

Inclusion is at the Heart of Catechists

A catechist reflects on the progression of inclusive religious education programs over three decades

Kathleen Schipani, IHM

It has been a privilege for me to be a member of the executive board of the Association of Philadelphia Parish Directors/Coordinators and Administrators of Religious Education and to represent the needs of persons with disabilities and the deaf community. Collaborating with the Office of Catechetical Formation in its endeavor to ensure that parish religious education programs are inclusive and welcoming to all our children seems to me to be at the heart of our mission as catechists.

This vision of not only accommodating our programs but also of actually reaching out to include those who do not have easy access to religious education is a Gospel vision.

We all know that really living and modeling Gospel values is not always easy. In my role as administrator for the Department for Pastoral Care for Persons with Disabilities, I have the opportunity to see and hear about the many and varied ways parishes, DREs, teachers and parents have re-envisioned religious education so that those with physical, sensory, behavioral and learning disabilities have a place and a caring, effective means of being formed in their Catholic faith.

Recently I decided to look back over my own experiences of reli-

gious education—from when I was in high school serving as an assistant catechist to the present, as DRE and catechist for the deaf apostolate. As I reminisced, I realized that these varied experiences also reflect the progression of our religious education programs over the last three decades.

In the mid 1970s, shortly after I first began teaching at the Cathedral parish in northern Virginia, Bishop Thomas Welsh asked me to consider preparing a teen and two young adults with mental retardation for the sacraments of Eucharist and confirmation. They were siblings and until this time their foster parents were unable to find a parish religious education program willing to accept them. When I look back on this now, I realize that Bishop Welsh and his brother bishops were in the midst of preparing the “Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities,” which was issued in 1978. I remember meeting these students at the convent and recall the very meaningful but private reception of Eucharist and confirmation in the convent chapel.

Small Classes

In the early 1980s, I returned to Philadelphia to a very large Catholic school and parish. Along with teaching eighth grade, I was asked to coordinate an existing “Special Religious Education Program.” This program took place in the school, but on a different evening than the CCD night. The parish was known for providing religious education for all its children, and parents from neighboring parishes and even from far-off parishes brought their children with a variety of disabilities to be part of this formation program.

There were small-group classes and one-to-one classes. Teachers were recruited from the parish. I can recall meeting children with a variety of disabilities including learning

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disabilities, ADHD, blindness and mental and physical disabilities that ranged from mild to profound. Here I met a child with autism for the first time. This child was also deaf, and thus began my first experience of learning American Sign Language. The catechists in this program often were asked to prepare adults with cognitive disabilities for the sacraments of Eucharist and confirmation because no programs were available for them when they were younger.

For three years in the 1980s I was transferred to another Cathedral parish, this time in Raleigh, North Carolina. In this smaller setting I first experienced inclusion of children

with disabilities in the regular parish religious education program. Children with learning disabilities and ADHD who needed some accommodations, as well as children with other disabilities, were included in the classes. Teacher aides assisted at times; if needed smaller group settings were arranged and one-to-one instructions were also taking place together on Sunday mornings during the parish religious education program.

When I returned again to Philadelphia to a parish, I was charged with the task of beginning the learning disability program for a large Catholic school. At the same time, the pastor requested that I coordinate the parish religious education program with the vision that one program would meet the needs of all the children. What the pastor and catechists seemed to notice in this particular parish was that many of the children in the religious education program were not in Catholic school because of their learning disabilities or other special needs. We worked hard to recruit cat-

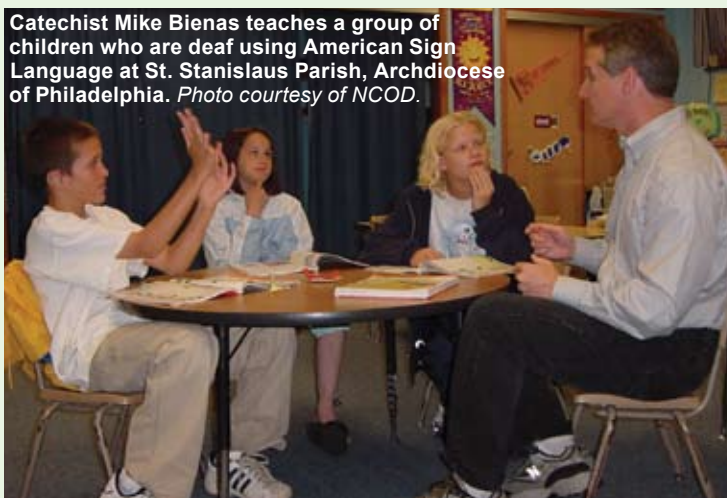
Inclusion Tips for Catechists

Collaborate with parents or guardians to determine best placement, communication methods and learning styles. Ask for input and suggestions, share expertise and remember that parents and guardians are often the best resource for their children.

Ask parents and guardians to share their child's IEP (Individual Education Plan) with you and explore the possibility of utilizing the service of the child's Therapeutic Support Staff (TSS, sometimes called Wraparound Services), during the religious education class.

Classroom Techniques

- Teach in small steps and give clear directions using visual aids like the board.
- Move the child physically through tasks step by step. A learning buddy can assist with this.
- Stand or sit near the child so you or an assistant can help when needed.
- Prepare children for transitions by giving them plenty of warning before changing activities.
- Establish routines and be consistent.
- Be sure you have the child's attention before giving instructions.
- Use visual cues such as pictures or gestures as you talk.
- If the child doesn't understand at first, rephrase your comment rather than repeating it.
- Be flexible. Create a balance of being flexible to a child's needs (which will vary), and being consistent to the schedule. Allow cool-down time before pressing to accomplish difficult tasks.
- Remain focused on all children's needs. When a student's behavior becomes a distraction to other students (not to adults), have an alternate plan such as a prepared back-up activity with a teacher assistant or learning support volunteer.



Catechist Mike Bienas teaches a group of children who are deaf using American Sign Language at St. Stanislaus Parish, Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Photo courtesy of NCOD.

echists who understood and were willing to learn ways to teach children who may not be efficient readers or who have difficulty paying attention or using language. During this time, I vividly recall a parent with a child with Down Syndrome from another parish coming to me on registration night. The mother explained, "I am bringing my child here because my parish said we don't have a class for your child."

During the nine years that I worked at this parish and coordinated the religious education program, I also completed my graduate degree in special education and began teaching more and more children who were deaf and hard of hearing, using American Sign Language. During this time the U.S. bishops authored the second document regarding persons with disabilities. This document, "Guidelines for the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities," emphasized the right given to all Catholics at their baptism to be formed in their faith and to receive the sacraments.

The Inclusive Catechesis Support Wish List

1. Catechists—Catechist with skills as an educator, particularly special education. Sense of humor and flexibility are huge assets.
2. Aides/Assistants—Caring adults who can be present in groups to be extra eyes, hands, legs and hearts. Sense of humor and flexibility are huge assets.
3. Teen Aides—Caring teens who can be present in groups to be extra eyes, hands, legs and hearts. Sense of humor and flexibility are huge assets.
4. Buddies—Someone who will support one child in particular in a larger group, in a non-invasive way. Sense of humor and flexibility are huge assets.
5. Inclusion Consultants—People with special education background who can serve as consultants/support for catechists.
6. Hall Monitors—Some facilities have many entrances and exits. It's good to have extra people around for the restroom and to keep in those who belong inside and keep out those who belong outside.
7. Crafters—Some materials/activities may require extra preparation for children with limited fine-motor skills. It can be a huge help if someone else can prepare the material once the catechist has determined what is needed.
8. Audio Recorders—Someone with a good speaking voice to record prayers, songs and other catechetical material. This is especially helpful for children with visual impairments or who are blind, but also for others, particularly children with attention issues.

List courtesy of Anne Masters of the Office of Pastoral Ministries with Persons with Disabilities, Archdiocese of Newark (masterane@rcan.org).

Web Sites of Interest



These Web sites provide information and materials to support inclusive religious education:

<http://ipi.udayton.edu/nice.htm> Network of Inclusive Catholic Education

www.ncpd.org National Catholic Partnership on Disability

www.nafim.org National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry

www.ncod.org National Catholic Office for the Deaf

www.inclusioninworship.org Pathways Awareness Foundation

www.friendship.org Friendship Ministries

www.pathways2promise.org Pathways to Promise: Ministries and Mental Illness

Since 1995, I have been DRE for the deaf apostolate and serving the Department for Pastoral Care for Persons with Disabilities in various capacities. I still have the opportunity to be a catechist to children and adults within the deaf community. The deaf children we meet in the deaf apostolate religious education program have a wide range of abilities and learning styles. Some are efficient learners in American Sign Language; others have cognitive, physical, behavioral, language or learning disabilities that impact their lives and their family's lives in significant ways.

Our first response to these young people may be that they are a challenge to the catechist. Another

response may be that these children have a problem or, as I have heard quite often, "they are a problem."

The bishops' pastoral gives us another perspective and the "National Directory for Catechesis" reiterates this perspective in reminding us, "The love of the father for the weakest of his children and the continuous presence of Jesus and his spirit give assurance that every person, however limited, is capable of growth in holiness." Furthermore, "All persons with disabilities have the capacity to proclaim the Gospel and be living witnesses to its truth within the community of faith and offer valuable gifts. Their involvement enriches every aspect of Church life." (NDC 49)

Progress Being Made

During this first decade of the new millennium, as I collaborate with the Office of Catechetical Formation and parishes throughout the archdiocese, I have witnessed the wonderful progress being made regarding meeting the needs of children with disabilities in parish religious education programs. When I look at some of my catechetical experiences during the years since 2000, a challenge I have encountered is meeting children who have special needs because of trauma in their lives.

Along with children with disabilities, we are meeting children who have been abused or who have undergone horrific violence in their homes and neighborhoods or their country of origin because of war or poverty. To provide meaningful and effective faith formation we are being challenged to be patient, flexible and creative. My experience in these situations is that the caring relationships and sense of belonging to the community we can foster and develop are key in the faith formation of the individual and the family.

As I look back over my journey as a catechist and director of religious education, each decade seems to present a new challenge and also a new charism or gift for us to embrace as persons who share in the mission of Jesus. Of course there is no greater teacher than Jesus. We can take heart when we look at the catechetical program outlined in the Gospel. Jesus was meeting the same groups and individuals we meet. Some were bright and articulate, some had disabilities and special learning needs and some had experienced unspeakable trauma in their lives. All are embraced by the loving Father and given the opportunity to encounter Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. ■