

A SPOTLIGHT ON THE SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY



In June, parish leaders gathered at the Blanchette Catholic Center for a day-long workshop on serving families of persons with disabilities. *Christ is Our Hope* sat down with Joyce Donahue, the catechetical associate in the diocesan Religious Education Office, who has coordinated the diocese's Special Needs Ministry since 2005.

Q. WHAT IS THE SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY?

Donahue: Our focus is service and advocacy — making sure that the needs of persons with disabilities are served around the diocese. We have been, for 30 years, the diocese's clearinghouse for disabilities ministry. Of course, since we are the Religious Education Office, the primary way we do that is by assisting parishes to prepare children for sacraments and to serve them through ongoing faith formation.

We also put on, with generous assistance from the Knights of Columbus, the annual Bishop's Mass with Persons with Disabilities, an opportunity for persons with special needs and their families to come together to celebrate. This year that Mass and luncheon will be on Oct. 4 at Holy Family Catholic Church, Shorewood.

Q. WHAT ARE SOME OTHER WAYS YOUR OFFICE HELPS PARISHES SERVE THOSE WITH DISABILITIES?

Donahue: We provide policies, resources and training about best practices and curriculum for parish leaders and catechists of children and teens. We also provide parish-based workshops and informational sessions at regional meetings. We loan curriculum materials to assist parishes. At the diocesan level, we don't provide any direct instruction, but we help families find services in their local parish or area.

Q. CAN ANY PERSON, NO MATTER WHAT THEIR ABILITY, CELEBRATE SACRAMENTS?

Donahue: Yes! The Church says all persons should be prepared to the best of their ability, to the point of "readiness." This is not about knowing certain prayers or answering questions. Readiness for first Eucharist, for example, is some sign (verbal or non-verbal) they know Eucharist is different from ordinary bread. Parents or caregivers can help understand when their child is ready. However, in the case of the profoundly disabled, the United States Catholic Bishops' "Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities" make it clear that no one is to be denied because of disability.

Q. DO ALL PARISH PROGRAMS SERVE PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES?

Donahue: They should, but, of course, resources vary, depending on the size of a parish. The local parish is where a family should begin. Almost all religious education programs in the diocese do some inclusion, mainstreaming those with less-severe disabilities alongside other children when possible. Every parish should make reasonable accommodations for the needs of those with disabilities to participate fully. If a child attends day school and has an IEP (Individualized Education Program) many parishes

will try to duplicate that — if a child needs a one-on-one aide, or a trained special education teacher, for instance.

The most common disabilities served by inclusion in religious education classrooms are physical disabilities and the less-severe cognitive disabilities such as ADHD/ADD or mild autism. In some cases, deaf students may be able to be included if an interpreter can be provided.

Q. WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE NON-VERBAL OR CANNOT FUNCTION IN A REGULAR CLASSROOM?

Donahue: Persons unable to function in a regular setting can take advantage of separate classrooms while the program normally meets or, in some parishes, programs that meet separately. Currently, 20 parishes have separate programs or classrooms. Some of these serve adults as well as children.

Q. DO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS ALSO SERVE THOSE WITH DISABILITIES?

Donahue: Currently only All Saints Academy in Naperville serves all forms of disability, but many of our diocesan schools include those who can be mainstreamed. Parents should check with the individual school.

Q. HOW CAN FAMILIES FIND OUT WHAT IS OFFERED IN PARISH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

Donahue: We have a listing of the services parish religious education programs provide, along with the name and phone number of the person to contact on our website. The easiest way to find that is to go to <http://www.dioceseofjoliet.org/reo/> and click on the scrolling banner on the top that says, "Find Parish special needs religious education."



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