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### Education and Inclusive Congregations: A Study of Three Congregations

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## **Education and Inclusive Congregations: A Study of Three Congregations**

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*This exploratory qualitative research project on inclusive congregations highlights findings from three churches. Each congregation has educated children with developmental disabilities for more than 40 years. Two congregations began by providing separate or exclusive education classes, while one congregation included children with developmental disabilities into regular classes from the beginning. All three congregations are currently inclusive of people with developmental disabilities, both children and adults, in the education programs and life of their congregation. This article describes the three congregations and their educational commitments. Finally, the author contemplates, amid the complexity of congregational culture, how including people with developmental disabilities in religious education contributed to the creation of an inclusive congregation.*

**KEYWORDS** *developmental disabilities, inclusive education, community, inclusive congregation*

What does it take to make an inclusive congregation? Can the education of individuals with developmental disabilities<sup>1</sup> contribute to creating inclusive congregations? The research for this article is part of a larger research project which focused on six congregations which were inclusive of diversity and people with chronic mental illness (Holt-Woehl, 2009). The research took place in three congregations in which an individual with chronic mental illness experienced acceptance, welcome, and support; congregations which had a reputation for welcoming diversity. For the purposes of this study, diversity was defined as any individual or group of individuals different from the mainstream of congregation members. In her book *Congregation &*

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*Community*, Nancy Ammerman (1997) states that each congregation has a culture of its own, a way of acting, speaking, and socializing new members. She writes, "People simply do not expect a congregation to be ethnically or economically diverse, and the practice of choosing a congregation (rather than being assigned to one) increases that homogeneity" (p. 56). Since people with chronic mental illness add diversity to and challenge the homogeneity of congregations, I speculated that a congregation which was welcoming of diversity would also be welcoming of people with chronic mental illness. This speculation turned out to be true in the three diverse congregations studied.

This article focuses on three congregations that had a reputation for welcoming diversity. Two of these congregations included individuals with developmental disabilities who were full participants in the congregation. One of the congregations was ethnically diverse, but in the course of the interview the congregation was discovered to have adults with developmental disabilities as full participants in the congregation as well. Each of these congregations started to offer religious education to children with developmental disabilities at least 40 years ago. The research focused on the question of what makes a congregation inclusive of others who have mental illness or who may appear different from the mainstream. The stories from the congregations revealed a focus of education for all of God's children that they credited to the welcoming atmosphere of the congregation. This article will tell the stories from three of the congregations in the study which reveal their educational commitments, report the findings of the research, and contemplate the role of education in creating an inclusive congregation.

### THE THREE CONGREGATIONS AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENTS

Information on the congregations was gathered through an interview with the pastor, an interview with a focus group, a worship visit by the researcher, written histories, and congregational websites. All names of people and congregations are pseudonyms. The members of the focus groups are referred to by title (Ms. or Mr.) and a capital letter.

Members of each congregation were asked the same series of questions concerning the history of the congregation and how they think the congregation came to include people with developmental disabilities as full participants. (For a complete list of questions, see Holt-Woehl, 2009.) Each congregation, during the course of the interview, looked to a time 40 to 50 years in the past when the congregation began including people with developmental disabilities in religious education. These congregations continue this practice of inclusive education to this day.

## Pentecost Lutheran Church

Pentecost Lutheran Church is a small congregation (120 average weekly worship attendance), located in the city center of a large city (275,000+ population), with a long and rich history. The congregation was formed within 20 years of the incorporation of the city and will soon celebrate its 140th anniversary. The Romanesque-style building was built in the early 1900s. It is a majestic structure, seating approximately 500 people. Pentecost has adapted to its urban city environment over the years and continues to serve the neighborhood in which it is located. The congregation was founded by Scandinavian immigrants and continues to serve the neighborhood immigrant community. The neighborhood is multicultural and so are the members of Pentecost Lutheran.

Pentecost Lutheran established a Sunday school for people with developmental disabilities in 1953. According to the congregation's church history, written for the 100th anniversary, Pentecost was the second congregation to establish this type of Sunday school ministry in Minnesota and the first in the city.

Norman is a man with developmental disabilities who has grown up in the congregation. He participated in Sunday school and Confirmation classes and was confirmed in 1966 along with eleven other youth with developmental disabilities. Today, he regularly attends worship sitting in the front row ready to lend a helping hand to those leading worship. He is a communion server and an acolyte. Norman brings many of his friends from his group home to worship and seeks to engage them in the life of the congregation also. He asks for prayer for his friends, when they are ill or experiencing difficulties, to be offered during worship. He knows many of the congregational members and greets everyone he knows.

The first thought that came to Mr. V's mind, when asked how the congregation became welcoming to all people, was that it started about 50 years ago when a member, Mr. K, started a confirmation class for individuals with developmental disabilities. Mr. K was not a special education teacher nor did he have any special training to work with people who had developmental disabilities. He owned and operated a grocery store. Mr. V thought that this helped him to see the need to welcome and care for all people because this "put him in contact with all kinds of different people." Mr. V went on to explain what he perceived was going on in the congregation in the late 1950s and early 1960s,

At this point in church life, parents of kids with disabilities were feeling really ostracized and of course there's a lot of urban legend, but I think I remember that the pastor who was here said that you could not confirm mentally disabled people because they could not understand what was going on. And for some reason Mr. K went against the wishes of the pastor and said, "I'm ready to do this." And so they went ahead and did that

and it was the first Lutheran confirmation program in the metropolitan area that was for Down syndrome people.

Pastor Miriam tells the story as a movement of lay people,

who wanted to have a confirmation class for mentally retarded. And whoever the pastor was at that time said no, absolutely not. Confirmation has to be for people who understand, and those people don't. And so . . . the lay people organized and went against the better judgment of their pastor. And . . . so you see a confirmation class in 1966 who are basically at that point called mentally retarded.

Pentecost Lutheran has a long tradition of welcoming new immigrants to the United States as well as into their congregation. After World War II they assisted in helping Latvian refugees settle into the city. The Latvians went on to form their own congregation in their own language. In the 1980s, Pentecost became the home of a ministry to Southeast Asian immigrants, and provided English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Many of these ESL students first came to worship at Pentecost because their teachers were in worship and they later joined as members.

The congregation's commitment to education of all people is lived out in the interactions of the members. Mr. V described members of the congregation who get to know those who are "different" (whether ethnically, emotionally, physically, or mentally) as "cultural brokers." These cultural brokers engage in educating others in the congregation about the special needs, different cultures, or mental illness of other members which might be perceived by some people as evidencing "strange" or "different" behavior. The members learn to interact by learning from one another.

### Mustard Seed Lutheran

Mustard Seed Lutheran Church is a medium-sized congregation (220 average weekly worship attendance) located in the county seat of a rural small town (2,000+ population). Although the town is located in the midst of farming territory, few members of the congregation are farmers. The town holds the county government offices, the area consolidated school, and a variety of businesses and agribusinesses. Despite the trend of population decline in surrounding rural areas, this community has maintained a steady population over the past 10 years, while during the same time Mustard Seed itself has experienced a slight growth in membership. Mustard Seed has been in existence for almost 120 years.

Mustard Seed has four adult members with developmental disabilities who are active in the life of the congregation. Bill, Mark, and Sam are regular ushers. They each have certain jobs that they do faithfully each week. Darrel

(who also has mental illness) serves as lector in rotation with other lectors as well as sings in the church choir. Bill has a unique role in the life of the congregation. Besides his job as an usher, he is the “town crier” for congregational announcements. Every 3 or 4 weeks if Pastor Jeff forgets to make an announcement, Bill will walk up to the front of the church at the close of worship, enter the pulpit, and wait for the pastor to call on him. When the pastor asks, “Bill, do you have anything to add?” Bill will adjust the microphone, state his announcement, and then walk to the back of the church. As Bill has a speech impediment, it is difficult for some of the members to understand what he has said. So, as Bill proceeds to the back of the church after his announcement, Pastor Jeff will say, “Thank you Bill for reminding us about...” and repeats the announcement so that all can understand.

Sam and Mark grew up in the congregation. They were in Sunday school and confirmation classes and were confirmed. A description of the congregation on its website states, “Historically we have been open-minded and accepting of change,” and then they go on to list their ecumenical work in the community, participation in a Hispanic ministry, the “dependable group” of adults with disabilities who serve as ushers, and their egalitarian approach to church leadership.

The focus group recalled that the congregation has been welcoming of people with developmental disabilities since before any of them became members. Mr. J remembers teaching Mark and Sam in Sunday school shortly after he became a member in the 1960s. It is worthy to note that in the 1960s students with developmental disabilities were separated from their peers in the school system, but this congregation included these students with their peers.

Mr. J was a math teacher in the public school. During the 1960s and 1970s he, together with the school principal, received grant money to offer a 6-week summer camp for county youth with disabilities. Ms. A, a member of Mustard Seed for more than 50 years, has spent much of her life working with youth with developmental disabilities in the county. She was instrumental in starting a weeklong Bible camp experience for youth with developmental disabilities, at the local Bible camp.

Mr. J thought Mustard Seed came to be welcoming and accepting of people with developmental disabilities because,

We have an understanding that we’ve all got different gifts and God has taken the time to teach us that, hey, life is pretty special. And we’ve got lots of different people in this congregation that have lots of different gifts. You know, like Sam. He lives just down the street from me. Sam will be here at least a half hour before church service to make sure that—first of all if it’s communion Sunday, are the communion cards out? You know. He’ll be here to pass out bulletins or to pass out books. Mark

is always here. Bill is always here. We count on them a great deal. And this just carried over.

People with developmental disabilities are seen as a working part of the congregation. Ms. S is a newcomer to the church. When she arrived 10 years ago she saw Mark, Sam, and Bill “up front and held in esteem and a working part of the community of our church, I honestly had not seen that before.” She says the congregation “wraps their hearts and minds and hands round” them. She is uncertain if this came about in Sunday school or whether there were some leaders who emphasized it. But, Ms. S replied, “I think that the congregation as a whole is very open and welcoming. I think that we have a community of special needs people that need a place to worship and to belong, and they found it here.”

Pastor Jeff reflected on how welcoming people with developmental disabilities, has shaped the congregation.

I think it lets people know every single person has a gift, even though there are people who might think, “Oh there’s really nothing they can give and what jobs there are aren’t really important.” What they are doing I view as important jobs . . . greeting people . . . helping with the ushering, making sure the cards are in the pews, which is very, very important. But letting everybody know everybody can use their gifts. And there is a certain permission and there is a sense of joy that they go about doing this they do it because they honestly want to and people see that joy and that joy rubs off on them. Whereas . . . a lot of people say well I’ll put my one month of ushering in—and [Sam, Bill, and Mark are] here faithfully every Sunday because they love doing it.

At Mustard Seed the congregation loves, respects, and educates all its members, no matter what they can or cannot do. And they are willing to learn from one another, even people with developmental disabilities, about faithfulness, joy, and love.

### Book of Life Lutheran Church

Book of Life Lutheran Church is a large congregation (an average of more than 500 in weekly worship attendance) located downtown in a mid-sized city (slightly less than 100,000 population) that serves as the county seat. The congregation was formed 20 years after the founding of the city and is more than 135 years old. The congregation has a rich history. It has always been located in the heart of the city. However, in the late 1800s, three other congregations split off from Book of Life due to a schism within the congregation, and relocated to different parts of the city and surrounding area. Fifty years later one of the congregations merged back into Book of

Life. The other two continue to this day. The present building was built a few years after the congregations merged in the 1950s. It is a massive structure that holds approximately 400 people.

Walter was an active and visible member of Book of Life Lutheran for approximately 30 years, until his death in 2005. He joined the congregation as an adult when he moved into a nearby group home for people with developmental disabilities. Walter served many roles in the congregation: a communion helper, greeter, scripture reader (“he read beautifully”), acolyte, “told the pastor what to do next,” had a key to the church, started the coffee at 5:00 AM every Sunday morning, and he also collected Sunday school offering. He dressed liturgically correct every week and “was always up front during the church service.” Book of Life has other members with developmental disabilities who are also active in the life of the congregation and “the most faithful worshipers in the church,” but none as much as Walter.

Book of Life was a founding member in a cooperative of churches that offer a special ecumenical worship service for people with developmental disabilities in the city, which began in the 1970s. During this monthly gathering there are opportunities to sing in the choir, lead worship, participate in Bible study, receive support, and use their various gifts. Even though Book of Life offers these same opportunities to its members, this special worship offers a way to give people with developmental disabilities a chance to participate if their own congregation is not as welcoming as Book of Life.

Ms. T thought that the welcoming of those with developmental disabilities into the life of the congregation began approximately 50 years ago, when a certain woman taught a Sunday school class. Ms. T no longer remembers the woman’s name and thinks she might have been a teacher of some kind, but she remembers the woman saying that children with developmental disabilities could learn. There were 10 to 12 students in the class. The youth were taught in Sunday school and then later in the regular confirmation program. It is unclear when children with developmental disabilities were enfolded within the regular Sunday school classes. Other members had told Ms. C, “there was a time in Book of Life when people who were a fairly prominent family had children with disabilities, and they just brought them—the church just accepted them.” These families continued to bring their children to Sunday school through confirmation seeing the need for them to have religious education. Reflecting upon the ability of the congregation to welcome a diverse group of people, Ms. E said, “Part of it is Book of Life but part of it is also who God continues to give us.”

Another form of education that has contributed to the welcoming atmosphere at Book of Life is role modeling. The members learn from one another as they see them interact with people with developmental disabilities. Ms. R described an experience where she felt like she was role modeling,

We were passing the [offering] plate and the woman to [the] right [of Heather who is blind] was going to take it from me and she had her hand out there and I purposely just ignored her and I just told Heather, it was here, it was right on her left, to take it, you know and to pass it on. So just by actions, I think we all do that. We all try to role model, those of us who are involved in populations. Just kind of educate the other.

## FINDINGS ON INCLUSIVE CONGREGATIONS

The stories from the three congregations above were gathered as part of a larger research project that focused on six congregations, which were inclusive of diverse people including those with mental illness. The detailed findings of the larger research project and information on methodology and data analysis can be found elsewhere (Holt-Woehl, 2009). All of the congregations in the study revealed two attitudes that formed an accepting, welcoming, and supporting environment toward all people. One attitude present in each congregation was that every person is a child of God and respected as such. The other is that all people are gifted by God and therefore have gifts to offer in service to God and the congregation. (For a theological reflection on these two attitudes, see Holt-Woehl, 2007.)

Unique to the three congregations described in this article, who all had members with developmental disabilities as full participants, was that these congregations made a conscious decision not to hide away those who were “different” but to include them in the activities of the congregation. People who were different from the mainstream were not seen as problems to be fixed so that they would blend in, nor were they seen as trophies to be placed on a mantle, but they were embedded into the fabric of the congregation and therefore *were* the congregation. These congregations were aware of their partners in ministry who were “differently-abled.” They did not see their ministry as a ministry *to* those with developmental disabilities, but as a ministry *with* those with developmental disabilities. All members of the congregation engage in ministry and are integrated in the life of the congregation. Sunday was the culmination of the integration for these congregations, through Holy Communion and the participation of people with developmental disabilities in every aspect of Sunday morning worship. These congregation members commented that people with disabilities have contributed to the church. Each of these congregations has been educating people with developmental disabilities for 40 to 50 years, or more, and continues to be involved in this venture.

### Education and Inclusive Congregations

Many factors go into creating a congregational culture, but can including those with developmental disabilities in religious education contribute to an

inclusive congregation? In the congregations studied there is reason to believe that this is possible. The research focused on how these congregations came to be inclusive and welcoming of all people. The questions asked were open ended and no specific questions about the education commitments of the congregation were posed. Each of these three congregations during the course of their interview mentioned either inclusive or exclusive religious education for people with developmental disabilities. The congregations were neither aware of each other nor of how the questions were answered by the other congregations. The religious commitments emerged out of their own understanding or experience.

Along with their commitment to inclusive religious education in Sunday school and confirmation, each congregation appeared to engage in life-long inclusive education as they interact with one another. Pentecost and Book of Life noted the importance of role modeling in order to teach others in the congregation. Due to the involvement of Bill, Mark, and Sam at Mustard Seed, the same thing appears to be happening in that congregation. Members who might be reticent to approach and talk with an individual with developmental disabilities, learn from members who are comfortable, and learn over time to be more inclusive in their relationships.

There is reason to believe that, in these congregations, the inclusion of people with developmental disabilities in religious education has contributed to the creation of more inclusive congregations. Yet, additional research is needed to explore this issue in greater depth. This might be done by replicating this qualitative study in additional congregations that evidence inclusive practices. Another approach would be to interview in greater depth individuals who have participated in inclusive religious education program about the role these experienced have played in shaping their faith journeys.

## NOTE

1. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta, GA) (2007), "Developmental disabilities are a diverse group of severe chronic conditions that are due to mental and/or physical impairments. People with developmental disabilities have problems with major life activities such as language, mobility, learning, self-help, and independent living. Developmental disabilities begin anytime during development up to 22 years of age and usually last throughout a person's lifetime."

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