



# *Every Member Matters*

**An Information and Resource Kit  
Provided by the  
Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network**

## INTRODUCTION

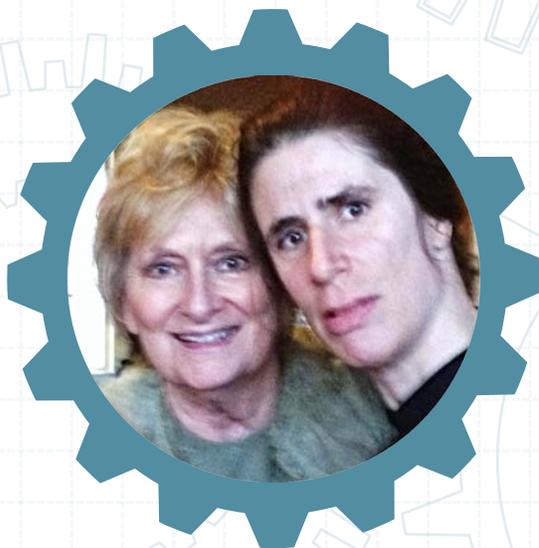
This information and resource kit will help guide and support your efforts to include people with disabilities in all aspects of your faith community. First, become familiar with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and how your facilities and programs fit its requirements. Community resources described in this kit can help you understand the law. Information from local disability organizations or advocates on a broad range of disabilities such as physical, cognitive, sensory, intellectual, and emotional.

Establish a disability awareness committee to assess existing accessibility and recommend specific actions and policies. Include people who experience a variety of disabilities themselves. They can provide valuable insight as you plan.

Learning about disabilities and inclusion can help your faith community to act upon traditions and practices about welcoming all people. We wish you much success in creating a faith community where every member matters.



# PARENT/FAMILY MEMBER SUGGESTIONS



*“As a parent of an adult daughter with significant support needs, it can be difficult to know her spiritual goals. But I do know that she would like to build relationships with people she enjoys, and a faith community could be a source for that. However, to my knowledge, no faith community has supports in place that would make that possible. Other families I have talked with have had the same experience and have either been turned away or sent to inappropriate options, like the church nursery. Surely, our community can come together to find ways to create faith inclusion for adults like my daughter”.*

Shelly Dumas

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**If you are a parent or family member of a person with a disability and would like your loved one to have greater inclusion in a faith community, consider these suggestions:**

- Have a plan to describe what you want.
- Identify whom to talk with. Clergy members, lay leaders or congregation members all may help you make a difference.
- Ask to meet with other family members and/or people with disabilities to find out if there are shared concerns or recommendations.
- Make recommendations that are specific to your goals, such as ways to participate in rituals, practices, services or programs at your house of worship.

# COMMUNITY SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES



*“People with disabilities are our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and neighbors. By welcoming and creating inclusive spaces for them in our faith communities and in other areas of our society, we develop a society that values all persons, regardless of their abilities.”*

Martin Kareithi

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**Sometimes faith communities do not know where to begin when thinking about where to find community support for a person with disabilities. The needs of the individual may seem greater than the faith community can address. Often people cannot participate in faith life because they do not have basic community supports. These include such things as food, housing, health care, social, medical, transportation, and emotional support. Directing and assisting people to access community supports can make faith inclusion more possible.**

**The following resources can help guide you to community supports and resources.**

Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network (AIIN) [www.onestarfoundation.org](http://www.onestarfoundation.org)

Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities [www.tcdd.texas.gov](http://www.tcdd.texas.gov)

Austin Mayor’s Committee for People with Disabilities [www.austintexas.gov/amcpd](http://www.austintexas.gov/amcpd)

Governor’s Committee on People with Disabilities [www.governor.state.tx.us/disabilities](http://www.governor.state.tx.us/disabilities)

UT Center for Disability Studies [www.tcds.edb.utexas.edu](http://www.tcds.edb.utexas.edu)

The Center on Disability and Development at Texas A&M University [www.cdd.tamu.edu](http://www.cdd.tamu.edu)

Interfaith Action of Central Texas (iACT) [www.interfaithtexas.org](http://www.interfaithtexas.org)

Parent to Parent Network [www.txp2p.org](http://www.txp2p.org)

Disability Rights Texas [www.disabilityrightstx.org](http://www.disabilityrightstx.org)

# ACCESSIBILITY



*“For me, a house of worship, is not the building but the people who have a common faith. When you have a disability and you are accepted as part of the faith, that is access. Also, by having access into the house of worship and into activities and services, real inclusion is possible. This inclusion allows my faith and spirituality to strengthen and grow”.*

Nancy Crowther

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When we think of access, we think first of physical barriers such as stairs, narrow doorways, hard-to-open entrances, and a lack of good signage. Beyond architecture, the most significant barriers facing many people with disabilities are attitudinal or procedural. For example, forms and processes can create a barrier. Fears or misconceptions about people with disabilities can create an atmosphere of hostility or fear that may lead to exclusion.

Use these suggestions to begin addressing procedural and attitudinal barriers that may be inhibiting access to your faith community. Organizations are available to help you assess and resolve all types of barriers to full inclusion (see Community Supports and Resources section).

## **Addressing procedural barriers:**

- Review the content of application forms, sign-up sheets, questionnaires and processes that may be difficult for a person with a disability to follow or complete.
- Provide assistance with reading and completion of documents. Waive unnecessary steps.
- Adjust a program schedule to accommodate a medication or transportation need.

## **Addressing attitudinal barriers:**

- Conduct awareness training that includes people with disabilities as teachers.
- Publish articles by and about people who have disabilities and inclusion in your faith community’s newsletters and bulletins.
- Include people with disabilities in faith rituals so your faith community can experience them as leaders and participants.
- Ask clergy and religious education leaders to share your faith’s traditions and teachings about the value of inclusion in sermons and classes.

# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION



Austin clergy, representing multiple faiths, present at Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network Symposium 2012 to offer their faith's perspective on the value of reaching out to and including people with disabilities.

**In religious education settings, children with different needs present an excellent opportunity to teach their peers about your faith community's emphasis on inclusion and establish an enduring sense of welcome. Consider these tips in fostering a positive experience for everyone:**

- Be positive and welcoming.
- Meet with the child's parents or guardians to learn as much as you can about how best to support the child.
- Find out what kinds of assistance or intervention the family seeks and what kinds of things have been helpful to the child in the past.
- Identify and train teachers and other staff who might be best suited to the child's needs.
- Offer any assistance and accommodation in the least restrictive manner practicable.
- Never assume that a fidgety or disruptive child is misbehaving. Look for causes you can address.

**For adults with disabilities in education settings, the above list provides some good direction. However, you may also consider the following:**

- Speak directly to the person, not through a third-party caregiver, and at eye level.
- Find out how the person communicates and receives communication.
- Ask about the person's preferred ways of learning and particular interests.
- Find out what the person needs to participate in a class or activity. Explore how you can meet those needs, including physical accommodations and relational supports such as a companion.
- Ask the person what talents or gifts he or she has to share with the community.
- Identify resources for curriculum and pedagogy appropriate to the disability. Many denominational bodies and related organizations have hard copy and online resources.
- Introduce the person to other adult members who have been prepared to extend welcome and hospitality.

# TIPS FOR ENGAGING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

**Most faith communities want to be available to anyone who wishes to participate. Sometimes, though, they wonder how to reach prospective participants or how to create a welcoming and comfortable environment that increases their participation.**

**Consider these tips regarding communicating with and including people with disabilities:**

## **WELCOMING**

- Acknowledge and reach out to people with disabilities and their families.
- Provide accessible seating that allows a person with a disability to sit with family and friends.
- Hold training for staff and religious leaders on welcoming people with disabilities.
- Identify people in the congregation who can assist people with disabilities.
- Remember, not everyone has an easily apparent disability.
- Conduct a survey to identify current and prospective participants who have disabilities and/or experience barriers to inclusion.

## **COMMUNICATION**

- Use “people-first” language--speak of the person first and then the disability.
- Speak directly to the person and not to his or her companion.
- Ask the person what he or she likes to do, inviting participation in the way he or she would prefer.
- Ask the person if he or she would like assistance and how. Many people with disabilities prefer to maintain as much independence as possible.
- Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.
- Include welcome, inclusion, interest and accessibility language in all materials.
- Offer printed materials in accessible formats: large print, Braille and audio.
- Include an invitation to request disability accommodations in event marketing materials.
- Use multiple cues. Combine printed directions with oral and physical cues that facilitate the participation of all people in worship and programs.

# TIPS FOR ENGAGING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

## **If a person uses a wheelchair or walking aid...**

- Place worship materials at a level that can be reached by everyone.
- Remove or shorten pews to allow for wheelchair seating.
- Add handrails, ramps or lifts to allow access to altars and stages.
- Consider any device a part of his or her personal space. Do not push, lean on, or hold onto it unless asked.
- Try to sit or kneel if necessary so that you converse at eye level.
- Provide adequate space for keeping walkers, chairs and crutches within reach.
- Point out accessible seating areas, restrooms, and routes.

## **If a person has an intellectual disability...**

- Allow the person time to tell or show you what he or she wants.
- Ask questions that require short answers or a nod of the head. Rephrase comments or questions as needed. Stay focused on the person as he or she responds to you.
- Treat adults as adults.
- Respect a person's wish to not be touched, left alone, or to leave without speaking. Sometimes people react differently in social situations.

## **If a person has a hearing impairment...**

- Let the person take the lead in establishing the communication mode.
- Speak directly to the person, even when a sign-language interpreter is present.
- If the person lip-reads, face him or her and speak clearly at a moderate speed.
- Speak expressively without over exaggerating.
- Provide seating that gives the person assistive listening devices, and train ushers in their use.
- Know where and how to hire sign language interpreters.
- Pay attention and wait for the person to complete a word or thought.
- If you do not understand, repeat or rephrase what was said to be sure you understood.
- Be willing to use various devices or techniques used to assist with communication: pen and paper, an alphabet board, a voice computer or interpreter.

## **If a person is blind or has a disability that affects vision...**

- Go up and introduce yourself to that person.
- Excuse yourself before leaving the person.
- Allow someone with a slight disability to take your arm, and then walk slightly ahead without pulling.
- Be specific when describing the location of objects.

## **If a person has a service animal...**

- Service animals are always working; do not pet or distract them.



A project of the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities

## ABOUT THE GRANT

Under a grant provided by the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities and Meadows Foundation, OneStar Foundation has convened the faith-based and disability communities to discuss inclusion in faith-based settings. This discussion resulted in the development of a self-sustaining Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network (AIIN) through partnerships between OneStar Foundation, Jewish Family Service and The Center on Disability and Development at Texas A&M University. The AIIN is an ongoing, self-sustaining alliance of faith-based organizations in Austin, Texas. The AIIN is committed to including people with disabilities and loved ones in faith community. Inclusion successes, concerns and barriers will be identified to inform two annual symposiums featuring local and national experts. These symposia will focus on best practices, goal setting, and collaborative problem solving. Ongoing surveys, training and outreach will be provided as part of this project to engage and support Central Texas faith communities.

The Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network recognizes that all people should have access to, feel welcome in, and participate fully in the faith practices of their choice. Further, the AIIN recognizes that all people have intrinsic value and are equal in their spiritual and religious pursuits, and that it is incumbent upon the greater Austin/Central Texas community to discover ways to ensure that full inclusion is a reality. The information included in this brochure, all of the initiatives of this grant, and the AIIN are informed by and seek to further this goal.

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