

# Autism and Faith: A Call to Action

The Autism Society asks all priests, pastors, rabbis, imams — all faith leaders — to answer the call and support over 3.5 million people with Autism Spectrum Disorders by creating inclusive faith communities



As a faith leader, you may fear that if you participate in including those with autism into your faith community, it will be a burden on you or your congregation. That is the furthest thing from the truth; welcoming all only adds to faith communities.

Families and individuals on the autism spectrum often have difficulty locating faith services that are inclusive. This means that there may be millions of people in our nation who are looking for a place to practice their faith. Loneliness can also be a common emotion among families and those who have autism who are unable to practice their faith openly. Some, unfortunately, walk away from their faith because they cannot locate an accepting environment to practice it. The lucky ones who find that place have renewed hope and strengthened faith. They grow as individuals and the congregation grows as well. Could your congregation be the place for them?

There are a growing number of resources and organizations in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions in this country who are supporting inclusive faith communities. There are numerous stories of faith assemblies that brought inclusion into their ministries and everyone benefitted from the decision. Initial uncertainties have led to profound conclusions that the whole faith community benefits and learns that everyone has gifts, that similarities are much deeper than differences, and that we all experience joy, loneliness and other feelings that are addressed by belonging to a community of faith. What's more, congregations are



beginning to report that their inclusive practices are leading to growth in membership and in the spirit of their family communities.

Congregations are able to put love, compassion, and other foundational beliefs of their faith into practice. People with autism and their families can then find a faith home where their spiritual needs and journeys can be nurtured and where they can truly feel that they are part of God's people.

Below are resources from people and faith groups that have embraced inclusion:

- One of the first guides on supporting congregations to be inclusive of all those with disabilities, "That All May Worship," created by The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) — <http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/interfaith/that-all-may-worship/that-all-may-worship.pdf>
- PBS religion and ethics episode — a story of a mosque, a synagogue, and a church that practiced inclusion — <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics>  
Search faith communities and disabilities.
- The AAIDD Religion and Spirituality Division, an interfaith network within this international professional organization — <http://www.aaiddreligion.org/>
- The Disability and Faith Forum: A space where ministry leaders and everyone can discover what is happening in disability ministries around the world — <http://www.disabilityandfaith.org/>
- All Are Welcome, A Faith Inclusion Program from the Autism Society of South Carolina: many resources and videos as well as sample forms to start inclusive practices — <http://www.allarewelcome.info/>

## Supporting Parents and Children with Autism

The main way to support those affected by autism is by including them in all of the activities of your congregation where other families are welcome and included. We all want to worship somewhere that we can be ourselves and feel welcomed. That desire is the same for those affected by autism. An open mind and heart go a long way. A faith community does not have to do







everything at once. Work with families and start where they need help. It can grow from there.

Below are some resources to support parents and their children:

- "Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community" – a resource for clergy, religious educators, and families of autistic children to develop "inclusive spiritual supports" for autistic individuals in religious settings – <http://www.rwjms.umdnj.edu/boggscenter/products/documents/AutismandFaith.pdf>
- Kentucky Autism Training Center and Barbara J. Newman present a webinar, "Inclusion Toolbox Practical Ideas for Faith Communities Including Children and Youth" with practical inclusion ideas for children and youth – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frA8w8mRnro>
- "Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families: A Practical Guide for Congregations" created by the

Disabilities, Religion, and Spirituality Program, at Vanderbilt Kennedy Center – <http://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/assets/files/resources/CongregationPracticeGuide.pdf>

## Supporting Teens and Adults with Autism

Again, teenagers and adults with autism are looking for a place to belong or fit in, just like others do. They are also interested in openly practicing their faiths, sharing their lives with others of the same faith, and putting their spiritual foundational truths into practice. Your faith organization could be the place where all can achieve these goals.

Below are resources to help faith groups assist all affected by autism including teenagers and adults:

- The Inclusive Church: Orange Conference Workshop Notes: Including Teens and Adults with Special Needs - <https://theinclusivechurch.wordpress.com/>



- The book, *Amplifying our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*, Benjamin T Conner, Eerdmans Publishing Company, has also been presented at by Mr. Conner and can be found on YouTube – <http://www.eerdmans.com/Products/6721/amplifying-our-witness.aspx>

## Supporting your Congregation to Welcome All

Not everyone has a disability, but everyone has had the experience somewhere and sometime of feeling on the outside or of not fitting in. When people have not been exposed to others that are different from them, which is sometimes hard to remember. Once the importance of inclusion is discussed and stories by individuals and families are shared, most people jump at the chance to provide an inclusive environment. We all want to be a blessing to others. Faith leaders can model that welcome as well as speak to the importance of inclusion for everyone as part of the people of God, in whatever tradition



There are many, many resources available through many channels. You can connect with the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/theologydisability/> Gleanings, available by email, is the newsletter of the AAIDD Religion and Spirituality Division which gives bi-monthly updates on faith inclusion — <http://www.aaiddreligion.org/newsletter>. YouTube has entire channels from inclusive faith groups like Bethesda Lutheran Communities filled with inclusive resources.

1. Help individuals and families share their stories of their faith journeys and hopes.
2. Have examples of other inclusive congregations in your faith tradition.
3. Be able to show how this fits within the mission and vision of your faith community.
4. Be able to show the gifts that the congregation and its leadership already have, ones that are needed by individuals with autism and their families.
5. Be able to point to written and video resources, including scriptural supports (there are many in this article)
6. Offer to help find people to help with educational programs, specific consultation and help, and issues that arise.





- "Identity and Inclusive Communities: What Languages do We Use?" by Bill Gaventa from the 2012 Summer Institute on Theology and Disability Conference, an interfaith perspective on topics related to developmental disabilities, discussed by international theologians, scholars and authors.
- "The Other Six Days" by Erik W. Carter – Supporting those with developmental disabilities every day not only days of worship.

The following videos are all on YouTube:

- "Congregational Strategies for Reaching Out to Agencies and Working with them to Identify and Honor Spiritual Supports and Enable Inclusion and Ongoing Participation" by the National Collaborative on Faith and Disability, one of five in their 2015 Webinar series

We know this brief guide is just a beginning. We also know that there are many people with autism and their families who would love to feel welcome and belong in faith communities.

If we can help, let us know. There are growing numbers of resources and organizations that can assist as needed and we would be happy to share them, please connect with the Autism Society's Faith Initiative, call 800-3-AUTISM or email us at [autismfaith@autism-society.org](mailto:autismfaith@autism-society.org).