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Charleen Katra, executive director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, is seen C

Charleen Katra, executive director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, is seen Oct. 21, 2022, during the partnership's conference at St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Church in Spring, Texas. (CNS/James Ramos, Texas Catholic Herald)

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Disability ministry leaders, advocates, family members and others gathered recently at St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Church in Spring for the annual conference of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability.

Charleen Katra, the organization's director, said the goal of the conference was to raise awareness about disability issues in the church, but more importantly it was to train church communities on how to "create a welcoming and hospitable" campus, parish, school and diocese.

"You want to do more than just include someone," she said. "You want to help create a home for the person with a disability, in the church, to where they move from just being included. We want to move people from inclusion to belonging in the church."

Katra said the recent synod discussions in the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese have helped bring new issues to light that the church community and its leaders have overlooked in the past.

The main message, she said, is that people with disabilities and their families "want to feel a sense of belonging in the church, and they do not feel like they have been on many occasions."

Part of the programming for the Oct. 21-22 conference included a sensory-friendly celebration of the Mass. The liturgy featured subdued lighting and music, softer or fewer instruments and spoken parts and other shortened segments for people with processing delays, as well as an American Sign Language interpreter and assistive listening devices and large print missals.

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The sensory-friendly Mass was a new experience for Bishop Brendan J. Cahill of Victoria, Texas, who was a keynote speaker at the conference.

Drawing from St. John Paul II, he asked participants to look beyond the evil things in the world, to "see what's positive in others," and to "maintain a love of God for them."

"Everyone should look on his neighbor, without any exceptions, as another self, bearing in mind, above all, his life and the means necessary for living it in a dignified way," he emphasized, taking the "without exceptions" phrase from Second Vatican Council documents.

The conference featured several breakout workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as a virtual registration option. More than 100 people were registered to attend. American Sign Language interpreters from the St. Dominic Deaf Parish in Houston also interpreted the keynote addresses and Mass.

Part of the work of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability is to encourage and increase sensory-friendly Masses in the church, a ministry that's starting to grow both in the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese and across the country.

"Parishes are starting to see and understand this is a real need," Katra said. "If you want to accompany people, if you want to be a synodal church, offering a sensory-

friendly Mass is as equally, if not more important, for Catholic identity than, again, the importance of adapting catechetical programs and other events and programs in a parish to make them physically accessible and adapted to the various needs of diverse learners."

Resources for disability ministries are seen on a table , Oct. 21, 2022, during the National Cat

Resources for disability ministries are seen on a table , Oct. 21, 2022, during the National Catholic Partnership on Disability conference at St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Church in Spring, Texas. (CNS/James Ramos, Texas Catholic Herald)

Katra recognized that many people with disabilities are among the marginalized populations that Pope Francis has consistently preached about during his papacy, especially during the synod. "It's important not only to the church but to God," she said.

Melissa Alvarez, assistant director of the Ministry with Persons with Disabilities for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, said the conference gave ministry leaders and church members the chance to meet each other and know where their needs are and how to help each other.

"This conference is very important because we are advocates for people that don't have a voice, that need that support, and to spread the word, to proclaim God's word and network within our own community," she said.

With communities continuing to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, she said many parishes and schools are seeing families struggle with achieving a healthy balance in life, especially families with children with special needs.

"The parents' hands are full, from taking care of their children's daily needs, let alone trying to remain active in faith formation," Alvarez said.

"I've encountered that a lot and that probably has to do with the repercussion of (the pandemic) ... We're going to see that wave of more emotional needs, more different needs, that now are not just disability, but more mental health issues and needs," she said.