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## Parish Inclusion: A Response from the Field

Anne Masters  
Archdiocese of Newark, [anne.masters@rcan.org](mailto:anne.masters@rcan.org)

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### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement from the Guest Editors This article is a response from the field to the article in this issue *The Absence of Asterisks: The Inclusive Church and Children with Disabilities* by Dr. Erik Carter. I am grateful to the respondent for her thoughtfulness, insight, and time connecting the worlds of research and practice.

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## Parish Inclusion: A Response from the Field

Anne Masters<sup>1</sup>

### **Belonging, Not Inclusion In The Body of Christ**

**T**he Absence of Asterisks: The Inclusive Church and Children with Disabilities provides a much needed framework for our catechetical programs and parishes. Carter's ten dimensions of belonging reminds us of the shared human need to belong, which is emphatically supported in Catholic Social Teaching commitment to support human flourishing in the world and the Pastoral Statement of the US Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities (Council Fathers of Vatican II, 1966/1989; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1978). This is also reflected in the object of catechesis, which is communion with Jesus (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). The heart of communion is relationship based on reciprocity and concern for the other. Relationship with Jesus presumes relationship with God, with each other, and all of creation.

Full and meaningful participation has been an elusive goal in the US Catholic Church since the 1950s. Yet there are deep ruptures between ecclesial statements and the lived experiences for many at the parish level. This is evidenced by the exodus of 32% of families from congregations because of wounding experiences when their son or daughter is excluded because of their disability, and a slightly higher percentage considering it for the same reason (Carter, this issue).

Not satisfied to simply diagnose, Carter creatively frames the challenge before us, "How might parishes become communities without asterisks?" In other words, how can Catholic parishes become communities whose practice reflects our statements of belief, rather than requiring a footnote of exceptions? He then suggests possible strategies for nurturing a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Director, Pastoral Ministry with Persons with Disabilities, Archdiocese of Newark

belonging by persons with disabilities according to each dimension within four areas of parish life: liturgy, learning, service and fellowship. Carter also challenges us to look beyond parish life, and consider possibilities to support flourishing in other areas of life as well. Such changes will require intentional planning, which will benefit greatly from his model for Community Conversations, based on the World Café model of community development.

### **In the Archdiocese**

Carter challenges us to move beyond a framework of inclusion to promoting a sense of belonging within our parishes. This is a critical distinction noted by individuals with disabilities. Inclusion implies there are gatekeepers deciding who will be included. Belonging means you are home. Yet, persons with disabilities are also quick to point out that true belonging is experienced by how one is treated, not simply pronounced. This is why his research into what belonging feels like is so important. There is the tendency to believe that the “everyone” in our ecclesial statements refers to people with a set of homogeneous characteristics considered normative for the community. There is little sense of identification with individuals with Down syndrome, autism, or other disabilities. Yet, when I share the ten dimensions of belonging with people, they say, “Gosh, that’s what I want, too!”

Carter’s list of asterisks statements is polite in comparison to the ones I have heard from parents in the archdiocese, country and world. Some have have been told, “not to worry about catechesis or celebrating the sacraments,” because their child with autism is, “in a perpetual state of grace.” Some have been given, “life-long absolution from the need to attend Mass,” while others have been told that, “individuals with autism are animals.” Parents know what the Catholic Church says about itself, and these experiences force them to conclude it is concerned with everyone, except their son or daughter. They are deeply wounded when rejected from the one place they expect to find acceptance, welcome and nourishment. Affirming the gift of life they have received from God in their sons and daughters with particular potential, they are struggling to do their best to raise them in the Catholic faith and launch them into the world.

### **Beneficial Ideas for Serving Learners**

Carter includes many great suggestions, but I think the greatest gift is his clarification of the dimensions of belonging, which serve as guideposts to facilitate meaningful participation and a true sense of belonging. Within this is also the challenge to recognize the capacity for growth, development and contributions of individuals with disabilities. Catholic educators can be helpful within their local parishes to support this, but you can also find effective partners amongst your parish learners’ teachers, local service providers and universities. Learners with disabilities will particularly benefit from enhanced expectations and valid opportunities to contribute, because low expectations not only undermine flourishing, they deeply wound spirit and diminish belief in one’s self. Take the time to get to know each person, their gifts, interests, ways of learning, motivation,

support needs, etc. Focus on the person, not the disability. Too often, people are looking for a program or a book, but this misses the point. The icing on the cake in the article is the practical, yet simple, suggestions made regarding specific supports individuals and families are looking for, as well as suggestions for systemic change. These do not require a lot of money, only the right heart and an openness to learn.

### **Critical Issues, Connections, and Questions**

All learners benefit when the basic need to belong and its dimensions inform education and community development. Our catechetical programs should be considered small Christian communities, within which our children and teens learn not only the precepts of our faith, but also how to live them through their relationships with each other, the parish and the surrounding community.

As Carter notes, the most important focus is relationship, getting to know individuals with disabilities in your parish. Our goal in the Archdiocese of Newark is to support each person based on their particular needs within ordinary parish life and programs, seeking to foster flourishing, meaningful participation, and a true sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities in the Church. It is always recommended to begin with someone's strengths and build on positive experiences, even if that means starting with just five minutes in the catechetical program or attending mass. You can build from there. The offices work collaboratively with pastoral and archdiocesan leaders on structures of support within the parish education. Resources, suggestions for adaptations and developing pastoral plans are available through consultation, workshops, included on the ministry website, and in the Pastoral Ministry WITH Persons WITH Disabilities Parish Resource Guide.

We have developed and piloted a program to teach children with autism and other disabilities to attend Mass, utilizing evidence-based practices. Additional services include: (a) Inclusive Family Masses in some of our parishes for the families that won't attend their regular parish liturgy; (b) parent support groups; (c) a teen mentor program; and (d) Putting Faith to Work with a local parish. I am particularly excited about this last initiative as it provides an opportunity to make real impact in the lives of individuals with disabilities who are significantly more vulnerable due to their disproportionately low participation in employment. In addition, it can foster new connections and possibilities for relationships between persons with disabilities and those without disabilities in parishes. For more information about the above, please refer to [www.rcan.org/disabilities](http://www.rcan.org/disabilities).

Carter has given us a framework describing meaningful inclusion in, and a sense of belonging in parish life. He has also provided parish tools, so we may live out what we proclaim about ourselves as the body of Christ. The question we should now ask is, "What's stopping us from living what we proclaim?"

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