CCSEM Special Needs Ministry Leadership Council Aims to “Make the Works of God Visible”

Just over 12 percent of the population in the United States has some type of disability[1]. This figure translates to one in seven persons. Serving this segment of the population in the six-county area of the Archdiocese of Detroit is the purpose of a team of leaders formed under Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan (CCSEM) Director of Christian Service and Healthcare Ministries, Joyce Hyttinen. Dubbed the Special Needs Ministries Leadership Council, the team came together as the result of a strategic planning retreat.

“The retreat took place at a pivotal time,” said Hyttinen. “At the diocesan level, we needed to be more proactive in generating resources and training for parishes and schools, so we moved from serving in an advisory board capacity to the CCSEM Special Needs Ministries Leadership Council.”

Several initiatives are underway through the council, including an annual Mass for Special Needs. (continued on page 2)

References

*American Sign Language symbol for “I love you.”
Pat Romzek, Head of the Parish Committee on the CCSEM Special Needs Ministry Leadership Council, stands in the center of his parish church, Our Lady of Victory in Northville.

“The location is different each year so more people within the Archdiocese have the opportunity to participate in this Mass, which recognizes the gifts and abilities of individuals with special needs,” said Hyttinen. “During the Mass, awards are given to outstanding people who have special needs, as well as to individuals who serve in special needs ministries. This year the Mass will be celebrated on October 1 at St. Anastasia Parish in Troy. Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Arturo Cepeda will be the main celebrant, and all are welcome to attend.”

Another initiative of the council has been establishing working committees, led by council members. These committees include the Parish, School, Faith Formation and Direct Services committees.

“The parish committee, with feedback from the council, has developed a number of resources to assist parishes in the Archdiocese to further expand and energize their focus and ministry for those with special needs,” said Hyttinen. “These resources will be provided to all parishes by mail in a package directed to Pastors, Christian Service Coordinators and Religious Education Directors. We also plan to make the materials available on the CCSEM website, www.ccsem.org.”

To gather information from parishes on existing special needs programs and parish needs, the council also will send to parishes an online survey, and for those interested, offer online training in how to start a special needs ministry.

Pat Romzek heads up the Parish Committee for the Special Needs Ministries Leadership Council. Before creating the materials, Pat and committee members Charlotte Teslak (Our Lady of Good Counsel, Plymouth) and Karen Schmid (Our Lady of Victory, Northville) got a list of exemplary dioceses nationwide from the National Catholic Partnership on Disability and collected information from each. They also talked with a selected group of archdiocesan pastors. “They believe serving those with special needs is important, and they want to figure this out,” he said. “But frankly, they don’t know what they should be doing in this regard. We hope to provide them with the means to serve and welcome people with special needs into the life of the parish.”

Romzek is active in special needs ministry at his own parish, Our Lady of Victory in Northville. There he teamed up with parishioner Karen Schmid to create a special needs ministry fully supported by their pastor, Fr. Denis Theroux. The ministry is listed in the OLV parish bulletin, including contact information to let parishioners know members are available to answer questions and provide information. “Our special needs ministry is a core priority, with equal emphasis as other parish ministries,” said Romzek.

“It takes baby steps to start a parish special needs ministry,” he explained. “It involves making people feel welcome and letting individuals with special needs know you care. Otherwise, they think you don’t care. Our whole philosophy is about making a difference in a person’s faith life. If one person at one parish somewhere has a greater relationship with the Lord and feels more included in their parish, all our work is worth it.”

Romzek has brought his desire to help those with special needs to his parish and diocese, as well as his workplace. He is a consultant for Cisco Systems, having served as a company executive for 16 years before his recent retirement. At Cisco he founded a program called LifeChanger which helps employ persons with disabilities. The project uses technology to...
enable people with disabilities to work in an accommodating, flexible work environment.”

“We’ve hired more than 70 people with disabilities across the company,” he said. Cisco asked Pat to remain as a consultant because the company knows the initiative has had a profound effect on its workforce, business, and on the lives of people with disabilities. “It is good for our business, and we are now in the process of implementing it across our entire company.”

Calling it his passion, Romzek credits his work for those with special needs to the inspiration of his son, Andrew, age 30, who has Down syndrome and can neither read nor write. “He is one of my life’s greatest blessings,” said Pat. “I will never ever be able to thank the Lord enough for the gift of Andrew. In countless ways, I’ve learned more from him than he will ever learn from me.”

Romzek strongly believes Andrew was born for a reason, pointing to a particular scripture passage, John 9:1-3, as proof: As Jesus passed by a man blind from birth, His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.” ~John 9:1-3

Elaine Leigh: Sharing her Faith from Her Wheelchair

Despite living with multiple sclerosis (MS), a progressive disease which put her in a wheelchair almost two decades ago, Elaine Leigh has not stopped sharing her faith with others. She started teaching catechism when her daughter, now age 38, was four years old, at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Parish in Beverly Hills, Michigan. “I’d say I’ve been teaching at least 35 years,” she said.

She leads a faith discussion group at Lourdes Senior Community in Waterford, which she has been doing about the same amount of time she has been in the wheelchair. Until her recent retirement from teaching religious education, she did both acts of service, and she continues to lead the program at Lourdes.

Leigh does not believe what she does is anything special. “When I was in a wheelchair it wasn’t any different,” she said. “I still wanted to share my faith. I wanted to give and continue to give, and it didn’t make a difference if I was in a wheelchair.”

“All God asks us is to do our best every day. No person with a handicap should underestimate themselves and what they can give.”

For the last several years, Leigh has been a member at St. Owen Parish in Bloomfield Hills. In the early 1990s, she worked with the high school students there, and then later on with the fifth graders. Her husband John was right by her side. “I felt God with me throughout the whole journey, and He gave me a good helper,” she said.

Leigh laughs as she remembers how her husband contributed to her classes. “I would talk during the whole class and John would say nothing. At the very end he could sum it up in one sentence.”

A former Baptist, Elaine’s husband converted to the Catholic faith in 2010. He smiles when asked if his wife was part of the inspiration. He turns the attention from himself and describes how she designed the program at Lourdes “from scratch” and has since led about “400 classes.”

“I think she is unique,” he said. “She can relate. She helps the kids on their level. I’m amazed at how on a Sunday she teaches fifth graders, and on Fridays and Saturdays she leads 80 and 90 year olds in studies. She makes it meaningful to them. When they reflect something they learned, you can see Elaine just light up.”

Elaine does not disagree. “My dad said one time, ‘You don’t even know Elaine’s in a wheelchair when she does that.’ I had to laugh. When you are sitting there teaching, how would they know?”
Helping People Have a Relationship with God:
Deaf priest serves the needs of his own in southeast Michigan

According to Fr. Michael Depcik, approximately 95 percent of people who are deaf in the world have no religious affiliation. As pastor of the St. John’s Deaf Center in Eastpointe, he works to change that statistic, at least for those who live in southeast Michigan.

The Deaf Center is the “heart of all Catholic ministry” for those served in the six counties of southeast Michigan, Fr. Michael said.

“We have Mass here for the deaf for the Archdiocese of Detroit (AoD),” he said. “We provide religious education classes, counseling services, Bible study classes, and different activities for the deaf Catholic.”

People like Alice Torz of Marysville and Joan Galbo of Eastpointe have been relying on the Deaf Center almost as long as they can remember. Photos of the two women hang among many on the walls in the center’s main hallway. One photo shows Alice in her white dress with her first communion class. Joan is pictured with a group of children and adults at one of the many social activities that have taken place at the center throughout the years.

The majority of deaf people are born into hearing families, he explained. “Their families often don’t know sign language. So they take them to a hearing church and many deaf people grow up not understanding what is going on. It just goes over their head.”

Fr. Michael Depcik, Pastor of the St. John’s Deaf Center in Eastpointe, celebrates Mass with the center’s community members.

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He lamented the lack of priests who know sign language. “Most other dioceses have almost nothing for the deaf,” he said. “Many are starving spiritually, and it’s sad.”

Many baptized deaf Catholics eventually go to other denominations like Jehovah’s Witnesses or Baptists “because they serve their needs.”

Fr. Michael said he is “fortunate” to have been born to a deaf family. “Growing up, I never had any barriers to communication because we had a common language, American Sign Language. I thought I was normal. One time when I was maybe four or five years old, I went to the grocery store with my mom, and another little boy was in line. I signed to him and then asked my mom, ‘Why is he not signing?’ And she said, ‘Well because he is not deaf.’ After that I understood that hearing people are different.”

Father himself almost left the Catholic Church as a young person.

“I went to Catholic school for the deaf in Ohio, and I knew about the Catholic faith, but my heart was way away from God.” He would later go to Australia as an exchange student and live with a born-again Christian family. “That’s really where I found God. I felt in the beginning the Catholic Church wasn’t for me. And then I came back to America. I went to a deaf college in Washington DC.”

During an orientation tour on campus the first week, he was about to join a local Protestant denomination when he met a Catholic priest. I said, ‘Hi Father how are you?’ And he said, ‘Hi, how are you? Are you Catholic?’ And I said ‘Yes.’ And he said, ‘Wonderful! Welcome to our Church!’ I couldn’t believe I had said I was still a Catholic. And I have been ever since.”
At the age of 21, he read a book about Medjugorje he said changed his life. “After reading that book, I began to embrace fully my Catholic faith. I went back to confession and taught myself how to pray the Rosary.”

It was about two or three months later that he had what he describes as a very powerful dream.

“I was back to the dormitory at my old school, St. Rita School for the Deaf in Cincinnati,” he said. “I looked down and was surprised I had on priest’s vestments, like I was ready for Mass. I said, ‘Me a priest? How can that be?’” He walked into the church and saw people “flocking” in. The church was packed. And someone motioned for me to come. I said, ‘No! I don’t know how to say Mass.’ Then someone said, ‘Yes. You will have Mass for us.’ And I said, ‘No! I’ve never even gone to the seminary.’ And then I woke up.”

The dream had its effect. Father is now one of only 10 deaf priests in the United States, and one of about 13 in the world. Consequently he is invited to go to different places nationally and worldwide to assist with ministry for the deaf. All the while he serves the deaf “scattered” through the Archdiocese of Detroit. “I feel sorry for my car,” he said. “It is two years old, and I already have more than 50,000 miles on it.”

He said he tries to keep in contact with those outside the boundaries of the Archdiocese because they have no priests to serve them. “I want to say, ‘No. I work for the AoD.’ But I try to use my time wisely. If there are people not too far away, I’ll help service them too.”

Father Michael posts a weekly video blog (www.frmd.org) to reach as many people as possible. “They say it really helps them continue their faith.”

What would Fr. Michael advise pastors of parishes to do to begin serving the deaf and others with disabilities? “I think they should try to understand what the special needs people are going through. Many times we assume we know what they are feeling. But all situations are different. People are different. You need to find out the best opportunity for each of them.”

He told a story about a woman from Florida who called him in tears. “She wanted to go to confession with a priest, but the confessonals were traditional and she couldn’t see the priest. The priest told her to sit outside and wait until everyone was gone. She was sitting there and people were staring because she was just sitting there.”

Father said there must be balance in the way Catholics care for each other. He used the analogy of a three-legged table, with the first leg representing a person’s physical needs (food, clothing, housing), the second leg their mental and emotional needs (relationships with other people), and the third leg spiritual needs (relationship with God). “If we don’t support each leg, the table, representing life, is out of balance and may collapse,” Fr. Michael explained. St. John’s Deaf Center provides deaf people these three important parts in their lives.

Simply put, he said, “We need priests who sign, or interpreters who help the deaf feel like they can have a relationship with God.”

THE ST. JOHN’S DEAF CENTER
16103 Chesterfield Ave
Eastpointe, MI 48021

Masses in Sign Language:
• Tuesdays: 10:30 am
• Wednesdays: confessions and private appointments with Fr. Michael
• Sundays: 9:30 am, celebrated by Fr. Michael at Our Lady of Loretto Church in the school building; 11:30 am, celebrated by Fr. Michael at Holy Innocents Church (voice interpreted for the hearing community)

Activities:
• Bible study
• Sign language classes
• Eucharistic Adoration
• Pilgrimages to holy sites
• Religious instruction for children and adults
• Administration of the sacraments and sacramental prep
• Spiritual retreats
• Fellowship after Mass
• Special event celebrations/dinner for holidays
• Senior Citizens social gatherings with card games (Tuesdays)
• Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (Mondays)
• Food pantry and support for the poor

For more information, call
St. John’s Deaf Center at 586-439-0146.
(Interpreter Service for Hearing Persons)
Fax: 586-774-8476
Website: www.sjdc-oll.org
When people refer to the special needs ministry at St. Irenaeus Parish in Rochester Hills as a “program”, Deacon John corrects them. “It’s more of a process than a program,” he says.

Once a month on a Saturday, the team hosts a get-together of participants informally referred to as the “Special Needs Disciples”. They come from all over the nearby area, though some travel quite far. Local group homes bring van loads.

Deacon Wright explains the ministry is for “people who may not have realized, or may not have understood, how God is present in their lives. It’s a process for them to understand and learn that.”

The main activity during each monthly gathering is inspiring participants to act out a specially selected Bible story. “It’s a good way for our friends with special needs to connect with scripture and understand a bit more about what is going on,” said Deacon Wright.

On June 10, St. Irenaeus held the last gathering before summer vacation. Meetings will resume in October.

“Usually we have a craft connected with each event,” said the deacon.

“Today they are making paper fish because the Bible account is from the Gospel of John, Chapter 21, when the risen Jesus makes a fire and cooks on the seashore the fish his disciples caught that morning for their breakfast.”

Deacon Wright first acted upon the idea for the Special Needs Disciples while serving at SS. John and Paul Parish in Washington Township.

When he was later transferred to St. Irenaeus, he brought the ministry with him. “When I first came here, Fr. Brian Chabala (Pastor at St. Irenaeus) and I talked about it. We had a very nice conversation, he was very supportive.”

Deacon Wright acknowledges the ministry “takes a lot of effort” to organize, adding his team meets about two weeks before each event.

Special Needs Disciples team member Vickie Hopkins gets a hug from one of the guests.
Once a month on a Saturday, the team hosts a get-together of participants informally referred to as the “Special Needs Disciples”.

Wright said he felt called to this type of ministry since he and his wife have a son with special needs. “The ministry to which you are attracted may often be something that’s happened in your own life,” he said. “So this ministry comes close to our home and close to our hearts.”

He emphasized the participants are not the only ones who benefit from this ministry. “Who learns as much as anybody? Who gets the gifts? We all do. The entire team does.”

Wright talks about one encounter with a Special Needs Disciple he especially remembers. “I asked him if he felt Jesus coming into his life. He looked me straight in the eyes and said, ‘Yes.’

“He may have a lot of things that hold him back with a developmental disability, but on that day, it was not important. That meeting touched me as much as it touched him.”

Opportunities for Parishes to Serve People with Special Needs

- Start a support group for special needs parishioners and their families
- Start a volunteer ministry to provide services for families with special needs persons. Pair families in a buddy system.
- Invite speakers to educate staff and volunteers about ministering to those with disabilities.
- Host a Mass for those with special needs, considering the climate needs of particular groups, such as softer lighting, no music, signers for the deaf, and designated, accessible seating.
- Provide a designated quiet room for those with sensory issues.
- Offer special needs religious education, faith formation and sacramental preparation as needed.
- Host a vacation bible school for children with special needs.
- Provide pew cards with information about welcoming people with special needs.
- Have missals or hymnals in Braille available for the visually impaired. Ensure parish events are inclusive, providing accommodations for those with special needs.
Personal Challenges Enhance Pastor’s Perspective

Fr. Denis Theroux likes to meet people where “the vertical meets the horizontal.” He refers to the beams of the cross, where at the center, he says, you find the face of Jesus Christ.

“In ministry, the center of the cross is where life happens,” he explains. “For me that’s been the focus of my ministry. As a church we reach out to one another, and we look for the face of Jesus. He is always, always there.”

Fr. Denis quickly adds that if a person sees in others only their crosses, or whatever is perceived to be their crosses, “that is all you will see.”

At Our Lady of Victory Parish (OLV) in Northville, where he serves as pastor, Fr. Denis has made Special Needs Ministry a priority. He can relate especially to those who suffer from disabilities.

“I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) about eight years ago,” he shares. “MS is a neurological disease that affects the myelin sheath, the covering of the brain. One person’s experience of the disease might not be the experience of another. Depending on where the myelin has been destroyed, one person’s gait might be impaired, another person’s speech, or in another their eyesight.

“Because my (MS) lesions are in the pons area, it’s my balance,” he said, holding firmly onto one of the three hand rails around the OLV altar. “I can fall easily. I have vertigo 24/7. So I continuously spin.”

He believes his own challenges have helped him understand life from a new perspective. “When you are healthy and have lots of energy, you don’t think about jumping up two stairs to the platform, or running home because you need a sweater. Now I’m conscious of that all the time, so it’s made me conscious of everyone who crosses our threshold at Our Lady of Victory. What are they in need of? How can we meet their need?”

“Because of my own struggles I’ve learned to be as specific as possible in asking questions, not assuming. Sometimes you don’t see on the outside what someone might be struggling with – a physical, spiritual or emotional challenge.”

“As church that’s what we do. We respond to one another in whatever way we can. Everyone struggles with something. We all have a cross in life.”

He points out how Jesus repeatedly met people where they were, treating all with dignity, kindness and love. “Are we allowed to do something differently?” Father asked.

When Fr. Denis was assigned to OLV in 2006, the parish was building a new school “I wasn’t sure when I arrived whether or not we would ever have the money to do more renovation, but I began to keep a list of things that struck me. A list of things I had seen in other places. Accommodations that had been made for accessibility of buildings and facilities.”

In 2008, the parish was able to renovate the old school building into an office administration building.

“The old office building was a combination rectory office space built in 1967,” he said. “My office was on the second floor. If we hadn’t renovated the old school, I would probably have had to leave OLV because I never would have been able to go up to my office every day. Just to get into the front door there were six steps.”

During his first month at OLV, a parishioner came to see Fr. Denis who couldn’t get up the steps due to a physical limitation. “So I met the person in their car in the driveway.”

Afterward, he asked himself, “How many other people are there who don’t even bother to call because they know they can’t come into the building?”

OLV’s church renovation started in 2014, and Father made special requests of the architect. “I wanted to make the church more than minimally accessible with ramps,” he said. On the altar he asked for an additional hand railing and a special outlining on the altar steps.
“We could not have the tile go right to the end of the steps because I could not differentiate the step from the floor.

“Highly polished marble floors are very beautiful, but if you are a person living with a disability they are a real challenge,” he said. “The glare of the light off that marble, the crisp sharp edges—I am very cautious on such steps.”

He also instructed the architect to be conscious of the size of doorways for wheelchair accessibility.

“At some parishes they might think, ‘We don’t have anyone coming to Mass in a wheelchair.’ Well, you probably don’t have anyone coming in a wheelchair because they know they can’t get into the building.”

He wanted to make sure people with disabilities had choices on where to sit. “When you have a disability, you are often told where you are going to be seated, like in the front row. But you might not want to sit there. So we have multiple sections for anyone who needs special access.”

OLV offers accessible seating on three sides, in six sections, in both the front and the back.

But facility adaption is not Father’s only concern. Regarding his staff, he stresses they create a welcoming atmosphere, for which he takes the lead. He makes an effort not to stigmatize families with young children or members who cannot be quiet or sit still during Mass.

“The congregation takes that message from the pastor. If I’m looking at the cry room when a child makes noise, I’m sending a pretty clear message for that family to leave. Purposefully when children are crying, I try to wink at the child or smile at mom without calling attention to them. I want to say, ‘Please don’t leave. You are part of who we are and if you leave, you take that part away from us. You take the opportunity for us to learn how to be together and be a community.’

“Jesus made the crowds uncomfortable because he reached out and touched the leper. The crowd was horrified because they thought Jesus made himself unclean. But it becomes clear those who are unclean are actually the ones staring at (the leper) and telling him to go away.”

Father believes OLV is a welcoming parish. “The most common thread I hear is that many people come to Our Lady of Victory because of the number of young families here.”

The parish and staff are also caring of their pastor.

“The staff has been wonderful in assisting me,” he said. “They realize I have great energy, and I’m very enthusiastic and passionate about everything I can do. But I only have a certain amount of reserve.

He remembers a particularly long offsite meeting in a room with little to no air conditioning. “Heat is one of the factors that affects MS pretty profoundly. And one of the staff members looked at me and said, ‘We need to leave, don’t we?’ I knew I was just fading at the table.

“The staff is, I would say protective, but always ensuring I have independence. They never want me to feel I am simply an MS patient whose name is Denis. I’m Denis, who struggles with MS.”

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**Ways to Make Your Parish More Welcoming for People with Special Needs**

- Ensure your facilities meet Americans with Disabilities Act compliance requirements.
- Ensure an accessible sanctuary and spaces for worship, including access to sacraments like the Eucharist or Reconciliation.
- Have a plan for faith formation and sacramental preparation for those with special needs.
- Establish designated, accessible seating for people with disabilities.
- Have appropriate signage in all parish facilities.
- Ask for feedback from parish members with disabilities about parish facility accessibility.
- Have a contact within the parish to assist those who need special assistance.
- Reach out in bulletin announcements on a regular basis to reach parishioners and family members who need special assistance, encouraging them to contact the parish office.
- Recognize people with disabilities have talents and skills useful to your parish and make sure to include those with disabilities in your liturgy and ministries.
Welcome to the Joyful Community, a No-Shush Prayer Service

Shannon Carlson grew up Catholic, going to church with her family. When she married and had her own children, she wanted the same opportunity to worship together with her family. But circumstances made that extremely difficult.

“My nine-year-old son has autism and his inability to sit still and be quiet makes it impossible at times for us to participate in church as a family,” she said, admitting they did not often come to Mass as a result. “I knew sitting in church was never going to happen for us. We were going separately. It just didn’t feel like it should feel.”

Her desire to worship together started her search to create a unique worship experience for families like hers. At first she said the parish she attended was not open to her ideas. “I really didn’t know what I was going to do. I had grown up in the Church as a family. I didn’t know how to be part of it without that.”

Her frustration led her to the edge. “I might have left the Church in all honesty, like many of the families that I know. There are so many families like ours that don’t come to church. They feel segregated, neglected.”

“When you have a special needs child who might be yelling speech fragments or throwing chew tubes or throwing a fit because something set them off, it’s distracting to others,” she admits. “As a parent, you feel like you are interrupting others who made their time to be there (in church). And now I’m not even paying attention because I’m worried about my child interrupting their experience.”

Carlson said organizing the eventual program that now exists at Christ the Redeemer “took us a really long time” but perseverance won out. She was inspired by a local Presbyterian service for families with special needs persons called Rejoicing Spirits.

The current program at Christ the Redeemer, “The Joyful Community” is a Christian prayer service and meets once a month in the parish chapel. Carlson calls it an “inclusive, shush-free prayer service” intended to “enrich the spiritual lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities along with their families and friends.” Intentionally short in duration, the service is interactive, centering on music and Bible stories that teach simple life lessons. Each service is followed by a social gathering.

“Many families who have left their church may not identify with any religion,” said Carlson. “We want this to be a place where anybody can come. For all children of God of all abilities.”

Carlson said though the program is not a Catholic Mass, she hopes to bring the Eucharist into the experience as much as possible. “Our hope is to offer communion outside of the prayer service once every quarter,” said Shannon, who is working with the pastor, Rev. Shannon Carlson (left) stands by the banner for her Joyful Community ministry, along with the liturgical leader Chip Ferrar (center) and music leader Mike Carter (right).
Joe Dailey, to add this aspect to the program.

“Another intent of our program is to give members of the parish the opportunity to become more aware and accepting of people of all abilities,” she said. “I desired to create a way for those with disabilities and all families, including those with small children, to be accepted, understood, and be able to experience a sense of community, given the opportunity to celebrate together inside the church without the fear of being shushed or worrying about interrupting the experiences of those around them.”

The environment is designed to be free of “no’s”. “They (the children) are able to move freely,” said Carlson. “We have instruments. We have ribbon wands. We have interactive Bible scripture. It’s a very free environment.”

They accommodate for each child who attends as much as possible. “There might be sounds – the organ is too loud – or a light flashing the wrong way, so we accommodate for that in our service. If there is a child who doesn’t like anyone around him, we make sure he has space.”

“We had a mother of a neuro-typical daughter who came her first time. She was nervous because she thought it was just a special needs service. Her daughter won’t sit still. The first time they came, during our interactive Bible story, her daughter was getting involved in the action but was also playing with the bibles. Her mom went to stop her, and I said, ‘Just let her be. Let her have fun.’ She was moved to tears, telling us how wonderful it felt. Later she joined our ministry.”

For more information about the Joyful Community, contact Christ the Redeemer’s Director for the Office of Family Ministry, Lisa Brown, at 248-391-4074 ext. 20 or dre@ctredeemer.org.
Religious Education Leaders Discuss Blessings and Challenges of Their Special Needs Ministry

Following is an interview with two program leaders for Special Needs Religious Education and Sacramental Preparation programs in southeast Michigan.

**Tell us about what your programs offer.**

Cal: Our program at St. Joan of Arc started in 1956. It began as a home-based study with the parents of challenged students and it has grown. Usually the parents of our students come to us because they need to have their kids make their sacraments and they are having difficulty in regular religious education programs.

Besides physically challenged students, we also have mentally, emotionally, and cognitively challenged students. We have had as many as 40 students in a year. Currently we have 33. We have about 14 younger students in early faith formation. We have about 18 older students, ranging from age 22 to 68. Once students have made their sacraments, they come back to us. We have some who travel as far as Chesterfield and Richmond because they want to be here, and they even show up on bad, snowy days. Ongoing formation, prayer and fellowship are very important to students and their families. Our students like to be in an environment where they are able to pray uninhibited by other people or surroundings.

I had one student, who wouldn’t talk to anyone. She would not pay attention in class or do any of the worksheets or assignments. When we introduced music, this student opened up as if a light was turned on. There was a whole new personality there. It was wonderful. But now we have another student who covers his ears when he hears music. You never know until you get a chance to know the students. What I like to do is have an opportunity for a parent to bring a child in and see how the child adapts. Often parents think they have to leave their child in the classroom, but if it makes the child feel more comfortable or helps with us learning to know the child, the parents are welcome to stay. It’s not so much the child doesn’t understand us, it’s us learning to understand the child.

Reith: At St. Ephrem, the youngest we take is age six, with the understanding their mental age is probably younger. The oldest I have is probably 40. For me, I don’t age them out, and we don’t do the same lesson every year, or it could get kind of boring. I’ve had one boy who has been there 20 years. They can remain in this community of faith as long as they wish. I had one girl in her 20s who we worked with a long time to get her to her first Eucharist. Regarding numbers, the first year I had 14 students. Last year I had 30. My peak year was 33.

We don’t go from first grade to second and so on. We may have a child for five to six years before they move to the next level.

**“We don’t give the faith to them. God gives the seeds of faith. We just provide spiritual nourishment. These kids have a profound connection to God.”**
In a whole church setting, it’s often difficult for a child with a special needs to participate. I try to get the kids actively involved in their faith life. How do they do something if they have never learned how? One thing we do is to begin each class with a procession. Students take turns carrying in a cross, a small Easter candle and the Bible. We play a song they can sing, use ribbon wands or rhythm instruments. There is no need to explain to them what a procession is because they have already done a procession.

Using the lectionary and reinforcing the liturgical seasons each week helps them to learn the flow of our liturgical spirituality. When they begin to realize the flow of the liturgical year, what each season brings is amazing. We’ve had pictures of the liturgical year around the room and walked it with a journey stick, which is a walking stick the students decorate.

Faith matters should not be taught like a subject. I can’t teach it like that. It’s not a head trip, it’s a heart trip. It needs to be taught actively.

It has to be lived. We don’t give the faith to them. God gives the seeds of faith. We just provide spiritual nourishment. These kids have a profound connection to God. So I do anything I can to help affirm their faith life and their involvement. Then I stand back and watch faith happen.

We have been to the Father Solanus Center in Detroit three times now. Besides being the residence of a future saint, it’s special to us. One of our students, as a baby, was taken there by his parents to Fr. Solanus. They asked him to pray for their child. The doctors had said the child would never walk or talk. Fr. Solanus asked to hold him and prayed quietly for about 10 or 15 minutes. He gave the baby back to his parents and said, ‘Your son will walk.’ And he walks! He doesn’t talk much, but if you play a song on the piano, he can play it exactly as you did. We wonder if he has Fr. Solanus’ gift for music because Fr. Solanus played the violin.

Our students also do service projects. They enjoy trying to help others. They know they can’t go and save the world, but they can do little things. Every year we recycle greeting cards for our shut-ins. They make packages of Christmas cards for Vets Returning Home. In October they make goodie bags for the veterans and collect items for the St. Vincent de Paul food pantry. In 2009 our students made teddy bears, with a little help from one of our parishioners who volunteered to sew them all. Our students stuffed them and put the bows on them. These were given to one of the Grosse Pointe police department to give to traumatized children as comfort objects.

“Our students also do service projects. They enjoy trying to help others. They know they can’t go and save the world, but they can do little things.”

What activities do you do with the students? Service projects?

Cat: We do a variety of things. Our students go to Eucharistic Adoration at the parish. They go on a yearly retreat. We’ve been to Manresa Jesuit Retreat Center in Bloomfield Hills and to neighboring parishes like St. Basil (St. Clair Shores) where our students learned about Jesus feeding the 5,000 and while baking bread (without making a mess I might add).

Rel: I want them to be familiar with the prayers of the church so some years we do the Stations of the Cross. We walk through the whole Passion Week. We have kids do the washing of the feet, act out Jesus being arrested and the Last Supper. The kids who play Jesus, you never know what you
are going to get. But it is always amazing. We do a Christmas play. We use songs to help tell the story while the kids are acting. There is no practice. They walk in that night and they get their part.

We spent at least two months studying the Mass. We use a “vestment” and set a table as an altar, and we walk through all the parts and I explain it to them. It has become a yearly tradition for our pastor to celebrate Mass with us. I try to get all the students involved in some aspect.

For a service project, we like to help St. Christine’s Soup Kitchen in Detroit. Our students make Christmas cookies for them and Easter baskets. Our older students actually prepared and served food for the homeless, through the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team (MCREST) when they came to St. Ephrem. And every year a group of students helps sort food and fill boxes for the Kiwanis Christmas food program.

How can someone get involved in your ministry?

Cal: Are our catechists special needs trained? No. To become a classroom assistant, an aide, a hall monitor, or a catechist here, you need an openness and a love for all of God’s people. Our volunteers are parents of students, or relatives, or they have had a neighbor who has a special needs child. They are here because they have a true love for the challenged person. It works for us and they are able to adapt to the needs of our students. Those interested in becoming involved on our program, can contact me. If they want be involved, then they come try us out, and we can see how we fit together. I’m not going to put a volunteer in a classroom, give them a manual and say teach. First, you are an observer. It may happen, someone thinks they would like to teach little children, but that doesn’t work. They might be more suited to work with the adult group. We don’t know until they are here for a while.

Reith: Have them contact me and we can talk. I have been very blessed with the teachers working with me. I have some good, experienced people. I usually try to have six plus me. And I have some of my older students who have gone through the program who work aids.

What would you tell a parish who wants to start a special needs religious education program?

Cal: There are usually one or two parishes in most vicariates that have some kind of stand-alone program. If there is not one at a nearby parish, a parish could start their own. Enlist the parents and older siblings of the special needs child. Ask your catechists if they would like to mentor the parent or sibling. Put a notice in your church bulletin and on the parish website.

Next try to figure out what materials are needed. Call a parish with a standalone special needs program and talk to them. Several times a year I get a call from parishes looking to help the special needs person’s formation. One recently wanted to know what kind of textbook to use for confirmation. I sent them the link for the materials I use, and that can be enough to get them going.

Reith: Parishes gain tremendously by receiving special needs people. It takes baby steps. In my mind, the vicariate level might be the best way to start. Students could be brought together at a central location with numbers enough to build a community and not just a class.

What religious education resources exist to help teach those with special needs?

Cal: People who work in parishes with special needs programs are happy to share. It’s difficult to find materials. The publishing companies have come out with some, but not all are useful. We may end up not using some things because they are not quite suitable for our students; we even make materials ourselves.

Reith: Many materials are not helpful, so I developed a lot on my own. Recently some companies are making the effort to produce more appropriate learning resources, but you still have to take it and adapt it to the students.

During the course of your ministry, what have you learned about people with special needs?

Cal: We learn more about the love of Jesus from our students than we could ever teach them. People think they don’t get it, but they do. ‘We learn more about the love of Jesus from our students than we could ever teach them. People think they don’t get it, but they do. ‘

Reith: When you meet someone who is particularly disabled, it’s easy to see a disabled body, and to forget there is a whole spirit there. Their body, their cognitive or
functional ability, does not define the wholeness of their being. I have gained so much from working with these students. I want them to understand who they really are in God’s eyes.

We have a young woman who is a Eucharistic minister who has Down syndrome. If you are in the pew next to her when she comes back from receiving communion, you are humbled because she is talking to God with such sincerity. When the thought came to us to have her be a Eucharistic minister – it was like, “Yes, she was meant for this.”

One young man is an altar server. He has been serving for five or six years. The family has incredible faith. Before serving his first Mass, he and his mother stayed in the car and prayed. And when they came inside, he said to his mother, “This is my destiny.” During the Mass, Father introduced him to the congregation and said to the young man, “We are so glad you are here. Nothing to be nervous about.” Then the boy asked, “Can I say something?” Father told him yes. So he thanked Father for letting him do this. “I’ve wanted to for a long time,” he said. Everyone there was touched. And then the young man leaned forward and said to Father, “I’m not nervous.”

This same young man recently asked me if I knew what he will do when he meets God. With pure joy on his face he said, “I’m going to hug God and give him a kiss and tell him how very much I love him.”

Mary Kay Reith shows photos from her Special Needs Religious Education classes, including activities during Passion Week.

Treating All Persons with Dignity and Respect

- Relax. Realize all people have gifts and challenges.
- Focus on the person - not the disability.
- Treat adults with disabilities as adults.
- Treat a child with a disability like any other child.
- Speak to the person - not the person’s companion or interpreter.
- Don’t assume you know a person’s need. Ask.
- Recognize the person may have multiple disabilities and multiple needs.
- Unless instructed to do otherwise, speak in a normal voice at a normal volume. Speaking slowly can be helpful. Consider there may be a physiological reason for unusual or inappropriate behavior.
- Trust, in most circumstances, parents know best how to care for their child.
- Politely offer help if needed. Open doors. Offer to get a book for the person. Offer to help seat the person. Offer parents struggling with their child’s behavior your assistance.
Strides for the SOUL

Linda Jackson’s daughter Kristen, a student at Western Michigan University at the time, probably didn’t realize almost a decade ago when she began a fundraising effort for the special needs education program at St. William Catholic School in Walled Lake that it would become the event it is today. Her initial 5-K Run raised about $9,000, and the most recent event held August 5, 2017, was the 7th annual, having raised thousands of dollars in support of the growing program. The fundraiser today is called Strides for the SOUL and always takes place the first Saturday in August.

Parents at St. William’s created SOUL -- Support Our Unique Learners -- to continue the fundraising efforts.

“We call it a 5-K walk, run or roll,” said Jackson, who happens to be the principal at St. William School. “You can walk, you can participate with your family, and you can bring strollers.”

The St. William’s junior-kindergarten through eighth grade Catholic school program now accepts students with special needs into mainstream classes with their peers, in addition to supplementing special needs student education in reading and math.

For more information about St. William’s and its special needs education program, contact Principal Jackson at 248-669-4440 or ljackson@stwilliam.com.

Internet Resources

Michigan Association for Deaf, Hearing and Speech Services
michdhh.weebly.com

Michigan Alliance for Families
michiganallianceforfamilies.org

Autism Alliance of Michigan
autismallianceofmichigan.org

National Catholic Partnership on Disability
ncpd.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness
nami.org

National Organization on Disability
nod.org

National Down Syndrome Society
nds.org

Autism Research Institute
autism.com

Leader Dogs for the Blind
leaderdog.org

Angel’s Place
angelsplace.com

The Arc, Michigan
arcmi.org