

I have a story...

People with disability and
their families participating
fully in parish life.



A PASTORAL DOCUMENT FOR PARISHES

Bishops' Committee for the Family and for Life
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference 2004



A letter from the Bishops' Committee...

**Dear Sisters
and Brothers
in Christ,**

It is with great enthusiasm and hope that we release this pastoral document promoting the full participation for people with disability in the faith life of the Church.

The document is addressed to parishes and offers insight, reflection and suggestions to nurture communities, which are built on relationships, participation of all members and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Since our 1997 pastoral letter “Lives Lived to Overflowing”, which was addressed to families, many initiatives have been undertaken to provide opportunities for people with disability to participate fully in their parish communities. These opportunities have grown out of listening to the stories of families who have a member with disability. We hold sensitively the experience of some parents and family members and acknowledge that they have not been welcomed or encouraged to participate in parish life. We are concerned that there were responses from some parents stating that some children are still not being included in sacramental programs and Catholic education. In the light of the following comment we call all parishes to take this document to the heart of their pastoral planning actions:

I once advertised in the Parish Bulletin for a companion to sit with an elderly lady (with an intellectual disability) during Mass and to assist her into a taxi at its conclusion. The response from one “pillar of the church” was “why would you bother?”

In 2003, we undertook a consultation to discover some of the hopes and dreams of people with disability for their participation in parish life. We invited people to tell us good news stories that would encourage us all, such as this story from a person with an intellectual disability:

It's very important for me to go to church. It makes me feel happy. It's what I really want to do and makes me feel independent. I especially like to sing with everyone. It's a talent coming out of me and makes me feel better in myself. Because of my disabilities, I need a friend to take me there. I have a good friend. It is important to know other people in the parish, someone to welcome me, someone who knows me.

We have been challenged by requests for greater recognition and more opportunities for participation of people with disability in parishes. We are all called to find new ways in which those with disability through their presence will bring life and energy into the experience of prayer and worship. The following statement is a witness to this:

Leadership in this matter should come from the diocese, especially the bishop, the parish priest and his council. There should be a willingness to know ... parishioners and ... respond in a creative and caring way.

We have been encouraged by the many initiatives that have been taken in our parishes, like this story from a man who cares for his wife who has a physical disability:

The good physical access into the church makes it possible to take my wife to church. The movable chairs mean we can sit where we want.

I want to ring the bell, answered one man with a disability when asked what he hoped for and wanted from his parish community. In his response we hear, not only a desire to make the bell ring, but also a hope that will resound across our nation as we read and act upon this document.

We, too, want to ring the bell and summon our parishes to be communities that gladly welcome people with disability and their families, recognising in all the presence of Christ, empowering all to evangelise and tell their 'Good News'. At the table of the Last Supper, Jesus gave to His disciples the most privileged of names. "I call you friends..." Friendship with people with disability, which is open and apostolic, leads to the harmony of mutual giving and receiving in times of both joy and sorrow. Harmony is the deepest and most beautiful tone of the bell.

I have new friends and they are like family to me, and we share our stories.

These reflections of people who were consulted provide witness and hope for us all. With this in mind let us go forward and liberate and enable all people who wish to ring out the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ. This also requires a response from the bishop, who the Vatican Council teaches is to "stand in the midst of his people, as one who serves." We therefore entrust this pastoral document to you and your parish communities. Let us all commit ourselves to take up this call and challenge, given by people with disability, to be communities where all can use their gifts.

Yours in Christ,

Bishops' Committee for the Family and for Life



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Communities that liberate

A guy at our church with an intellectual disability sings beautifully. He uses his gift. See people for their gifts and ability, not their disability.

The great strength of community is the uniqueness and giftedness of each member. The more each person uses their gifts, the stronger the community and the richer the relationships in that community. People are liberated if and when they use their gifts. People are imprisoned when they are prohibited or not enabled to use their gifts. Parishes are communities with great potential to receive and nurture the giftedness of people with disability. The Christian community is one in which all people can claim an equal place and contribute through presence and action. This is liberation.

When we open our hearts and our community to the gifts each person brings, we are all strengthened. ¹

Society is emerging from a long era when most people with disability were forced to live, socialise and learn in special facilities, separate from their own natural communities. It was thought this was best. However, it meant that people were only known in those settings and it led to communities being developed without the participation of people with disability. And still now, many people with disability are not connected to the various activities and structures which make up their local communities. What is best is that communities engage all members in the giving, the receiving and the building up of a community. This is liberating.

Church communities are called to take a lead, rather than mirror what happens in society. ²

The cry for a supportive community by people with disabilities, their families and friends, should not be denied in our homes, our churches, our schools, our neighbourhoods. Neither the written words of parliamentary law nor the written words of the Gospel, are finally capable of enabling people with disabilities and celebrating with them. Only supportive communities can do this. ³

In thinking about people with disability, many parishes ask the question, “What can we do for them?” This pastoral document will assist parishes to appreciate that different questions are required. Let’s change focus and ask:

- How is this parish community liberating for all members?
- How does everyone contribute?
- How do we build relationships in this community?
- How can we learn about the experience of people with disability?

It is clear from contributions to the consultation for this pastoral document that many people with disability still feel overlooked in their parish and their broader community. Some people are actually rejected. People with disability say that the old belief of them being the “weak” members of the community or the “suffering ones” puts them in a place of need, but does not acknowledge their abilities and desire to participate. Their strength is diminished when they are not affirmed as equal. Barriers of negative attitudes in many community members can be liberated by open discussion, learning and genuine relationships.

As faith communities, we are one body and through Baptism we are in solidarity as we journey together with our diverse personalities, struggles and gifts.

It was during the Eucharistic prayer at the Easter Vigil. A very upset lady, whom I know to have a mental illness, walked into the church and up the centre aisle with her dog. Arriving at the altar she faced the people and, amidst tears of despair, began singing, ‘God is dwelling in my heart...’ I [a parish priest] moved next to her and sang along. Before long the entire congregation joined in one way or another. Hymn over she left. To me this was the most significant and inclusive action I have ever witnessed anywhere.

What are people with a disability saying?

As a family we need to continually juggle Mass times to ensure someone is able to look after our daughter. We NEVER have the opportunity to attend Mass as a family.

The spirit of Christian hospitality urges parishes to invite people with disability to participate as fully as they wish. It demands a willingness to change or adapt whatever is necessary to ensure that all feel welcome and that each person can live up to their own hopes and expectations. The responses to the consultation for this document have provided a rich source of fresh ideas and learning. The following practices all depend on the support given to people with disability and their families by individuals or groups through meaningful relationships.

Most respondents believe that opportunities for the participation of people with disability could be broadened through:

- A focus or strategy for participation established by pastoral councils
- Awareness of attitudes moving from doubt to confidence, from uncertainty to involvement, from ignorance to knowledge, from fear to openness, from avoidance to interaction
- Education of the parish and general population to demystify disability
- Provision of access to and within church buildings
- Support to people with disability to participate in social activities
- Encouragement of lay movements that promote full participation of people with disability

I was invited to join a parish family group, which has been marvellous for me. I now have a group [of friends] who take me to parish outings and functions [and] who welcome me at Mass. I once brought up the gifts at the Offertory procession.

Many respondents expressed a desire to be involved in parish life through:

- Being a choir member
- Serving as an acolyte
- Being an altar server
- Reading at Mass
- Presenting the gifts
- Meeting and greeting people
- Serving as a special minister of the Eucharist

Being present around people at parish events, even though I can't express myself

The majority of respondents believe that the following may be barriers to full participation:

- Attitudes and prejudices of the faith community
- Lack of suitable access to and within church buildings and facilities
- Lack of education within and beyond the school system about disability
- Lack of transport to and from Mass and other parish activities

Most respondents expressed a desire for:

- Inclusion in the sacramental life of the Church
- Catholic education
- Access to the celebration of Mass
- Access to large print and Braille
- Access to interpreters for the deaf and appropriate technology

Our recent experience in our parish was interesting. We didn't feel particularly welcome or acknowledged at all – but the priest recently dropped by to give us music for the weekend liturgy and said how good it was to have our family in the parish and that people talk about really liking having us and that our family inspires them. We had no idea about this. Which makes us think that perhaps the welcome in many parishes is disguised by them not knowing what to do and by the silence which is often associated with disability.



Calling communities through stories

The many jubilant stories of service, celebrating the contribution of people with disability to parish life highlight their giftedness, their diversity, their spirit and their capacity to serve. These stories are living parables carrying messages of faith and hope and love.

Stories like: the parent who translates the Sunday reading into Braille so that his daughter can proclaim the Word; the woman with cerebral palsy who composes the weekly Prayers of the Faithful for her parish; the inclusion of children with special needs into the parish sacramental preparation programs; the altar servers with disability who serve in many parishes; those who carry up the Book of the Gospels; the welcomers, the interpreters for the deaf, the special ministers, the acolytes, the readers, the singers, the musicians, the collectors, the bringers of gifts; the diocesan offices that employ people with disability, all challenge us to make further commitments.

In 1986 and again in 1992 Australian disability legislation⁴ affirmed the principle that people with disability have the same rights as all members of society. Australia began to witness a new era of visibility, access and equity for people with disability. These values provide a further guide in living out the Gospel, which continues to call us to re-imagine our parishes as communities where people with disability are vital and fully participating members.

Catholic social teaching encourages us to explore further the practical dimensions of our spirituality and affirm the dignity of the human person.

My good news story is to just be able to do things in my parish like everyone else, and do it in my own time and according to my ability.

Disability can be acquired at any stage of life's journey and can affect any part of the mind and body. A reality we all share is our vulnerability and our need for support through our life's journey.

A man was left with brain damage after being struck by a train. He now goes to church and is invited to afternoon teas with his family group. Someone collects him and takes him to Mass. Someone sits with him and helps him with the place in his hymn book.

The presence of people with disability in a parish brings a perspective into parish life which is invaluable.

Some may presume that participation can only be done by word or action. By being themselves and being there parishioners with disability are full participants and are all good news stories.

Some of these stories, which follow, are pastoral, some are reflective and some are practical. All reflect a commitment to encouraging the participation of those with disability in the life of the Church.

I was never included in anything. One day when they asked people to participate in the choir group for Easter and Christmas celebrations, I just turned up and I was welcomed. This Easter was very special for me. I was asked to take part in the reading of the Passion story on Good Friday. I was reading the part of the maid. I was happy and proud. So many people congratulated me afterwards. It makes me feel great!

Our daughter became an altar server at the age of fifteen, was very keen and filled her roster every time and was always willing to take the place of anyone who didn't turn up. Because of this our priest asked my wife and I if we would approve if he approached our daughter to be a special minister. We were delighted to approve and subsequently five years ago our daughter did her allotted time and is always willing to fill in if anybody on the roster fails to turn up.

There are two people in our parish, both with mental illness, who actively participate in the parish. One does secretarial work and using her skills as a graphic artist to produce the Parish Bulletin. The other, who is musical, plays the organ for our Italian Group, and assists them with their liturgy.

One of our teachers has acquired a physical disability since she has started teaching at our school. Adjustments have been made to enable her to continue teaching. This teacher participates in the life of the parish. She is in the choir and RCIA.

Could I have some religion people please? A young woman with intellectual disability and a terminal illness experiences a lot of pain and spends a lot of time at home. Her social and family networks are strong. She asked for some spiritual support from other young people. Young people from the parish were identified, prepared and supported to get to know this person. They formed 2 groups of 3 people and each group visited monthly. That meant a visit every fortnight for the young woman. They prayed and socialised with each other. Friendships developed.



...re-imagine
our parishes...



Building a community in which everyone is valued

The Body of Christ presumes a place for everyone. The Gospel of Jesus Christ demands a place for everyone.

As in all communities care of individuals and groups in parishes requires organisation. A parish can only encourage and support people with disability in parish life with what they have, that is, a practical commitment to being open to what is possible in the ordinary activities of parish life and mission. Parishes will encourage and support people with disability if there is careful attention to all pastoral processes, faith education and arrangements for liturgical and sacramental practices.

I would like to be able to participate in the spiritual and social life of my parish. I would like people to overlook my disability and accept me as I am.

This can happen through:

- ongoing reflection on the culture and story of the parish community
- realistic pastoral strategies

I want to be accepted and treated as a normal person by the parishioners and the parish. I want people to talk to me after church. I want to be able to help. I would like to take up the collection. I like sharing about the Catholic faith. I like to be able to go into the church and pray and light a candle.

Process for Reflection on the Culture of the Parish

Every parish community is unique in the way it organises itself and how it responds to the reality of its life and mission. This Process for Reflection could support parish priests and the parish leadership teams, eg pastoral councils or planning groups, to consider inclusive practice in parish life.

The parish leadership team reflects on the culture and profile of your parish:

- What words would you use to describe your community identity?
- What are some individual stories and experiences of parish members?
- How does your parish organise itself?
- What are the strengths of your parish community?
- How do members of your parish support each other?
- What structures exist to build relationships?

The parish leadership team and parish groups reflect on inclusive practices in your community:

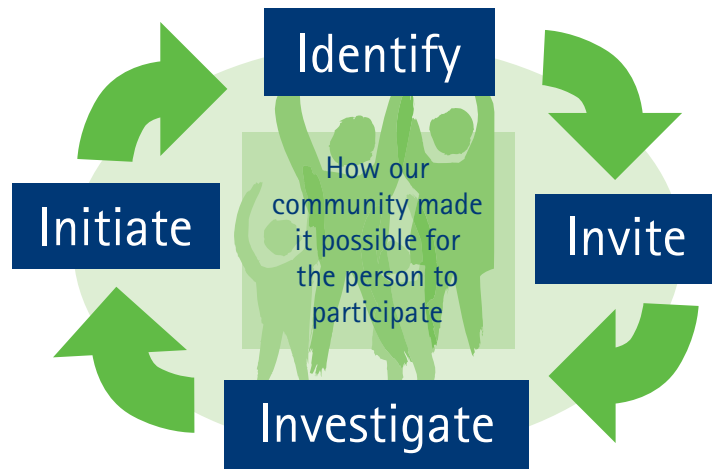
- How hospitable and welcoming to all is your parish community?
- What are some of the signs that your parish community is inclusive of all? eg the newcomer to the parish, the elderly person, the young person, the person with disability, the refugee, the person with mental illness.

The parish leadership team thinks about ways to build community and create possibilities for people with disability and their families to participate in the life of your parish:

- Are there untold stories of people with disability in your parish?
- Are parishioners open to forming relationships with people who have disability?
- How will you identify people with disability in your community?
- How will you listen to their stories?
- How will you respond to their stories?

From Reflection to Practice

The many stories gathered through the consultation inspire and guide us and challenge the whole community to think about:



- Who took the initiative
- How the person was invited to participate
- Who recognised the gifts of the person with a disability
- How an ongoing relationship with this person was supported

Whatever is done to improve the ways people with disability are assisted to participate fully in parish life, will also improve access for other people in the community... people of different cultures, diverse backgrounds, elderly persons or parents trying to manage young children at Mass.

Actions taken by the leaders of the community to enhance the environment and build community awareness will, in time, lead to a conversion of the whole community.

Some Suggestions for Action

- The pastoral council or other leadership groups reflect on the presence or absence of people with disability in the parish. Try to identify those attitudes or obstacles which prevent people with disability or their families from fully participating in parish life or lifelong education programs.

I can participate and I want people in my parish to know this.

- Create opportunities to get to know people with disability or to listen to the story of families who live with disability eg:
 - o when seeking volunteers for ministries reassure people with disability that you welcome discussion about their needs and how they can participate
 - o contact Centacare, parish and local schools, particularly schools for specific purposes, supported accommodation, aged care facilities, inviting people with disability and families to parish functions
- Ask families and people with disability what support or adjustment they may need to participate fully in parish programs or social activities
 - o when advertising a parish sacramental or RCIA program specifically invite and welcome children or adults with disability and reassure them and their families that they will have the support they need to fully participate in the program
 - o establish a support group or invite a parishioner to be a companion or friend for the person or family

- Create links for people with disability and families. Friendships and connections can be established and supported through the activities of parish groups, eg hospitality and care groups, social activities, liturgy group or at the time of Baptism, sacramental preparation or family events. Establish an ongoing support group for individuals or families to ensure lifelong connections.
- Promote an inclusive culture:
 - o Help the parish to focus on the diversity of gifts in the community. Affirm and celebrate the variety of ways people use their gifts and contribute through their presence.
 - o Themes through the liturgies of Advent, Lent, etc provide opportunities to reflect on the responsibility of every person to live the Gospel.
 - o The Christian community and the world need the gifts of everyone.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. 1 Cor 12: 4-7; 11

- Invite people with disability to participate in parish leadership training, parish faith sharing groups and education programs, eg Advent and Lenten programs.
- Invite, welcome and accompany children, young people and adults with disability into parish or school programs.
- Organise programs for catechesis, which take into account the individual needs of children, young people and adults using community and diocesan resources and personnel.

- Invite parishioners to be involved in specific disability initiatives within parish communities and dioceses eg:
 - o being a volunteer driver for a housebound person or a person with disability living in supported accommodation
 - o supporting people with disability to participate in parish social activities
 - o Faith and Light communities ⁵
 - o Ask parishioners to consider being involved in diocesan or deanery disability committees
 - o Ask parishioners to consider being involved in regular diocesan or deanery gatherings that offer leisure and opportunities to nurture spirituality and relationships
- Encourage leaders and parishioners to attend workshops about disability.
- Find out about resources, services and personnel in your diocese that would support your parish to implement these strategies.



....Jesus said
to him, Go
and do likewise
Luke 10:37

How can you now go and do likewise in your parish?

19% of Australians have a disability, while 6% of these people always need personal assistance. ⁶

This means that approximately one-fifth of your parish members would be expected to have some form of disability. In an average parish weekend Mass attendance of 375 people, you would expect 71 people to have some type of disability, with about four of these always requiring personal assistance.

Who is the person in your parish who could assist your community to reflect on this document and decide on your next step?

Who in your diocese could assist you? Some dioceses have resource persons, organisations or publications available to assist communities to identify some very practical strategies to raise awareness and to ensure access for all.

The Bishops' Committee for the Family and for Life Secretariat can provide practical resource contacts.

*“I want to ring the bell”
answered one man with a disability
when asked what he hoped for and
wanted from his parish community.*

The bells continue to prompt us to come gladly to this church there to experience the presence of Christ, listen to your word offer you our prayers and, in both joy and sorrow, be friends to one another. ⁷

This pastoral document has been developed by the Bishops' Committee for the Family and for Life. The Bishops of Australia acknowledge with gratitude the people from every state and territory of Australia who contributed to the development of this document through the Consultation in 2003.

This document is available on request in large print, Braille and audio recording.

A Disability Working Party was established by the Bishops' Committee for the Family and for Life in 2002 to develop a pastoral document, which would be representative of people with disability and their families. To ensure the authenticity of the document, the Working Party conducted a broad consultation, whereby responses to certain questions could be used in the development of the pastoral document.

The Working Party members were Sr Jeanie Heiningerg SGS (Wollongong), Sr Veronica Hoey SGS (Melbourne), Ms Trish Murdoch (Brisbane), Patricia and Glenn Mowbray (Canberra and Goulburn).

The main aim of the consultation was to collect ideas and stories from people with disability and their families. Opinions and comments on how they saw their membership within the parish and the Church were sought. The objective was to discover what was happening in parishes and how people were participating in the faith life of the Church, while being aware of the difficulties that still exist. People were invited to comment on the barriers, as well as give constructive suggestions for parishes.

This pastoral document is the culmination of the 357 responses received from dioceses in every state and territory of Australia.

Reference Notes

- 1 Joseph Cardinal Bernadin: Open Hearts Open Minds Open Doors
- 2 Mike Duggan: Confidence and Capacity: Parish communities knowing and supporting people with disability, Brisbane, 2003
- 3 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference: Lives Filled to Overflowing, 1997
- 4 Disability Services Act 1986 and Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- 5 Faith and Light is an international Christian association of people with an intellectual disability their families and friends
- 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996
- 7 The Book of Blessings, The Roman Ritual, 1987

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