



# EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES

*Inclusion in Liturgical Ministry*

By: Kathleen Basi

**M**y daughter has never met a microphone she doesn't like. Her favorite activity is to retreat to her bedroom and sing along with every Disney, Taylor Swift, and One Direction song she can pry out of her free Spotify account.

She also loves to sing in the contemporary ensemble my husband and I lead at our parish. And the teen ensemble. And she loves to announce the songs.

All of which sounds pretty unremarkable until I tell you my daughter has Trisomy 21, commonly known as Down syndrome. And while she is a better singer than most people with her brand of chromosomal giftedness, let me assure you: she would not meet the standards most of us would like to uphold in our parish music ministries.

But we let her participate anyway. There is more to ministry than high quality "performance." It never fails to surprise me how often people come up to tell me how much they love hearing my daughter sing. How much joy it brings to their lives.

## A Mandate from the Bishops

In 1978, the United States bishops issued their *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities*, which began by acknowledging the need for "fuller integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life."<sup>1</sup> The statement, which is in the process of being updated by the USCCB, goes on to affirm that it's not enough to affirm the rights of people with disabilities; we must stand with and support their demand for justice in the public realm, as well as make room for them in "the ecclesial community."<sup>2</sup>

This call to action presents a challenge to pastoral musicians and to those involved in liturgical ministries at large. If the celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, and if liturgy done poorly harms the faith, then it seems obvious that our musicians, our lectors, even our altar servers, need to function at exceptionally high levels.

But at what point does the quest for perfection become exclusion?

*"Realizing the unique gifts disabled individuals have to offer the Church, we wish to address the need for their fuller integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life."*

(Pastoral Statement of U.S. Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, 1)

## Getting It Wrong

Jill and Chris Reffett, of Topeka, Kansas, have a long history with disability. The couple have three children, two of whom have developmental disabilities. The couple has extensive experience working with and advocating for people with disabilities in the education and health care realms.

In one parish they used to attend, the music minister wanted the music to be of the highest quality. She resisted letting Catholic school kids perform liturgical ministries at weekend Masses. Music in the parish consisted of a single choir, led by her. If her group couldn't do the music, there was no music at all.

"One of our friends is blind," Jill said, "and she loved to sing. She asked to be in the choir and she was told no." Why? Because she couldn't see the conductor's hands.

Of course, the problem laid out here is not confined to liturgical ministry. Catholic schools often turn away students with cognitive disabilities out of a fear of not being able to serve their needs. This is not a separate issue; anyone who's served at a parish with an attached school knows that, for better or



for worse, schools and parishes are profoundly interconnected. Most parents want their kids in a single school system. If the school will not accept their child, it weakens their bond to the parish as well.

Even the families the Reffetts know who chose to split their children between public and Catholic school “never felt great about it,” Jill said. “They learned to live with it, but there was resentment. There were hard feelings. They were never at peace with it.”

My own family’s experience bears that out. For years after our Catholic school told us they couldn’t serve our daughter’s needs, every contact with both the parish and the school was tinged with resentment. A decade and a half later, even though we know our daughter landed precisely where she needed to be, it still smarts.

Perhaps all this helps contextualize the results of a 2010 survey conducted by M. J. Ault for a doctoral dissertation. She found that 32.3% of special needs parents had left a church because their child was not included.<sup>3</sup>

And so, when liturgical musicians are tempted to place perfection above inclusion, Jill invites us to ponder: What would Jesus do? “Do you really think Jesus would say, ‘I do not want someone who does not intellectually fully understand the liturgy be allowed to read, or sing?’” she asked. “Isn’t our intent to build the Kingdom of Heaven? Shouldn’t our parish look like the Kingdom of Heaven? When you look around the church, who is missing? If we have 100 people in our parish and only ten of them have a disability, then we’re missing people.”

## Getting It Right

Karen Shepherd had no idea what she was getting into.

Twenty-five years ago, she started attending a bilingual American Sign Language/English Mass for extra practice while she was taking a class in sign language. The Pittsburgh Diocesan Deaf Choir signed the songs that the hearing choir was singing. Karen signed along with them.

The members of the choir noticed. One day, when their director was sick, they asked her to fill in. Over time, she got more involved; now, she’s officially in charge.

The choir members, who minister primarily at St. Mary of the Mount Church in Pittsburgh, can’t hear the words, but they can feel the pulse of the music. Karen interprets the message of the text to them, and they sign it back to the entire assembly.

Most of us take for granted having choices for Masses that suit our convenience or preferences. The Deaf community doesn’t have that. “They have few options for a signed or interpreted Mass,” Shepherd said, “but they show up every week at our church, which is not in a neighborhood near their homes, and they embrace the opportunities to be in the Deaf Choir or to be lectors or response leaders or serve in some other way.”

Half a continent away, in the Diocese of Jefferson City, Missouri, you might walk into the Cathedral one day and see Kathy Meagher singing. Kathy, whose husband is the Director of Music at the Cathedral of St. Joseph, is a classically-trained singer with a visual impairment.

There are stairs going up to the sanctuary at the Cathedral, but for Kathy, this is not a significant barrier. “They have a rail going up to the ambo,” she said, “but sometimes I’ll have one of the choir members guide me. Once I get to the stairwell, I’m good. They meet me at the bottom of the stairs after I’m done.”

For Kathy, the key to being able to participate in ministry is getting oriented in a space. She is trained in “orientational mobility,” in which teachers work with students on cane technique and getting acclimated to a particular place.

“When you can’t see very well, you have to know where the stairs are, where the walls are, the poles, the furniture, the pews,” she said. Microphone cords across the floor can be a hazard if she doesn’t know where they are. And when things get moved around, it can throw her off.

*“We look forward to the day when more persons with disabilities are active in the full-time, professional service of the Church.”*

(Pastoral Statement of U.S. Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, 7)

To accommodate Kathy’s visual impairment, her husband Andrew enlarges hymns to 135% and prints them on 11x17 paper. Recordings help her learn music more quickly.

At times in her life, people have assumed that because she has low vision, she can’t walk around on her own or navigate stairs. “But in this diocese, people have been so hospitable,” she said. “It’s helped me.”

Back in Topeka, Jill and Chris Reffert remember fondly a robust music ministry at a parish in Illinois where they used to live. There, a man and his autistic son used to lead Masses on guitars. It wasn’t always perfect. The dad, Jill said, was “more a roll-with-the-punches guy, and the kid was black and white—you play it the way it’s written.” Sometimes they got out of sync. Still, the duo was a model of inclusivity, and the parish embraced them wholeheartedly.

## Why Does It Matter?

As pastoral musicians, we believe in the importance of representation. We program bi- and even trilingual music; we value a wide use of instruments and musical styles in our worship. We want everyone who enters our church doors to experience something that nourishes them.

It is not just those with differing abilities who gain when they are fully included in the life of the parish. The community served by the Pittsburgh Deaf Choir has been sensitized, by their ministry, to the diversity of the Body of Christ. “Many of our parishioners have taken a sign language class, so they can communicate in simple ways and sign the prayers and responses,” Karen Shepherd said.

Jill Reffett draws on experiences outside the church to illustrate the importance of inclusion within it: swaggering jocks who melt when their daughters with Down syndrome ask for help changing their shoes or navigating steep stairs; “cool girls” helping them push up their sleeves while washing their hands. “Our children draw out empathy from others,” Jill says.

People with disabilities give all of us an opportunity to love and include as Jesus taught, she says, but it’s up to us whether we accept that opportunity or walk by with eyes averted. If we want to be a pro-life Church, we have to walk with people with disabilities. When a mother receives a prenatal disability diagnosis, why should she have to go to Google to learn about it? Wouldn’t it be better if she already had the experience of worshiping alongside people with different abilities in her parish? Of sharing school supplies or a choir hymnal with a person with differing abilities?

## Great—Now Tell Me How!

For those wanting to explore greater inclusivity in their ministry, here are four areas to consider:

### 1. Start the conversation.

“Any experience of inclusion has to begin with the heart,” said Chris Reffett. “If people don’t have that, they’re always going to find reasons why it won’t work.”

Parish conversations can be facilitated by pastors through the homily; opportunities to ponder inclusion and welcome pepper the Lectionary.

**Ask:** Who’s missing? What do we do well already? What obstacles do we face? Are we hampered by a quest for perfection?

Much of people's hesitancy around inclusion comes from the fact that we don't live in an inclusive world, Jill said. "A lot of people have had no experience with people with disabilities, or they had a limited experience that wasn't great." She points to a woman who had a bad experience on a bus as a child. For decades afterward, this woman was afraid of people with disabilities.

The Refferts' former parish hosted a Bible study for people with disabilities. Neurotypical parishioners who volunteered with the group looked at people with cognitive disabilities differently once they'd had meaningful interactions.

## 2. Make building projects inclusive.

When building or remodeling your sanctuary, remember those with visual impairments and physical limitations. Steps into the sanctuary, steps into the loft, cords on the floor, even poorly-designed ramps can present barriers to people with physical challenges—including our aging choir members. Bring the voices of the people you want to include into your planning processes.

## 3. Get outside your comfort zone.

Karen Shepherd didn't feel qualified when the Deaf Choir first called upon her to lead them, but she stepped out in faith. "The Holy Spirit had a plan. I am just doing my best to answer that unexpected call," she said.

## 4. Communication and cooperation are key.

"It has been my experience that the success and integrity of my ministry is more contingent upon communication and cooperation than on expertise," Shepherd said. "When the intentions of the community are welcoming and sincere, the logistics can be worked out."

For example, Shepherd relies on good communication with the Director of Music. Having music lists ahead of time lets her prepare her materials for herself and sign interpreters, both for weekly Masses and for special events like Christmas and First Communion. She works with the livestream team to make sure sign language interpreters are not blocked by seasonal decorations.

*"Love everybody, find a way for everybody to be part of the community."*

## Putting It Together

We all want our liturgies to be good—to lift the heart and enlighten the mind. But too often, we conflate "good" and "perfect." Including Eucharistic and hospitality ministers, lectors and choir members with differing abilities (both physical and cognitive) is a powerful pro-life witness. And after all, Jill Reffett reiterates, inclusivity is the entire message of the Gospel: "Love everybody, find a way for everybody to be part of the community."

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (United States Catholic Conference: Washington, DC, 1978), 1.
- <sup>2</sup> *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Bishops on Persons with Disabilities*, 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Ault, M.J. (2010). *Participation of Families of Children with Disabilities in Their Faith Communities: A Survey of Parents* (Publication No. 3492795) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.



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*Publishers' 2022 Song of the Year. She is a published novelist and the founder of Intentional Catholic, a Substack- and parish-based ministry seeking to connect our Catholic faith to the real, practical situations of daily life.*