

Christine's Story: Welcoming a Child with Special Needs

Jen Geddes



Hospitality is something we at St. Andrew's thought we did well. We have wheelchair accessible entrances in both our buildings. Ushers are placed at every entrance to hand out the bulletins and assist anyone with need. We have assistive listening devices and large print hymnbooks. We were confident that we had done everything possible to be a welcoming and hospitable church to those with special needs. But when a young father came to the lead minister explaining why he had not been attending church, we realized that we still had a ways to go before we could say we were a church welcoming to all.

David is the father of two children, a son, Jeremy, who regularly attends our church school and a daughter, Christine, who had not been to church in at least six years. Many in the congregation had no idea David had a daughter, and others assumed that Christine lived with her mother. Christine had not been attending church school because she has moderate-severe autism and our church school was not equipped with the

resources to teach or care for Christine's needs. Because we were not equipped to welcome Christine, David was unable to bring his whole family to church.

How could we transform our church school into an inviting space, offer an appropriate program which includes children with disabilities and help our church community learn to be welcoming too? This was a new venture for us. We were unaware of what assistance was out there and we had no idea where to begin. Now, two months after David first raised the issue, we have made great strides in helping Christine become a valued part of her church family.

I am not an expert in autism.

This has been as much a learning experience for me as

for all the members of our church community. I now understand that each individual situation is different. What has worked for Christine and our church may not work for another child with autism. Our learning is not complete and we will continue to grow and make changes as we work together with David's family. However, the following are some of the things we have learned along the way and actions we have taken as we seek to make our church school a hospitable place for Christine. I hope these ideas help guide your church as you seek to welcome children with disabilities into your church school.

Contact the local applicable foundation. David gave me the name of the local foundation that had helped his family. It took me a few emails and phone calls to connect with the right person, but once that connection was made, weekly emails and brainstorming sessions helped get us on the right track. Foundation experts can answer questions, provide resources and help find trained volunteers. The particular foundation I contacted also linked me with a local Christian

school that has an integration program. As a result, I was able to get some additional ideas about how to proceed and teach the leaders of our church school about Christine's needs.

Ask the congregation for help. We discovered that not only did we have members of our congregation familiar with autism, we had people who were willing to help. The daughter of one of our elders is an occupational therapist. She met with the family and has become acquainted with Christine's needs. She now serves as a volunteer with Christine and as a liaison between Christine and the church school.

Adapt the curriculum where needed. Discover what activities and words are helpful and enjoyed and what activities or words trigger a negative response. We discovered that Christine prefers to do tactile activities. This means lots of crafts! We just finished a unit on the creation story in which the children made paper mache puppets and presented a puppet play during a worship service. Christine was able to participate fully in this unit and to enjoy her experience along with everyone else. However, even with adaptation, the curriculum will not always fit the diverse needs of everyone all of the time. Christine may sit something out if needed. We always have her favourite DVD and toy on hand so that she will continue to feel safe and in familiar surroundings. We encourage Christine to be a part of the group as much as is possible. A community needs to be a community together, not apart.

Do not give up after the first try. Christine refused to go into our church school room on her first visit. There were far too many unfamiliar items around and she was overwhelmed with our large gym. Proceed in baby steps towards the goal and present new challenges in a way that is manageable for the child. Each time Christine worships with us there is something new that creates a challenge for her and each time we learn from that experience.

Consult the child's behaviourist/specialist. After our first visit, we took pictures of the church school space so that Christine's behaviourist could incorporate familiarity with the space in their sessions. The behaviourist was able to give suggestions and help us accommodate the space to Christine's personal needs. You are not alone in your desire to help. We quickly discovered that everyone involved in Christine's life wants to help her grow and feel safe.

Talk honestly and openly with leaders, parents and children. Our church school volunteers were asked to be honest about their concerns and open with their questions as we prepared the church school for Christine's arrival. We did not want anyone to feel unable to lead. We also prepared the parents and children of the church school for the changes occurring. David attended church school with Christine the first few weeks to ensure that everyone was comfortable. David continues to be a resource and his guidance and suggestions are invaluable. Keeping honest lines of communication open allows us to serve all of the children of the church school in the best way we can. Letting parents know how their child is doing and affecting the group dynamic allows changes to be made before there is a greater problem.

Provide education on the needs of those who live with disabilities for everyone in the congregation. Don't assume that everyone is familiar and therefore at ease with autism or other disabilities. Providing useful



information allows your church family the opportunity to learn and support the ministry.

Be patient and pray. As with most things, it takes time to make the changes necessary to help an individual feel at home and to help a congregation understand the special needs of those in their family. We have learned that we cannot rush Christine. Likewise, Christine has taught us not to rush. Christine teaches us that in the midst of our own chaotic structure we need to take time to slow down and pray. God is ever-patient with us. Being able to demonstrate a similar patience with God's children is a gift.

We do not know what the future will bring as we continue in ministry with Christine. Down the road we hope to include other families who may have stopped attending church because the church was not ready to

welcome all members of the family. We will continue to discover new ways of reaching out, knowing that God is guiding us.

The Rev. Jennifer Geddes is the assistant minister at St. Andrew's, Victoria, British Columbia, and the Presbyterian chaplain at the University of Victoria. Her main focus is what she calls "Beyond the Walls" ministry.

Not all children with autism are alike. For more information on autism, please visit www.autismsocietycanada.ca

Just Sayin'...

Everybody is talking about the new curriculum re:form by Sparkhouse for middle-school-aged youth. Canadian Ministries/The Vine (CMV) has been recommending this curriculum to churches, and they are coming back to us with rave reviews! Here's what Kenda Creasy Dean, United Methodist pastor and Professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, has to say about this curriculum in a recent post on Facebook:

Just sayin': re:form continues to be the best youth curriculum I've ever seen (wouldn't hurt adults either). It now comes in three denominational flavours. At least watch the promo video. Kudos to all of you who have contributed to re:form...you've hit paydirt. (Nobody paid me for this ad.)

www.wearesparkhouse.org/reform



re:form