

Putting Faith and Jobseekers

by Courtney Taylor, Associate Director of Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Communications and Dissemination

A new manual outlines how faith communities can support members with disabilities in finding and maintaining employment. The manual was developed by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and its partners in the Putting Faith to Work (PFTW) project, which include University Centers for Excellence who make up the National Collaborative on Faith and Disability.

PFTW is an innovative approach that addresses a critical need. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is double that of people without disabilities. According to 2014 statistics from the Department of Labor, only 19.1% of people with disabilities participate in the labor force, versus 68.3% of people without disabilities.

"There have been many public and private sector initiatives focused on improving employment rates for individuals with disabilities," said Erik Carter, PhD, professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University and principal investigator on the PFTW grant. "Yet, despite these efforts, overall employment rates have remained virtually

unchanged. The unpredictability or lack of funding, limited programs, complicated eligibility requirements, long waiting lists, and myriad other factors all highlight the need for pursuing new avenues and new partnerships if we are going to change the employment landscape."

There are more than 335,000 churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship nationally, so it made perfect sense for Carter and his colleagues to apply for a Signature Employment Grant through the Kessler Foundation to partner with faith communities in an effort to improve employment outcomes.

"The Putting Faith to Work model is actually engaging what ends up being among the most extensive networks of employers in any community," said Carter. "The average congregation has 186 attenders who themselves are connected to a number of different employment sectors. The model recognizes most jobs are obtained through personal connections, including jobs traditional job developers are unlikely to know about. And the model also engages faith community members who already have a vested interest in an individual and affirms the call of

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a place that offered a Best Buddies club as well. However, the University of Memphis didn't have one at the time. Even though I had dreams of getting out of Memphis and going to UT Knoxville, I decided that maybe something was keeping me here. So, I stayed in Memphis and started a Best Buddies chapter at U of M.

I also had joined a sorority and SO many members were like, "how can we get involved?" Finally, I thought about doing an "adopt a buddy" program so that each individual chapter got matched with a buddy that they would invite to events, support, attend Best Buddies events with, etc. Since it's only two years old we let the sororities and fraternities make it their own and I will say it is AWESOME!

Watching Greek Life on campus get a buddy is so rewarding and really helps social inclusion. You'd be amazed how many fraternities ask if they can host a Best Buddies event at their house. Kappa Alpha Order at the U of M has hosted two

cookouts and a bonfire for Best Buddies, and Sigma Chi has hosted a Thanksgiving get together at their house.

*I also have to brag on U of M and say that we even have sports teams that have "adopted" buddies. This just started this year so it's very new. - **Carlie Carter, University of Memphis, Best Buddies Memphis Chapter President, TigerLIFE Social Inclusion Unit Member and Phi Mu Kappa Lambda Le Bonheur Chair.***



Meeting sorority sisters at the Best Buddy's party.

with Disabilities to Work

scriptural traditions that individuals use their gifts in service and that communities recognize the dignity of work.”

Carter and partners in Texas, Minnesota and Kentucky were awarded the Kessler Foundation grant in January 2014. Administered through the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center in Tennessee, the model was implemented over the course of two years. Teams at each of the four sites provided support, coaching and encouragement to 25 diverse congregations who collectively have connected more than 50 individuals with jobs.

The model is outlined in the new replication manual, *Putting Faith to Work: A Guide for Congregations and Communities*. The manual provides step-by-step instructions for gathering a team, holding person-centered conversations to assess strengths and skills, and reaching out through the members of the congregation and beyond to find an employer in the community who needs exactly those strengths and skills in their workplace.

“Faith communities have a wonderful opportunity to enhance the lives of people with disabilities, their families, and their communities by helping people find meaningful jobs, assume valued roles and share their talents with others,” said Bill Gaventa, chair of the National Collaborative on Faith and Disability and a member of the Texas PFTW team. “The manual is a product of two years of important work that will encourage a unique way to support people well in all aspects of life—spiritually, relationally and vocationally.”

PFTW in Action: A Congregation’s Story

Christ Presbyterian Church (CPC) is a large congregation located in a suburban neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee. The church has an active special needs ministry that began informally when a member

volunteered to care for a baby with Down syndrome during a service so the mother could worship. Over time, more families with sons and daughters with disabilities came to the church and a more formal ministry was established.

Though the special needs ministry is supported and active within the church, staff and families were looking for a way to minister with members with disabilities and

their families beyond Sunday. They also wanted to address concerns that some families had expressed about feeling isolated from the larger church community. The congregation decided to pilot the *Putting Faith to Work* project as a way to meet employment needs and to make the young adults within their ministry “better known” within the larger community.

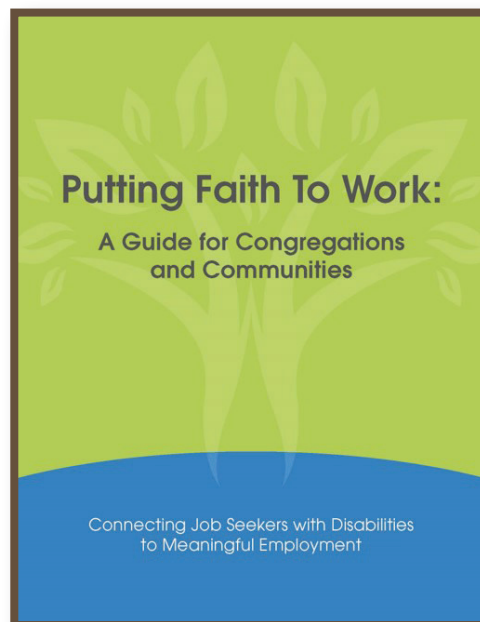
Gathering a team

The initial informational meeting consisted of the special needs ministry coordinator, who had extended personal invitations to staff, parents and church members with interest or experience in working with people with disabilities. Around 25 people attended. At the meeting, an overview of the project was presented and the group held a conversation about the potential need in the church, who might benefit and how the project might be structured. After the team affirmed participation in *PFTW*, a parent of a young adult son with a disability agreed to chair the team and the special needs coordinator agreed to provide administrative support.

Crafting a plan

The team decided to meet on a monthly basis. Early conversations focused on identifying members with disabilities who they believed should consider participation. Because the congregation has an established

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Putting Faith to Work: A Guide for Congregations and Communities outlines the model that congregations can use to connect job seekers with disabilities to employment.

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special needs ministry they decided to work, at least initially, with job seekers they already had relationships with and who attended church on a regular basis. Five candidates were identified.

They elected to begin working with two individuals and expand as initial successes were made. They also decided that team members could be involved in different ways. They polled the group to designate roles. Team members could invite job seekers, participate in the “Conversations about Work” to better understand their gifts and strengths, identify and make connections to employers, and/or provide on the job supports.

Team members also desired to integrate *PFTW* into the life of the church, making it an established Missional Community, which focuses on making a positive difference in the greater Nashville area. This made them eligible for small internal grants to support their efforts, gave them a Web presence, and further legitimized the project within the community.

A Conversation About Work

Once the candidates had agreed to participate, the team organized a time to convene the job seeker and his family, the team, and anyone else who could help to point out the gifts and talents of the job seeker. At the Conversation, the job seeker was able to select a menu and draft the invitation list. The team followed the questions provided through the *PFTW* program, which helped frame the discussion in an organized and productive fashion.

Connecting People with Employers

For CPC, this stage in the process presented the most challenges. Though many ideas emerged from the conversations, after potential employers with whom the team had personal relationships were exhausted, the team stalled. In response, they built a webpage on the CPC website, developed one-page job profiles for their job seekers, and were able to share them through their missional community blog and through other natural forms

of communication, like email and calls to friends and acquaintances in various employment industries. Another challenge was that the team only met monthly with periodic communication between meetings. Despite these obstacles, the team’s commitment kept them motivated and effective in making employment connections.

Supporting Job Seekers

Because *PFTW* is a formal Missional Community at CPC, the group was eligible for a small grant that could be used to meet project goals. The team decided that the grant could be used to provide for any work-related expenses like transportation to and from work, or required uniforms. Team members also made efforts to ensure that job seekers were prepared for interviews. They assisted with developing “job wanted” ads and one-page profiles that could be shared with potential employers.

Reflecting on the Journey

The team reflected at monthly meetings, especially when the process of connecting job seekers to employment felt stalled. They brainstormed new ways to disseminate information, new yet relevant job sectors to explore, and/or reassigned tasks. Reflections of each stage of the *PFTW* project from team members, job seekers and families at CPC are sprinkled throughout the manual.

For those interested in researching more information about PFTW, visit <http://faithanddisability.org/> and <http://faithanddisability.org/projects/putting-faith-to-work/>.



The Putting Faith to Work team at Christ Presbyterian Church poses after a “Conversation About Work” with one of its participants.