

April is Autism Awareness Month

B'ville faith formation directors create alternative teaching methods

By Eileen Jevis
Staff writer

Exploring and deepening our understanding of the Catholic faith is a lifelong process. We learn through reading and living the word of God, attending Mass, receiving the sacraments, reflection and prayer.

For those who have an autistic family member, guiding them to a closer relationship with Christ may be a challenge. As Christians, we are not called to be followers of Christ in isolation, rather we are called as a community, to inspire, educate and evangelize by sharing God's message.

Cathy Mackey is the director of faith formation and sacramental preparation for St. Augustine's & St. Mary of the Assumption parishes. It is her mission to provide the necessary resources to parishioners who are seeking a closer relationship with God.

Tracie and Lawrence have been parishioners at St. Augustine's for 10 years. They attend Mass every week with their sons Eli and Isaiah. The boys, who are autistic, have different levels of learning and require various levels of intervention. "My husband and I presumed that sacramental preparation would be something they wouldn't be able to do because of their inability to self-regulate in a normal class setting without individual attention and program modifications," said Tracie.

She explained that the boys benefit from one-on-one attention and respond differently to assigned tasks. "They prefer hands-on activities and need clear routine and procedures in order to learn," she said.

Determined teacher

Shannon Houston, a special education teacher in the Baldwinsville School District, is also a parishioner at St. Augustine's. Both Eli and Isaiah were her students last year. When she realized the boys couldn't make the sacraments of First Reconciliation and First Communion, because of their disability, she approached Mackey and asked if she could use specialized teaching methods to prepare them to receive the sacraments.

"St. Augustine's has always held a special place in my heart," said Houston. "As a special education teacher, I wanted all faith formation classes to be as inclusive as possible." Houston applied the training and skill that she uses in the classroom and modified the curriculum to meet the boys' needs. Teaching assistant Mary Davis also knows the boys and is an active parishioner. She eagerly offered to assist Houston with the instruction. "Since we started working with them, we discovered adaptive First Reconciliation and First Communion kits that we have been able to use along with other materials I've made," said Houston. Interactive books, social stories, visuals, and cut and paste activities keep the students engaged in learning.

Houston turned to co-workers including the speech therapist, occupational therapist and other special education instructors to ensure Eli and Isaiah have a meaningful and positive experience. "I was so excited to work with these sweet boys because I grew very attached to them last year," she said. "It makes my heart happy to know they will be able to receive their sacraments along with their second-grade peers."

"Shannon and Mary engage the boys using the strategies they learned at school. They are angels for their willingness to help Eli and Isaiah by making the sacraments accessible to them," said Tracie.

"Everyone is on their own journey of faith and conversion," said Mackey. "As catechetical leaders, it is our job to find

ways to help each person bring about a relationship with Christ. It is no different for our autistic parishioners. It's all about helping each individual to find their way to God."

"We hope others in the diocese will hear our story and step in to offer their gifts," added Tracie. "If they are in a position to assist as catechists, teacher aides, or just reaching out to other families with special needs, then our story has served as inspiration."

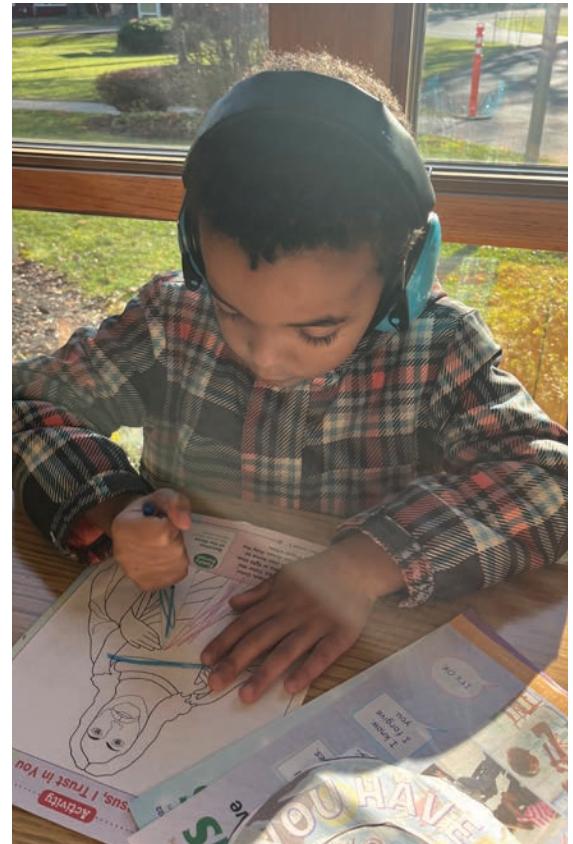
'The right people'

Part of God's will for both boys is "for them to go through the process to formally introduce them to Jesus," added the boys' father, Lawrence. "As we now know, God's larger plan is for the boys to be used as point of contact to reach other autistic kids."

Tracie encourages others to reach out to their church communities to explore ways they can be of service to others. "God placed the right people in our lives for a reason — so that our boys can grow up in the church and have a relationship with God."

Mackey encourages other catechetical leaders to contact the faith formation office for guidance on how to accommodate children who have autism. "We truly want to help all children become more fully involved in the Church and help them encounter Christ and his sacraments," she said.

If catechetical leaders are interested in learning more about alternative teaching methods, they can contact Cathy Mackey at cmackey@syrdio.org or Andrea Slaven, director of Office of Child and Family Catechesis for the Diocese of Syracuse, at aslaven@syrdio.org.



Brothers Isaiah, above, and Eli take advantage of specialized teaching options at their parish classes.

