

Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Religious Programs and Services

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In this paper we describe the status of religious services outreach to people with disabilities in a small city. Results of the research are presented and discussed. A method for enhancing the service delivery system is discussed.

Introduction

In the middle to late 1990s, spirituality and religion were recognized as essential components of the rehabilitation counseling process (Boswell, et. al, 2007; Byrd, 1997; Havranek, 1999; Havranek, 1995; Kelly, 1995). Indeed, Wright's (1997) definition of rehabilitation counseling directly addressed the need for the inclusion of spiritual issues in rehabilitation counseling. It is:

Total rehabilitation as a human service philosophy is designed to attend to the physical, mental, emotional, *spiritual*, social, and vocational aspects of life. Its goal is to facilitate productivity and independent living as well as community integration of a wide variety and substantial population of persons who otherwise may be functionally and societally limited in fully realizing their potential. (p. ix)

The authors are in a fairly typical Midwest college town. Based partially on conversations with the leaders of a local protestant church, as well as several other religious/spiritual organizations, we began to suspect that religious/spiritual organizations in the Bowling Green area were not doing much to reach out to people with disabilities. A theme that one church was examining was "social justice." According to the Berkley School of Social Welfare, "Social Justice is a process, not an outcome, which (1) seeks fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities; (2) challenges the roots of oppression and injustice; (3) empowers all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential; and (4) builds social solidarity and community capacity for collaborative action." (http://socialwelfare.berkeley.edu/swga/symposium_2007/sjsymposium.htm). Simultaneously, a look at that church body revealed there were very few people with disabilities in the worship service and/or other programs.

Purpose

One would have thought reaching out to people with disabilities would be something that came naturally, or was at least a high priority, to religious/spiritual organization leaders and lay people. Several questions emerged, including: (1) is it not their mission to help the poor and downtrodden, to spread the word that God is the God of all people regardless of abilities or disabilities? (2) do they not subscribe to a natural law, one that would seem to have no need for something like the Americans with Disabilities Act to provide religious/spiritual organization facilities that were accessible to all; and (3) would one not expect to find this caring attitude particularly in a small city?

If one assumed that the answer to the foregoing questions would have been yes, then one would be disappointed, according to an informal study by a Bowling Green State University professor and his graduate assistant. In August 2007 the professor asked his graduate assistant, the co-author, to do a survey into this issue, into the questions of: (1) what kind of outreach local religious/spiritual organizations did to people with disabilities; and (2) whether their buildings were accessible to people with disabilities.

Methodology/Results

The authors were intrigued and, as rehabilitation professionals, disappointed by what they found. The yellow pages (Verizon, 2007) were examined and 81 religious/spiritual organizations were identified (city population was 29,636, according to the 2000 U.S. Census) and 50 (62%) responded to the survey. Of those 50 religious/spiritual organizations, only 17 had any form of what they perceived as disability outreach programs. Most of those that claimed to have outreach programs touched lightly upon people with disabili-

ties, ministering mainly to the elderly, the acutely sick, those in nursing homes, or people who came to them. A few hosted Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and welcomed group homes in for services. All of this is admirable, but not exactly what the authors had hoped for in disability outreach.

There were only a few programs directed toward people with disabilities. A Methodist church held a special Sunday School class for adults with "mental disabilities," which draws about 25 to 30 people weekly, according to a religious/spiritual organization staff member. Another religious/spiritual organization had a Sunday School program for a handful of youth and young adults with mental retardation. Neither of these programs was, but kept people with disabilities separate from the congregation as a whole. But overall only five of the 50 (10%) reported actually going out into the community to people with disabilities, other than the elderly or sick: two Catholic churches and three protestant churches.

Additionally, an off-campus student organization has built a ramp for a family and helped other families make their homes more accessible. But even some of those that reported going out to people with disabilities admitted their efforts were minimal. One religious/spiritual organization said they do not have any members with disabilities, but do go to visit several persons who have disabilities. Finally, a Catholic church said its efforts are on a case-by-case basis if someone with a disability calls the church. When asked about disability outreach, several religious/spiritual organizations said it was something they wanted to do more of in the future. Reaching out to people with disabilities did not even seem to be an important issue.

On accessibility, the religious/spiritual organizations fared better. Though religious organizations are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act's Title III Public Accommodations requirements and mandates (some would be required to comply because they fall under Title I's employment domain), 43 (86%) of the 50 religious/spiritual organizations that responded said they were either completely or mostly accessible to people with disabilities. The new religious/spiritual organizations were all compliant. Several older ones had installed ramps or elevators or remodeled to make restrooms accessible. Something unique to the area, which is near several major highways, was a truck stop ministry. It was a chapel located in an old tractor trailer. The church leader said they have a ramp up into the chapel and serve several truckers with disabilities.

The religious/spiritual organizations that were not accessible typically blamed their financial wherewithal and/or their aging buildings. A Methodist church reported that its building dated back to the 1800s and each new addition seemed to add more steps making it

more and more inaccessible. The church is close to the street and there is no perceived room for a ramp. Church leaders have done a few things, adding railings in the church and treads to the steps.

Some did work to accommodate people who could not easily get into their building. The Salvation Army of a nearby town will take groceries out to people's cars. For another religious/spiritual organization, the basement was the only accessible part of the building so the religious/spiritual organization installed a closed-circuit TV system and has people with disabilities watch services from there.

One means of outreach is to let people know that a religious/spiritual organization welcomes them and stands ready to make their facilities accessible through universal design, removal of barriers, and assistance in individual issues of accommodation (e.g., transportation). Religious/spiritual organizations can also have specific programs for all members which can be tailored to individuals with disabilities such as a vocational counseling ministry (see Exhibit 1). At the same time, recognition of the generally prominent role of religion among some cultures or ethnic groups (Kelly, 1992) can alert the counselor to consider spirituality and religion as a potentially relevant issue with clients from these backgrounds (Kelly, 1995).

Discussion

It may not be possible for the Rehabilitation Counselor to prescribe a spiritual plan, but there is rationale to provide supportive advice and encouragement to the client. This advice may come in the form of information regarding worship settings available to the client and the opportunities for prayer in the fellowship of other believers. Of course, not all clients will need or be receptive to this information; however, there is the possibility that those who are open to spiritual growth may see that as part of their total rehabilitation effort (Byrd, 1997).

Based on the findings in this study, the issue was presented to one of the author's pastor and then presented to the congregation. They agreed and the first action taken was to let human services agencies know about the program and desire to reach out to people with disabilities. This was accomplished by sending out a cover letter (Exhibit 2) and poster (Exhibit 3) in early January. One of the authors will be following up on those mailings, as well as inquiries about accessible transportation.

Spiritual and religious issues are now being embraced when necessary to effect positive counseling goals (Burke & Miranti, 2001). It is the authors' belief that reaching out to people with disabilities, and particularly going to them where they congregate, is something religious/spiritual organizations should make a

high priority. It has been proposed that counselors evaluate their own spiritual beliefs in order to facilitate clients' belief systems which may not coincide with those of the counselor (Havranek, 1999; Feltham, 1995; Kelly, 1995). These are the people who are disenfranchised, who are often shunned by relatives and society at large because they look, act, or behave differently (or perhaps have a hidden disability). They often are unemployed or underemployed and need material assistance. Government programs are aiming to include them more in mainstream society but full inclusion for many is not here yet. Depending on their level of disability, many will spend their lives isolated. If this is not a role for religious/spiritual organizations, what is? Is it the responsibility of rehabilitation counselors to be "angelic" (Havranek & McBee, 2003).

The religious/spiritual organizations seemed not to recognize the issue of accessibility. They need to understand the message that an inaccessible worship center sends to these individuals – that they are unwanted, stigmatized, and not worthy. The junior author of this manuscript posed a startling question, "What would Jesus do?" This is a critical area in which equal opportunity is not enough; rather, affirmative action is required. Truly, what would the Divine Being do?

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Exhibit 1: Vocational Counseling Ministry

The [Institution Name] recognizes that a complete ministry must address not only the spiritual aspects of the lives of its members, but also those aspects of the world that impact upon its members and may potentially affect their spiritual progress. One of those areas is the vocation that members pursue in order to provide for themselves, their families and the religious/spiritual organization.

The [Institution Name] encourages its members to work with both energy and wisdom. However, there are times that an individual's work life can become a problem and an effective vocational counseling ministry will allow the person to solve that problem and once again devote themselves fully to both their vocational and spiritual opportunities.

A vocational counseling ministry will allow a worldly issue to be approached from a spiritual perspective. The ministry will serve brothers and sisters in Christ who experience work-related problems, especially as it impacts spiritual health. The service will be primarily for those associated with [Institution Name] and will be cost free.

Services will include vocational assessment, counseling and coordination of services. Those who might avail themselves of the service include students making career decisions, displaced workers transitioning to new employment, the underemployed seeking means to become more productive, and other individual concerns. Thus the vocational counseling program will be an empowering ministry, allowing Christians one more opportunity to function effectively in a largely non-Christian world.

Exhibit 2: Sample Cover Letter

Institution Name

Address

City/State/Zip

Phone#

Internet Site

Contact Person

This letter is sent to you for you to share with your clients/consumers so that all may be aware of the opportunities for worship and the services our church offers.

[Institution Name] is a friendly, compassionate group of people who welcome all to experience our purposes. As individuals and as a congregation, we are deeply interested in serving all segments of our community with emphasis on those who society has deemed the "least" of us.

Our building is a newer facility that is accessible. We have a van to transport individuals who need transportation to our programs. The van is not wheelchair accessible, but if sufficient interest is expressed in an accessible van, obtaining such will be considered. Please contact Joe Havranek (419-372-7300) or <joehavranek@gmail.com> if you have such a need.

While this open letter is directed to the consumers of your agency's services, our congregation welcomes all, including you!

Please circulate or post the attached flyer which describes the programs at [Institution Name].

Thank you for your cooperation in this regard. If you have any questions, please call or email the church. We also have more information available at our website: <http://abc.com>.

Contact Person

Title

Email address

Exhibit 3: Sample Flyer

Institution Name

Address

City/State/Zip

Phone#

Internet Site

Contact Person

YOU are invited to our programs, services and opportunities to worship and minister to others.

Who We Are

The [institution name] is part of an international denomination that places a high priority on sharing the message of [Divine Being]. We have [institutions] in 151 countries and support numerous hospitals, colleges, universities, and seminaries throughout the world. Along with an emphasis on the need to have a personal relationship with [Divine Being], the [institutions] also emphasizes the importance of living a holy life.

Our Mission

We are a caring family, glorifying [Divine Being] by leading our community into a dedicated and dynamic relationship with [Divine Being].

Our Ministries

Sunday 9:15 am - Sunday School

Sunday 10:30 am - Worship Service

(Nursery, Toddler, Preschool and Elementary School Worship Available)

We have a variety of services/ministries which are offered throughout the week.

Sunday Night Youth Group - grades 7-12

Wednesday Night Open Gym for Teens

Upward Basketball and Cheerleading Ministry (Kindergarten - 8th grade)

Summer Children's Camps

Family Fun Nights

Adult Dartball

Weekly Small Worship Groups

Local Mission Outreaches

Men's Bible Study and Breakfasts

Women's Bible Study and Book Talk

Gadabouts Outings (Senior Adult Ministry)

Career Counseling