

Catechesis Teaching and Assessment for Special Needs Individuals and How I Use These Pages

Pastor Tim Onnen, Christ Lutheran Church, Montrose, CO

Background: The youngest son of my wife Kim and I is "TJ". He has Down-Syndrome. When he reached 7th grade, our Pastor invited him to come to the regular Jr. Confirmation class. We knew that, based on his attention span and thought process, he would not track at all with the material being presented. I looked at materials from Bethesda; they presented Bible stories and truths simply, but did not offer ways to access whether the person was truly grasping the teachings. Just to ask TJ whether he understood something might get a yes, might get a no; but his yes-s and his no-s are frequently mixed up.

Trying to help TJ feel a part of worship was also a challenge. At some point, we discovered that he liked tracing Bible phrases that we would "dot-out" for him. That led to us using a Trace font and printing full Bible verses for him each Sunday based on the day's theme. This gave him a better sense of participating with us and God's Word, especially when we would later have him hold up his verse while we all read it. Over time, he also traced meal prayers and the Apostles' Creed.

We wanted TJ to learn and understand the Apostles' Creed and gave him the goal of saying it publically "someday" at his confirmation. I believe giving such a goal helped motivate him to learn it well. To aid this, we put his traced Creed pages on a large poster board that he pointed to as our Bible study group said it each time we met over about a 2 year period. We also wanted to teach the meanings of the many words and phrases of the creed and assess whether TJ understood these. Noting how much of his public school work was matching concepts/words to pictures and doing multiple choice, I decided to make matching sheets for the creed and multiple choice sheets for other key Catechism truths. Talking through the truths with our son and checking his understanding with the pages, we were able to see that he did grasp those truths. (Certainly, these pages could be used with all children.)

Though TJ usually speaks in two-three word sentences, he got to where he read the entire Creed without help. We recorded him doing so; because we knew he would be way too shy to say it loudly enough to be heard when he did do it in front of the congregation at his confirmation service. By hearing his voice over the sound system, he did read along with himself, and the congregation was able to hear him and gave him great encouragement for his public profession. (This kind of profession is valuable even if it is not thought of or spoken as an official "confirmation" of faith. It gives the special needs person a way of feeling they have contributed to the faith-life of the congregation in a wonderful way.)

I think doing such a profession before the congregation, though it puts the person on the spot, is also a beneficial faith-life memory for the individual. And thus, it is good to "set them for success". TJ loves to play his Djembe drum, so that was the first thing he did, playing along with me on guitar while the congregation sang the Hymn we were playing; then he was more at ease to read the creed. And that was made easier by having him looking at his big poster board that he pointed to as he read - so he was not making scary, throw-off-your-concentration eye contact with the congregation.



At age 25, TJ still enjoys tracing the Bible verse of the day in worship during the sermon and holding it up after the service (along with the other children) as the congregation recites it. Doing this, he seems to feel a valuable part of the message of the day. He also alternates with other children in pointing to the words of the theme verse from last week as we take the short amount of time to review it in our Sunday School openings. That's another, or alternate place, where a special needs person can take part - actually "lead" - and have a real sense of valued participation. In our home, we review the theme verse at many of our meal times during the week, and again, TJ feels good about having traced it and in helping us all review it together. And we all benefit from the truth of God's Word a bit more deeply hidden in our hearts.

You can freely download copies of this page and the attached pages at www.HisHeartSong.com under the "Ministry Resources" tab. Feel free to tweak the teaching pages if you desire. For example, the multiple-choice questions or answer choices and even images could be changed. I pray these are helpful. I welcome questions.

Pastor Tim Onnen pastor.tim.montrose@gmail.com