



Inclusion Initiative in the Service of the Catholic Church in Maine - Summary

Scriptural Inspiration:

“Enlarge the space for your tent. Spread out your tent cloths unsparingly; lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs.” (Isaiah 54:2)

Guidance:

- Pope Francis has consistently shared this quote in his message to the world vis-à-vis inclusion of all persons
- 2017 - USCCB revised *Guidelines for the Celebration of Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*
- *Directory for Catechesis 2020* - five tasks of catechesis for holistic formation of all persons

Inclusion Initiative – Diocese of Portland ME:

In May 2023, the *Office of Lifelong Faith Formation* (OLFF) received a grant from the *Lay Continuing Education & Formation Endowment of the Catholic Foundation of Maine*, to launch an ***Inclusion Initiative*** with the goal of creating a unifying, comprehensive framework to help parishes in our diocese grow in awareness and inclusion of persons with disabilities. We are a faith formation entity with inclusion at the heart of it.

Grounding question: How do we enlarge the area for our (ecclesial) church ‘tents’ to enable the entire Body of Christ to enter?

What a diocesan framework is not:

- Not a policy or a one-size fits all model; let’s think of it as a diocesan ‘tent’ framework, around which each parish stretches its unique canvas upon it, in the way that suits, strengthens, supplies, and beautifies the ‘tent’ and the space around it to be a welcoming place; together, we map out a framework that encourages and supports long-term efforts and outcomes
- Not a way to burden parishes but to explore, develop, and grow together in our understanding of inclusion
- Not a list of things to do or not do, but a broad menu of reflection questions for collective conversation and best practices

Purposes that a framework has:

- To help parishes include persons with disabilities in the fulness of the Body of Christ, not as a **separate** parish ministry, but as integrated into existing parish and sacramental life
- To provide opportunities for parish awareness, education, conversation, action steps, and best practices, for long-term, systemic, and impactful growth

- To guide parishes in helping persons with disabilities feel valued, welcome, and affirmed, within the context of each of these 5 areas:
 - Accessibility – Attitudinal: being aware of and naming our discomforts, fears, and assumptions
 - Language of Inclusion
 - Accessibility/Hospitality (physical, social)
 - Meaningful Participation in Church (nurturing lifelong spirituality; living a full sacramental life; identifying and aligning individual gifts for ministry to parish community and local communities
 - Belonging (moving from inclusion to belonging; relationships)

Consultative Guidance:

- To help guide us toward a framework, we turned to the [National Catholic Partnership on Disability \(NCPD\)](#) of which our diocese is an affiliate. We are in collaboration with its leadership, and in particular, Charleen Katra, Executive Director, and Esther Garcia, Director of Outreach and Diocesan Relations. NCPD is conveniently near the USCCB office in Washington, DC, with whom they share close collaboration.
- A state-wide diocesan steering team has been formed, under the leadership of the OLFF staff; this group’s primary role is to assist the OLFF in creating a common framework of inclusion for parishes.

Diocesan/Parish Communications:

- Nov 15, 2023 – OLFF Promotes to Parish Leaders in Monthly Learning Series; as a follow up, VIMEO recording along with the summary text sent to all
- Dec 12, 2023 – OLFF promotes to the Diocesan Pastoral Council
- Jan 17, 2024 – OLFF promotes to the Hispanic Community

Grant extras:

- Parish Advocate Course (NCPD), **at no cost to 50 individuals** from Maine parishes, made available through diocesan Lay Continuing Education Grant; online, roughly 2 hours; OLFF will register these individuals with the help of NCPD
 - **Who are parish advocates?** “Parish Advocate are parishioners, approved by the pastor, who assists him in working for and with persons with disabilities. In consultation with the pastor, the advocates reach out to the parish to identify needs, barriers, and their offers to serve in ministerial roles. By responding to the identified needs and gifts, the parish advocate works with parish leadership, to promote the full participation of children and adults with disabilities in the life of the parish (NCPD).
 - Registration form for the events will be live the 1st week of Jan and will include a field for those wishing to take the Parish Advocacy Course - good through June 30, 2024.
 - Who are the persons in your parish who could act as Parish Advocates?

- Forum Events: April 2024

As one focus of the *Inclusion Initiative*, OLFF will direct and lead 3 in-person regional gatherings in Maine; encounters where information, ideas, and collaboration will surface for long-term impact in parishes. Keynote presenter will be Charleen Katra, Executive Director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), assisted by the OLFF staff.

Parishes will be invited to attend and to secure a parish table. Cost is \$20 per person which includes the framework, NCPD presence, a meal, and all snacks/beverages. Host parishes have been selected because of ease of physical access, mirroring the spirit of inclusion of the gatherings:

- **Southern Maine Gathering** - Wednesday, April 10, 11:00a - 4:30p
Holy Martyrs Church, Falmouth (Parish of the Holy Eucharist)
- **Central Maine Gathering** - Thursday, April 11, 12:00p – 5:30p
Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Calais (St. Kateri Tekakwitha Parish)
- **Northern Maine Gathering** - Friday, April 12, 10:00a – 3:00p
Holy Rosary Parish Center, Caribou (Parish of the Precious Blood)

As we remember to enlarge the space of our ‘tent’, which parish participants could possibly fill the parish tables at the Inclusion Forum?

Two or more parishes could join together at one table.

- Clergy and/or Parish leader (PCL, PLC, staff)
- Person(s) identified or could be as Parish Inclusion Advocates
- Person(s) with visible and/or hidden disability
- Family caregiver for person with a disability
- Knights of Columbus
- Pastoral Council member
- Finance Council member
- Parish professionals who care for/work with persons with disabilities
- Parish person who advocates for parish aging population, homebound
- Parish Catechist

Finally, it is our conviction that serving persons with disabilities will ultimately be beneficial to all persons and groups in parish communities and beyond. Our work is so that ALL households/families see themselves in this framework. Have you heard of “**CURB EFFECT**”? Here is just one example:

When WWII veterans returned to the United States, those who had disabilities found it difficult to physically negotiate curbs, and curb cuts were subsequently made. In addressing and making change for a group ended up being beneficial to many others. Those preferring curb cuts

include parents with strollers, delivery people with hand trucks or carts, older people who may have canes, persons with imbalance concerns, toddlers, bikers, and many walkers who prefer the sloped ramp instead of the harder impact of stepping off a curb.

“Making churches accessible and service understandable is important, but...not enough for a parish to call itself “inclusive’...The church must meet people’s needs for belonging, relating to others, and cultivating their spiritual lives so they experience the fullness and blessing of our Lord for the unique and marvelous gift that they are”. (Pope Francis)