

## Sensory Friendly Mass

In an effort to embrace and welcome the members of our church with Autism, Down Syndrome, Developmental/Intellectual and other disabilities, the Diocese of Des Moines encourages parishes to consider adaptations to a current mass already scheduled. Setting aside a liturgy (even just one a month) for the people with disabilities in our community, would allow for a more comfortable environment for families like these. It would remove the stigma for them, and enable them to more fully enter into the liturgy. Not all accommodations are possible in all churches, but consider doing those that can be done. Key things to consider are softer music and lights, homily considerations, people with disabilities serve in Mass roles, provide sensory tools and make announcement before the Mass.

### Why is a Sensory-Friendly Mass necessary?

A vast majority of Catholic families with members with disabilities do not attend Mass for various reasons. They may feel stigmatized or fear being disruptive. They may have had a negative experience while attending in the past. They may feel that it is just too difficult. Regardless of the reason, having a Mass that is specifically welcoming to these families is an essential step in bringing them back into the Church. A Sensory-Friendly Mass does not require a tremendous amount of change on the part of the parish.

### What are some ways to make Mass more sensory-friendly?

A Sensory-Friendly Mass requires three main criteria: a welcoming, stigma-free environment; an informed community; and a few special accommodations to help reduce instances of over-stimulation.

- **Prepare the community ahead of time**
  - Make bulletin announcements in the weeks leading up to the Mass, both in the host parish and other local parishes, announcing the date and time. These might also somehow state the intended community for the Mass so that others will know what to expect.
  - Cantor/pulpit announcements should be made prior to the Mass so that all in the congregation are aware of the unique nature of the sensory-friendly Mass.
  - Signs on the church door or in the narthex noting that this Mass will be different than other parish Masses.

- **Training for Ministers of Hospitality**
  - Consider buddying the hospitality ministers with someone from the parish disability ministry
  - Give particular attention to welcoming families and letting them know where they might find certain things: Sensory kits, fidget materials, Quieting room, accessible restroom access
    - Hospitality ministers should be well-versed in explaining the sensory-friendly Mass, so as to be able to answer questions and inform people that may be unaware what will be happening.
- **People with disabilities perform all hospitality functions.**
- **Mass servers and lectors are people with disabilities.**
- **Adapted liturgy (Children's liturgy)**
  - If hosting an additional weekend mass as a sensory mass, then the Children's lectionary can be utilized for the readings. If a normal weekend mass is utilized, then the regular readings should be used.
  - If the children's lectionary leaves out a reading (as a rule), the other reading should be taken from the normal lectionary. Both readings need to be utilized during mass.
  - Though it is longer, the Nicene Creed as the text is generally more familiar to a congregation and is recommended over the Apostles Creed. You cannot replace the Creed with Baptismal Promises outside of Easter Sunday.
- **Provide Picture Missals for use (consider making available at all masses)**
- **Music**
  - Softer
  - No sudden increases in volume
  - Slower temp
  - Fewer verses
  - Choir includes people with disabilities. Songs are those most familiar to all and easy to sing.
  - Work with music directors on a simple mass setting
  - Rhythm instruments passed out for the last song.
- **Accessible Visual Aids**
- **No Incense**
- **Dimmed Lights, if available**
- **Calming/Quiet area for when behavior becomes too disruptive**
- **Homily suggestions**
  - Personal stories, visual aids, and interactive questions could be a great way to build an effective Homily that meets the needs of a neurodiverse community.

- Simpler language
- Shortened in length
- Interactive
- Practical
- Tangible
- Literal
- **Access to Low Gluten Hosts**
- **Smaller Host Portions, as requested on individual need to the pastor**
- **An invitation for those with special needs to bring necessary resources when attending (or provide resources to borrow if families forget their own)**
  - Wiggle Seats
  - Fidgets
  - Comforting Toys
  - Noise Cancelling Headphones
  - Sun Glasses

**Be a prepared community who is ready to receive those with disabilities without judgement!**

### **Provide additional opportunities for people with developmental disabilities and their families**

As a follow-up to offering Sensory Friendly masses once or twice a month in a parish, consider Faith formation/sacramental preparation classes, Bible study, Faith Sharing or Music Worship hour being held for 30-60 minutes length of time prior to Mass. Curriculum could be taken from *Adapted Finding God* by Loyola Press.

Consider providing social activities once a month after Mass. Possibly provide a light meal and/or followed by activities such as bingo, karaoke, dancing, etc. During the pandemic virtual activities (through Zoom) have included a talent show, favorite book, scavenger hunt, exercise, sing-a-long, and a lesson on racism).

Getting your youth group volunteers involved in these social activities is a great way to add energy to the group! And consider offering volunteer teenage youth to be mass or pew buddies to individuals and families that request them. Making those personal connections and building relationships is key for these individuals and families to become the Body of Christ!