

## **Accessing the Word: Special Approaches for Individual Needs**

*Who am I? What do I believe? What is God calling me to do? Where do I belong?*

Faith, prayerful discernment, grace, and the study of God’s word provide comfort and understanding about our place in the world. Christian Education curriculum provides an important piece – an avenue for seeking answers to life-defining questions. The fact is; most of us take the existence of Christian curriculum for granted. It’s always available if we’ll devote the time for study and prayer. But what happens when the typical ways of seeking to understand one’s vocation cannot be accessed? How is one’s sense of purpose and belonging impacted? For those without access to the curriculum, it may seem that another brick has been added to the wall of exclusion. It may mean adding a poignant question to the ones initially listed: *Do I belong?*

Increasingly, Presbyterian congregations are appreciating the presence, participation and contributions of people with disabilities. Providing personalized curricular adaptations represents one important dimension of Christian hospitality.

There are many potential variables for curricular adaptations in addition to revising teaching materials and methods of instruction. These include changes in the *organization of things to be done* (e.g., breaking a large activity into manageable parts); *groupings of people* (e.g., mentoring and/or team work); and *environments* (e.g., finding a place without fluorescent lights for someone who is distracted by 20,000 flickers of light per second).

Here are some basic principles for adapting curriculum that have been developed by educators, people with disabilities, and their family members:

- 1 *A Clear Vision and Deliberate Purpose* - Why would we want to adapt curriculum for people with disabilities? The answer seems obvious. Of course we want to honor people’s inherent needs for acceptance, fellowship, love and spiritual understanding. However our society is such that people with disabilities are often denied fundamental human needs and deprived of Christian hospitality. Rejection, isolation, segregation, and trivialization depict the lives of many. Taking steps to welcome people with disabilities into the fold is a radical and necessary action requiring energy and commitment.
- 2 *One Person at a Time* - People with disabilities need to be known and understood – not as a group, but as individuals. What’s the functional impact of the person’s disability? Does he have difficulty speaking, learning, remembering, walking, seeing, hearing, reading...? What are his gifts and desires, concerns or difficulties in life? The foundation for making suitable adaptations is to be found in relationship and understanding.
- 3 *Adapting What’s There* - We live in a society that has so immersed people with disabilities in “specialness” that sometimes we lose sight of their involvement in the typical aspects of everyday life. However, the reaction to do something special unwittingly perpetuates separation and accentuates differences. Using the curriculum that is used by everyone and making suitable adaptations honors the person’s belonging in the group, promotes her involvement, and invites others to know her. Additionally, time and resources that would be spent developing a separate curriculum or program can be applied to knowing and involving people as individuals. The following are considerations for making adaptations:

- a. *Age and Gender* - A good place to begin is by asking this: How do people of this age and gender participate in the everyday life of the church? Grouping people with their age peers will positively impact learning, belonging, and a sense of community and commonality.
- b. *Timing and Participation* – Educators have long realized that participation is not an all or nothing proposition. A person’s endurance, stamina, and energy may increase over time, but doing everything may be too much at first. What might be the place to start that will provide the greatest likelihood for success? Perhaps a participatory class is preferable to one that’s lecture-based. Or a child who does not have the fine motor control to cut paper in Vacation Bible School may work with another student. She glues while her partner cuts. A teen who cannot cope with the demands of the entire youth retreat can be supported to attend the parts that are most likely to go well for him and others.
- c. *Mentoring* – Sometimes people do not know what to do or “how to act” because they have not been involved in social situations where they could model people who do know. Mentoring is a powerful way for people to learn how to act in a respectful way.

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Here’s an example of a personalized response to curriculum adaptations: Joanne, a 64-year-old woman with mental retardation who is withdrawn and cannot read, may find interest in the study that’s happening with the Tuesday Afternoon Woman’s Circle. Her life will be enriched by getting to know the other members, and vice versa. But her involvement in the group will require supports for preparation and participation. Each week, one of the other woman’s circle members will get together with Joanne, perhaps over lunch, to review the content of the chapter to be covered the following week. For Joanne, this requires that the mentor describe the abstract concepts of the chapter in a more concrete way. Initially Joanne and her friend will rehearse a couple of questions and answers using the same format that is used weekly in the group. Then Joanne’s mentor will share these questions with the leader prior to circle. This will provide a way for Joanne to get the feel for class contributions. Rather than just being physically present, she will be a participating member.

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What’s required of people who want to adapt curriculum? Imagination, insight, resourcefulness, openness, and a willingness to listen are essential qualities. Appreciating what people with disabilities have to offer the church and the world honors them and Jesus.

~ Milton Tyree

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