Tips for Handling Bullying with Special Needs Individuals

¶162.I of The Book of Discipline states, “We recognize and affirm the full humanity and personhood of all individuals with mental, physical, developmental, neurological, and psychological conditions or disabilities as full members of the family of God.” And, “We call on the Church and society to protect the civil right of persons with all types and kinds of disabilities.” The North Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church is committed to creating within its churches Safe Sanctuaries which provide love and acceptance for all people, regardless of ability. It can be difficult to know whether or not a person with special needs is being bullied because they may be afraid or lack the language to be able to speak about their bullying. They may also have deep fear associated with telling someone that they are being bullied. Below are some ways that all people in the church can work together to make sure all people regardless of ability feel welcome into the community of the church.

1. Individuals with special needs are more vulnerable to bullying. They learn and process the world differently and may have limitations when it comes to mobility and language and this makes them targets for bullying. It is necessary to pay close attention to how these individuals are treated.

2. Initiate the Conversation. Individuals with special needs may have difficulty expressing what they see, feel, and experience. If you suspect one of these individuals is being bullied speak to them and take steps to intervene. These conversations may be more successful if done by someone within the congregation the individual trusts and knows.

3. Create confidential ways to report bullying. This is especially important for bystanders because they have a lot of power to stop bullying. If individuals are not afraid of repercussions they will be more likely to report incidents of bullying. This can be helpful for all, but especially those with special needs who may be more hesitant or unsure of how to speak up for themselves.

4. Conduct congregation awareness programs. Parents and advocates of those with special needs can be partners for ending bullying within the church. They need to be included in bullying training and made aware of the church’s bullying policy so that they know they are supported and their children and friends will be loved and cared for in the church.