

Chicagoland

# Parishes going beyond 'inclusion' to belonging

By **Michelle Martin** | Staff Writer

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**Chris Hebein assists Father Joseph Tito during Mass at St. Nicholas Parish in Evanston on Aug. 4. Chris, 47, has Down syndrome and has been serving Mass for 33 years at his parish. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)**

Parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago are moving beyond “including” people with disabilities in their congregations, instead working to find ways to help those with disabilities and their families find a true sense of belonging.

“If you invite a guest to your house, and you include them in what you’re doing, that’s great,” said David Gayes, a parishioner at St. Nicholas Parish in Evanston. “Because you are including them in your space. But the church isn’t just your space. ‘Belonging’ means the space belongs to everybody. This space is mine, this space is yours, this space is your friend’s.”

As part of that change, the archdiocese has moved away from observing “Inclusion Sunday” one day in October. The one-day observation has turned into a month in which parishes are asked to think about what belonging really means for parishioners with disabilities.

Joanne Meyer of That Every Ability May Worship, a program of Pathways.org, said everyone needs to feel they belong to a community. The archdiocese is trying to address that need for everybody through its Renew My Church initiative. Team-W is working with parishes, especially in the month of August, to help them identify and remove barriers that keep people with a disability from that sense of belonging.

Gayes, who uses a wheelchair, knows what it means to belong. Now 33, he has belonged to St. Nicholas since he was 8 years old. He sings in the choir almost every weekend, and he has worked on disability issues at the parish. He is also a Bernardin Scholar at Catholic Theological Union, working on a master’s degree in intercultural ministry.

He hopes to use that degree to help church communities understand their obligation to welcome people with all kinds of disabilities, visible and invisible, as full members of the Body of Christ.

“It really comes down to seeing people with disabilities as an ordinary part of the diversity of humanity,” Gayes said. “Everybody with disabilities has their gifts, and we all want to share our gifts. We all want that opportunity.”

Father John Kartje, rector/president of the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary, said that seminary formation must help men studying to be priests see everyone as part of the Body of Christ.

“We don’t want anyone to see people with disabilities as a special burden or an ‘other’ group to be accommodated,” he said. “Folks with disabilities might need certain accommodations, but so does everybody — young families, people with children. We accommodate all the differences.”

That includes welcoming people with disabilities into parish leadership roles, Kartje said, whether as liturgical ministers or members of the pastoral council.

St. Nicholas has ramps for those with mobility challenges, an elevator takes people who cannot climb stairs to the social hall, and there is a sign-language interpreter at the 9 a.m. Mass every Sunday. There is also a bathroom with an adult-size changing table.

Parishioner Sheila Habein, a member of the committee advocating for people with disabilities, has worked to make those accommodations a reality, but in some ways, building a ramp or adding an elevator is the easy part, she said.

“It’s changing attitudes that is more complex,” said Habein, the former executive director of the National Association for Down Syndrome. Her son, Chris, 47, has Down syndrome and has been an altar server for 33 years.

“I think Chris sees himself as an integral part of this parish,” said Habein, noting that he often serves alone, at the Masses other altar servers don’t want to do. He carries the cross each year during the Good Friday procession and serves every Easter vigil. “For Chris, serving at Mass is his vocation.”

Gayes agreed that the most important thing parishes can do is develop an attitude of openness and welcome to everybody.

“It is about putting in a ramp. It is about access,” Gayes said. “But it’s not all about that.”

Both Gayes and Habein said that if parishes make it a priority to welcome all people, not as the objects of charity but as full members with their own gifts to share, then they will find ways to make sure their spaces are accessible.

“That requires a really good attitude of listening, to understand what people with disabilities are experiencing, how they relate to God,” Gayes said. “It’s not an us vs. them thing. It’s for all of us. Recognize disability as part of the diversity of the church. The church belongs to everybody.”

For that to be a reality, Habein said, parishes should make sure they are accessible before people who have disabilities show up at the door and find their way barred.

If someone in a parish says they don’t have to worry about wheelchair accessibility because they have no parishioners who use wheelchairs, Habein said, she asks, “How do you know?”

Providence Sister Kathleen Smith works on access issues at St. Katharine Drexel Parish at St. Ailbe Church, 9015 S. Harper Ave. Sister Kathleen had been at St. Felicitas Parish, which became part of St. Katharine Drexel as part of Renew My Church.

“We are seeing more of our seniors coming to Mass, because now we have a lift to get them up into the sanctuary,” Smith said. “They’re trying to pray, and this is one way they can be present. It makes it easier for everybody.”

However, the now-closed St. Felicitas Church had a sound system that worked with assistive hearing devices to help people who are hard of hearing. Sister Kathleen is working on a proposal for a grant to bring a similar system to St. Katharine Drexel.

The church, she said, should do everything it can to accommodate their needs.

After that, the wish list includes automatic door openers, to make it easier for people who use mobility aids such as walkers and wheelchairs to get into the building, and perhaps even an elevator.

“That way the person and their helper and other people could come up together,” she said.

*To help parishes and schools with accessibility initiatives, TEAM-W offers \$1,000 grants as part of the TEAM-W Awards and TEAM-W Junior Awards. To enter, adults or students between the ages of 5 and 18 can submit a video or an essay about their planned accessibility project. The deadline for entries is Oct. 1. For more information, visit [team-w.org](http://team-w.org).*

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