

# New Training Project Promotes Inclusivity in Faith-Based Communities

**Launched by the Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities at Kennedy Krieger, the project brings together faith leaders and individuals with disabilities to create inclusive faith spaces.**

In the spring of 2020, the Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities (MCDD) at Kennedy Krieger Institute launched a project to promote inclusivity in Maryland's faith-based communities, train faith leaders to improve outreach and interventions, and create better health outcomes for people with disabilities and their families.



**Mirian Ofonedu, PhD, LCSW-C**, the MCDD's director of training, believes the project—[Disability, Mental Health, Inclusive Faith Support and Belonging: A Training Collaborative](#)—can improve quality of life for people with intellectual, developmental and other disabilities and their families by addressing an important gap: the lack of inclusive faith support in faith communities.

"Creating inclusive spaces in churches, mosques, synagogues and other faith spaces contributes to health and well-being," Dr. Ofonedu says. "Everyone has dignity and

rights in all spaces, including people with disabilities. [The] faith community is where people who do not know each other come together to worship, share and work. It is a space beyond one's ability, socioeconomic or marital status, level of education, nationalities, race, gender, ethnicity, or profession—a space that can promote social relationships, independence and meaningful community participation for people with disabilities.”

### **‘A Glaring Need for Innovative Outreach’**

The inclusion of people with intellectual, developmental and other disabilities and their families in faith communities is critical, Dr. Ofonedu says. Individuals and their families go to these communities hoping to find a welcoming atmosphere. But research shows that faith spaces often fail to meet their needs: Parents are often hesitant to bring children with intellectual or developmental disabilities to faith spaces, where inclusive teachings are often not practiced, and leaders do not often receive training in such practices, she explains.



Attendees of a May 2023 meeting of the MCDD’s Faith Community Learning Collaborative for Faith Leaders: An Inclusive Faith Support Ambassador Program included Dr. Mirian Ofonedu and Rabbi Yanky Baron (seated in front) and, standing from left to right, Tracy Hincke, the Reverend Carmi Washington-Flood, Eva Queen, Pastor Angelic Williams, Deacon David Lascu, Tonya Cherry, Evangelist Barbara Johnson and Nafaida Jumriyani.

“It’s disheartening to hear that our families raising children with disabilities are being excluded in their faith communities when we are all calling for inclusive spaces in the community,” Dr. Ofonedu says.

The MCDD’s faith community training initiative began with a virtual Faith Leader Forum, held in May of 2020. Then in the summer and fall of 2022, the MCDD conducted a faith and disability needs assessment, in collaboration with the

Maryland Department of Health's Office of Faith Based and Community Partnerships and the Faith Community Commission of the Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention. The survey questions were based on:

- Feedback from faith leaders and individuals with disabilities and their families
- The "Six Ps to Inclusive Practice" (person, practice, place, program, policy and philosophy), a framework developed by Dr. Ofonedu
- A literature review on faith, disability and inclusive practice in faith communities

More than 255 people—including faith leaders and people with disabilities and their families—completed the survey.

The results, which Dr. Ofonedu shared with Maryland faith community and disability service agency leaders earlier this year, are informing the disability-focused training needs of Maryland's faith communities. Early findings based on the survey results show that:

- Among respondents in Maryland, only two out of 27 members with a disability reported holding a leadership role in their faith communities. Parents of individuals with a disability also reported holding fewer leadership positions in faith communities.
- There is a need for faith communities to have better written guidelines on inclusion.
- Faith leaders expressed a desire for knowledge and training on how to connect with people in their communities who have disabilities.
- Several themes emerged from the comments submitted by respondents, including feelings of exclusion, isolation and rejection; lack of knowledge and training; negative attitude and beliefs; poor sense of belonging; lack of opportunities; unaccountability; poor policies and guidelines; and lack of inclusive community.

Experiences shared by survey respondents underscore the glaring need for this innovative outreach in fostering inclusive faith support in faith communities, Dr. Ofonedu explains.

### **‘Awareness and Meaningful Collaboration’**

The MCDD has created a planning advisory board for the project that includes faith leaders, people with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and service professionals. While the training is geared toward faith leaders, Dr. Ofonedu believes it is essential to include the voices of people with disabilities and their families.

“Awareness and meaningful collaboration are on our radar,” she says. “In creating our inclusive faith support training program, we want to draw on what exists; leverage the collective individual and community strengths, assets and resources—not reinvent the wheel; and engage with the community in a respectful and collaborative partnership.”

Upcoming plans include:

- Launching the Faith Community Learning Collaborative for Faith Leaders: An Inclusive Faith Support Ambassador Program
- Forming focus groups of people with disabilities and their family members, as well as faith leaders and service providers, to inform the structure, content and implementation of inclusive faith support training



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- Creating an inclusive practice training video for Maryland's faith community
- Establishing an Inclusive Faith Support Ambassador Leadership Training program for faith leaders
- Collaborating with University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) in other states to develop a national network for inclusive faith support (the MCDD is Maryland's UCEDD)
- Recruiting and training inclusive faith support ambassadors to work with faith leaders across Maryland to create inclusive faith communities

## Get Involved

There are several ways to get involved in this important project:

- **Participate** in the MCDD's Faith Community Learning Collaborative for Faith Leaders, a four-session virtual series. [Reserve your spot today!](#)
- **Refer** your faith community to receive an inclusive practice training and/or refer your organization to sponsor an inclusive practice training for a faith community in Maryland. [Learn more.](#)
- **Visit** the [project's website](#) for inclusive practice resources, including a guide on [Becoming Anti-Ableist](#), and to learn more.
- **Contact** Dr. Mirian Ofonedu at **443-923-9555** or [Training.MCDD@KennedyKrieger.org](mailto:Training.MCDD@KennedyKrieger.org) to participate in the training or discuss how a faith community can receive training.