

The Power of One

Over the years of my ministry, I have heard stories of people with disabilities and/or their families being unable to find a welcoming congregation. That also has included staff working in group homes or providing other forms of support to help assist adults in taking part in community and congregational life.

But early in November, 2010, at a Saturday conference sponsored by the Lancaster Christian Council on Disability, I hear two parents, now fully included in congregations, tell their stories of being asked to leave previous congregations because of their child. One was a parent of a son with a mental illness; the other's daughter is on the Autism Spectrum. The first family had been asked to leave 7 congregations, the latter, 13. I was stunned.

A congregation may not feel that it is equipped to deal with a child with intense behavioral issues or may think, this is just one family. But it is not just one person or family. When a child is asked to leave, the family does as well, and word ripples about that congregation to other relatives, extended families, other families of children with disabilities. When an adult is not welcomed or asked to leave, word also ripples, not just to families but to young staff in those agencies who may be struggling with their own faith, and end up being further disillusioned. It is evangelism in reverse, sending people of all kinds into the ranks of what some Christians call the "unchurched."

The opposite is also true. When a congregation welcomes a child, their family, or an adult with support staff (many of whom may not have ever been in a church like yours) and really helps them feel included, it not only is good for those individuals and your church, but it is also a witness. The word gets out. Through family networks, to others in a support agency, and to extended family. That is why some congregations are now citing their development of inclusive ministries as the primary reason for their church growth, because intentional and radical welcome and inclusion often extends to many others as well.

If there are issues or problems, then simply deal with them. First, ask the family or staff what they need, and how you can best support them and their child or person they are accompanying. Find congregational members who may be professionals to help figure out the supports needed. Connect with school teachers or agency staff to help you. Figure out ways to address behavioral or other issues that give the individual a chance to learn your rituals and routines.

After all, those individuals and families are not the only individuals or families that may have posed challenges for a congregation. If we asked everyone who posed a challenge at some point in their life to leave, our sanctuaries would be empty and our light dark. The amazing fact about the two families in Lancaster was the faith of the individuals and families who kept searching and hoping, in spite of the lack of faith and love demonstrated by the rejecting congregations. Start with the one. If you have 99 in a congregation to help you figure it out, then the shepherd has lots of help, and your congregation has the possibility of a journey that will benefit everyone.

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