

# Bring On The Church Coach!

Bill Van Dyken is the Religious Services Coordinator of Hope Haven Inc. in Rock Valley Iowa. He is also a church coach. He doesn't organize winter basketball teams, or summertime softball. He organizes congregational care teams. How? By helping families of persons with disabilities contact their congregation. He goes with them to meet with a group to tell their story describing their simple basic need for a break in the tasks of care giving through the support of others they can trust. Bill then helps organize and guide these groups into a team of friends within that congregation. These teams take turns providing respite care to that family as a way of support and living out their own faith and call.

So what's a church coach? A church coach (or synagogue coach or mosque coach) is not that different from a job coach or inclusion facilitator. However, he or she works in a very different kind of organization and community.

The familiar story is that of families with children or adults with disabilities who have not had much support from their congregation. Sometimes, it is an issue of trying, and not having any success. Sometimes, it is spiritual abuse: when a church leader or congregation member has said or done something that has been very wounding. These wounds can be particularly painful coming from "a man of God" or "God's people." More often, it is fatigue. Parents who have had to fight and advocate in every other area of their children's lives may not want to when it comes to church. "That's the one place," they have often said, "where I thought I wouldn't have to. If I do, forget it. It is easier not to go." Sometimes not wanting to advocate within the congregation is the normal struggle with being or appearing vulnerable, or to ask for something for ourselves. When it comes to church, most of us would rather be givers than receivers.

The other side of that story is a congregational community that simply does not know the struggles and journey; that may want to help, but does not know how; that is afraid and uncertain of how to act or respond; that is, ironically, dis-abled in their ability to act in faith and love.

Thus enters the church coach. A person who believes that within congregations, there are many groups of people who will respond to others, once they see the need and feel empowered to do so. The coach's role is to help a family or person with a disability tell their story to the right group, and then help the congregation to see their own capacity and ability to support that family or person. Most families don't want *special* ministries or services. The *real* gift to them and their children is to be included in what is the typical and normal life of that particular community of God's people.

When people say, "Well, we would like to respond or help, but we don't know how," the coach is the one who responds:

- "I can help you learn."
- "The family can help teach you."
- "Let's work on it together."
- "All the questions and fears you have are perfectly normal, and it is OK to ask me."
- "You *all* can do something I can't. You can include that kid in that class, or be his friend on the retreat, or help her be part of the synagogue's preschool..."

The coach knows that he or she is on the sidelines. The coach's role is to teach, guide, motivate, celebrate, and support a group of others who begin to learn about their own capacity and ability to do something they once thought they could not do.

Where do you find these coaches? Lots of places. They could be a chaplain of an agency or program, like Bill Van Dyken, a Director of Ministries with People with Disabilities at the local diocese; or someone like Wendy Chesnov, who works for the Jewish Metrowest Federation in New Jersey. She helps congregations include children with disabilities in all kinds of programs of Jewish life and education. They could also be a professional in your congregation who works in the area of disabilities, or your child's teacher, or, think of it, someone from the IEP ( Individualized Education Program). Lots of professionals are also people of faith, but have not been asked to use their gifts from both "worlds" to help faith communities with inclusive supports. What the coach *must* be is someone of faith who sees the needs, gifts, and abilities of everyone concerned through the eyes of faith, and can use the language of that congregational community, not of the IEP.

A coach *could* be a parent, but neither the church nor the parents should have to be the coach for their own child or member. I remember a mother telling me that the Sunday School teacher of her children with ADHD asked her not to send her fourteen year old son anymore, unless she could come to help out. Her son may have needed a buddy, or several, and a coach to work with them. How many teenagers want their own *parents* performing that role! Much better that the parents can be the teachers for those who are willing to help. However, like a coach, they must be willing to believe others can and *will* respond, and then *let go*.

The resource materials are out there for congregations to use. A wealth of materials on inclusive religious education, respite care, congregation-based circles of support youth activities and more is compiled by the Religion Division of AAMR. For many families of children with developmental disabilities, their congregations have been life-giving sources of hospitality, friendship, and support. For many, many others, that *is* not the story. Bring on the *Church Coaches!*

~ Bill Gaventa

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