

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

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Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Facing the Challenge of Inclusive Worship

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More than 10 years ago, our congregation, Eastminster United Church in Belleville, Ontario, was approached by a couple whose adult son had just been moved from our regional institution to a group home. Recent changes in public policy have brought new neighbours into many communities across the country. They are the people living with significant developmental and other challenges who used to be accommodated in institutions. In several provinces they are now living in community-based group homes. That is definitely true of our city, where our neighbours now include an increasing number of group homes.

This family was mostly pleased with their son's adjustment to the new environment. They had no complaints about the care he was receiving or the extent to which his needs were being met, with one exception: There was no intentional provision for his spiritual needs. A staff chaplain had served our regional centre, and his job was to minister to the residents on their own terms. That ministry was no longer available, and the usual worship life of our church did not seem very helpful to people who may not speak, hear, or comprehend beyond the most basic level.

The boy's parents were challenging us. Would we – could we – change the way we do ministry to include people like their son? This congregation was already an eclectic mix of people from a variety of denominational traditions who are stubbornly diverse in their expectations and preferences, especially about worship. As a result, our services include a mosaic of styles that regularly change as we try to be as inclusive as possible.

We like to think that everyone would feel welcome, old and young, whether they prefer traditional or contemporary music, or whether they find the sacred in formal liturgy or delight in worship that is casual and spontaneous. We work at being inclusive, but the reality is that the reach of our Sunday morning fellowship does not extend to people who don't read, who may have seizures, or who shout out at any time. These are people who are not likely to experience the presence of God in any sermon, no matter how down-to-earth the preaching.

Steps toward change

The first step in meeting the challenge was to know the community we wanted to serve. We formed a task group to do some research. Its members included the couple who first approached us, as well as several members of the congregation,

including my spouse Betty, a teacher who has worked for most of her career with people who are developmentally challenged. We consulted with other families and the staff of local organizations that support "special needs" populations. The task group helped us to define first what we wanted to accomplish and then to identify the obstacles. Eventually the congregation's leadership agreed on a goal to create a worship experience with as few barriers as possible so absolutely anyone could feel at home and participate to their fullest ability.

The first step was easy. Our church building is already physically accessible, with no stairs between the driveway and the sanctuary. The washrooms on the same level are fully accessible. Removable chairs provide seating in the sanctuary so we can create as much open floor space as we need. The physical barriers were not the problem.

Adapting worship

A bigger challenge was figuring out how to worship in a different way from the usual service. The printed word would be useless, whether on a page or projected on a screen. The language of scripture could be confusing to those with a limited vocabulary. A sermon was not going to communicate in this situation. Any verbal responses by the congregation would have to be simple and repetitive. The idiosyncrasies of denominational tradition would be irrelevant. Since the participants would bring a wide range of needs and abilities, the style of worship needed to be intentionally flexible and as spontaneous as possible.

The new model

Thus began our experiment in truly inclusive worship. On the last Wednesday evening of each month, we offer our Special Services of Praise. We count on the cooperation of the organizations that support the group homes, since the attendance of their clients depends on the staff and transportation provided. An unintended benefit has been the attendance of many special needs individuals who are living with their families and have long been our neighbours, though they used to be mostly unseen.

Intentional hospitality

In addition to staff to support their clients, we have developed a team of caring volunteers who provide hospitality. They move wheelchairs, assist with bathroom calls, and host the time of fellowship and refreshments after the service. They also serve food and drink under the direction of group home staff so that no one is put at risk by the enthusiasm of our generosity.

Adaptability of music

We are blessed in these services by the talents of those who provide this congregation's ministries of music and by their willingness to participate and adapt. Our Minister of Music, Michael Faulkner, leads the singing and arranges for appropriate special music with an emphasis on high energy and heavy beat. The services themselves begin with a simple chorus. All the music is as simple as possible, with lyrics adapted to the context, fewer syllables, and more repetition.

The services always end with a version of "Kum Ba Ya" with words that are appropriate to the theme or mood of the evening.

We've learned the importance of percussion, especially to those living with severe forms of autism. Rhythm instruments are given to everyone who can manage them. Some of our "regulars" are completely non-communicative but can drum the rhythm of a song without missing a beat. A highlight of the service is our "karaoke worship", where we offer the microphone to anyone who wishes to sing. Where possible, Michael provides accompaniment. I help sometimes by whispering the lyrics into the singer's ear. The words may not be quite right and the melody may be off, but the smiles of accomplishment are truly brilliant.

Participating in the Word

One young man, who has been in care since shortly after birth, loves to read out loud, so we invite him to read the "lesson". I've learned that you can take almost any biblical text, sift out its essential meaning, and paraphrase it in simple language. For example, this is our version of the Shepherd's Psalm:

God gives me what I need.

God gives me food and water and strength for my spirit.

God shows me how to live.

If I am alone, God is with me.

If I am afraid, God protects me.

I know I am loved and always will be, in life and forever.

In these services, the sermon is replaced by a story presented in a way that engages everyone. As with the lesson, the first step is gleaning the essential message. Then we try to involve as many actors as possible. Parts are assigned according to capability. We've learned that you can fill an imaginary boat with disciples in wheelchairs, and before Jesus walks toward them on the water, the rest of the congregation can wonderfully produce the sound of storm and thunder.

Special moments

One Christmas, the sermon consisted of creating a tableau of the Nativity. In choosing volunteers to come forward to take a role, I chose the father who, with his wife, had first challenged us to provide a ministry that included his son. "Dad" was chosen to be one of the angels. After the service, his wife told me that when I stuck the "halo" on the father's head, her son turned to her, grabbed her hands, looked directly into her eyes, and smiled. The miracle in that moment was that this 50-year-old autistic man had not communicated with his parents in any meaningful way since he was a child.

Removing invisible barriers

Our original motivation was altruistic. We were asked to help and we decided to do something that, as it turns out, seemed to accomplish the goal we had set for ourselves. Certainly, those who attended the services, as well as relatives and caregivers, appreciated our new model of services. The organizations running the group homes were grateful for our help in meeting their obligation to provide for the spiritual needs of their clients. The services have also made us the church

home of many people who otherwise have no such connection, including the residents and many of the workers. We were the ones to whom they turned in times of grief or other need.

However, the people of Eastminster Church would agree that the best benefit of these services is our own benefit. These "special" members of our church family have taught us about courage and joy, trust and humility. They have helped us discover the true meaning of worship. Many members of the congregation make a point of attending our special services, not just to help out but also for their own benefit. They claim that worship in the new style and context provides an especially meaningful sense of God's presence. By making the effort to remove barriers we had never bothered to see, we learned that truly inclusive worship really does include everyone!

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