

IMPACT OF TWO NATIONAL
CONGREGATIONAL PROGRAMS
ON THE SOCIAL INCLUSION OF
INDIVIDUALS WITH
INTELLECTUAL/DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES



Angela Novak Amado, Ph.D.

Megan DeGrande

Christina Boice

Shannon Hutcheson

Institute on Community Integration

University of Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

Congregational representatives of two national efforts to increase congregational inclusion of people with disabilities were surveyed to determine impact of these efforts on the social inclusion of individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities. A random sample of congregations participating in the Accessible Congregations Campaign was surveyed, as well as all 730 Befrienders Ministry programs. The intention of the study was also to gather information about congregation members' perspectives on efforts to increase social inclusion of individuals with disabilities, and to compare the impact of the two different approaches on social inclusion of individuals with developmental disabilities. Survey responses for ACC indicated that although most congregations had joined the ACC to increase physical accessibility, most benefits of the program and to congregation members were seen to be in the arenas of increased acceptance, knowledge, and relationship/emotional ties. The relational nature of the Befrienders Ministry resulted in more emotional ties than ACC, and benefits to congregation members reflected more acceptance and loving attitudes. The surveys also gathered information on a wide variety of barriers to social inclusion, which congregations and human services agencies could address.

INTRODUCTION

It is a general principle that individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities should be given the same opportunities to actively participate in school, work, and community settings as their classmates, co-workers, and neighbors without disabilities (Carter, 2007). Besides physical integration, many avenues have been recommended to also increase social inclusion of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, resulting in more relationships and community belonging. Faith communities have been one frequently-recommended path for such increased social inclusion (Ducharme et al., 1005; Gaventa et al., 2001; Taylor & Bogdan, 1989).

According to the 2000 National Organization on Disability (NOD)/Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities, "roughly 85 percent of people both with and without disabilities consider religious faith to be important to them." (US Newswire, 2001, p.1) According to a 2004 Harris Survey (Hanson, 2004), an identical percentage of people with and without disabilities, 84%, reported that religious faith was important or very important to them. Gleeson (2001/02) has indicated that the benefits of religious

faith and belonging to a religious community for the general population include many benefits, including greater longevity, better management of stress and crisis, and the experiencing of a greater sense of meaning and purpose in one's life. Selway and Ashman (1998) found that, for people with disabilities, attending church may indeed improve their health conditions.

Despite the promising benefits that religious participation has for those with disabilities, a survey conducted by the National Organization on Disability (NOD) found that individuals with disabilities were much less likely to attend a worship service than individuals without disabilities (47% versus 65%, respectively, NOD, 2001). Such a disparity is disconcerting, considering that many individuals with disabilities want to go to church and enjoy religious activities (Minton & Dodder, 2003).

Besides just attendance at church services, the quality of life for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (ID/DD) is significantly correlated with whether they are identified as members of networks and associations in their communities (McNair & Smith, 1998). Because many religious activities occur weekly, these opportunities offer the chance for more interaction than do those that occur less frequently (Blaney & Freud, 1994). Religious organizations are a place for the integration of different groups (McNair, 1997), providing individuals with disabilities a place to belong, to be accepted, to be comforted, and to share values (Riordan & Vasa, 1991).

However, it has been noted that there are many barriers to faith community participation for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, including barriers on the part of the individual themselves, their family or their support setting. However, congregations themselves also often present many barriers. The congregational barriers that may be contributing to the lack of participation by individuals with disabilities include architectural, attitudinal, communication, programmatic, and liturgical barriers. These are described by Carter (2007) as follows:

(a) *Architectural barriers* are structural barriers in the physical environment that exclude those with disabilities due to inaccessibility, such as a church that is not wheelchair accessible.

(b) *Attitudinal barriers* include stigmatizations and negative stereotyping of individuals with disabilities. While barriers of attitudes are often subtle and inadvertent, they can nonetheless be harmful, and may push people with disabilities away from the church.

(c) *Communication barriers* include barriers to participation in the areas of sight and sound, language and listening. For example, some individuals need Braille materials if they have a vision impairment, or a sign-language interpreter if they have a hearing impairment.

(d) *Programmatic barriers* exist when a church does not offer specific needed programs, such as inclusive Sunday school services.

(e) *Liturgical barriers* exist when someone with disabilities is unable to participate in sacramental practices and rituals, such as exclusion of a person with autism in weekly communion.

In order for congregations to be fully inclusive of those with disabilities, they must go beyond removal of architectural barriers, by addressing these other four categories of barriers as well.

Besides the removal of barriers, some literature has addressed factors for actively promoting inclusion within a faith community. At a minimum, inclusion begins with physical presence and physical integration; inclusion begins with presence (Carter, 2007), which is also affected by accessibility. Once an individual enters into a community of faith, he or she should be able to fully participate in all the activities in which those without disabilities can take part. However, while accessibility is essential to inclusion of those with disabilities, it is through relationships with others that welcome is truly realized. While many individuals with disabilities may be physically integrated at services, they might not experience true social inclusion and a genuine sense of belonging.

Some ways which congregations have found to increase social inclusion include congregation members making significant efforts to greet and communicate with individuals with disabilities, and making connections with them outside of services. Another important aspect of an inclusive community is a sense of shared lives. Carter (2007) writes that “an inclusive congregation welcomes people with disabilities into every aspect of congregational life, allowing everyone to learn and live amongst each other.” Other ways in which some congregations have promoted inclusion include: recognizing the contributions that those with disabilities can make to the church, anticipating and responding to the needs of those who have not yet arrived to the church, and inviting opportunities to learn from those with disabilities.

While both congregational literature and human service professionals who promote social inclusion have recommended the pathway of faith communities to increase such inclusion (e.g., Taylor & Bogdan, 1989), there is not a significant amount of research about the success of such efforts. That is, to what degree are congregational efforts actually successful in increasing the social inclusion of congregation members with developmental disabilities? Much of the inclusion literature includes principles of faith and values of social inclusion of those with disabilities in congregations (e.g., Gaventa, 1993), and also anecdotal stories, but not systematic research or evaluation efforts of the effectiveness of faith community approaches in increasing social inclusion of individuals with developmental disabilities.

Determining the extent and success of community inclusion of individuals with disabilities has typically been studied from the human services perspective, that is, of evaluating the degree of inclusion based on information gained from the staff of provider agencies or social services systems (e.g., Conroy, 1996; Hewitt, Larson & Lakin, 2000). These types of studies survey support agencies and ask for information such as the number of community activities or friends which individuals with ID/DD have. For example, in terms of inclusion in faith communities, a typical question may be how often do group home residents attend church services.

In contrast to evaluating community inclusion from the perspective of human services provider agencies, more recent approaches attempt to evaluate community inclusion from the perspective of community members themselves. Such a perspective is founded on the principle that communities will only be inclusive if community members themselves are dedicated to such inclusion. Much more research is needed on community member attitudes toward people with disabilities and inclusion efforts, such as what barriers and challenges are experienced by community members and what they gain from social inclusion efforts.

Faith communities are a key part of community life, and can be important avenues for learning effective approaches to impact social inclusion. Determining the impact and results of inclusion efforts and projects in faith communities is important to those who are committed to finding effective approaches to realizing fully inclusive societies. There have been a few national efforts to address the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in faith communities. For example, Herrera and Pepper (2003) evaluated Robert Wood Johnson's Faith in Action projects, but this evaluation centered on operational features such as survival of the program itself and implementation challenges. More evaluation of such types of projects is needed, especially understanding effects on other congregation members regarding the inclusion of those with disabilities. From the perspective of other congregation members, what are the barriers and benefits of such efforts?

The overall intention of this study was to evaluate the results of two national congregational programs to determine how successful they were in impacting the inclusion of people with disabilities, and specifically to determine if these efforts had an impact not just on the physical but also on the social inclusion of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. The two efforts studied were the Accessible Congregations Campaign (ACC) of the National Organization on Disability (NOD) and Befrienders Ministry. These two particular efforts were selected because both have a national scope and in some congregations people with ID/DD have been included in project efforts. That is, although each of these two efforts were aimed at broader groups, they have resulted in inclusion of people with developmental disabilities. The two efforts, however, used very different approaches and thus afforded the opportunity to evaluate the impact of different types of approaches to promoting more inclusion. ACC was directly aimed at inclusion of all types of people with disabilities. While Befrienders is a broad-ranging social ministry program (e.g., all types of disabilities, elderly, people in crises, etc.), it has had some effect on increasing the social inclusion of particular individuals with ID/DD.

There were three specific purposes for this study. First, while the survey asked broad questions on the results of these programs on impacting the inclusion of individuals with all types of disabilities, we wanted to determine the specific effects and impact on the social inclusion of those with intellectual/developmental disabilities (ID/DD). That is, in what way have these programs impacted the social inclusion of those with the specific disability of developmental disabilities?

The second purpose was to gather information on the perspectives of congregation members toward inclusion efforts, through surveying congregation members who were directly related to these projects (i.e. ministers, project coordinators, those providing social ministry). What are congregation members' perspectives on inclusion, their experiences in these efforts, and the benefits and barriers experienced? As noted above, there is a dearth of research information on congregation members' direct experiences with inclusion of people with developmental disabilities.

The third and last purpose was to gain information about the results and impact relative to the two very different approaches. The Accessible Congregations Campaign was intended to result in congregation-wide efforts to become more inclusive of people with disabilities. The Befrienders Ministry fulfills its intention for support through individual interactions and relationships between the Befrienders (those providing social ministry) and the people they support. What were the inclusion experiences for both congregation members and individuals with developmental disabilities in these

two different approaches? How does the impact on social inclusion of people with developmental disabilities differ in these two approaches?

The methods and results from each of the two different programs are reported separately, with comparison information about the two approaches in the final Discussion/Conclusion section.

PART 1: ACCESSIBLE CONGREGATIONS CAMPAIGN

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) is a national organization that has made efforts to support the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into faith communities, including those with developmental disabilities, through many different projects and commitments. One specific effort to expand inclusion was the Accessible Congregations Campaign (ACC). Launched in 1998, the Campaign had the goal of having 2000 congregations commit by the year 2000 to identify and remove barriers to the inclusion of people with disabilities. The campaign continued for several years after 2000, with 2292 congregations registered by 2008.

The basic principles and values of the campaign itself included:

- (1) people with disabilities are valued as individuals, having been created in the image of God;
- (2) the congregation is endeavoring to identify and remove barriers of architecture, communications, and attitudes that exclude people with disabilities from full and active participation; and
- (3) people, with or without disabilities, are encouraged to practice their faith and use their gifts in worship, service, study, and leadership (U.S. Catholic, 1998).

A fourth goal, besides access, was to offer people with disabilities friendship, love and acceptance (Zielinski, 2000). Project coordinators noted that for people with disabilities, "access to worship is just as important as education, employment, transportation, health care, and recreation." Each participating congregation identified particular barriers they were going to address, and avenues they were going to pursue, to become more accessible. The barriers identified could include physical, attitudinal, or other barriers. At the time of joining the Campaign, when a congregation committed to participate, typically an ACC task force or committee was formed within the local congregation.

METHOD

In the present study, congregations which had been participating in the ACC campaign were surveyed about the results of that campaign and its influence on their congregation. While some congregations had been participating since as early as 1998, and some had joined after the year 2000, part of the intention was to determine whether there were continuing results and influence from the

project after several years since the time of joining. That is, what impact had the project had and was that impact continuing in the long term?

Of the more than 2200 congregations registered with the national ACC office at the time of the study, 400 were randomly selected to be surveyed. The random selection was done by NOD staff, using the website www.randomizer.org to select the 400 congregations. NOD provided contact information for those selected to the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota.

In the fall of 2006, contact people were sent a survey by mail and also by email if an email address was available. People were contacted several times to try to maximize return.

The survey asked a series of questions such as the size and location of the congregation, and specific questions about the experiences of the congregation with the Accessible Congregations Campaign. In pilot surveys, we had found that when community members were asked about people with developmental disabilities, they first responded with information about all types of disabilities. Hence, the survey asked first about disabilities in general, and then more specific questions about people with developmental disabilities. The survey was designed to elicit information about results, successes and barriers of the ACC in general and then specifically about people with developmental disabilities. There were 3 areas of questions.

The first area asked for general information about the congregations like average size, how many members with disabilities, and when the congregation first joined the Campaign.

The second area of questions were open-ended questions about how the Campaign went.

1. What goals were planned upon joining the campaign (whether they have been achieved or not)?
2. How do you feel about the progress your congregations has made since it committed to the ACC?
3. What have been the main benefits, commitments or projects of the ACC?
4. What have been the biggest successes or accomplishments?
5. What have been the major concerns, breakdowns, barriers, or issues?

The third area of questions asked specifically about how many congregation members in general and how many people with disabilities had been involved, and the types of disabilities experienced by the people involved, with additional open-ended questions:

6. In addition to the Accessible Congregations Campaign, has your congregation made or tried to make any other important changes in recent years to support the inclusion and full participation of children and adults with disabilities?
7. What have been the benefits to other congregation members of having people with disabilities in your congregation, and/or what have been the main benefits to other congregation members of this campaign?
8. What have been the challenges of having people with disabilities in your congregation? What

have been the challenges or issues for other congregation members in connecting with or supporting people with disabilities?

9. For the people with disabilities, can you explain any specific benefits or challenges of being congregation members?
10. Did anyone outside the congregation help and support you in these efforts? If so, who?

There were also some specific questions about friendships for people with developmental disabilities:

11. Have there been any friendships established between members who had developmental disabilities and other congregation members? (if so, for approximately how many?)
12. If people with developmental disabilities have been befriended, can you explain the general experiences of these connections, for both parties?

RESULTS

Of the 400 surveys that were sent out, 60 were returned from congregations in 22 states, for a 15% response rate. Of these 60, ten indicated they were no longer participating in the campaign, the person responsible had left the congregation, or there was some other reason for not responding to the survey. Of the 50 completed surveys, 37 indicated that their congregation had individuals with developmental disabilities. Because the primary focus of the current study was to evaluate the impact of the ACC on congregational inclusion of individuals with developmental disabilities, results are reported here only on the information from the surveys concerning individuals with developmental disabilities. The 37 surveys concerning individuals with developmental disabilities represented congregations from 19 different states (listed in Table 1) and from 26 different denominations (listed in Table 2).

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The sizes of these congregations ranged from 80 people to 2800 families. The number of people with disabilities in the congregations ranged from zero to 400, with most reporting about 10-25. The congregations that reported having people with disabilities but not developmental disabilities were generally smaller congregations, one as small as 30 people and none larger than 650.

When asked how many congregation members, with and without disabilities, are actively participating in the Campaign, responses ranged from zero to 40, with most reporting again in the range of 10-25. One congregation reported that 95 of 150 people were participating. When asked how many people with disabilities have been actively involved in and/or impacted by the efforts of the ACC in

the last year and last three years, responses ranged from zero to 75, with most responses in the 10-15 person range. The total number reported was 681 people with all types of disabilities in the congregations with people with developmental disabilities, and 132 in the other congregations, but there were also several responses that said “too many to count,” “several,” etc.

Respondents were asked about the types of disabilities experienced by the people involved in the ACC, and people with all the types of disabilities listed on the survey were assisted by the Campaign in various congregations. The disabilities listed were: hearing impairments, vision impairments, mental retardation/intellectual disability, developmental disabilities, mental health issues, chronic illness, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, autism, cerebral palsy, other physical disabilities. Additional disabilities that survey respondents added were: diabetes, alcoholism, epilepsy, Parkinson’s, kidneys, heart, mobility, communication, environmental sensitivity, and spina bifida.

The number of people with developmental disabilities to be been involved or impacted by the campaign was 127, with a range of 1 to 30 in any one congregation. The number of people reported with mental retardation/intellectual disabilities was 185, with a range of 1 to 25. The total of people with autism who had been involved was 40, with a range of 1 to 5. A total of 18 people with cerebral palsy were reported, with a range of 1 to 6 in any one congregation, and 3 people with epilepsy. It is possible there is overlap between these categories, with some people counted in more than one group.

Respondents were asked if any friendships had been established between members who have developmental disabilities and other congregation members. Of the 37 respondents, 28 indicated yes, with a total of 100 relationships reported, with a range of 1 to 25. In the Qualitative analysis section below, the experiences of these connections are described.

Respondents were also asked if anyone outside the congregation had helped and supported in these efforts. A total of 16 respondents answered yes to this question. The assisting entities included a staff person from the National Organization on Disability, three Coalitions for Inclusive Ministries (one state, one city-wide coalition), clergy association, diocesan consultants; two types of programs (Friendship Ministries, Joni and Friends); one human services agency, building/architectural consultants, a Foundation, National Alliance for Mental Illness, Arc, and “parents of adults who are handicapped.” One congregation had gotten a \$5000 grant from UCC for an elevator.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Since the study was about the impact of these efforts on individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, for the content analysis of the open-ended questions, we summarized only the 37 surveys which had indicated that people with developmental disabilities were involved. Most of the open-ended questions were about people with disabilities in general, but many of the responses to these questions addressed issues relating to people with developmental disabilities.

Responses were analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which involved analyzing survey responses into specific themes. Potential categories of themes were identified, and then coded according to the frequency of mention. Individual responses were categorized into the relevant theme, and the total number of responses that fit into each theme, or category, was calculated.

Some individual responses fit into more than one category, due to the fact that some lengthy replies touched on different themes. Therefore, the sum of the number of responses from each category

surpasses the actual number of individuals responding, since one response could conceivably address all themes.

Table 3 lists all the ACC survey questions, the number of responses for each category within each survey question, and the total number of responses and overall percentage of responses for each theme.

Six major themes were identified:

1. *Specific Physical Characteristics of the Church and/or Accessibility to Areas of the Church.* This category includes references to changing, modifying, or improving specific physical characteristics of the physical building, or if the response indicated a change in terms of how accessible the church was to individuals with disabilities.

2. *Welcoming/Including/Accepting People with Disabilities in the Community.* This category includes any specific mention of welcoming, including, or accepting those with disabilities into the congregational community. If responses addressed both ideas of being accessible and welcoming others, the response was placed in both categories.

3. *Increased Awareness/Education of Disability/Value of Diversity Issues.* Examples of responses in this category included that the ACC had made congregation members without disabilities aware of the existence of disabilities, or educated them about specific disabilities. Other responses placed in this category discussed congregational training programs which had the purposes of educating individuals on how to interact with people with disabilities. Finally, some responses spoke of appreciating the 'value of diversity,' which were also categorized under 'increased awareness/education of disability issues.'

4. *Lack of Resources.* Responses in this category mentioned resources, such as time, money, and/or volunteers, and how they influenced the accomplishments of the ACC.

5. *Relationship/Emotional Ties.* Responses fitting in this category specifically mentioned friendships forming, or any strong emotional connections between those with disabilities and those without disabilities.

6. *Other.* This category includes responses of: 1) "I don't know" or something similar, or 2) did not share a common theme with the other responses.

Survey Responses for Specific Questions on the ACC Survey

There were nine questions concerning the goals, accomplishments and experiences of the ACC.

1. *What goals were planned upon joining the campaign (whether they have been achieved or not)?*

Upon joining the campaign, the most frequently planned goal was to enhance physical accessibility to those with disabilities, by changing/modifying physical areas of the building of worship. This goal was reported by 78% of the respondents (n=29). Examples included building a better sound system for individuals with hearing difficulties, or making the sanctuary wheelchair-accessible. For example, one typical response was: "We built a ramp to our front door of sanctuary and removed curb leading to front door. In renovating the sanctuary, one can now receive the sacrament without any steps or impediments to a wheelchair. We created a cut-out in pews for wheelchairs and built an elevator to connect the ground floor to our fellowship room in the basement. We installed a better sound system and we purchased 'headsets' for persons with hearing disabilities."

The second largest response-category (n=11, 30%) for this question was *“Welcoming/Including/Accepting People with Disabilities into the Community.”* Examples of responses in this category are: *“Broader integration in church life,” “Inclusion of those with disabilities into the faith community,” “To affirm that all people with disabilities (spiritual, mental, physical) are God’s children as we are and need to be welcomed and loved and involved in church life.”*

Two responses indicated that the goal upon joining the ACC campaign was to increase awareness of disability issues, or to educate people about disabilities and the people who have disabilities. Finally, one person commented that the goal upon joining ACC was to build an *“emotional supportive community,”* which was classified in the theme of *“Relationship/Emotional Ties.”*

2. *How do you feel about the progress your congregation has made since it committed to the ACC?*

The majority of the responses (86%) were positive in response to this question. In general, respondents felt their congregations were making adequate progress and most positive responses were general statements such as *“fine,” “good”* and *“positive.”* Three individuals indicated that they were disappointed in their congregation’s progress, and two responses were categorized as *“neutral”* (neither positive nor negative). An example of a *“neutral”* statement is: *“It has always been part of this congregation’s ministry.”*

While just more than half of the responses were general statements such as *“good,”* any specific topics in the responses to this question were categorized into the above themes, such as *“accessibility,” “welcoming,”* etc. The specific topics in response to this question were fairly evenly dispersed throughout these themes; however, issues of accessibility and physical characteristics of the building were the most frequent (6 responses). For example, one response was: *“Excellent—major renovations of the building, to assure accessibility (ramp in sanctuary, elevator, signage, etc).”*

Five responses indicated the importance of a welcoming, accepting community (e.g., *“Full inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church.”*) Four people described their progress as it relates to awareness of education of disability issues (e.g., *“We have a ways to go - seems like we just started seeking the value of diversity as it relates to those with special challenges.”*)

Two responses indicated that the amount of resources a congregation has influenced the outcome of the campaign (e.g., *“good, but budget was a problem”*).

3. *What have been the main benefits, commitments or projects of the ACC?*

The pattern of responses for this question significantly differed from responses to the first two questions. When asked about the benefits of the ACC, respondents wrote more about welcoming individuals with disabilities into the community than issues of accessibility: 42% of responses to this question described *“welcoming/including/accepting,”* 17 percent described *“increased awareness and education of disability issues,”* and 6% described *“relationship/emotional ties”* (a total of 65% of responses to this question were in these 3 categories). This contrasts with only 25% mentioning accessibility in response to this question, and 78% saying accessibility was the main goal upon joining the campaign.

In terms of responses reflecting *“welcoming,”* one example was: *“More of our members feel that they are a part of the worship life and/or fellowship life of the church.”* Some of the six responses

concerning *“increased awareness and education of disability issues”* included: “The benefits have been that we are aware of those with disabilities” and “Appreciation of those who use the services being offered.” In the *“Relationship/Emotional Ties”* category, two responses reflected encouragement to those with disabilities and the making of a compassionate and caring community. In addition, one of the *“Other”* responses was “A feeling of satisfaction.”

Nine responses touched on the importance of accessibility, including one response: “We have been able to expand the usability of the church facilities.”

The majority of the responses about the benefits of joining the ACC reflected attitudinal and welcoming benefits, in contrast to the main reason for joining the ACC as being one of increasing physical accessibility.

3. *What have been the biggest successes or accomplishments?*

While respondents talked less about physical characteristics of the building when discussing the benefits of the ACC, when discussing the biggest successes, the largest number of responses (n=17, 45%) again fell in the category of *“Specific Physical Characteristics of the Building and/or Accessibility.”* Most responses in this category indicated major renovations to their congregation, such as elevator installation, ramps and sloping hallways, sound systems, and cut-outs in pews etc. The second largest category (n=13, 34%) of responses indicated that creating a congregation that was more open and welcoming to those with disabilities was the biggest accomplishment of the ACC.

Responses to this question of successes in the category of *“welcoming/including/accepting”* included “full inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church,” “a welcoming atmosphere” and increased regular participation and “weekly attendance” on the part of individuals with disabilities. In this category, there were examples of inclusion in regular Sunday School, a new group for bible study, and a parent child support group for kids with special needs.

Five responses indicated that their congregation was increasing their *“awareness of disability issues.”* One person responded that this was, in fact, their congregation’s biggest accomplishment: “Annual adult education on disability issues and sensitivity to issues of disability.”

One respondent noted the development of relationships as the biggest accomplishment. Two *“Other”* responses included “No big successes-just many little ones” and “spiritual integrity.”

4. *What have been the major concerns, breakdowns, barriers or issues?*

Most responses about barriers fell into two categories: “Lack of Resources” (n= 14) and “Specific Physical Characteristics of the Building” (n=12). These two categories represented 74% of all responses to this question. Many times, responses fit in both themes, noting the resources needed to modify building characteristics. For example, one response indicated that a major barrier to the ACC was “insufficient funds for external elevator.” Other respondents simply noted “finances” or “money.” Many individuals indicated struggles with renovating the building, due to limited space, architectural design, or building location. One person wrote: “The primary barrier or concern that had to be overcome was the unwillingness of a substantial proportion of the congregation to install an elevator if it took away from the original ‘look’ and historical aesthetics that their parents and grandparents built. It was a major accomplishment to put people before buildings.”

The one response categorized in the *“welcoming”* theme concerned the fact that “full inclusion in various Sunday School activities is an ongoing challenge.” Two responses indicated a need for volunteers (“Lack of Resources” category). Relationship barriers noted by individuals included: “Many

of our people are transient and really don't allow for relational ties and accountability," "misunderstanding of need or communication," and "teaching boundaries to special needs woman."

The four responses indicating no barriers included such responses as "None, congregation has always been inclusive" and "Can't think of any . . . the congregation has been extremely supportive of this work."

5. *In addition to the ACC, has your congregation made or tried to make any other important changes in recent years to support the inclusion and full participation of children and adults with disabilities?*

There were 23 "yes" responses to this question and eight "no" responses. The most common change (n=12) addressed physical characteristics of the building of worship. Eight additional "yes" responses to this question of other changes described further efforts made to include or welcome individuals with disabilities into the congregation. For example, one person mentioned that his/her church is now including youth with disabilities in Vacation Bible School, and another indicated that a Sunday school teacher received sensitivity training by a parent of a student with a disability. Two responses were simply "yes" without further explanation.

6. *What have been the benefits to the other congregation members of having people with disabilities in your congregation, and/or what have been the main benefits to other congregation members of this campaign?*

The largest group of responses about benefits were again in the realm of attitudes and welcoming. Eighteen people (49% of all survey respondents) discussed the benefits congregation members receive by welcoming others into the community, and helping people to feel included. Examples of responses included: "Appreciation of how God uses all who belong to him, with or without disabilities," and "We realize we help people feel 'normal' simply by attending our worship service without being singled out for preferential treatment." Two other categories, "*Increased Awareness*" (11 responses) and "*Relationship/Emotional Ties*" (9 responses), had a large number of responses as well, describing benefits to other congregation members. One person revealed that "The minister educates others on the value of 'special needs' people to God & our church." These three categories together ("*Welcoming*," "*Increased Awareness*," and "*Relationships*") constituted 88 % of all responses to this question.

While the most common response about the benefits of the ACC in general was about "*Welcoming/Including/Accepting*," this question about benefits to other congregation members elicited the most responses to any question in the theme of "*Relationships/Emotional Ties*." One person wrote in response to this question: "more folks to make friends with." Other responses included "love" and "compassion."

Three "*Other*" responses included members being more prayerful and inspired by individuals with disabilities. There were two responses about physical characteristics of the building in response to this question of benefits; one such response was: "from year to year, the people who need accessibility help changes; we realize that many of us will benefit at some point in our life."

7. *What have been the challenges of having people with disabilities in your congregation? What have been the challenges or issues for other congregation members in connecting with or supporting people with disabilities?*

There were 37 responses describing challenges and 4 people responded "no."

Six responses (14%) indicated there were no challenges. An example is “we are a small, extremely caring congregation where connecting with people with disabilities is not an issue.”

Of those who did indicate challenges, the largest number (n=10) indicated challenges with characteristics of the building, such as having to overcome physical obstacles that prevent full access to the building. In addition, four responses indicated that a challenge is a lack of money and the costs associated with renovations (“*Lack of Resources*”).

Ten individuals talked about difficulties in fully welcoming individuals with disabilities into the congregational community, due to behaviors that cause distractions, such as unusual sounds that an individual with disabilities makes, and other difficulties. One of the three responses about challenges in the “*Relationships*” theme was: “overcoming fears of people with disabilities or being uncomfortable or uncertain in relating to one another (this applies to both those with disabilities and able-bodied members).”

Four answers indicated challenges due to a lack of education or awareness about disability issues. Six “other” responses included “remembering to serve diabetic-friendly food at coffee hour”, “boundaries – telephone calls night & day”, “keep the batteries charged on the cordless mic” and “for a decade or more we have just been taking things as they come.”

8. *For the people with disabilities, can you explain any specific benefits or difficulties of being congregation members?*

The largest group (58%) of responses to this question discussed the theme of “*Welcoming, including and accepting*,” with a three-fourths split between benefits and challenges. Seventeen of the 23 responses in this theme indicated that individuals with disabilities benefited in relation to feeling more welcomed and accepted into the community. One person wrote that it “gave a family a chance to be part of a community and not isolated as a result of their child’s disability.” One response was “Some years ago a resident of the group home, when asked if she’d like to go to church with some of the others, said “I thought it would be too much trouble.” When she was assured it would be no trouble, she chose (this church) and found much solace and peace here. She died a few years later and at her funeral the homily expressed her love of the service and the members.”

In response to this question, six of the 23 responses in this category discussed how being accepted was a challenge in the eyes of the individuals with disabilities. Some answers noted that individuals sometimes felt stigmatized, indicating a feeling of exclusion. One person wrote: “one member still avoids church attendance as he feels ‘less than’ when here.” Another wrote “Stigma continues to be an issue, again especially with mental health issues.” Four of the 23 responses in this category mentioned both benefits and challenges.

Four people commented on how individuals with disabilities benefited through the relationships they gained. These comments included: “socialization,” “they enjoy the interaction that takes place between people”, “their love of the service and others”, “support, understanding, patience, determined love, fellowship, openness.” The one response concerning “*Increased Awareness/Education*” was: “preconceived understanding and expectations by both those with disabilities and those without.”

Six people (15 %) wrote about specific challenges and/or benefits associated with accessibility. Four of these were about benefits; for example, “improvements we made have made it easier for people to access our building, use our facilities, and take part in the church services; they can hear what’s going on.” Two responses in this category were about challenges; e.g., “the difficulties that remain are physical barriers that we have not been able to address yet.” Two responses indicated that transportation is a specific challenge for people with disabilities (categorized in “*Lack of Resources*”).

Three individuals indicated they were not aware of any specific challenges or benefits.

9. *If People with developmental disabilities have been befriended, can you explain the general experiences of these connections, for both parties?*

As noted above, of the 37 respondents, 28 indicated that friendships with people with developmental disabilities had been established. A total of 100 relationships were reported, with a range of 1 to 25.

Those who indicated that friendships with individuals with developmental disabilities had been established were asked, "If people with developmental disabilities have been befriended, can you explain the general experiences of these connections, for both parties?" Of the 23 people who responded to this question, all made comments that were positive. Two people noted "don't seem a whole lot different than other friendships" and "the same as benefits for anyone who makes a new friend, your world gets bigger and yet more intimate, and less scary!" Examples of general positive comments included "relationships of trust and caring," "simply wonderful!", "respect, warmth, unleashing of gifts & skills, humor, greater inclusive bonding," and "feeling of camaraderie, a place where things can be shared." Seven people noted specific activities, either at or outside of church: committees, greeting, invitations to Wednesday night supper, an apartment shower, inclusion in church events and participation in church projects, and Eucharistic ministers visiting shut-ins. One person noted, "friends often become advocates and work to assist the person without speech to find inclusion. One individual with cerebral palsy was able to e-mail a parish friend when an emergency occurred and his caregiver didn't show up."

SUMMARY OF ACC SURVEY RESULTS

As described above, the goals described by the national ACC initiative were:

- (1) valuing individuals with disabilities;
- (2) identifying and removing barriers of architecture, communications, and attitudes that exclude people with disabilities;
- (3) encouraging individuals with disabilities to practice their faith and use their gifts in worship; and
- (4) providing people with disabilities friendship, love, and acceptance.

Responses to this survey did reflect accomplishment on each of these four goals, with some stronger than others. The most recognized achievement was in the second goal area of ‘identifying and removing barriers of architecture, communications, and attitudes that exclude people with disabilities.’ The largest group of responses was about physical barriers, and the second largest reflect the barrier of exclusionary attitudes. There were many responses that did reflect change in the first goal of “valuing” and in the third goal of “encouraging individuals with disabilities to practice their faith.” The goal area which elicited the fewest responses was the fourth goal of “providing people with friendship and love,” although there were definite examples of this for a small number of people.

The major barriers that were noted were lack of funding that made appropriate building renovations possible, lack of volunteers, lack of transportation for those with disabilities, and lack of education about those with disabilities and disability issues.

Upon joining the Accessible Congregations Campaign, most respondents indicated that their major goal planned was increasing physical accessibility, and accomplishments in this area were considered the greatest area of success. However, when asked about the benefits of the ACC and the benefits to other congregation members, the greatest benefits were seen in the areas of welcoming/including/accepting, increased awareness, and relationship/emotional ties.

PART 2: BEFRIENDERS

Another national effort that has had an impact on inclusion of people with disabilities in faith communities is a social ministry program called Befrienders Ministry, which has programs in 25 states. The overall goal of Befrienders Ministry is to train interested parishioners to respond to the emotional and spiritual needs of other congregation members. People who are interested in becoming a Befriender are interviewed, participate in a two-week training program with a set curriculum, and then serve an internship. After the internship, candidates may become a Befriender if the program leader decides that their skills, abilities, and interests are needed by potential Befriender’s.

Befrienders may make visits to those who are home-bound, those who are dying or grieving, and/or those who are experiencing difficult times. Befrienders Ministry targets a diverse group of individuals, and it was known that in some congregations, efforts have included individuals who have intellectual/developmental disabilities (ID/DD). The program differs from the Accessible Congregations Campaign as an avenue for social inclusion, since it is designed around individual relationships rather than an overall congregational effort.

METHOD

The national Befrienders office had 730 names and addresses on their mailing list in the fall of 2006. Of these 730, there were 165 distinct congregations. Of all the contacts listed, 288 were addresses of either congregations or specific befrienders’ names with one of the 165 congregations listed. There were an additional 442 persons with addresses without a specific congregation listed. Of all of these 730 people, some were the only contact for their church, and some congregations had

multiple Befriender names and addresses. All of these 730 contacts for the Befrienders Ministries were sent a survey, with specific questions about involvement with people with disabilities and specifically people with developmental disabilities.

The survey was aimed at determining the extent to which Befrienders were involved in providing support to individuals with disabilities and specifically to individuals with developmental disabilities (DD). While Befrienders provide assistance to a wide variety of individuals in need, and while a few examples of relationships supporting individuals with DD were known, it was unknown the size and extent to which these ministries touched individuals with developmental disabilities. Part of the value of the study for the Befrienders Ministry program was to find out, from all the Befriender efforts, the extent to which these programs did provide support to people with intellectual/developmental disabilities and what Befrienders' experiences were with this group.

All of the 730 congregations and individuals that were on the mailing list of the national Befrienders office at the time of the study were mailed a survey. If an email address was also available, an additional survey was also emailed. People were contacted three times by email and twice by mail to maximize returns.

Survey questions were similar to those on the ACC survey regarding size of the congregation, etc. As noted in the previous section on ACC, general questions about people with different types of disabilities were asked. Questions about experiences regarding inclusion of people with disabilities were similar to the questions on the ACC survey, but were specifically designed for Befrienders Ministry. Note that "minister" in the questions refers to the Befriender Minister, not the parish minister.

1. What have been the benefits to the other congregation members of having individuals with disabilities in your congregation?
2. What have been the challenges of having individuals with disabilities in your congregation?
3. What have been the benefits to the Befriender minister(s) of befriending individuals with disabilities?
4. What have been the challenges or issues for the Befriender ministers/volunteers in connecting with or supporting individuals with disabilities?
5. For the befriended persons who have a disability, can you explain any specific benefits or challenges of being befriended by the minister/volunteer?
6. If people with developmental disabilities have been befriended, can you explain the general experiences of these connections – both for the ministers/volunteers and the befriended individual(s)?

RESULTS

Out of the 730 congregations contacted, 142 surveys were returned, for a 19% response rate. Of these, 26 indicated they were no longer participating in the Befrienders program and 24 indicated no one from Befrienders was participating with people with disabilities. Nine-two of the 142 surveys

(65%) indicated Befrienders were participating with people with disabilities, and 31 (21% of all returned) of these were participating with people with developmental disabilities. Table 4 shows the surveys returned by state, and Table 5 shows the denominations of those returning surveys.

The surveys in which people with DD had been befriended had programs that had been in existence for several years, with a range from three years to one program starts in the late 80's and two programs that reported more than 20 years. The surveys from the congregations where people had been befriended who had disabilities but not developmental disabilities in general had programs of shorter duration, with most from 1 to 3 years, although one had been in existence for 10 years and one for 16 years.

Individuals who responded to the survey were either leaders of the Befrienders Ministry program within their congregation, or individuals participating in the program as a Befriender. Of the thirty congregations which had members with developmental disabilities, the majority (19) were from congregations located in Minnesota. This was followed by Michigan with six and one each in 6 other states. These responses reflected percentages similar to the distribution of all Befriender congregations in the 25 states in which there are programs.

Of the 31 surveys from congregations where people were befriended who had a developmental disability, there was a total of 584 Befriender ministers or volunteers.

The number of people reported who had been befriended totaled 1350 with 1132 of these from congregations where people with DD had been befriended, and 218 from the other congregations. The number of people with disabilities who had been befriended totaled 438, with 344 from congregations in which individuals with DD had been befriended and 94 people with disabilities from the other congregations. However, there were additional individuals befriended who had disabilities, as several respondents put a question mark or left it blank when asked for a number.

Of the types of disabilities which the people who had been befriended had, all of the categories listed on the survey were reported. These included: Hearing impairments, vision impairments, mental retardation, developmental disabilities, mental health issues, chronic illness, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, and other physical. Additional categories which responded added included: kidneys, diabetes, alzheimer's, and down syndrome.

In terms of the numbers of individuals with different types of developmental disabilities who had been befriended, these were the responses from the total of the 37 surveys:

Mental Retardation: 31 total individuals reported, plus 4 "yes" responses with no number

Developmental Disabilities: 28 total individuals, plus 7 "yes" responses with no number

Cerebral Palsy: 6 total individuals with 2 "yes" responses with no number

Down Syndrome (added by one respondent): one

When asked how long people had been befriended, most responses were either in the 6-10 month range or two years. The longest period reported was eight years.

The responses to the open-ended questions reported below reflect the survey information from the 30 congregations who reported that the Befrienders program had been involved with individuals with developmental disabilities.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Again, since the study was about the impact of these efforts on individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, for the content analysis of the open-ended questions, we summarized only the 31 surveys which had indicated that people with developmental disabilities were involved. Some of the open-ended questions were about people with disabilities in general, but many of the responses to these questions addressed issues relating to people with developmental disabilities. Several questions were specifically about people with developmental disabilities.

Responses to these surveys were analyzed utilizing qualitative analysis methods in the same fashion as described above in the Accessible Congregations Campaign.

Some of the response topics on the Befrienders survey reflected the same themes as found in the ACC survey responses. The themes, *Relationship/Emotional Ties*, *Increased Awareness/Education of Disability Issues*, *Welcoming/Including/Accepting People with Disabilities into the Community*, *Specific Physical Characteristics of the Building of Worship and/or Accessibility*, and *Lack of Resources* were common themes that arose in both the ACC and Befriender survey responses. In addition to these five categories, six additional themes were found in the Befrienders' surveys. These were:

1. *Serving/Helping Others and Reaching Out*. Participant responses were categorized here if the response mentioned the influence of the Befrienders Ministry on serving or helping others, or reaching out to those in need.

2. *Communication with Individuals with Disabilities*. Many responses found in the Befrienders Survey touched on this theme.

3. *Patience*. If a response included any mention of the word 'patience,' it was included here.

4. *Maintaining Boundaries*. Some survey responses had to do with the difficulties associated with maintaining boundaries, between those with and without disabilities.

5. *Fixing a Person's Disability/Seeing Improvement*. Some responses were comments about being able to heal, cure, or fix a person's disability.

6. *Individuals with Disabilities Accepting the Befrienders*. Responses that remarked on acceptance by the individual with disabilities of the Befriender were placed in this category.

As in the ACC responses, any responses that did not fit into any of the above defined category were placed in the category of 'Other.'

Table 6 lists the Befrienders survey question topics, the number of responses for each category within each survey question, and the total number of responses and overall percentage of responses for each category.

Survey Responses for Specific Questions on the Befriender Survey

The information summarized in this section is based on the responses from the 31 congregations that indicated that Befrienders were involved with individuals with developmental disabilities.

There were six questions concerning experiences with individuals with disabilities.

1. *What have been the benefits to the other congregation members of having individuals with disabilities in your congregation?*

While responses to this question included a diverse range of categories, the majority fell in two areas: “increasing awareness and education” surrounding disability issues (n=12, 29% of all responses to this question) and “welcoming” those with disabilities into the community (n=11, 26%). Examples of responses categorized as “increased awareness” were: “Greater awareness of their disabilities and the human dignity of all individuals” and “Greater understanding for those with disabilities.” Some individuals spoke of increased tolerance of diversity, and these were also included in this category of “increased awareness.”

Examples of responses in the category “welcoming/including/accepting people with disabilities into the community” were: “Acceptance – valued for who they are”, “The disabled have become a part of the congregation – no fears; they have contributed at worship services – speaking, singing and telling their story”, and “We are often able to receive them as they are – both with gifts and liabilities – just like the rest of us.”

A third common theme was “serving others and reaching out to those in need” (n=7, 17% of all responses). For example, one response indicated that having individuals with disabilities in the congregation gave other members “a chance to serve others and a chance for families to share in helping others.” When responding to this question, five individuals remarked about the relationships and emotional ties that formed between those with and without disabilities. For example, one individual wrote that congregation members benefit because “they feel more special because they have a friend” and the other responses spoke of compassion for individuals with disabilities.

Only one response concerned the theme ‘*Specific Physical Characteristics of the Building of Worship and/or Accessibility*’ for this question. One person responded “patience” to this specific question. Five “Other” responses included: “They and their families are an inspiration to the rest of us.”

2. *What have been the challenges of having individuals with disabilities in your congregation?*

Ten individuals (32% of all respondents) discussed challenges as they relate to physical characteristics and providing accessibility to individuals with disabilities, such as changing/remodeling areas of the church. One example was: “The church had to be changed to provide access for those with disabilities – several pews were shortened to allow for wheelchair space, a hand rail was added along with a ramp to make it easier to get up to the altar (tape stripes were also placed along the edges of stairs surrounding the altar to make the steps more distinguishable for those with poor vision). A ramp was added to the outside of the building along with handicap accessible doors.”

Besides this group of responses concerning physical accessibility, there was a wide range of other challenges reported. Four responses reflected a lack of resources. Examples included: “The challenge of, in some cases, providing transportation and providing volunteers for the often needed one-on-one care” and “Transportation and financial burden for families.”

Four individuals mentioned that actively including people with disabilities in church activities was at times challenging (categorized in the “Welcoming/Including/Accepting” category). One example was: “Choosing appropriate ministries for them to participate in and providing an atmosphere of welcome.”

Three individuals expressed concern about the challenges of serving, maintaining contact and reaching out to those with disabilities; one example was: “Not knowing how to reach out to these individuals.” The two responses in the category *‘relationship/emotional ties’* were: “Developing mentors to work with them” and “Stress felt by family members and for the people with mental disabilities, the unpredictability of episodes.” Two more individuals noted that maintaining patience was often a challenge. One individual remarked that obstacles were present due to a lack of communication with individuals with disabilities. One person noted that a challenge of having individuals with disabilities in his/her congregation was being able to erase stereotypes (categorized in *‘increased awareness/education of disability issues’*). Also, one individual noted that a challenge was “appropriate boundaries.” Two people reported having had no challenges. Two “Other” responses included “Those with more obvious disabilities are a challenge just because they are different . . .” and “Everyone has challenges, and everyone causes challenges, too!”

3. *What have been the benefits to the Befriender minister(s) of befriending individuals with disabilities?*

The largest number of respondents (n= 12, 39% of all responses to this question) felt that social ministers benefited from befriending individuals with disabilities because of the knowledge and awareness gained surrounding various areas of disability issues. One person wrote that the Befrienders Ministry has “continually been a training ground for realizing that people with disabilities are not inferior or useless but are often uniquely gifted with many excellent qualities and much to contribute.” Another response reflected that befriending those with disabilities has “increased their awareness of the struggles people with disabilities face and has helped them to see the whole person.”

The next largest group of responses (n=10, 32%) indicated that ministers benefit from the connections and relationships formed through meeting and interacting with people with disabilities. Others spoke of increased sense of compassion for individuals with disabilities, also included in the category of *‘relationship/emotional ties.’* One response was that one benefit is simply the addition of another friend. Another individual wrote: “Adding joy to their existence and their families and adding joy to the Befrienders’ lives.”

Two people related specific benefits as the act of serving others and reaching out. One of these individuals wrote that ministers benefited through knowing they have helped someone who is often ignored by others and knowing they are doing Christ’s work, specifically to help those most vulnerable. The other individual wrote: “The rewards of serving others’ needs.”

One person included in his/her response (categorized in “Lack of Resources”) that many individuals at his/her church have vision loss, and therefore are unable to get to actual church services. Some of the six “Other” responses included “Spiritual growth,” “Nurtures more active listening, has helped BF ministers to grow spiritually”, “I have taken the position that we all have some disability so there has not been a big leap to do this outreach,” and “Creates and develops sense of confidence to listen to and stand with those with disabilities.”

4. *What have been the challenges to the Befriender ministers/volunteers in connecting with or supporting individuals with disabilities?*

For this question, there was a wide variety of responses, with 10 themes among the 38 responses (some respondents noted more than one barrier). The largest number of responses (n=8) discussed challenges regarding communication with individuals with disabilities. Specific challenges included carrying on a conversation with those with developmental disabilities, communicating with a voice spelling board, learning to communicate without words, hearing the individual correctly, and confusion about where to meet those with disabilities due to lack of communication.

The next largest category of responses for this specific question was '*Lack of Resources*' (n=5). All responses placed in this category noted that finding the time to meet with an individual with a disability was often a challenge, especially when considering differing individual schedules.

The theme of '*Patience*' was reflected in four responses -- that one challenge of befriending individuals with disabilities is maintaining patience, and/or understanding. Four other people made comments in the theme of "increased awareness/education" about individuals with disabilities, including two people who had little prior experience ("Learning about their needs is a challenge") and one who was challenged about knowing the right organizations to assist a mother "with the issues her son presents."

Three people indicated that it was difficult to maintain boundaries in their befriending experiences. One of these wrote that it was a challenge to have to set boundaries with his/her time, because she wanted to help as much as he/she could. Another commented that he/she had challenges with boundary issues because those that were befriended often made inappropriate demands regarding personal issues.

Three responses indicated that it was a challenge to not have any control over an individual's disability or progression. One person wrote: "Watching someone fail in health and not being able to 'fix it' for them – watching them die when they had been a very active person and had something 'hit' so fast and take their life."

Two respondents indicated it was a challenge to get the individual with disabilities to accept the Befriender. The one response in the category "*Welcoming/including/accepting people with disabilities into the community*" was: "Many times there is no connection to the parish community." Another individual noted she wanted to help more (*'Serving/helping others or reaching out'*), but felt she didn't have enough time. Finally, one person responded: "They have needs and we listen" and then went on to discuss e-mail communication back and forth between the Befriender and the Befriended (*theme 'relationship/emotional ties'*).

Two individuals noted that they were presented with no challenges. Four "Other" responses included "getting referrals is often lacking," and an explanation of Spiritual Enrichment classes at two different group homes – one where the program ended because staff was not supportive, and another where the staff do provide transportation. Another "other" responses described that "There have been some hesitations and fears they wouldn't know how to deal with their personal concerns . . . There have been many times where the Befriender was able to grow with their Befriended and through their fear with help from coordinators and group supervisors."

5. *For the befriended persons who have a disability, can you explain any specific benefits or challenges of being befriended by the minister/volunteer?*

In response to this question, there were 23 responses of benefits, five of challenges, and four “Other” responses. When individuals were asked about specific challenges or benefits of being befriended, the largest category of responses by far was the benefits of *‘relationship/emotional ties,’* (with 14 benefits representing 44% of all responses to this question) with the second largest the benefits in the *“welcoming/including/accepting”* theme. The majority of these responses noted the great relationship and emotional benefits of being befriended, for the individual with disabilities. Of all responses to this question, 66% were benefits in *Relationships/Emotional ties* and in *Welcoming/Including/Accepting*.

Of the 15 responses in the *Relationship/Emotional Ties* theme, 14 of them discussed this as a benefit and one discussed challenges. Examples of benefits were: “They can share their joys and sorrows with a non-judgmental friend because Befrienders are trained in listening skills,” “Simply being heard (and not just listened to) by a caring individual,” “Having someone to listen and not judge or fix them,” “Knowing they have a friend who loves them and enjoys spending time with them,” and “Definitely the Befriender helped the person know they mattered and connections of the heart go far beyond words.”

Of the seven responses (22% of all responses) in the theme of *“welcoming/including/accepting people with disabilities into the community,”* respondents discussed how the Befriended individual benefited by the connection they felt with the community, along with newfound feelings of acceptance. One person wrote that the Befriended individual experienced a continuing connection to the congregation through contact with their Befriender. Another wrote that the Befriended person “appreciated that they have a place – like all ‘ordinary people’ – to vent, search, and find solutions for themselves.” All responses in this category discussed the benefits, with no challenges noted.

Two people noted the benefits the Befriended have experienced due to their congregation reaching out and helping. One wrote that individuals with disabilities specifically profit through personal services such as help with connecting/installing such things as TVs, VCRs, telephones, and phone calls. Another noted that people benefit by “knowing that their church is reaching out to them.”

Of the five challenges described in response to this question, two people noted specific challenges relating to maintaining boundaries between the Befriended and the Befriender. One response about challenges regarding boundaries was “A limited ability of the Befriender to ‘solve all their problems.’ The mentally challenged who are befriended often expect the Befriender to be all things to them – social worker, case manager, parent, friend, etc.” Two responses reported challenges relating to communication with individuals with disabilities: “Challenges to being befriended: frustration caused by inadequate communication or understanding of what is said or meant,” and “A challenge is being comfortable to ask for assistance.”

Four “Other” responses included “I can’t speak to that” and “All Befriender persons enjoy the same benefits and welcome the chance to share their story.”

6. *If people with developmental disabilities have been befriended, can you explain the general experiences of these connections – both for the ministers/volunteers and the befriended individual(s)?*

This question asked specifically about experiences regarding individuals with developmental disabilities. The largest number of responses (n=8, 36% of all 22 answers to this question) described how relationships and connections have formed, between those with and without developmental disabilities. Responses include: “For the Befriender – demanding but very rewarding, a learning

experience specifically in becoming more compassionate; for those befriended – a sense that someone cares, of being special – sometimes when their own family has abandoned them” and “I visit a mentally challenged man who has many health problems and is homebound. He shares his true feelings with me. He sometimes shares that he is lonely since his wife died 5 years ago. We have great visits and both he and I look forward to our Tuesday visits.”

Two responses were in the theme of “*welcoming/including/accepting.*” One of these was: “We worked with a person with Down Syndrome. The individual was able to stay connected to the church and feel a real sense of belonging to the community.”

Two people wrote that, as Befrienders, they have developed more patience and one person wrote that the experiences have created a better understanding for individual issues (“*Increased awareness/education*”). Another individual wrote that the Befriender Ministry has created a sense of call and doing Christ-like work, and of accepting Christ-like ministry (reflected in the theme of “*servicing/helping others and reaching out*”).

The “*Other*” category included eight responses. Two people had no experience, two answers were “generally positive,” two were specific examples of relationships, one indicated the pastoral minister had better understanding of people with disabilities, and one reflected that the ministry has been more with caregivers and family members than individuals with developmental disabilities.

Summary of Befrienders Survey Results

For the Befrienders respondents, the most commonly discussed theme of all was “*Relationship/Emotional Ties.*” Individuals were most likely to talk about the relationships and connections formed between people when addressing the benefits of the Befriender Ministry, and the general experiences of the Befriended and the Befrienders.

The next two topics most frequently addressed by respondents were: “*increased awareness/education of disability issues*” and “*welcoming/including/accepting people with disabilities into the community.*” Respondents were most likely to discuss awareness and education regarding individuals with disabilities when discussing the benefits to those without disabilities, and benefits to the Befrienders ministers themselves. The discussion of welcoming those with disabilities into the community came about most frequently when individuals discussed how the befriended have specifically benefited through Befrienders Ministry, along with how congregation members have benefited through having individuals with disabilities in their congregation.

The challenges that were described about befriending individuals with disabilities and the challenges of having such individuals in the congregation, included: specific characteristics of the building of worship and/or accessibility, lack of resources, communication with individuals with disabilities, maintaining boundaries, fixing a person’s disability/seeing improvement, and individuals with disabilities accepting the Befrienders. Responses that were placed in the category of ‘*patience*’ were equally likely to discuss benefits or challenges; individuals noted that congregation members benefited through developing more patience, and individuals also noted that the Befrienders experienced challenges due to the large amount of patience needed when befriending those with disabilities.

In summary, the nature of the Befrienders program as a one-to-one match or link between particular individuals resulted in many benefits in the arenas of relationship, understanding, and acceptance. While there were many benefits to those who were befriended, the people who

were Befrienders also gained tremendous benefit from getting to know individuals with disabilities.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

There were three purposes of this study. The first intention of the study was to find out whether these two programs impacted the inclusion of individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities into faith communities. While the Accessible Congregations Campaign was aimed at a wide variety of disabilities, and the Befrienders Ministry is aimed at assisting congregation members who are dealing with a wide variety of life issues, the study was aimed at determining the impact of each of these two programs for a specific sub-group, those with intellectual/developmental disabilities. The second study purpose was to gather information concerning the perspectives and experiences of typical congregation members about inclusion of individuals with developmental disabilities in their congregations. The third intention was to compare the types of results of these two differing approaches for the social inclusion of those with developmental disabilities: ACC was designed at congregation-wide efforts, while the foundation of Befrienders Ministry is individual relationships.

With the Accessible Congregations Campaign, there were five common themes that emerged from survey responses. These themes were, in order from the most commonly to the least commonly expressed:

1. Specific physical characteristics of the building and/or accessibility to areas of the church,
2. Welcoming/including/accepting people with disabilities in the community,
3. Increased awareness/education of disability issues,
4. Lack of resources, and
5. Relationship/emotional ties

While the majority of ACC respondents indicated that their primary intention for joining the campaign was to address physical accessibility issues, the most noted benefits to other congregation members were in the arenas of welcoming and accepting people. There are several possible ways to see the relationship between physical accessibility and welcoming/accepting; that is, it is possible that the changes in physical accessibility were needed in order to increase social inclusion, that the physical accessibility efforts brought attention to the issue of social inclusion, and also that addressing physical accessibility thereby increased the presence of people with disabilities and thus increased their being welcomed and accepted. It is clear that even though most congregations' intentions in joining the campaign were to increase physical accessibility, these efforts did have an effect on welcoming and accepting attitudes (42%), and on increased knowledge and awareness (26% of responses), and on relationships/emotional ties (21%). Of the benefits to other congregation members, survey respondents categorized a total of 89% of benefits in these three categories. Thus, although project efforts may have been aimed at increasing physical accessibility, social inclusion was one of the main outcomes and benefits.

While there was an increase in creating a welcoming and accepting environment, deeper relationships and emotional ties were also expressed in a few cases (7.5% of the ACC responses). Such relationship ties were most noted in response to the question “What have been the benefits to other congregation members of having people with disabilities in your congregation, and/or what have been the main benefits to other congregation members of this campaign?”

While responses to the ACC Survey indicated that the main goals and achievements of the ACC were seen as physical accessibility, responses to the Befrienders survey reflected the different nature of that ministry. Overall, there were 11 common response-topics that emerged from the Befrienders surveys. These themes, in order from most commonly to the least commonly expressed, were:

1. Relationship/Emotional Ties,
2. Increased Awareness/Education of Disability Issues,
3. Welcoming/Including/Accepting People with Disabilities into the Community,
4. Serving/Helping Others and Reaching Out,
5. Specific Physical Characteristics of the Building of Worship and/or Accessibility,
6. Communication with Individuals with Disabilities,
7. Lack of Resources,
8. Patience,
9. Maintaining Boundaries,
10. Fixing a Person’s Disability/Seeing Improvement, and
11. Individuals with Disabilities Accepting the Befrienders.

Almost half (48%) of the responses were placed in the first three categories above (Relationship/Emotional Ties, Increased Awareness/Education, and Welcoming/Including/Accepting), while only 12% of responses were placed in the last 4 categories, combined. The Befrienders program has effectively impacted the social networks, relationships, and social inclusion of those with developmental disabilities, and perhaps other such programs aimed at one-to-one relationships would also be effective in this arena.

While these two programs (ACC and Befrienders Ministry) have different designs and purposes, both have resulted in more inclusive congregational environments for individuals with disabilities in general, and specifically for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, albeit in different ways. For the congregations responding, the ACC campaign has made a difference in eliminating architectural barriers that exclude those with individuals from worship, while Befrienders Ministry is aimed at the relationships and friendships that are a key part of a socially inclusive environment. The result of both efforts has been to successfully impact, at least in some ways, the provision of a feeling of welcoming and acceptance to those with disabilities, and education of the congregation about disability issues.

One study purpose was also to gain information concerning congregation members’ attitudes toward these initiatives concerning inclusion of people with disabilities, to gather information about the results of these efforts in the eyes of other congregation members. That is, how do efforts such as these affect ordinary congregation members’ perceptions of people with disabilities? How do other congregation members feel about these inclusion efforts? As described above, those responding to the surveys perceived that the efforts had positive impact on knowledge and awareness, and welcoming and accepting attitudes, on the part of congregation members as a whole. There were far more responses about benefits than about challenges, in both programs.

In both efforts, but especially in the Befrienders ministry, there were several moving examples of eyes opened and deep emotional ties. These include comments about benefits such as the following: “(It has) continually been a training ground for realizing that people with disabilities are not inferior or useless but are often uniquely gifted with many excellent qualities and much to contribute.”

“. . . adding joy to the Befrienders' lives.”

“Addition of another friend”

“more folks to make friends with”

“We have great visits and both he and I look forward to our Tuesday visits.”

“love”

“compassion”

“knowing they are doing Christ's work, specifically to help those most vulnerable.”

“We are often able to receive them as they are – both with gifts and liabilities – just like the rest of us.”

“. . . connections of the heart go far beyond words.”

At the same time, there were also numerous types of barriers, concerns, and challenges identified. While the survey did not ask about strategies utilized to overcome those barriers and challenges, there can be real and concrete efforts to address such barriers. Staff of both congregations and human services agencies supporting social inclusion can determine barriers experienced in the eyes of other congregation members and take efforts to ameliorate them.

Of course there were limitations in the present study. While every effort was made to increase return, the 16% return rate for ACC and 19% response rate for Befrienders were limitations.

There may be several reasons for the ACC return rate. Since the initial launch of the ACC was for the year 2000, there may have been fewer surveys returned due to time lapse since these congregations were being surveyed in in 2006 and 2007. However, many congregations have continued their campaigns since their initial start prior to 2000 and one intention of the study was to determine if respondents felt there had been some longer-lasting results to the campaign; that is, had the campaign changed the congregational environment in ways that could still be seen a few years down the road? In terms of the return rate, since the vast majority (86%) of those who did respond felt positive about the results of the ACC, it is possible that the Campaign in at least some of the non-responding congregations had minimal or no impact. It is also possible that the responses we did receive were from those congregations that had had the most positive results from the campaign, where there were still fairly active efforts, or where there had been more impact for those with developmental disabilities. It is also possible that those who had been most involved in the initial campaign had left the congregations or were no longer involved and that the remaining congregation members did not feel qualified to fill out the survey. Another explanation is that changes may have become so integrated into the congregational culture that they were not recognized as changes. Other efforts at gathering information on the longer-term results of the ACC would provide the opportunity to see if these responding congregations were representative of the larger group, or were unique.

For the Befrienders Ministry responses we received, it is possible that they were returned by Befrienders who had greater contact with people with disabilities or those with developmental disabilities. Other Befrienders may direct their ministry efforts toward other groups, such as the elderly or congregation members experiencing short-term crises.

The study was not aimed at interviewing people with disabilities themselves. Future studies could seek to interview individuals with disabilities themselves, on their own perceptions of how well programs and efforts such as the ACC and Befrienders Ministry create welcoming communities and inclusive environments. Also, we did not conduct congregation-wide surveys, which would also yield more first-hand reactions from other congregation members not directly involved in these projects. In addition, future studies could also address other systematic efforts to increase social inclusion of those with disabilities, and methods that work or don't work for particular congregations or type of congregation members. Lastly, the study ascertained what types of barriers were reported as being experienced by congregation members, and more research should be done on effective ways to address these barriers to further increase social inclusion.

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Table 1. *Number of ACC surveys returned from each state.*

State	Number of Surveys from Congregations with ID/DD	Number of Surveys from Congregations without ID/DD	Total
Pennsylvania	7	4	11
New Jersey	4	1	5
Illinois	3	1	4
Ohio	3	0	3
Minnesota	2	0	2
North Dakota	2	1	3
Texas	2	0	2
Washington	2	0	2
Wisconsin	2	1	3

Florida	1	0	1
Indiana	1	0	1
South Carolina	1	0	1
Indiana	1	0	1
Kansas	1	0	1
Maine	1	0	1
Massachusetts	1	1	2
Missouri	1	1	2
North Carolina	1	0	1
South Dakota	1	0	1
Colorado	0	1	1
Rhode Island	0	1	1
New York	0	1	1
Total	37	13	50

Table 2. ACC Surveys Mailed and Returned, by Denomination

Denomination	Total Surveys Sent to ACC Congregations	ACC Congregations Involving Individuals With Any Type of Disability	ACC Congregations Involving Individuals With Developmental Disabilities
Assembly of God	6	0	0
Baptist	25	8	5
Catholic	58	4	4
Charismatic Ass. of Churches	1	0	0
Christ/Missionary Alliance	1	0	0
Christian Reformed	16	1	1
Church of the Brethren	14	0	0
Disciples of Christ	11	0	0
Episcopal	28	4	4
Evangelical Free Church	1	0	0
Evangelical Friend Church	1	1	0
Full Gospel	1	0	0
Jewish	14	4	2
Lutheran	80	15	12
Mennonite	3	1	0
Methodist	49	3	3
Methodist/Episcopal	1	0	0
Nazarene	4	0	0
Non-denominational	1	1	1
Presbyterian	33	4	2
Quaker	1	0	0
Reformed Church in America	3	0	0
Science of Mind	1	0	0
Seventh-day Adventist	4	0	0
Unitarian Universalist	3	0	0
United Church of Christ	4	4	3
Blank	36	0	0
Totals	400	50	37

*Additional 10 surveys returned who indicated they were no longer participating

Table 3. Responses on the Accessible Congregations Campaign survey, according to categorical themes.

	Accessibility	Lack of Resources	Increased Awareness/ Education	Welcoming/ Including /Accepting	Relationship/ Emotional Ties	Other	None	Total Responses
Goals for joining ACC?	29	0	2	11	1	5		48
Progress? (In general: Positive= 30 Negative=3 Neutral=2)	6	2	4	5	0	0		35
Benefits of ACC?	9	0	6	15	2	4		36
Biggest successes?	17	0	5	13	1	2		38
Barriers of the ACC?	12	14	0	1	3	1	4	35
Any other changes? (Y=23, N=8)	12	0	1	7	1	2	8	31
Benefits to congregation members? (Y=44, N=0)	2	0	11	18	9	3	0	43
Challenges of having members with disabilities? (Y=28, N=11)	10	4	4	10	3	6	4	41
For people with disabilities, benefits or challenges?	6 benefit=4 challenge=2	2 benefit=0 challenge=2	2 benefit=1 challenge=1	24 benefit=17, challenge=7 4=both	4 benefit=4 challenge=0	1	3	42
Total (% of total responses)	103 (29.5%)	22 (6.3%)	35 (10.0%)	104 (29.7%)	24 (6.9%)	24(6.8%)	19 (5.4%)	349

Table 4. *Number of Befrienders surveys returned from each state in which individuals with disabilities were befriended.*

State	Number of Surveys from Congregations with ID/DD	Number of Surveys from Congregations with disabilities other than ID/DD	Total
Minnesota	19	37	56
Michigan	6	5	11
Virginia	0	5	5
Missouri	1	3	4
Florida	0	4	4
Nebraska	1	2	3
Colorado	1	1	2
Arizona	1	0	1
Iowa	0	1	1
Kansas	0	1	1
North Carolina	1	0	1
North Dakota	1	0	1
Wisconsin	0	1	1
Washington	0	1	1
Total	31	61	92

Note: An additional 50 surveys were returned which were not included in the table: 26 congregations indicated their congregation was no longer participating in Befrienders Ministry, and 24 additional congregations indicated no one in the congregation was befriending someone with a disability.

Table 5. Befrienders Surveys, Mailed and Returned, by Denomination of Respondent

Denomination	Surveys Sent	Returned Surveys		
		Congregations Befriending People With Disabilities	Congregations Befriending People With Developmental Disabilities	No People with Disabilities Befriended
Baptist	3	1	0	0
Catholic	161	55	22	9
Christian	5	0	0	1
Episcopal	13	4	0	0
Evangelical	3	0	0	1
Lutheran	52	12	4	4
Methodist	23	5	2	3
Non-denominational	13	7	1	2
Presbyterian	9	5	1	1

Unitarian Universalist	1	0	0	0
United Church of Christ	5	3	1	3
Undetermined	442	0	0	0
Totals	730	92	31	24

* "DD" included people with mental retardation, developmental disabilities, cerebral palsy, and/or Down Syndrome

Table 6. Responses on the Befriender survey, according to categorical themes.

CATEGORIES/ THEMES	BEFRIENDER SURVEY QUESTIONS						Total (%)
	Benefits to church members w/o disabilities?	Challenges of having individuals w/ disabilities in church?	Benefits of befriending for the ministers?	Challenges of befriending for the ministers?	Benefits or challenges for the people befriended?	General experiences for these connections?	
Relationships/ Emotional Ties	5	2	10	1	15 benefit=14 challenge=1	8	41 (21)
Increased Awareness/ Education	12	1	12	4	0	1	30 (15)
Welcoming/ Including/ Accepting	11	4	0	1	7 benefit=7 challenge=0	2	25 (13)
Serving/ Helping/ Reaching Out	7	3	2	1	2 benefit=2 challenge=0	1	16 (8)

Physical Characteristics of Church/ Accessibility	1	10	0	0	0	0	11 (6)
Communication w/ Individuals w/ Disabilities	0	1	0	8	2 benefit=0 challenge=2	0	11 (6)
Lack of Resources	0	4	1	5	0	0	10 (5)
Patience	1	2	0	4	0	2	9 (5)
Maintaining Boundaries	0	1	0	3	2 benefit=0 challenge=2	0	6 (3)
Fixing the Disability	0	0	0	3	0	0	3 (2)
Accepting the Befrienders	0	0	0	2	0	0	2 (1)
Other	5	2	6	4	4	8	29 (15)
No Challenges		2		2			4(2)
TOTAL # of Responses Categorized	42	32	31	38	23 benefits 5 challenges 4 other	22	197