of the Church that will:

a. be applicable in diverse settings (rural, urban, small communities, regional collaborations, differing languages or cultures);

b. serve as a guide for parishes and Catholic schools in planning, assessing and adapting local efforts in making disciples;

c. foster healthy family life that naturally embodies and forms Catholic faith.

The basic framework of evangelizing catechesis in Maine consists of six basic, interconnected components:

- Parish Community [context for encountering, learning, and living faith]

- Faith Instruction [knowing the "kerygma" and how to proclaim it in life]
- Sacrament Formation [preparing individuals, families, communities for celebrating one or more sacrament and for living out the sacramental graces received for one's whole life]
- Ongoing Formation [continued learning and formation of the fully initiated]
- Sound Resources [people, materials, and methods that harmonize with the way God teaches (divine pedagogy) and what the Church believes]
- Catechetical Leadership [pastor and those he delegates to collaborate with him in envisioning, planning, implementing, and assessing local efforts]

These serve like tent posts over which the fabric of divine revelation and magisterial teaching are draped to create spaces for catechesis. The people and the conditions within and surrounding the tent vary. This is why paying attention to the context of who, what, where, when, and how people encounter Jesus Christ is key to discerning the concrete applications of the lifelong faith formation framework.

Greater specificity about organizational strategies, desired learning outcomes, and effective methods are in process as OLFF works toward completion of the goal by June of 2027. Putting the framework into practice around particular needs is critical to responding to the Holy Spirit at work among the people and parishes of Maine.

People and Parishes

According to the most recent data available through the U.S. Census Bureau (source: 2022 https://data.census.gov/), an estimated 16% of Maine's total population lives with some sort of

disability that impacts how they perform day-to-day functions. This percentage increases as people age. For example, roughly 10% of adults aged 18 to 34 have a disability and the percentage for those aged 75 or older is an estimated 45%. The shifts from 1 in 5 young adults to almost half of older adults, points out that, while the visibility may change over time, disabilities are normal experiences within all communities across Maine.

In 2022, there were 48 parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland. Parishes reported a total of 135,216 individuals as being part of local faith communities (Kenedy Directory annual report). Assuming the general demographics apply, this means roughly 21,630 Catholics in our parishes live with some form of disability. These threads are woven among the fabric of our local church even though many individuals and families with members who have disabilities struggle to find welcome as parishioners or valued contributors to community life.

We read in the bible of Jesus' interactions with persons with disabilities. While many in the society considered them sinful or unworthy of being members of the community, Jesus saw each with love and compassion, reaching out as he did to all people. He taught us how to respond. "The Church's solicitude for persons with disabilities springs from God's way of acting. Following the principles of the incarnation of the Son of God, who makes himself present in every human situation, the Church recognizes in persons with disabilities the call to faith and to a life that is good and full of meaning. This calls for twofold attention: an awareness

of the possibility to educate in the faith the people with even grave or very grave disabilities; and a willingness to consider them as active subjects in the community in which they live." (*Directory for Catechesis*, 2020, n. 269-272)

Principle of the Curb Cut Effect

An article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* notes: "There's an ingrained societal suspicion that intentionally supporting one group hurts another. That equity is a zero-sum game. In fact, when the nation targets support where it is needed most—when we create the circumstances that allow those who have been left behind to participate and contribute fully—everyone wins. The corollary is also true: When we ignore the challenges faced by the most vulnerable among us, those challenges, magnified many times over, become a drag on economic growth, prosperity, and national well-being" (Angela Glover Blackwel, Winter 2017, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect).

Ramps graded down on sidewalks to meet smoothly with the street first appeared in the 1970's. These curb cuts in sidewalks were originally mandated to assist war veterans with mobility injuries to navigate city streets more easily. Over time, many have come to benefit from curb cuts including persons who push baby strollers, delivery people with hand trucks or carts, elders with assistive equipment, toddlers, bikers, and walkers.

What came to be known as the "Curb Cut Effect" is the principle that what we do to accommodate persons with disabilities has the

potential to be helpful for other groups and individuals, sometimes in ways that are unexpected. An illustration:
Oxo brand was born when the founder created a vegetable peeler that would make cooking easier for his wife with arthritis. The company now uses a universal design approach (design that makes an item or process usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need to further adapt the design to accommodate various ages, hand sizes, strengths, and dexterity) for its widely available *Good Grips* line of kitchens and home tools to make everyday life easier for everyone.

ELECTRONIC CURB CUT EFFECTS

Several technologies originally developed to assist persons with disabilities are now the norm, improving access for everyone. For example:

- **Automatic Doors** offer hands-free options that ease entries and exits for those using wheelchairs as well as those who push carts, carry babies, etc.

- **Closed Captioning and Text Messaging** originally created to translate between audio and visual communication with those who are deaf or have hearing impairments changed the way everyone watches videos and communicates using phone

- **Speech to text, text to speech, enlarged fonts, and hands-free functions on cell phones and other devices** developed to eliminate the use of a keyboard for greater access by those with low vision or limited control in their fine motor muscles led to generally available virtual assistants

Inclusion Initiative

The Office of Lifelong Faith Formation (OLFF) is a faith formation entity with inclusion at the heart. Pastors and parish leaders continually seek guidance from OLFF for how to welcome and include persons with disabilities in faith formation, sacramental preparation, worship and liturgy, and parish life.

The *Directory for Catechesis* states: "It is the task of the local Churches to be open to the reception and ordinary presence of persons with disabilities within programs of catechesis, working for a culture of inclusion against the logic of the disposable" (n. 271).

These are among the reasons the OLFF sought and received a grant from the Lay Continuing Education & Formation Endowment in Spring 2023 to launch an Inclusion Initiative.

The goal of the initiative is to create a unifying, comprehensive framework to help parishes in our diocese grow in awareness and inclusion of persons with disabilities. Together, we seek to answer a central question: How do we enlarge the area for our 'church tent' to enable the entire Body of Christ to enter, belong, and contribute?

Purposes of the Inclusion Initiative

- To help parishes include persons with disabilities in the fulness of the Body of Christ, as persons who are integrated into and contributing to existing parish and sacramental life, and not as a separate parish ministry group
- To provide opportunities for parish awareness, education, reflection, conversation, action steps, and best practices, during long-term, systemic, and impactful growth
- To guide parishes in helping persons with disabilities feel valued, welcome, and affirmed, in five areas:
  1. Attitude
  2. Language of Inclusion
  3. Accessibility: Physical, Social, and Learning
  4. Meaningful Participation in Church
  5. Belonging

Leadership and Consultation

With the launch of the initiative, the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation formed a Diocesan Core Steering Team, comprised of individuals representing parish communities in the various geographic areas of Maine. Team members include a person with disabilities who advocates for military veterans and those experiencing homelessness, caregivers of loved ones with disabilities, educators, a psychologist, staff member of Catholic Charities of Maine, a professional administrator in direct care of persons with disabilities, a speech pathologist and feeding specialist, and parish advocates for elders. Their combined lived experience, professional expertise, and advocacy bring authenticity to the inclusion efforts. The diocesan-wide initiative has also been guided and strengthened by our consultative relationship with the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), of which our Maine diocese is an affiliate member.

Diocesan Steering Team at work for the Inclusion Initiative

Five Dynamics and Three Strategies

Like evangelizing catechesis, inclusion is an ongoing process of cooperating with the Holy Spirit who is already at work among the faithful to gradually bear fruit of abundant life for all people. The Diocesan Core Steering Team offers five dynamics at the heart of such cooperation: Attitude; Language; Accessibility; Meaningful Participation and Belonging.

Photographer invites the world's beauty into focus

While it may be tempting to jump right to addressing physical or organizational barriers to inclusion, it is essential to first examine personal and communal attitudes about disabilities so changes will be both authentic and lasting. The pages that follow outline each inclusion dynamic with information and suggestions to help users implement three strategies toward lasting change:

A. Broaden Knowledge and Awareness
B. Engage in Dialogue and Discernment
C. Take Appropriate Local Action (Personal and Communal)

The hope is that the contents and processes of the Inclusion Initiative will be used in decision-making and as a common reference for guiding parishes in local catechetical efforts for everyone.

How to Use this Booklet

This booklet provides information, questions, and suggestions of best practices that support these strategic aims. The contents can be used by individuals and with others in local communities, within the parish and with partners beyond the church. Each inclusion dynamic is presented to address the three strategies for lasting change:

A. Broaden Knowledge and Awareness

Scripture passage and a **description** of the dynamic from various sources, including the *LAMB: Inclusive Participation Assessment Tool* published by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD).

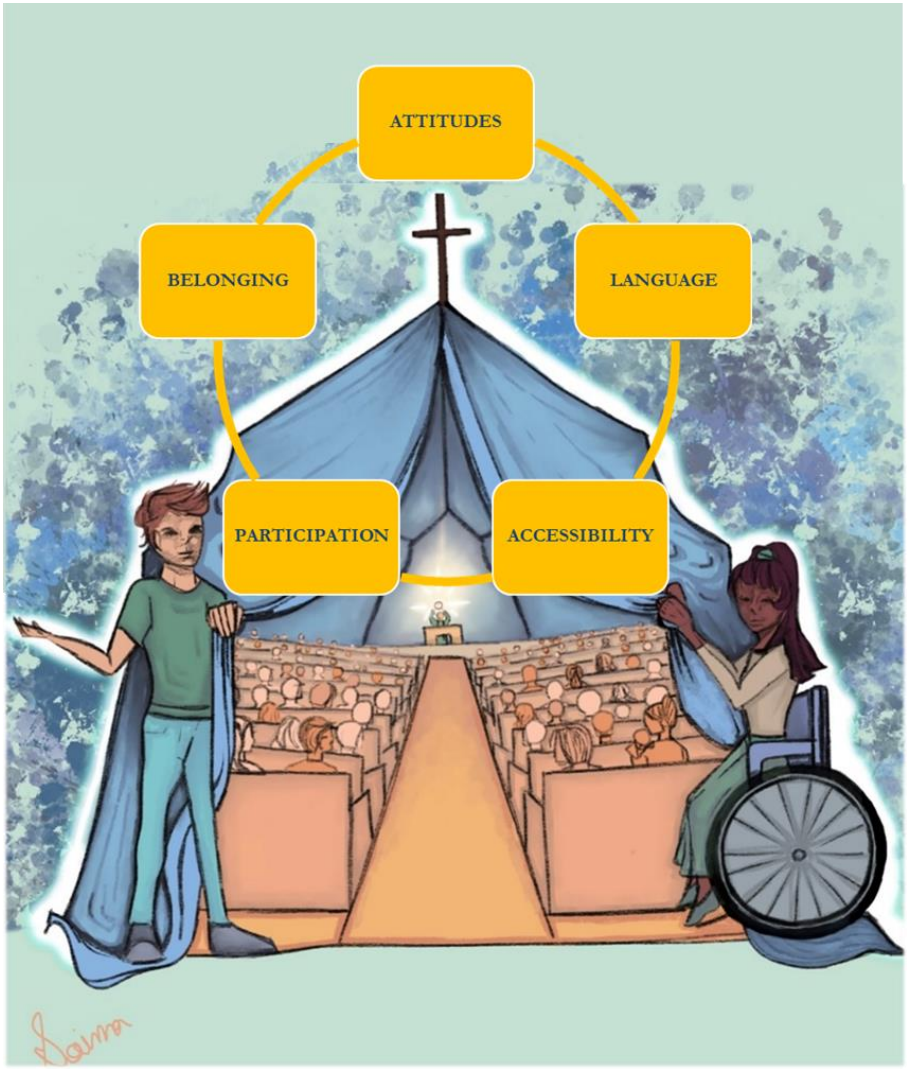
B. Engage in Dialogue and Discernment

Reflection-based **questions** designed to prompt parish conversation, surface greater understanding, increase comfort levels, and inspire strategic efforts for short-term and long-term change.

C. Take Appropriate Local Action (Personal and Communal)

Examples of best practices reported to be effective in other parishes, communities, and organizations. The practices offer strategic guideposts to help each parish identify areas of local success and areas of needed growth. They are <u>not</u> meant as 'prescriptive' measures.

FIVE DYNAMICS OF INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



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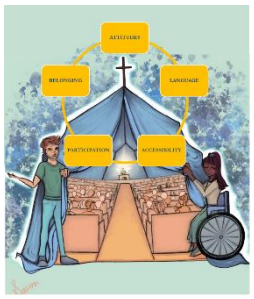
Dynamic One: *Attitude*



"Enlarge the space for your tent. Spread out your tent cloths unsparingly; lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs."

Isaiah 54:2

Description

Honoring the dignity of every human person, including holding positive attitudes about differing abilities, is essential to removing barriers to and supporting full participation of persons with disabilities in Church life. Becoming aware of common discomforts, fears, assumptions, and perceptions is a pivotal step to change leading to intentional design for spiritual, social, and physical accessibility that naturally includes all persons, of all abilities. Change for long-term impact is lively and gradual and is helped by patience, intentionality, and a long view.

In his message for December 2023 monthly papal prayer intention Pope Francis stressed, "It means changing our mentality a little and opening ourselves to the abilities and talents of these people who are differently abled, both in society as well as in the life of the Church. Creating a completely accessible parish does not only mean eliminating physical barriers. It also assumes that we stop talking about 'them' and start talking about 'us'."

Questions for Parish Reflection

- What is typically your first reaction to seeing or hearing about someone with a disability?
- Which, if any, of the common discomforts or fears about disability have you experienced?

Common Discomforts or Fears about Disabilities

- I am afraid of saying the wrong thing and of offending someone with a visible disability whom I encounter her/him.
- I don't have any experience being around a person with a disability, so I feel uncomfortable.
- I don't know how to recognize an invisible disability.
- I don't understand the way a person communicates.
- I am unsure of how to engage beyond a "hi" or a "wave."
- I am uncomfortable with the awkward silence that can follow a question or greeting when someone has delayed processing issues.
- I want to be more engaging, but some encounters are unpredictable and that makes me uncomfortable.

- How do we acknowledge that a person is never defined solely by a disability?
- What does Jesus teach us about compassion, relationships, and inclusion?
- In what ways does our parish show genuine desire to include all persons of all abilities?

- How do we learn to see Christ in the person with a disability?
- How do we promote that belonging and contribution are universal human desires?

Examples of Best Practices

- Start by reflecting on your own attitudes and beliefs about disability to be aware of any discomforts, fears, or perceptions that make you hesitant to include people with disabilities.

Assumptions & Perceptions that Perpetuate Harmful Stigma

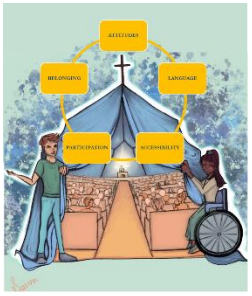
Persons with disabilities …

- are unable to receive sacraments.
- do not have the intellectual capacity to understand abstract concepts of the Catholic faith.
- are unable to sin because they don't know the difference between right and wrong.
- call for special treatment and meeting their needs are a burden on others.
- can't distinguish or communicate the difference between bread we eat and Jesus in the consecrated bread.
- don't understand what is communicated to them.
- can be disruptive, causing annoyance to others.
- are a small percentage of our community, causing us to change or adapt everything in our parish.
- have a 'less full life' than others and I feel pity for them.
- by virtue of their vulnerability, may present legal issues.

- Seek direct contact and more interactions with people with disabilities to overcome fears or discomforts.
- Question whether or not your attitudes and actions toward people with disabilities reflect the Catholic social teaching of the inherent dignity of very human person.
- Learn more about disability and the contributions persons with disabilities make to the common good as well as the unique challenges that come from living with a chronic condition.
- Use the 3-step model - Ask, Listen, Provide Choices - as part of all parish planning and welcoming efforts.

A father and son moment at a Maine Catholic parish event

Dynamic Two: *Language*



"It happens that there are many different languages in the world, and none is meaningless; but if I do not know the meaning of a language, I shall be a foreigner to one who speaks it, and one who speaks it a foreigner to me." 1 Corinthians 14:10-11

Description

"Language can empower or diminish a person in any setting by the words that are chosen, which often reflect the attitudes of the writer or speaker. A person is the sum of many different characteristics: gender, age, height, talents, culture, struggles, vulnerabilities, etc. Yet, first and foremost, each of us is a person. To reflect this reality, "person-first language" is preferred, where the person is mentioned before any disability or diagnosis. Remember to always use language that is respectful, age-appropriate, and proper to the setting". (*LAMB* tool, NCPD)

All behavior communicates.

Questions for Parish Reflection

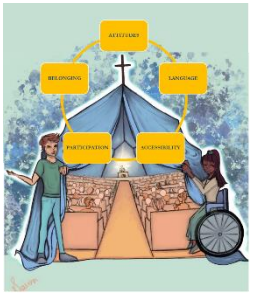
- If God knows us each by name, how does it feel when others speak our name?
- Why is 'listening' an essential principle of communication?

- What are the pros and cons of asking or not asking a person about their disability?
- How do we learn to 'see' and name the person before the disability?
- How could parish-wide communication methods and means be more inclusive and accessible?

Examples of Best Practices

- Communicate directly with adults with disabilities rather than talk to someone else about them; this may differ with children.
- See and acknowledge the person rather than highlighting his/her disability at the very onset of an encounter.
- Use a natural and authentic demeanor as with encountering any other person.
- Speak in welcoming, positive tones, using typical volume, so as not to draw unwelcome attention to the person.
- Take cues from person with a disability and follow her/his lead.
- Avoid euphemisms, terms of endearment, dated and derogatory words and phrases.
- Use American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for two-way communication with people who are deaf.
- Promote inclusivity in signage and communications so actions of the community will align with what is being stated.

Dynamic Three: *Accessibility*



"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well." Psalm 139:13-14

Description

"Accessibility enables different modes of engagement in social interactions, community participation and resources: physical, social, and learning. Human (social) interaction access considers communication. Learning considers learning styles, comprehension, and support needs" (*LAMB* tool, NCPD).

"It is a duty to guarantee persons with disabilities access to buildings and meeting places, to make languages accessible and to overcome physical barriers and prejudices. However, this is not enough. It is necessary to promote a spirituality of communion, so that every person feels part of a body, with his or her unique personality. Only in this way can every person, with their limitations and gifts, feel encouraged to do their part for the good of the entire ecclesial body and for the good of society as a whole" (Pope Francis, Address on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, December 3, 2022).

Physical Access

Physical access considers mobility, comfort, age-appropriateness, and integration with the community.

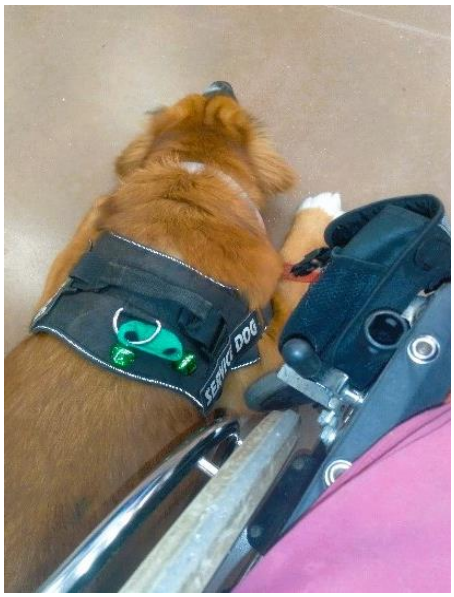
Questions for Parish Reflection

- What helpful, inclusive attributes already exist in our parish churches and gathering spaces?
- How might we improve the physical mobility and accessibility of our parish properties?
- What are the ways and means available for financing improvements to physical accessibility on parish properties?

Examples of Best Practices

- Maintain obstacle-free, facilitated pathways and walkways for persons with mobility challenges to access worship and community spaces.
- Make adaptations in gathering spaces to allow for people using mobility devices to sit with or near family members or friends. For example, make pew cuts in various locations in the worship assembly; not everyone likes to sit in the front or at the back of the church.

- Understand that a person may need to move around or to exit and re-enter during Mass or other communal events.
- Provide ample accessible parking spaces and accessible/family restrooms.
- Provide an elevator or lift to access multiple floors.
- Include furnishing in meeting spaces that can accommodate participants of various ages, statures, and abilities.
- Ask about seating preferences and provided options for full participation.
- Allow fidgets and other small personal items that promote self-calming with distracting others.
- Enhance experiences by using visual aids, large print and or braille materials, and electronic documents that are screen- reader compatible.
- Offer a calming environment for group sessions or a near-by alternative space where individuals can take a momentary physical or sensory break during group activities.



Bernadette is working. Do not disturb!

Social Access

Human (social) interaction access considers communication.

Questions for Parish Reflection

- How do we understand that "being together" is an innate human desire?
- What are the benefits of being together, intergenerationally, at events?
- What are the benefits of having independent, smaller groups meet at other times?
- What are creative outreach ideas that support inviting and including persons with disabilities in faith communities?
- How can we intentionally spend more time building relationships with persons with disabilities, their families and caregivers?

Examples of Best Practices

- Respect a person's answer when offering help.
- Respect a person's need for self-regulation to leave or remain at events as desired, is respected.
- Fully engage persons with various communication abilities (e.g. verbal, audio, visual, kinesthetic).

- Match the gifts, talents, strengths, and interests of persons with disabilities with needs of the parish (e.g., serving at socials, assisting in the kitchen, cooking, decorating, and planning for special liturgies and events, being part of a prayer group).
- Identify teens and adults to be buddies who accompany people needing extra assistance to naturally form relationships and lowers anxiety levels.

An experience of 'horse-driving' activity in Maine

Learning Access

Learning considers learning styles, comprehension, and support needs.

Questions for Parish Reflection

- How can we create parish environments that allow diverse learners to gain social skills and understand healthy boundaries by what is being modeled by others?
- Why is it important for persons with disabilities to be immersed in every aspect of parish life: liturgical and educational settings, community building events? Who benefits?
- What could help persons with disabilities communicate their needs to our Church?
- What opportunities can our parish provide any newly arriving persons, to help us learn about and appreciate their gifts, customs, foods, traditions, worship styles?

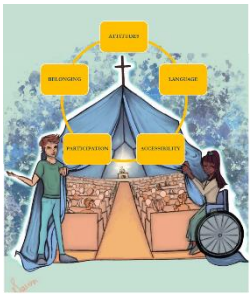
Examples of Best Practices

- Normalize the reality that everyone has strengths and challenges to learning in a group setting.
- Declutter learning spaces to minimize stimulations and promote greater focus for all learners by having fewer distractions.
- Include a question on registration forms like "What would be good for us to know about how your child learns, to best support him or her in parish faith formation?"

- Learn about characteristics of invisible intellectual disabilities and ways that may best support their needs in the church (e.g., use caution when planning ice breakers, music volume).
- Choose program materials that provide catechists lesson adaptations or alternative methods for delivering content based on learner's differing abilities.
- Use methods of instruction that involve the five senses and channels of communication "capable of including all participants in a personal and meaningful way" (*Directory for Catechesis,* 271).
- Incorporate learning tools like communication boards, social stories, or pictographs created for parish life and faith formation.

Colorful family fun at a Maine Catholic parish event

Dynamic Four: *Meaningful Participation*



"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Romans 8:28

Description

"Participation is involvement in any life situation, specifically, actual activity and functioning of an individual in society. Meaningful participation is not mere inclusion within a group, but rather active involvement within roles that are valid, age-appropriate activities. A person's strengths are acknowledged, and interests and goals are respected, with support provided naturally as required. Interactions with all group members are organic and encouraged. Personal input is not only welcomed, but also sought as a part of ordinary engagement in an open and diverse environment" (*LAMB* tool, NCPD).

Questions for Parish Reflection

- From a Christian perspective, how do we uplift people with our attitude, language, postures, and behaviors?

- What could help persons with disabilities communicate their needs to our Church?
- In what ways can a parish's faith formation and sacramental preparation efforts include persons with differing abilities and learning styles?
- What opportunities can our parish provide any newly arriving persons, to help us learn about and appreciate their gifts, customs, foods, traditions, worship styles?
- In what ways can we identify, align, and build up a person's gifts to best serve our community needs and roles?
- What strategies (accommodations or modifications) do/can we offer for persons with diverse learning styles and abilities, to increase their full participation in parish life? [end list]

Examples of Best Practices

- Begin all planning by keeping relationships at the forefront of mind and heart.
- Recognize that persons with disabilities may not want to be singled out or treated differently.
- Respect and support individual's goals for parish participation based on abilities and gifts.
- Explore and use various methods of teaching, learning, praying, worshipping, and conversing, so all people can engage to the best of their abilities.

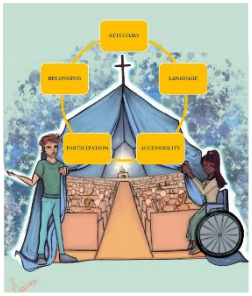
- Stress that Mass is not a private faith experience. Eucharistic liturgy is a time and space for the entire community to gather to experience the depth and richness of worship as the Body of Christ.
- Match the gifts and strengths of a person with a disability with the needs of the parish. For example, liturgical roles for identified gifts include:
  - Musical talent = choir, musician
  - Reverent and enjoys ritual = acolyte, assisting a sacristan, extraordinary minister of holy Communion
  - Likes to read = lector, help in faith formation/catechist
  - Likes to help = greeter, usher, hand-out bulletins or prayer cards, catechist

Examples of appropriate accommodations that allow meaningful participation in a liturgical role

- Incorporate a multi-sensory approach using materials/resources that include pictures and symbols to provide interactive options for engagement.
- Ensure that those who cannot tolerate gluten know how to arrange to receive holy Communion from the cup only or low-gluten host at Mass.
- Practice conversing with the help of augmented or alternative communion devices that people use outside of church settings.
- Incorporate communication boards, social narratives, or pictographs when applicable.

- Add symbols or images along with the text in parish print, web, and indoor/outdoor signage, when applicable or helpful.
- Support those who are hard of hearing (HOH) by incorporating assistive listening devices or loop systems in the worship space.
- Provide American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters familiar with religious terminology for liturgies and other parish events.
- Use art, film, theater, photography, music, and movement as indicators of human expression that affect emotion when applicable and helpful.
- Sync outreach efforts with the liturgical cycles and existing family events to acknowledge how God is already present in people's lives and connect with their natural openness to the sacred.

Dynamic Five: *Belonging*



"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

Jeremiah 29:11

Description

"Everyone belongs by virtue of baptism. Further, belonging expands participation and presence to a deeper level. It is relationships among individuals within a group. Relationship is apparent when persons are welcomed, when one's presence and contributions are missed, when each person's growth is encouraged. It is a mutual sense that we are all a part of one another, in Christ, and without that, the Church would not be whole. It is a setting for creating and strengthening continuing relationships and building communities, where all persons have a growing capacity to interact together" (*LAMB* tool, NCPD).

Natural outcomes of belonging are socialization, support, and a richer parish and family faith life. "The person is not only sacred, but also social. … The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable" (*National Catholic Catechism for Adults,* p.423).

Questions for Parish Reflection

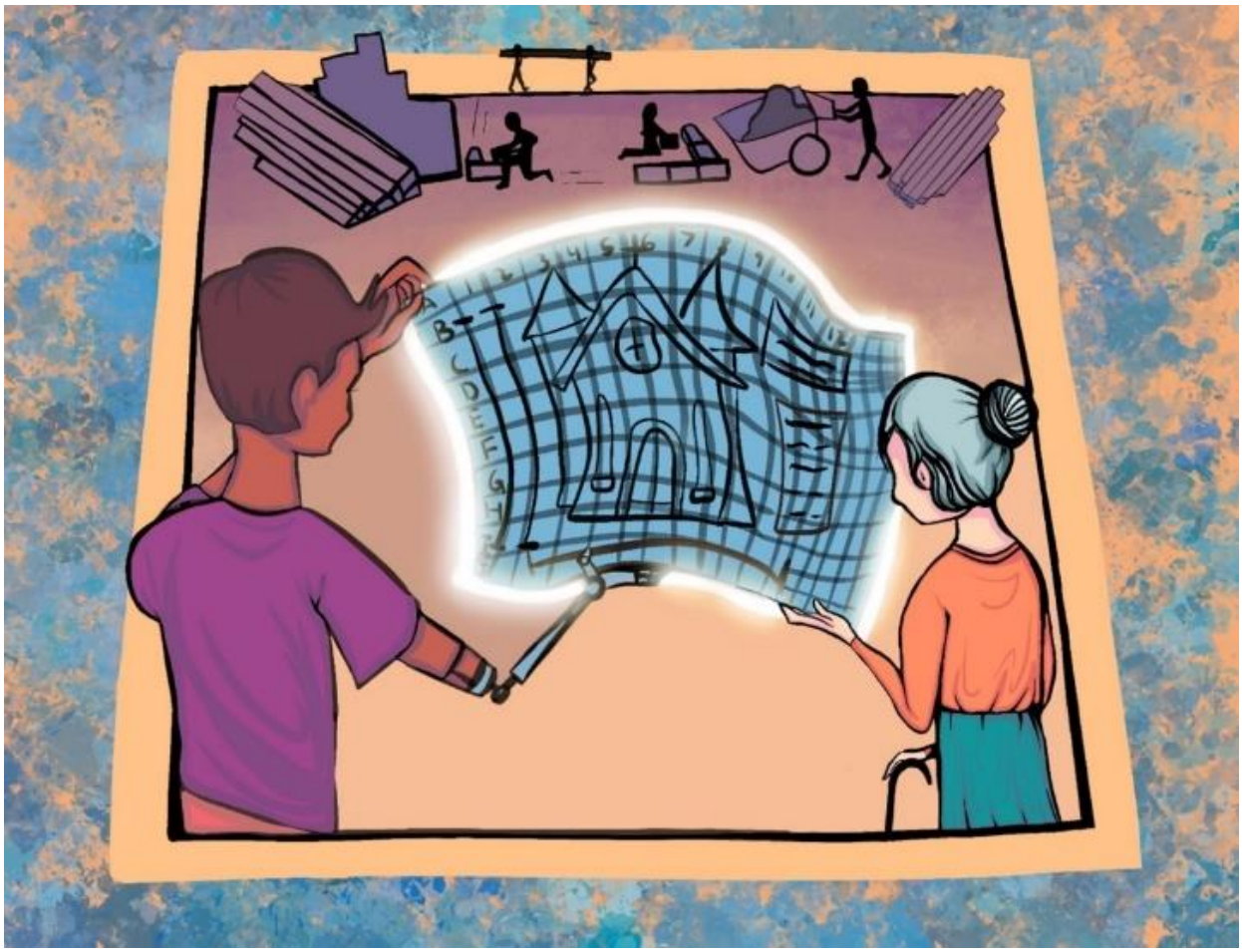
- What makes me feel like I belong? How, if at all, might this be different for persons with disabilities?
- What does it mean to shift from 'inclusion' to 'belonging' and why are relationships and active involvement at the core?
- How does baptism and other sacraments help to strengthen a sense of belonging?
- How does a Catholic Christian anthropology support that persons of all abilities seek purpose and meaningful relationships?
- In what ways can we support and strengthen family members to grow spiritually as they care for loved ones with disabilities and one another?
- From a Catholic perspective, what does true belonging lead to?

Mother and son belong and contribute
to their Maine parish

Examples of Best Practices

- Emphasize we all belong in the parish by virtue of our Baptism, making relationships the core of shifting from inclusion to belonging.
- Encourage and support each person's desire to contribute, according to her/his abilities.
- Offer diverse opportunities for individual, intergenerational, and large-group and small-group engagement.
- Provide any parish surveys or gift inventories in various formats that will allow all parishioners to respond to them, for example provide them in large print format or offer opportunities for people to complete it through a verbal conversation with the person gathering the data (read the questions to the person then dictate his/her responses).

NEXT STEPS



Ask, Listen, Provide Choices

Prayerful learning, reflecting, and acting are at the heart of responding to God in faith and solidarity. Working through the dynamics of inclusion to this point you have asked questions and "listened" to the experiences of others through their best practices. The next step in the 3-step model introduced in the Attitude dynamic is to provide choices for acting with the Holy Spirit toward greater inclusion.

In his homily for 2024 Chrism Mass, Bishop Robert Deeley reminded us that "There is a mission for every one of us in the Church: bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, religious women and men, laypeople. Through the anointing of baptism and confirmation, every Catholic is sent forth on mission. Our laypeople have a mission. Through baptism, you are called to be priests and ministers of life in the world. You are called to bring God into that world and to reveal his love to the people around you. So many people in our world today are longing to find God! And they are looking for us, for the Church, to show them the way."

We work, dream, celebrate and struggle together, united by a common mission and strengthened by each person's unique gifts, wisdom, knowledge, and expertise. We keep the flame of the long view burning as we live in the present. God's promises encourage us at every step as we enlarge the space for our tent.

Parish Inclusion Advocates: Role and Training

In an ideal world, the gifts, needs, and concerns of persons with disabilities and their families are automatically considered in planning and living parish life. Until this is true faith communities may be helped by individuals dedicated to asking, listening, and providing choices related to inclusion. This role might be described as an encourager or advocate.

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) offers training and support for parishioners who feel called to serve as parish inclusion advocates. "Parish Advocate are parishioners, approved by the pastor, who assists him in working for and with persons with disabilities. In consultation with the pastor, the advocates reach out to the parish to identify needs, barriers, and their offers to serve in ministerial roles. By responding to the identified needs and gifts, the parish advocate works with parish leadership, to promote the full participation of children and adults with disabilities in the life of the parish." (NCPD)

So, who might be good candidates for serving as a parish inclusion advocate? People who volunteer on parish-wide welcome or hospitality teams already show concern for building up community life. Other people to consider include those who participated in the Spring 2024 Inclusion Initiative regional events or serve as assistants in children's faith formation. Consider including this role as part of ministry surveys or however the parish helps people discern their gifts, interests, and commitments to sharing in the Church's mission.

NPCD offers an online training course to prepare individuals for serving as a parish inclusion advocate. The on-demand course is approximately 2-hours long and is available in English and Spanish. While anyone can register for the training, the cost for the course may be reduced through the Diocese of Portland's status as an affiliate member of NCPD. Please reach out to the Office of

Lifelong Faith Formation for assistance in getting the lower registration rate.

Because of our affiliation, the Outreach and Diocesan Relations Office of the NCPD provides guidance to our diocese and each parish through short courses, parish advocate training, and additional resources, designed to help movement toward fuller parish and sacramental life. Three of the course topics currently include "Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities," "Sensory Friendly Mass," and "Parish Based Mental Health Ministry." Go to the organization's website ncpd.org for more information.

LAMB: Inclusive Participation Assessment Tool

Taking stock of the current situation is important in honoring how the parish already practices inclusion and identifying areas of possible improvement. A resource booklet from the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), available in both English and Spanish, offers an assessment checklist with examples for considerations within the four areas of Language, Accessibility, Meaningful Participation, and Belonging. The downloadable English version is included here https://ncpd.org/files/resources-toolkits/LAMB_Assessment_Key_English.pdf

LAMB: Inclusive Participation Assessment Tool

We are called to follow the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, reaching out so that all feel welcomed, valued and affirmed. Expertise is not needed. All that is necessary is the will to meet each person, get to know him or her, and form a relationship. To do this it is important to consider various forms of communication, various ways of moving in spaces, various ways of participating, and various ways to nurture an environment of belonging. Four attributes of thriving communities that foster spiritual growth for all are Language, Accessibility, Meaningful Participation, and Belonging (LAMB). The NCPD Council on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CIDD) offers the LAMB Assessment Tool to support this vision by guiding the development and evaluation of programs, materials and/ or other resources for use in the Church, relative to accessibility or usability for all persons.

Language

Language can empower or diminish a person in any setting by the words that are chosen, which often reflect the attitudes of the writer. A person is the sum of many different characteristics: gender, age, height, talents, culture, struggles, vulnerabilities, etc. Yet, first and foremost, each of us is a person. To reflect this reality, "person-first language" is preferred, where the person is mentioned before any disability or diagnosis. Remember to always use language that is respectful, age-appropriate, and proper to the setting.

Accessibility

Accessibility enables different modes of engagement in social interactions, community participation and resources: physical, social, and learning. Physical access considers mobility, comfort, age-appropriateness and integration with the community. Human (social) interaction access considers communication. Learning considers learning styles, comprehension and support needs.

Meaningful Participation

Participation is involvement in any life situation, specifically actual activity and functioning of an individual in society. Meaningful participation is not mere inclusion within a group, but rather active involvement within roles that are valid, age appropriate activities. A person's strengths are acknowledged, and interests and goals are respected with supports provided naturally as required. Interactions with all group members are organic and encouraged. Personal input is not only welcomed, but also sought as a part of ordinary engagement in an open and diverse environment.

Belonging

Everyone belongs by virtue of baptism. Further, belonging expands participation and presence to a deeper level It is relationships among individuals within a group. Relationship is apparent when persons are welcomed, when one's presence and contributions are missed, when each person's growth is encouraged. It is a mutual sense that we are all a part of one another, in Christ, and without that, the Church would not be whole. It is a setting for creating and strengthening continuing relationships and building communities, where all persons have a growing capacity to interact together.

Follow the LAMB

The checklist on the following pages provides examples of considerations within the four categories of LAMB: Language, Accessibility, Meaningful Participation and Belonging. It is intended to help you assess resources and programs you are considering using in your parish for such needs as: catechetical and faith formation materials, parish development, small Christian communities, worship aides, environmental assessment, etc. It can also help you assess the inclusiveness of your liturgies and general parish dynamics. Some items may be more appropriate for assessing a resource or program, while others may be more appropriate for reflecting on liturgies or your parish community in general. We hope it will also help you to better understand each of the attributes.

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Assessment Key: 0 (Not at All), 1 (Minimally), 2 (Moderately), 3 (Very Well)				
	0	1	2	3
Language				
Person-first				
Respectful				
Age appropriate				
Persons with disabilities are communicated with directly. There should always be the assumption that s/he can advocate for themselves, and understand the verbal and non-verbal (body) language of others.				
Accessibility – Physical				
Entrances, exits and the interior of the church are free of physical barriers.				
Entrance ways to and from catechetical programs are free of physical barriers.				
Entrance ways to and from the community spaces are free of physical barriers.				
Persons can enter the sanctuary using their mobility devices.				
Church and parish facilities provide a calming space or manipulatives (e.g., fidgets) for persons with sensory processing needs.				
Wheelchair accessible restroom(s) are available.				
Family restroom(s) are available.				
Meeting space and furniture compliments chronological age and/or physical stature of participants.				
Persons with mobility devices have options for accessible seating in worship and community spaces (e.g., pew cuts in various locations; not designated to specific sections/pews).				
Accommodations for liturgies, meetings and events are provided upon request (e.g., sign-language interpreter, large-print materials).				
Available accommodations for liturgies, meetings and events are indicated on all print, digital and social media promotions (e.g., use symbols to indicate availability of an interpreter or wheelchair access).				
Accessibility – Social				
Provides opportunities to engage persons with different communication abilities in total parish life.				
Supports provided for the Deaf or Hard of Hearing (HoH) (e.g., ASL interpreter, assistive listening devices, loop systems).				
Supports provided for persons with vision impairment (e.g., large print materials, braille, screen reader compatible, electronic documents).				
Augmented communication device use is supported (e.g., communication boards, pictographs).				
Accessibility – Learning				
Alternate strategies for diverse learning needs are offered.				
Adapted content with pictures and/or symbols is utilized.				
Interactive options for engagement with materials (e.g., multi-sensory approach).				

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Assessment Key: 0 (Not at All), 1 (Minimally), 2 (Moderately), 3 (Very Well)				
	0	1	2	3
Meaningful Participation				
Provide opportunities, roles and activities to utilize various talents/gifts.				
Everyone's strengths are utilized to facilitate active engagement of all.				
Individual goals for parish participation are understood and respected.				
Provides opportunities for active engagement in the life of the parish.				
Belonging				
Promotes interaction of persons with diverse abilities.				
Fosters relationship-building among parishioners of all abilities.				
Fosters a sense of community within the entire parish.				
Attitudes support participation rather than act as barriers.				

Assessment Notes

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Support from Diocesan Offices and Ministries

The Office of Lifelong Faith Formation (OLFF) staff are available to support and accompany parishes in their short-term and long-term planning for inclusion of persons of all abilities, who see themselves as belonging and contributing to the lifelong process of personal and communal formation in faith.

The OLFF collaborates with other diocesan offices, advisory councils, and affiliated organizations to respond to situations and opportunities as needs arise including:

- Campus Ministry
- Canonical Affairs
- Catholic Charities – Parish Social Ministry
- Catholic Foundation of Maine
- Catholic Schools
- Diocesan Pastoral Council
- Ecumenism and Interfaith Affairs
- Hispanic Ministry
- Ministerial Services (especially ministry with the Deaf)
- Missions/CRS Office
- Diocesan Presbyteral Council
- Prison Ministry
- Protecting God's Children/Safe Environment
- Vocations

The OLFF also curates resources for a diversity of learners, offering links to these sources on the diocesan website https://portlanddiocese.org/lifelong-faith-formation when they support the overall faith formation framework.

Local Relationships

Building relationships with entities in local communities who serve as resources to persons with disabilities is ecumenically encouraged. Some of these entities may have funds available to assist with buying equipment, adaptive resources, or making physical changes in church facilities for greater access for all. Such groups can include Maine associations, advocacy organizations, and other faith communities like:

- Local special interest groups like the Lions Club
- Knights of Columbus
- Catholic Daughters of the Americas
- Catholic Charities ME, especially Parish Social Ministry that offers the Matthew 25 award for parish ministry and Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) Parish Grants www.ccmaine.org/parish-social-ministry

National Organizations

National Catholic Partnership on Disability ncpd.org

Following the example of Jesus, The National Catholic Partnership on Disability works with dioceses, parishes, ministers, and laity to promote the full and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church.

National Catholic Office for the Deaf www.ncod.org
Non-profit membership organization dedicated to pastoral ministry with deaf and hard of hearing persons.

Pathways: TEAM Belong pathways.org/team-belong/
That Every Ability May Belong, or TEAM Belong, provides interfaith educational materials, events, and cash grants to assist faith communities to welcome members of all abilities and move from inclusion to belonging. These resources include the *Different Gifts, Same Spirit* lesson plan series to teach elementary, junior high, and high school students how to welcome students and parishioners of all abilities. https://pathways.org/team-belong/resources/ and TEAM Belong Awards of $1000 toward inclusion efforts. Applications due by Oct 1 each year https://pathways.org/award/team-belong/ .

The Arc thearc.org
Promotes and protects the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and actively supports their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes.

Xavier Society for the Blind xaviersocietyfortheblind.org
Provides religious, spiritual, and inspirational reading materials in braille and audio to blind and visually impaired individuals worldwide.

Maine family selfie near the Christmas tree

"Brothers and sisters: I kneel before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,
that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory
to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner
self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;
that you, rooted and grounded in love,
may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Ephesians3:14-19

Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland

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portlanddiocese.org/lifelong-faith-formation