

ADAPTIVE PROGRAM

Finding God

Our Response to God's Gifts

GRADES
1-8



LOYOLAPRESS.
A JESUIT MINISTRY

Pastor Guide

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All Are Welcome

Every parish should seek out its parishioners with cognitive, emotional, and physical disabilities, support them with love and concern, and ensure that they have ready access to a catechetical program suited to their needs and abilities.

—*National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 61.B.1.

Thank you for considering the *Adaptive Finding God Program* as a component of your parish religious education program. This guide provides an overview of adaptive catechesis, an outline of the *Adaptive Finding God Program*, and a general description of the pastor's role in the program. These discussions are designed to assist you in creating a supportive environment for adapted catechesis in your parish. All children can learn, all children can pray, and all children can find God.

Adaptive catechesis is a way for parishes to minister to the faith formation of those with special needs. It can be transformative for the whole parish. As the catechetical team models open minds and open hearts, members of the parish take notice. As information about the program is shared, discomfort and misapprehension give way to compassion and gratitude. As parish volunteers offer their time and talents, others are moved to do the same. The entire faith community experiences the grace of deepening relationship. God becomes present in surprising new ways.

In short, catechesis for persons with special needs is catechesis for all members of the Body of Christ. Welcome to this adventure in the Spirit.



What the Church Says

The Church has clearly expressed its understanding of people with disabilities as full members of the Church with both the rights and the responsibilities that full membership entails. Without the participation of all people, including those with disabilities, the Church as a whole is diminished. With their participation, the Church is enriched.

The Church has articulated these ideas in various documents over the past several decades.

DATE	DOCUMENT	KEY STATEMENT(S)
1978	<i>Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities</i> , United States Conference of Catholic Bishops	People with disabilities “seek to serve the community and to enjoy their full baptismal rights as members of the Church” (no. 33) and that “the Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with [persons with disabilities]” (no. 12).
1995	<i>Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities</i> , USCCB	“By reason of their Baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling” (no. 1). Therefore, “Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community” (no. 2).
1997	<i>General Directory for Catechesis</i> , the Vatican	“Every Christian community considers those who suffer handicaps, as well as other forms of disability—especially children—as persons particularly beloved of the Lord.... Education in the faith, which involves the family above all else, calls for personalized and adequate programs” (no. 189).
1998	<i>Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework of Access and Inclusion</i> , USCCB	“Catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity” (no. 5). Fellow Christians should “recognize and appreciate the contribution persons with disabilities can make to the Church’s spiritual life, and encourage them to do the Lord’s work in the world according to their God-given talents and capacity” (no. 8).
2005	<i>National Directory for Catechesis</i> , USCCB	The involvement of persons with disabilities “enriches every aspect of Church life. They are not just the recipients of catechesis—they are also its agents” (no. 49).
2011	<i>Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities</i> , USCCB Respect Life Program pamphlet	“In short, as persons with disabilities share their gifts and needs, they bring out the best in our mutual humanity. They challenge us to live the Gospel precepts of charity in the real world, to sacrifice some of our comfort for others, to take the time to enable them to be full members of society. They need to feel our solidarity with them, and to know their true dignity and worth as fellow sisters and brothers in Christ. Our own future with Christ depends on it.”

As a bridge between the official Church and the Church “on the ground,” you are in a unique position to implement the letter and spirit of these teachings in your parish. Choosing to employ the *Adaptive Finding God Program* is the first step. Building a welcoming environment for families of children with special needs and extending that welcome in personal ways to program participants will be an ongoing endeavor.

Many parents of children with special needs want their child to receive religious education but have encountered a number of obstacles in church and elsewhere. Some may have heard that their parish lacks the interest, numbers, or resources to establish an adaptive program. Others may have grown weary of patronizing attitudes or of being told that their expectations are unrealistic or inconvenient. Still others may question whether their child with a developmental disability will ever be able to “grasp” the tenets of the Catholic faith. Some may have given up and fallen away from the Church.

For all these reasons, adaptive catechesis provides an opportunity not only to educate the child, but also to promote spiritual healing within families and within the broader community whose attitudes may have caused pain in the past. To this end, you may want to take these small but meaningful measures to set the tone in your parish:

- ▶ Approach parents of children with special needs as partners in their child’s faith formation.
- ▶ Humbly, express the desire to learn from parents and other professionals about a child’s gifts and needs.
- ▶ Interact directly with the child in ways appropriate to his or her communication style.
- ▶ Maintain a warm and open presence to families at liturgies and key parish events.
- ▶ Create opportunities for parents, siblings, and children to participate in liturgies and other parish events.
- ▶ Emphasize that a child with a disability is not spiritually disabled.
- ▶ Lead conversations about how the children themselves can serve and participate in the parish, the larger Church, and the world.

The fruits of such a ministry are manifold. As the U.S. bishops have stated, the involvement of persons with disabilities “enriches every aspect of Church life. They are not just the recipients of catechesis—they are also its agents” (*NDC*, no. 49). Not only are we called to share the faith with all our sisters and brothers, but we are also called to receive their gifts. Adaptive catechesis brings all parties to this table of abundance.

Note

See pages 12–13 of this guide for more detailed information about the pastor’s role in *Adaptive Finding God*.

What Scripture Says

“What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.”

—*Matthew 18:12–14*

Many Christians in leadership positions harbor secret doubts about the Good Shepherd parable. They wonder whether the shepherd might have been ill advised to abandon ninety-nine percent of his flock and squander hours tracking down one missing sheep in a distant landscape. This is no way to run a business, a classroom, or least of all a parish. Or is it?

As shepherds, Church leaders are called to protect and build up their flocks by remaining spiritually committed to each member. The health and integrity of the whole is preserved only when those outside the margins are seen and affirmed. Through the figure of a shepherd who searches, finds, and rejoices, Jesus encourages Church leaders to foster a deep awareness of all those who are in their care, especially the least visible.

When we as a Church take the time to find, truly see, and gather in each person in our community, we experience such real and delightful relationship that we can't help but rejoice.

How Adapted Catechesis Works

The Church calls for catechesis to be “accessible to persons with disabilities.” However, what is “accessible” to one child is not necessarily accessible to the next. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution for teaching children with special needs. Adapted catechesis meets learners where they are. In other words, it begins by looking, really looking at each child.

