

Church History 101
Lesson 32
Full Inclusion: Part Two

Key Concepts: The church was always supposed to be a place in which all persons were not only welcomed, but where their spiritual gifts were valued. Unfortunately there were people for whom that was not always true. One such group was those with physical and developmental disabilities.

The Story: The United States has long struggled with how to treat individuals with disabilities. The 19th and early 20th Centuries saw a growing recognition of the need to more adequately assist those with physical and developmental disabilities and mental illness. It wasn't however until the late 1960s, when those with disabilities and their advocates began to demand equal protection and treatment that real changes began to occur. Those changes were codified in numerous pieces of legislation culminating with the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) that provided protection for the full civil rights of those with disabilities.

The movement toward full inclusion of persons with disabilities within the Presbyterian Church followed well behind that of society in general. The first mention in General Assembly minutes about this issue was in 1970 when the denomination called the church to look at the needs "of the mentally retarded." Beyond this there was little or no work done toward addressing the religious and spiritual needs of persons with disabilities. The first policy paper on inclusion came from the 189th General Assembly in 1977. This report, subtitled, "*That All May Enter*" was one of the first statements by any denomination on the desire to include all persons in the life of the church. This action would ultimately lead to the creation of Presbyterians for Disabilities Concerns (PDC) (1981), which would advocate across the denomination for the full inclusion of persons with disabilities. Three members of our church's staff have served on PDC's leadership team.

Our congregation has been one of the denominational leaders in the area of inclusion of persons with disabilities. This work can be divided into two significant stages in recent years. While a class for children with disabilities was held in the 1980s, there was a gap in this effort until the development of Celebration Station in 2000. Celebration Station was a "pull-out" program where children with disabilities would meet on Sunday mornings during the worship hour with adult volunteers. These volunteers would work with the children by telling stories and engaging the children in developmentally appropriate Christian activities.

The second stage of our involvement began in 2010 when we moved toward a model that was focused on inclusion rather than a pull out program. In order to do this, the church hired Inclusion Coordinators, who reported to our Director of Christian Education and Inclusion, Cindy Merten. The task of the Coordinators was to recruit volunteers who would be Sunday morning "buddies" with children who needed assistance. As this program grew, the church hired and then called the Rev. Joanne Blair as Associate Pastor for Inclusion and Visitation (2014). Along the way the program expanded to include the Rejoicing Spirits worship services, community outreach to area group homes, quarterly social events, and a program for Middle School and High School students. We also produced a video on Inclusion in churches that has been viewed more than one thousand times, have hosted numerous conferences on disability and inclusion, and have been involved in creating resources and leading workshops locally, regionally and nationally.

Questions:

1. In what ways have you seen the church become a more inclusive community?
2. What do you think the church could do differently in order to be a more inclusive community?
3. What could you do to help the church become a more inclusive community?