

# Presence and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Your Parish

Pope Francis accurately characterized the experience of persons with disabilities (PwD) as 'hidden exiles' in *Fratelli Tutti* and also challenged the Church to appreciate and support PwD as integral members of the Body of Christ.

Many persons with disabilities 'feel they exist without belonging and participating.' ... Our concerns should be not only to care for them but *to ensure their 'active participation'* in the civil and ecclesial community. That ...

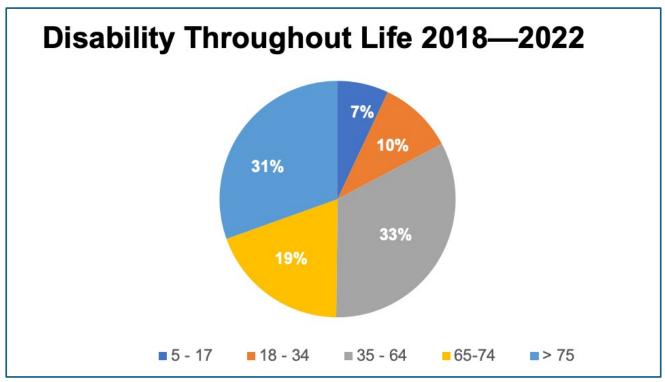
will gradually contribute to the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person. (Fratelli Tutti, 97–98)

The desire to belong is a basic human need. In the *Faith and Flourishing Project*, teens and young adults with autism or intellectual disability and their families reported that what they wanted most from their faith community was "to belong" (Erik Carter, E. Biggs, & T Boehm, "Being Present Versus Having a Presence: Dimensions of Belonging for Young People with Disabilities and Their Families," 2016). As a team, consider what it means to belong. Is it one thing or are there several things you need to feel you belong?

According to the individuals in *Faith and Flourishing Project*, there are ten dimensions to feeling a sense of belonging, to be: present, invited, welcomed, known, appreciated, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved. All ten need to be present to feel it. Does your list look very different from this?

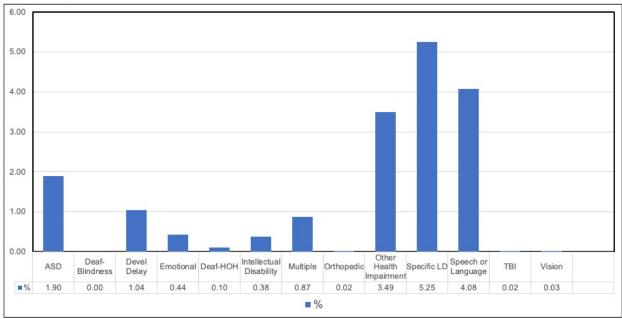
How many folks with disabilities are there?

- About **1 in 6 children** under 21 receive special education services in the counties of the Diocese of Trenton. This can vary a little between counties and even between school districts, from 1 in 4.7 to 1 in 6.4 children.
- More than 1 in 4 adults in the United States have some type of disability.
- Of all individuals with disabilities in the four counties of the Diocese of Trenton, the largest percentage of disabled individuals within all people with disabilities is between the ages of 35 and 64. See the diagram on the next page. This is different than percentage of PwD within an age group.



Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S. (2025). Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute (YTI). Retrieved from Cornell University Disability Statistics website: <a href="https://www.disabilitystatistics.org">www.disabilitystatistics.org</a>

# NJ Special Education Classification 17.62%



Reported for school year 2022.

QUESTION: Does anything surprise you about the charts above? What and why or why not?

#### **Questions to Consider**

| 1. | What steps have we taken to identify persons with disabilities in our parish?   |
|----|---|
| 2. | What steps have we taken to identify persons with disabilities in our area who do not attend mass or participate in our parish?   |
| 3. | liturgy, activities, and ministries in our parish? The checklist on the next page will help you develop a preliminary understanding. A general guide to assess the extent PwD are PRESENT: None: 0; A Few: a small percentage of the numbers of PwD in your area based on the data shared above—20% or less; Many: too many to count, or at least 60% of the numbers of PwD in your area. Not sure: Don't know, or doesn't fit in the other |
|    | three options.  |

| PRESENT                                  | NONE | A FEW | MANY | NOT SURE |
|--|------|-------|------|----------|
| Sunday Eucharist                         |      |       |      |          |
| Sacrament Celebration                    |      |       |      |          |
| Serving the Parish                       |      |       |      |          |
| Lector                                   |      |       |      |          |
| Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion |      |       |      |          |
| Hospitality                              |      |       |      |          |
| Altar Server                             |      |       |      |          |
| Choir                                    |      |       |      |          |
| Catechist                                |      |       |      |          |
| Parish Leadership                        |      |       |      |          |
| Ministry Head                            |      |       |      |          |
| Fellowship Activities                    |      |       |      |          |
| Adult Faith Formation                    |      |       |      |          |
| Cornerstone                              |      |       |      |          |
| Catechetical Program & Sacrament Prep    |      |       |      |          |
| Children-Inclusive                       |      |       |      |          |
| Children-Separate                        |      |       |      |          |
| Teens-Inclusive                          |      |       |      |          |
| Teens-Separate                           |      |       |      |          |
| Children Ministries                      |      |       |      |          |
| Youth Ministry                           |      |       |      |          |
| Young Adult Ministry                     |      |       |      |          |
| Social Justice & Outreach Ministries     |      |       |      |          |
| Social Activities                        |      |       |      |          |
| Other*                                   |      |       |      |          |
| Other*                                   |      |       |      |          |
| Other*                                   |      |       |      |          |
|  |      |       |      |          |

<sup>\*</sup>Please specify.

4. The items listed below are many considerations for a parish to be welcoming and supportive, promoting a sense of being needed and belonging. Please complete the checklist below.

| WELCOMING & SUPPORTIVE  |     | ,  |   |
|---|-----|----|---|
| PHYSICAL ACCESS   | YES | NO | ? |
| At least 4% (1 in 25) of our parking spaces are clearly marked as disability parking spaces near accessible entrances to parish buildings.  |     |    |   |
| Disability parking spaces are 8' wide with adjacent 5' access aisle.  |     |    |   |
| At least one disability space is van accessible: 11' wide with clearly marked adjacent 5' access aisle (or 8' space with 8' access aisle)   |     |    |   |
| Individuals using wheelchairs, walkers, or canes can independently enter parish buildings and rooms.  |     |    |   |
| There is clear signage for rooms and accessible entrances and elevators.  |     |    |   |
| Individuals using wheelchairs, walkers, or canes can freely move around parish buildings and rooms.   |     |    |   |
| Individuals using mobility devices or have difficulty walking can easily go onto the altar area.  |     |    |   |
| Wheelchair accessible spaces are provided throughout sanctuary to allow seating choice and ability to sit with family or friends.   |     |    |   |
| Handrail(s) is provided on stairs to altar area OR space is same level  |     |    |   |
| There is at least one ADA family restroom OR one stall in men's and women's restrooms accessible from each floor. (60"x60" turning space with 33–36" high wall-mounted grab bar next to toilet extending 54" from back wall; toilet height 17–19. |     |    |   |
| Soap dispenser and paper towels mounted no higher than 48" OR placed on counter for access.   |     |    |   |
| 27" sink clearance from floor with easy controls (lever style or automatic), hot water & drainpipes covered.  |     |    |   |

| Interior stairs and ramps have handrails on both sides OR buildings are one level.  |     |    |   |
|---|-----|----|---|
| ATTITUDE & OPENNESS   | YES | NO | ? |
| Clergy, pastoral leaders, and parish staff know how to welcome and offer support to individuals with disabilities.  |     |    |   |
| Pastoral council members, greeters, ushers, and catechists know how to welcome and offer assistance to individuals with disabilities.                               |     |    |   |
| Pastoral staff (clergy & lay) are willing to explore alternate ways for participating in liturgy, sacrament celebrations, and full life of the parish.              |     |    |   |
| Accessibility measures and who to contact for questions are described in bulletin, website, maps and/or signage.  |     |    |   |
| Our priests gear homilies for a wide audience of comprehension, including identifying 1 central point (the Big Idea) that everyone can relate to.                   |     |    |   |
| Qualified service animals are welcome within all areas.   |     |    |   |
| Catechetical program is designed to appeal to children and teens who learn, participate, and contribute in a variety of ways.                                       |     |    |   |
| Programs and activities are adapted and supports provided when required so children, teens, and adults with disabilities can participate actively and meaningfully. |     |    |   |
| Special diets are considered when food is offered   |     |    |   |
| Information about receiving low-gluten hosts is posted clearly  |     |    |   |
| "Buddy" system of "Circle of Friends" offered when more individualized support is necessary   |     |    |   |
| Registration for events includes asking what supports someone requires to participate fully.  |     |    |   |
| Posting for events without registration includes clear directions to ask for supports to participate.   |     |    |   |

| Website is accessible for folks with different disabilities, such as vision, comprehension, interaction, etc. <sup>1</sup>                |     |    |   |
|---|-----|----|---|
| COMMUNICATION & ENVIRONMENT   | YES | NO | ? |
| Projected words use large sans serif font and good contrast   |     |    |   |
| Large print bulletin, hymnal, and readings are provided <i>on request</i>   |     |    |   |
| Braille OR electronic documents provided <i>upon</i> advanced request   |     |    |   |
| Microphones are used by all speakers or comments repeated at mic  |     |    |   |
| Assisted listening system (FM, Infrared, and/or loop) & receivers are available   |     |    |   |
| ASL interpreter is provided upon advanced request   |     |    |   |
| Consideration and options are provided for individuals with sensory processing issues   |     |    |   |
| Captions are provided/turned on for videos and other media  |     |    |   |
| We communicate with someone based on their preferred method of communication, including individuals who don't communicate through speech. |     |    |   |
| NEEDED—BEFRIENDED—BELONG  | YES | NO | ? |
| We connect people based on shared interests and experiences, with and without disabilities.   |     |    |   |
| PwD serve the community in different ways through the parish.   |     |    |   |
| Individuals with disabilities and their family members contribute on planning teams.  |     |    |   |
| Individuals with disabilities and their family members serve in leadership positions.   |     |    |   |
| We connect people based on shared interests and experiences, with and without disabilities.   |     |    |   |

<sup>1</sup> https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/

| We seek the perspectives of PwD and their                |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| families regarding their ability to participate as fully |  |  |
| as they want in the parish.                              |  |  |

# NOTES—COMMENTS—QUESTIONS

# Accompanying Persons with Disability—Thoughts for Going Forward What are the four most pressing barriers or concerns?

| Concern   | 4.  |  |
|-----------|-----|--|
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| COLICCITI | ٠.  |  |

| • | Underlying issues?                                   |
|---|--|
| • | who can help   |
| • | anticipated resistance?                              |
| • | Individuals and/or agencies to seek information from |
| • | Timeline—steps and or stages:                        |
| • | anticipated costs                                    |
| • | who's responsible                                    |
| • | Introduction strategy and communication              |

# Concern 2:

| • | Underlying issues?                                   |
|---|--|
| • | who can help   |
| • | anticipated resistance?                              |
| • | Individuals and/or agencies to seek information from |
| • | Timeline—steps and or stages:                        |
| • | anticipated costs                                    |
| • | who's responsible                                    |
| • | Introduction strategy and communication              |

# Concern 3:

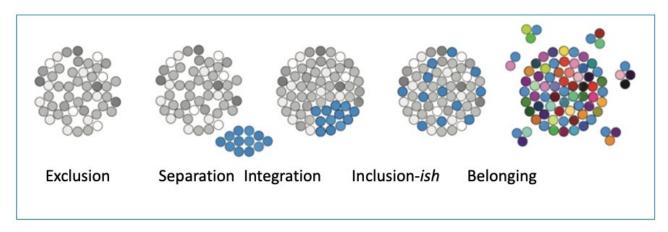
| • | Underlying issues?                                   |
|---|--|
| • | who can help   |
| • | anticipated resistance?                              |
| • | Individuals and/or agencies to seek information from |
| • | Timeline—steps and or stages:                        |
| • | anticipated costs                                    |
| • | who's responsible                                    |

• Introduction strategy and communication

# Concern 4:

| • | Underlying issues?                                   |
|---|--|
| • | who can help   |
| • | anticipated resistance?                              |
| • | Individuals and/or agencies to seek information from |
| • | Timeline—steps and or stages:                        |
| • | anticipated costs                                    |
| • | who's responsible                                    |
| • | Introduction strategy and communication              |

# **Developing Your Evolving Vision**



Carter's graphic representation of the typical models of 'Disability & Ministry.'

#### Other Questions to Consider

1. What is our vision of Accompanying Persons with Disabilities? How do we understand Belonging?

2. What steps can we take for ongoing awareness of persons with disabilities in our parish?

#### Organization

Organization will build on foundation developed during Moving Forward, getting people's buy in, interest, and motivation.

#### Some suggestions:

- Identify a central point person for contact—but NOT sole responsibility!
- General accountability: PwD considered in all new initiatives and ongoing ministry, reported on during staff meetings, successes and obstacles.
- Developing mission statements for each ministry will support this.
- Establish priorities within priority list, timelines and plans to support these.<sup>2</sup>
  - Short term goals: high priority, easy to do
  - Medium-term goals: Require more time and resources. Suggest 6–12 month deadlines.
  - Long-term goals: Less urgent but still important to address over time over the next year or more.
- Identify items already addressed or easy to do so and publicize

# Sustainability

- What support is needed to support your continued journey
  - o Determine follow up schedule
  - Identifying particular areas of support/education. Such as adaptive catechetical practices, positive behavior support, messaging/homily helpers...
- Shared accountability across ministries
- Maintain priorities and boundaries without diminishing message—Openness and a sincere heart goes along way healing wounding experiences of exclusion and marginalization!
- Establish schedule for reviewing outcomes and status
- Draw on wisdom in the parish and community partners

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Guidance for these suggested by CoPilot analysis of survey.

# Who Are You Missing?

#### "Do you require support to participate more fully related to a disability?"

Rather than surveying what disabilities parishioners may have, I suggest asking if anyone, or a family member, requires support to participate more fully and meaningfully as a result of a disability. Also ask if they know of anyone else who stays away from the parish because of disability related issues. Examples are below.

- Do you or a family member identify as having a disability?
- Are you unable to participate as fully as you would like in any areas of parish life because of any disability related support issues? If yes, please let us know what would be helpful.
- Is a member of your family unable to participate as fully as they would like in any areas of parish life because of any disability related support issues? If yes, please let us know what would be helpful.
- Do you know of anyone in the area who identifies as having a disability and is unable to participate as fully as they would like in any area of parish life because of disability related support issues?
- If yes, would you please share a copy of this survey and encourage them to respond?

This will help you get a sense of the diversity of disabilities of your parishioners. Results of this will likely lead to a conversation, during which you may learn their diagnosis. A diagnosis is helpful to the extent it communicates some areas of particular limits, but these will vary across people with the same diagnosis. People also may be less comfortable sharing their diagnosis, but happy to say what kind of supports would increase their participation. Also, you may miss someone who requires support by not naming their disability.

For your parish catechetical program, simply ask if their sons or daughters receive any accommodations in school. Learning about our faith is learning, so strategies for school subjects are just as relevant and are apt to have social implications also. You can find more about this under "Step 1 – Encountering Your Learners" on the ministry website under "Disability and Catechesis." Click here for this information.

It will be interesting to see what responses you receive. Is it all regarding children and teens for the catechetical program? Or are you also reaching adults interested in expanding their participation?

RE: people reported to staying away because of disability related issues, here are two suggestions:

- Develop a welcome letter to be given to the person/family by your parishioner
- Host an "Open Parish" night specifically for people and families staying away because of
  disability related issues. It may make sense to host different events for parents and PwD. For
  each, ask the families and PwD to invite other local Catholic families or PwD they know who
  feel unwelcome. If you want to expand outreach, you could ask local disability agencies to
  help with planning and distributing the invitations/flyers. This will be most helpful if you have
  developed a relationship with the organization already.

See the next page for some examples of helpful supports

#### Examples of common helpful supports.

#### Communication supports:

- Written or digital copy of text for homilies, liturgies, presenters.
- Plain language
- Increased visuals/pictures
- Assistive listening devices, such as infrared, hearing loop, and FM systems.
- ASL interpreter
- Captioning for videos
- Speaker volume okay?
- Alternative or augmented communication devices.
- Large Print (17 or 18 font typically)
- Braille
- Audio files

#### Environment – Architecture

- Ramps and elevators
- Do you use a wheelchair, walker, cane or other mobility support devices
- Is lighting sufficient or too bright?

#### Participation support

- · Advance information about expectations and flow of an event
- Different ways of engaging topics
- Simplified delivery: "your one big idea" This is as relevant for homilies as for catechetical program.
- Peer mentors
- Teen mentors



#### Persons with Disabilities Access & Participation Parish Survey

[Begin with reference to your parish mission. This connects participation of PwD to it and the realization you are incomplete if any individuals are absent. Such as]: The Parish Community of [parish name and mission, such as following...] who are on a mission to worship God, serve others and make disciples. We do this in an environment where all are valued, and all can grow through the Gospel Message of Jesus Christ. Please let us know if you or a family member requires support to participate more fully and meaningfully because of disability related concerns. All responses are confidential. Your name and contact information is optional.

| of | u or a family member requires support to participate more fully and meaningfully because<br>disability related concerns. All responses are confidential. Your name and contact<br>ormation is optional.   |
|----|---|
| 1. | Do you consider yourself a person with a disability (PwD)? yesno Does someone(s) in your family have a disability?  |
| 2. | If yes, do you or does your family member require support or accommodations to participate in mass and other parish activities (such as large print, assisted listening devices, adaptive learning and/or communication strategies, ASL interpreter, companion other)? yesno  If yes, are you receiving the support you require? yesno  If yes, is your family member receiving the support they require? yesno  If not, what would enable you to participate more fully? |
|    | If yes, do you feel you are able to serve in our community using your gifts and skills to your full capacity? yesno  If yes, is your family member able to serve in our community using their gifts and skills to their full capacity? yesno  If not, what would enable you (or your family member to participate more fully?   |
|    | <del></del>   |
| 3. | Are you aware of Catholics in our area who are not able to participate because of disability-related barriers or concerns? yesno  If yes, what are the barriers and what would help?  |
|    | If yes, would you please share this survey with them?   |
| 4. | Are you willing to serve on a task force to help our parish become increasingly accessible and supportive of PwD participating meaningfully? yesno If so, please provide your name and contact information below.   |

Adapted for Catholic parishes with permission. Received with gratitude from Deaconess Lynn Swedberg and the United Methodist Church Disability Ministries Committee.

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| Please rate the following on a scale of 1 = we do a poor job to 5 = we do an excellent job | an excellent job | 5 = we do ar | iob to 5 : | 1 = we do a poor | on a scale of ' | se rate the following | Please |
|--|------------------|--------------|------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------|
|--|------------------|--------------|------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------|

- 1–2–3–4–5 The ushers and greeters appear to have sufficient training, information, and skills to welcome and support people with disabilities and their families.
- 1–2–3–4–5 The pastor and pastoral staff, clergy and lay, seem to have sufficient training, information, and skills to welcome and support people with disabilities and their families.
- 1–2–3–4–5 Our catechists have sufficient training, information, and skills to welcome and support children and youth with disabilities.
- 1–2–3–4–5 Our parish welcomes children and adults with disabilities and their families and supports meaningful participation in all areas of parish life.

| Additional comments, please let us know your thoughts: |         |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|---------|--|--|--|--|--|
| what we are doing well and how we could improve        |         |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |         |  |  |  |  |  |
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| Ор   | otional |  |  |  |  |  |
| Name   |         |  |  |  |  |  |
| Contact info email                                     | phone   |  |  |  |  |  |

Please note: surveys are confidential, Thanks for your feedback and assistance!

| Concern & Ideas to improve or resolve | Who does it involve? Do you expect resistance? | What material or resources do you need? | Timeline: Who will do what by when? |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|
|                                       |  |   |                                     |
|                                       |  |   |                                     |
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|---------------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|
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