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Bishops Consider Proposed Statement on Disabilities

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NOV. 16-19: BISHOPS CONSIDER PROPOSED STATEMENT ON DISABILITIES

U.S. Catholic bishops will meet in Washington, D.C., Nov. 16-19. Among the items on the agenda is a proposed statement called "Welcome and Justice for People with Disabilities."

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE — People with disabilities encounter barriers in too many Catholic parishes, and the least of them may be physical, says Pat Carter, assistant director of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives at the University of Dayton. "The largest barriers that prevent people with disabilities from becoming full members of a parish may well be the attitudes and stereotypical beliefs that people hold on to," she says. "We 'take care of' people with disabilities. We wonder how to help them instead of considering what they can contribute."

The attitudes can be hard on families of people with disabilities, she says. "If you've got a 15-year-old who behaves like a 2-year-old who can't sit down and be quiet and follow the rules, the stares you get may make you feel like you shouldn't bring him or her to Mass if they can't be controlled," Carter says.

Physical barriers do still exist, she says, noting the few or more steps that typically elevate the sanctuary and keep people with mobility disabilities from serving as eucharistic ministers or readers.

What's the payoff if a parish can change attitudes and facilities? "If you talk to people in an inclusive parish, they're more alive, they're happier, it changes the whole atmosphere. If you accept someone who's different than the norm, that's a powerful statement about unconditional love." And there's a side benefit, she says. Other people with nonvisible conditions, such as AIDS, will see the parish accepting someone with physical differences and may be more assured that they won't be rejected.

Carter directs the national Inclusive Catholic Education conference each fall and heads the Network of Inclusive Catholic Educators, two programs that focus on welcoming students with disabilities into Catholic schools and religious education programs. Contact **Pat Carter** at (937) 229-4356, at home at (937) 426-3170 or via e-mail at carter@trinity.udayton.edu.