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# THE LIVING CHURCH

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ON THE COVER: Emily Betts from Trinity Church, Lawrenceburg, Ind., delights in conquering the climbing wall at Waycross Center. See page 16 for more on this camp.  
Rick Wood photo



The Rev. Canon Timothy Dombek and his son Jonathan prepare for the Eucharist at Trinity Cathedral, Phoenix.

Greta Huls photos

# Welcoming People with Disabilities

## Our Joy and Delight

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me (Mark 9:37).

By Timothy M. Dombek

Sixteen years ago this fall, our only child, Jonathan, was born with Down Syndrome. The gift of his birth into our lives has been nothing less than an epiphany, an eye-opening revelation of a population to whom many if not most of our churches are unprepared (or, more likely, inadequately prepared) to serve.

For a parent of a child with a permanent, lifelong disability, sometimes just getting basic services or simple approvals for your child's participation in "normal" activities can be arduous. Social service agencies, schools, employers, and other organizations swing between being a champion of your rights — or your child's rights — and being the barrier to a better life, education or therapy — sometimes all in the same week. The last place where families like ours need to deal with resistance is in church. But even the church is not above resisting the changes needed to accommodate adults or children with disabilities.

How we welcome people into our congregations matters greatly. "The likelihood that people with disabilities and their families attend a congregation certainly is influenced by the extent to which they are welcomed and supported," writes Dr. Erik Carter, author of *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*. Dr. Carter's landmark book on this topic features a virtual paint-by-numbers methodology for preparing people and congregations to be that kind of supportive, welcoming presence, and to have skill and grace in meeting the challenging needs presented by those families.

Last fall at our diocesan ministry fair, my wife Beth and



Acolytes Jonathan Dombek and Lillie Carlile assist at the Eucharist May 24.

I offered a workshop titled "Preparing for Children With Disabilities" as a way of bridging this gap in knowledge and practice for congregations wishing to be more welcoming. Ultimately, it takes individuals in our churches who want to learn how to do this, who want to welcome people with disabilities, to make it happen. That has been borne out in our experience time and time again. If you have a person or a committed group of people in your congregation who will say, "We can do this!" and are willing to learn and implement what it takes to pull it off, chances are your efforts will be successful.

As a model for how to begin welcoming children with disabilities in a congregation, we shared our experiences of success, and lessons from not-so-successful efforts we learned about during the past 15 years. When I was called as rector of St. James' Church, Greenville, S.C., in 2000, our son was 6 years old. During the interviews, when asked if *we* had any questions for the search committee and vestry, Beth asked point-blank: "Will my son,

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# Welcoming People with Disabilities

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Jonathan, be accepted here?" After an uncomfortable silence, one vestry person ventured, "I can't imagine that he wouldn't be accepted." Not exactly reassuring. But we discovered that people committed to making sure he was included stepped up to make it work.

When we needed a one-on-one aide for Jonathan in Sunday school, one person volunteered to help. Beth took the time to share with her all the pertinent information about Jonathan, his health and behavior, his communication level (Jonathan's biggest delay is his speech), and how to motivate, redirect or correct him, when needed. That information made it easier for this woman to be his aide and for him to have a positive Sunday school experience. Working with the teachers, Beth (a special education resource teacher herself) demonstrated how to adapt the curriculum in ways that could include Jonathan in their activities, which eased their comfort level and lessened any anxiety they might have had about having a child with disabilities in their class.

As Jonathan got older, we discovered he had celiac disease, which is a gluten intolerance (no wheat, barley or oats can be consumed). St. James' immediately added gluten-free wafers to the celebrations of the Eucharist, and we soon discovered other people who needed them.

**Families of children with disabilities are looking for faith communities that will accept them in the same way they accept others.**

When it came time for Jonathan to move up to the Episcopal Youth Community (EYC), the youth ministry coordinator created a method to ensure that all the kids had a chance to get to know him better. The entire EYC group made up the Ability Team — known as the A-Team — and each week, two kids were paired up with Jonathan to go to EYC with him, to ensure his inclusion in all the frenzied activity that youth group can be, and to provide redirection when needed. We provided his gluten-free pizza or pasta for dinner, and the kids wound up loving the chance to be Jonathan's "partner" at EYC. The A-Team proved a great success, and best of all, Jonathan made some lasting new



Jonathan recently began his acolyte duties at the cathedral, having previously served at St. James' Church, Greenville, S.C.

friendships. The young people of St. James' also had the valuable experience of accepting people with differences and learning from them.

During our seven years there, Jonathan, who eventually served as an acolyte, became such a beloved part of St. James' that when I announced my leaving, one parishioner said, "What are we going to do without Jonathan?" What a difference his presence made in their parish life! Jonathan continues to be an acolyte regularly, and is a member of the Rite-13 class (where he offers the closing benediction prayer each week) in our home parish in Arizona.

Families of children with disabilities are looking for faith communities that will accept them in the same way they accept others. Think about it: The community of persons with disabilities is an open community, perhaps the most open community in society. People join it every day — some through aging or as a result of an accident, an injury, or illness, or sometimes by genetic difference at birth. People with disabilities don't discriminate on who can join them, yet regularly they are discriminated against purposefully or unwittingly by a culture too busy to notice them. Sometimes the church also fails to notice or respond.

Since the conclusion of our ministry fair, one congregation in Arizona has called on the resources of our disability awareness program group to train members on including four children with autism into the life and routine of their Sunday school and congregation. The need for this kind of education and commitment in other con-

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## Welcoming People with Disabilities

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gregations in the diocese is increasing.

We need to give people with disabilities access to society's most important place: our compassionate heart. In fact, if we each begin with opening our heart, access to our church buildings, programs and our lives will be a natural expression of welcoming all God's children into the community of Christ's body, freely and without prejudice. Our proactive inclusion of adults and children with disabilities into the full life of our churches then will become the living and best example of what our familiar blue-and-white signs proclaim to all: "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." □

*The Rev. Canon Timothy M. Dombek is canon to the ordinary in the Diocese of Arizona.*

## Resources to help welcome persons with disabilities:

*Including People With Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families and Congregations.* By Erik W. Carter. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. ISBN-13:9781-55766-743-4

*Accessibility Guidelines for Episcopal Churches, Revised Edition.* Edited by Jean Forrey, Betty Moe, and the Rev. Barbara Ramnaraine. Episcopal Disability Network. [www.disability99.org/id7.html](http://www.disability99.org/id7.html)

*Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality.* By Thomas E. Reynolds. Brazos Press. ISBN: 978-1-58743-177-7.

[www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

The mission of this website is to encourage new ways of thinking about developmental disabilities in the belief that changes in attitudes and actions can help create a society in which children and adults with developmental disabilities have opportunities to live the lives of their dreams.