



Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Volume 6.4

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Winter 2012



FAITH FORMATION & SPECIAL NEEDS



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Lifelong Faith Volume 6.4 – Winter 2012

Welcome to the Winter 2012 issue of **Lifelong Faith** on the theme of “Faith Formation & People with Special Needs.” This issue presents theological and theoretical reflections on faith formation with people with special needs, as well as practical suggestions for ministry and learning.

In the first article of this issue, **Educating Toward Full Inclusion in the Body of Christ**, Brett Webb-Mitchell moves us beyond the first step or stage of welcoming people with disabilities into congregations in general—particularly with segregated programs and activities or “main-streaming approaches” for people with intellectual disabilities—toward the full inclusion of people with disabilities into the rich, active life of a church.

Welcoming All: Intergenerational Faith Formation for People with Disabilities by Sharon Urbaniak presents a working model of faith formation she created for people with disabilities and their families, and the whole community. Her program, *God’s Family: Learning, Loving and Living Our Faith*—a monthly faith formation program for people of all ages with disabilities and their family and friends—has won awards for its innovative model of ministry and learning.

There Are No Barriers to God’s Love by Mark I. Pinsky is an excerpt from his wonderful book, *Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion*.

Affirming Presence: Spiritual Life and Friendship with Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities by Benjamin T. Conner explores how to nurture spirituality in adolescents with developmental disabilities. His article advocates the practice of friendship as one important Christian model of spiritual connectedness that finds its origins in the initiative of God and addresses the fundamental human experience of loneliness and fear of negation. By participating together with adolescents with development disabilities in Christian practices, especially the practice of friendship, we open up spaces where their spirituality and ours will be nurtured.

I hope this issue provides new insights and practices to strengthen your ministry and faith formation with the members of our faith community who have special needs and disabilities.

John Roberto, Editor

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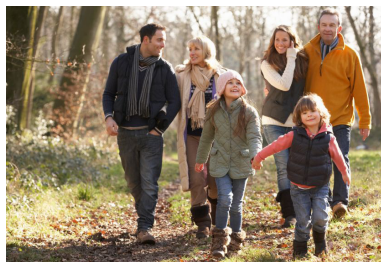
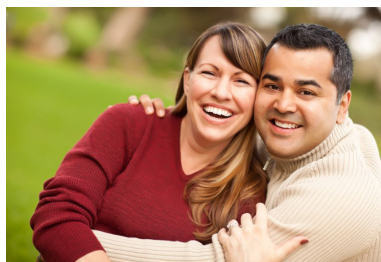
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Educating Toward Full Inclusion in the Body of Christ: People with Disabilities Being Full Members of the Church

Brett Webb-Mitchell

In the past decade, people with disabilities have “slowly but surely” found their way into more congregations’ and parishes’ collective lives. Recent congregational studies indicate that greater numbers of mainline churches are taking steps to make their sanctuaries physically accessible to people using wheelchairs, walkers, or other assistive devices. For example, a recent survey indicated that a high percentage of Presbyterian Church (USA) sanctuaries (in the 70 percentile range) were accessible to people with disabilities using wheelchairs or walkers (Research Services). While these figures do not show how active people with physical disabilities are in congregational life—or where they may be active in a church—the simple act of beginning to collect these statistics evidences an awareness among congregations of the growing number of people with physical disabilities desiring to become more active participants in the life of a faith community.

Moving In, But Not Necessarily Moving Forward

There also is anecdotal evidence that people with disabilities are taking their place and becoming a “presence” in communities of faith. Whether it is through a “random act of kindness” that a person with a disability happened to be welcomed into the church, that someone with a disability who grew up in a family related significantly to a church stayed in it, that someone

The Rev. Dr. Brett Webb-Mitchell is a nationally and internationally recognized author and advocate for and with people with disabilities in the context of the church. He has authored several books and numerous articles. His most recent book is *Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities* (Church Publishing, 2010).

This article first appeared in the *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* (Volume 14:3, 256-268) and is reprinted with permission. A version of this article is included in Chapter 7 of *Beyond Accessibility*.

with a disability came into a church through a pro-active program of including people with disabilities, or someone acquired a disability after joining the church, there is no doubt that among some communities of faith there is an increase in the number and presence of people with disabilities. If there has not been an increase in a single parish or congregation per se, there has been a great infusion of information about the place and presence of people with disabilities in a church's life. Sadly, there are also churches in which people with disabilities are still on the sidelines, a possible object of "mission" or "service" work; a separate, "special" class of people. For example, some people with developmental disabilities are kept away from Sunday worship and relegated to a Monday night worship experience only for people with developmental disabilities and their family and friends.

But once a person with a disability has been welcomed within a congregation or parish, people with all types of disabilities—including physical, social, intellectual, developmental, hidden, medical, and sensory disabilities, along with people with mental illness—of both genders and all ages experience the next hurdle or set of obstacles: the challenge of being fully included in the ongoing activities and programmatic life of communities of faith. This is a barrier of more than accessibility or attitude. It is an issue of justice requiring that members of a church be educated to understand the God-given gifts of people with disabilities, and the necessity of adapting to the presence of people with disabilities. Herein lies the next step of the Church's pilgrimage toward full inclusion: *moving beyond simply welcoming people with disabilities in the life of a church—or treating people with disabilities as a "special ministry" where they participate in separate worship, education programs, and fellowship opportunities—and enabling them to become full, active, and voting, members in a faith community.* The challenge is the full integration or inclusion of people with

disabilities in the practice of worship, education, fellowship, youth group activities, small group activities, choir or music programs, art programs, or service opportunities (e.g., mission programs). This will involve confronting the awkwardness that some church members experience, both from the vantage point of the non-disabled member simply being with a member with a disability, as well as the member with disabilities feeling uncomfortable with the awkwardness of the member who is able-bodied. ***This is the next challenge for the Church: total inclusion of people with disabilities.***

The focus of this article is on moving beyond the first step or stage of welcoming people with disabilities into congregations in general—particularly through segregated programs and activities or "mainstreaming approaches" for people with intellectual disabilities—toward the full inclusion of people with disabilities into the rich, active life of a church. In the following sections, I will first consider a key obstacle to the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church; namely, the way we educate all members in the body of Christ. Since all education is context dependent (e.g., education looks different and is defined differently because it is dependent on the context in which it occurs), the question before us is this: How do we understand the basic nature of being Church with each other? This has to do with the ecclesiological perspective of what is called "the Church," and whether the church is more of an able-bodied group, that is dependent on using language, is hearing-based, and is more or less an intellectual phenomenon (i.e., an extension of the academy) or if it is more organic and spiritually based (i.e., the body of Christ). If the Church is perceived as the body of Christ, then this leads to the second issue: the focus will be on examining the early church's ecclesiological perspective on the basic nature of the Church (e.g., the body of Christ), as described in Romans 12 and

1 Corinthians 12. In other words, what does life in a church look like when the presumption is that church members are not part of any old body of believers, but part of the mysterious yet real resurrected body of Christ? The third part of this article addresses how we educate the entire membership of the body of Christ, with and without disabilities alike. After all, the Apostle Paul did not classify people by their abilities or limitations as to which members will be teachers, caregivers, or healers in the body: the Spirit decides. Perhaps in re-considering, and re-claiming, the ancient but eternal vision of the Church as the body of Christ we may discover in what ways we are all part of the body of Christ.

Analysis of the Problem of Segregation of People with Disabilities

One of the key obstacles to the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the church is not only the way we perceive and thus construct our worship of God, but the way we understand education *in toto* in the context of the Church. For the church as the body of Christ is what the Benedictines understand to be the “school for God’s service” (Meisel & Del Mastro), according to the Rule of St. Benedict. To quote Michael Casey, “[We] as individuals and as members of a group . . . are to learn Christ” in this church-as-school approach (25).

When hearing or reading the word *school*, many people in the church revert to how we were and are taught in Sunday school, youth groups, and seminaries. We were and are taught to understand education in what John Westerhoff would often call a “schooling-instruction paradigm” for which there is a time, place, and practice considered “education” in the hectic life of a church. In other words, education in a church is often an extension of the way we are educated in other contexts that give themselves the name *school*.

Christian education is typically held in certain set-off rooms in an educational wing or hallway of a church, in which there are certain kinds of curriculum (paper), activities, and media aids (e.g., film projectors, PowerPoint projectors, and audio-recorders), held during an hour that was set apart from the other distinct activities of the church (e.g., worship, preaching, choir rehearsals, counseling, administration, biblical studies, fellowship, service projects). And the content of these classes focuses primarily on the biblical history, theology, and the philosophy of the church, taught largely through linguistic communication modes (Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

The usual “50-minute hour” of Sunday school instruction is largely based on what Paulo Freire called the “banking concept” (72) of education: students are given information pertinent to the context while sitting and receiving education passively via a teacher’s lecture or leadership (also called chalk and talk), repetitive drilling exercises, rote memorization, homework, and fill-in-the-blank or solve the puzzle worksheets and memorized Bible verses, creeds, and confessions. In many cases, the student then regurgitated this material on tests and worksheets, depending on the context, and sometimes would bring home a small hands-on souvenir or worksheet from the educational activity found in the pages of the Sunday school packet. Freire called this process of education “dehumanizing” (73) since there was no connection between a person’s life and the knowledge accumulated. The teacher simply pours the information into the mind of the student and waits for it to be spit back out. While reading, listening to lectures, studying, and memorizing Scripture verses have their worthy places in education in general, such approaches may ultimately fail because they do not create a connection with the rest of one’s life. In other words, someone needs to connect the dots for students between what is learned in the culture called “school” and the culture called “life” (Freire, 80).

The problem with the material learned in such conventional Sunday schools (Protestant) and catechetical instructions (Catholic) is five-fold (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). **First**, the reason this context (e.g., the Bible, church history, theology) did not and still may not make a connection with our lives in the growing complexity of today's world is that we have reduced the great ongoing story that we Christians are part of to objective tidbits (e.g., "The world was created in how many days?"), and consumable "factoids" ("How many Gospel accounts are there?") or memory verses. The ongoing problem is that these verses and facts are not easily generalizable to a person's life. In other words, it is easy to teach those who are capable to memorize verses and theological truths, but it is an entirely different task to teach people how to embody these verses and truths (e.g., the Decalogue, the Beatitudes). Not enough can be written about the need to make the learning process relevant to the lives of Christians in the body of Christ, including both teachers and learners.

Second, by using the educational material in a way that discounts a person's life, we assume that a person is a blank slate to be written on rather than a life already being lived that thus needs to be "transformed" or to go through a slow but steady conversion process. This can fail to inspire a dialogue with students, thus "killing off the passion" of students because they become passive learners as they are fed a steady diet of facts (Palmer).

Third, the current approach to learning in the church is directed toward the individual and not necessarily toward the community-as-a-whole. Christian religious education and worship in particular are beholden to the viewpoint that some people are in search of a community for what it can bring to them rather than seeking a community to which they can give of themselves—where each person's life is open to the other, without hesitation (Vanier).

Fourth, there is a loss of the communal or

corporate memory in educating Christians, in which basic knowledge of the Bible, church history, and theology has been lost among generations of Christians. Many people are not as loyal to the faith communities in which they were raised. What has become overall consuming is simply the "reading, writing, and memorization" of biblical verses as an object of our investigation and information gathering, rather than as a subject intended to engage us.

Fifth, in much of education in the Church, the absence of the training of the physical body and nurturing of the spiritual is noticeable. Instead, emphasis is placed on the psychological, emotional, and therapeutic needs of the learner, alongside marketing mechanisms for selling curricula. The question is this: Are we more caught up in education-as-entertainment than education-as-transformation? In other words, Christian education, as constructed today, is meant to be a pleasing, emotionally satisfying experience for both teachers and students, rather than necessarily transformational of both of their lives. Equally, the Church—in worship and educational programs—has been captivated by being more about "entertainment" of the masses than praise of God.

This critique of church-based Christian education is broad and includes educational programs both for people with and without disabilities alike. However, there are unique problems faced by people with intellectual or developmental disabilities within many Christian religious education programs. First, classes comprised only of people with disabilities often are set aside as a separate educational context apart from others who might be of the same age-range, but with different intellectual abilities. In other words, many church-based programs rely on segregated educational approaches. Second, while people with physical, sensory, or certain hidden disabilities may be able to participate in the overall congregational life, this is not always true for people with certain intellectual and social disabilities. In

particular, material for people with intellectual disabilities is often simply a first or second-grade curriculum in which only the images in the curriculum are simply changed from what is given to those who are chronologically younger. Third, much of the lesson material is taught using only memorization or simple hands-on, experiential activities, both of which occur outside of shared educational experiences involving peers who are the same age as the person with disabilities. Some church-based Sunday schools are now more “mainstreamed,” meaning that people with intellectual or developmental disabilities are included in age-appropriate classes for some activities, but moved over to a corner in the same room with a “best buddy” or tutor, leaving them still segregated from others.

What the previous approach assumes is that knowledge of God, Christ, the Spirit, and the precepts of the church is basically an intellectually based proposition that utilizes one’s cognitive skill, rather than practice-based, which engages and is based on the utilization of one’s mind, body, and spirit. This intellectual-based approach to educating Christians is especially true among Protestant Christians, whereas Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christians have focused more upon the bodily rituals of the Christian life. This approach to educating Christians, some of whom have intellectual disabilities, will never be inclusive by its very nature of being language-based and linguistically oriented. This leads to the following question: What would a more inclusive approach to educating in the body of Christ look like?

Educating Toward Full Inclusion

For people with all kinds of disabilities to be not “more fully included,” but “fully included” in the church, the first task at hand is to define what it means to be “Church.” As stated earlier, if the church is a place where

members spend a great deal of time on a more or less intellectualization of the Christian life, then people with disabilities, especially intellectual or developmental disabilities, will be marginalized and segregated, because they are not capable of participating in some cognitive activities, while those who have no intellectual disabilities may possibly be fully included. A caveat: by writing “may be fully included,” it is also understood that congregations will need to work with people with disabilities in order to find ways that both work toward the goal of creating a “common good” of what it means to be a church that welcomes and includes all. While it may seem like a harsh judgment, there is little chance that people without disabilities who participate in a highly intellectualized faith will often tolerate, let alone move toward adapting, to the ways that some people who are severely or profoundly developmentally or intellectually delayed understand or communicate in the world. This is why worship, educational programs, special events, service projects, even fellowship time, may find some people with disabilities marginalized and thus secluded from the majority of church members who do not have disabilities.

But there is another way of perceiving, and thus living life in and as the body of Christ, in which full inclusion of people with disabilities, along with those who are non-disabled, is possible: embracing and re-claiming our identity as members of the body of Christ. Rather than the schooling-instruction paradigm of education, or the banking-concept of education, the focus is on a socialization or enculturation approach to educating Christians in the traditions, rituals, and practices of the storied life of faith. According to Thomas Groome, “becoming Christian requires the socializing process of a community capable of forming people in Christian self-identity. We ‘become Christians together’” (43).

Why is this significant for people with disabilities? While many people with

disabilities will always be excluded from a community of faith that adheres to the schooling-instructional paradigm approach to educating believers, people with disabilities are given a chance not to be excluded from the overall practices of the church within a socialization–enculturation process of educating people into the practices of the body of Christ. In this section, I first explore the church-is-the-body-of-Christ concept and the effect the very reclamation of this theological truth may have on the overall way we learn and teach in the body of Christ. Second, what do we practice in the body of Christ? We practice the gestures of Christ. Third, in the very performance of gestures we learn the virtues of the Church, which in turn teach us the habitual practices of being God’s people, with and without disabilities alike.

The Context: The Body of Christ

Karl Barth wrote that the body of Christ is not just like any other body, physical, or social, regardless of anyone’s philosophical or theological construction. This body is the body of Jesus Christ, the risen Son of God, in whom we encounter God through fellowship and communion with other Christians. Barth understands that Christ’s body is not a human body per se, but is a kind of reflective realism; that is, the church as Christ’s body reflects some attributes of the human body in certain ways but is not a human body in some very important ways. Following this logic, Janet Soskice argues that theological models such as “body of Christ” must be understood contextually. That is, “body” is a way of talking about Christ’s activity. “Body of Christ” appears more often than any other vision of what the church is in Paul’s letters. Soon, speaking of the Church, Christ’s body became a part of the Christian community’s common vocabulary, embellished over generations of Christians and giving each generation a context of Christian reflection (Soskice, 1985).

Re-imagining the Church as the body of Christ, no matter how big or small our congregation or parish may be, means that we are in and participants of the works of love that are unique to the resurrected body of Christ. Because we are part of Christ’s body, there are some unique aspects of being members of the body. **First**, we are made up of the same “stuff” as Christ himself (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). Writing in a culture that was shaped by the early Greek philosophers, the Apostle Paul used concepts and language that came from those philosophers. As the Greeks assumed that human bodies themselves were made of the same “stuff” as the world around them, such as air, earth, water, and fire, it is probable that Paul and the early Church believed that its members were a microcosmic synthesis of the larger body of Christ: members’ lives are made with and of the same “stuff” as Christ himself. And that “stuff” is none other than the Spirit. Paul understood that Christ’s body is porous as the Spirit of God moves freely within this social body: “To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:8; Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

Second, there is an authoritative structure to this body, in which the head—namely, Jesus Christ—is truly the top-most part of the body that rules the rest of the body (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). In Paul’s description of the body in his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes that the mind of Christ is central to the body of believers: “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). This means that we are all dependent not only upon the other members, but on the head of the body, Jesus Christ: “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15; Webb-Mitchell, 2003). The head tells the body what it is going to do and be.

Third, if Christ is the head of the body, we, the members, make up the rest of the body. Paul never tells us that the body of believers

replaces Christ's body, nor that it represents Christ's body, nor even that it is Christ's mystical body. God is still here, just as real and physical as God was in Jesus Christ. If it is true that we are members of Christ's body, then God's presence in the world today depends very much on us.

For example, what are we to make of Paul's example of the ear saying to the eye, "I do not belong to the body because I am not an eye" (1 Cor. 12:16). Are we to consider it an account of friction within the Corinthian church, in which Paul used the language of his time and tradition to explain both the reality of living in the body of Christ and in the presence of Christ himself? I propose that this is a way of talking about the experience within the body of Christ, in which one group of people, because of their place and function within the body, were exclusionary of another group of people. Paul charges the church to practice respect among the members of Christ's body, and this is the way of Christ, which we know through his earthly ministry, in which God was and is among us. Christ is still with us as we mediate him to the world. The power of God flowing through us is how God acts through those who are being changed to Christ's image (Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

Fourth, the gifts and services of this body extend to one and all, regardless of one's seeming ability or limitation (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). Every member—with and without disabilities—has been given a gift (charisma, meaning grace-given) by the Holy Spirit. And every gift is of equal dignity. As John Howard Yoder (1992) writes, "Each bearer of any gift is called, first of all, to reciprocal recognition of all the others, by giving 'special honor to the less comely members'" (48). This is significant insight because it points to the deeper mystery of Christ's body, where all who are baptized—women and men, poor and rich, disabled and non-disabled, gay and straight, young and old, of all ethnic heritages—are bearers of God-given gifts and services for the good of Christ's body. Therefore, one goal of

the body of believers in our congregations should be to aid others in discovering, naming, and growing into their gift. By doing so we become a church that embraces a Pauline vision of "every-member counts empowerment, where there would be no one un-gifted, no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated. Only that would live up to Paul's call to 'lead a life worthy of our calling'" (Yoder, 48).

This is important in terms of people with disabilities in relationship to the wider Church. Paul was not using metaphorical or analogical language, writing that the church is like a body, or the Church as the body of Christ, but even more forcefully: the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor 12; Rom 12). And in this body, the Spirit of God does not choose to neglect or not be in the life of people whom the world calls disabled, let alone in the distribution of gifts, services, and talents in the body of Christ. None of the gifts of the Spirit are withheld or designated to people based upon one's academic pedigree, or an intelligence quotient score, social adaptation scale, or any other modern-day assessment tool. Yoder argues that this is done so that we are aware that our gifts and services are God-given and not a source of selfish pride in our own accomplishments. Each gift, talent, and service may be performed by a person with a disability, whether that be a gift of ministry, teaching, being a giver, a leader, or compassion (Rom 12), or prophecy, discernment or interpretation of people's ideas and visions (1 Cor 12).

This opens us up to an important question. If the Spirit of God is what unites us together as one body in Christ, how do we learn about what these various gifts, talents, and services do, or how they are to be practiced, and by what gestures, in the body of Christ? What is proposed in this article is that the gestures for each person's God-given gift would be learned and practiced within the context of a faith community, in which we are all to work together toward the up-building of each other—with and without disabilities alike—

into the head of the body. In other words, education in the body of Christ, given the truth that it is based upon the body itself, is to be all-inclusive, because the Spirit of God is all-inclusive, giving each person—regardless of whether they are labeled as having a disability—a gift, talent, and service in this body. In this next section, the discussion will further promote an argument for a more inclusive approach to educating people with disabilities and those who are non-disabled in the body of Christ.

An Argument for Inclusive Education in the Body of Christ

If the Church is the body of Christ, then how do we educate everyone in the context of the body of Christ? More to the point of this article: how do we educate people with disabilities alongside people who are able-bodied in the body of Christ? For example, as the surrounding society created special schools for persons with disabilities, or segregated classrooms in public schools, so too has the Church. We created special classrooms for people with disabilities, and special churches and chapels on state institution grounds. To this day, there are still special worship services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout the country, held at different times and places than Sunday morning worship. Likewise, there are still segregated Sunday school classes with special curriculum that mirror the material written and the approach taken in the 1950s and 1960s in American society.

In the 1970s, many school districts approached special education through a “mainstreaming” approach. Mainstreaming involved placing a child with a disability into a public classroom with his or her peers throughout most of the day, making no special adaptations per se in the classroom

itself, and offering remedial courses in another corner of the classroom or a special education classroom in another part of the building. Again, the Church in many ways followed this approach, merely placing a person with a disability in worship, Sunday school, adult Bible studies, and youth group, with no adaptations on behalf of the person with a disability or the congregation per se. This approach still did not erase the “us” versus “them” mentality.

From the late 1980s to today, inclusion and inclusivity became the “catch-words” of the education strategy of special educators and social activists in the “disability” community. Instead of placing a child or a young adult with a disability in a standard classroom for part or even more of day period and expecting the student with a disability to keep up, inclusion involved rearranging not only the classroom’s physical layout, but the entire curricula and class makeup of students as well. The ideal is this: once a classroom is inclusive, it will have been re-thought and re-structured, serving a cluster of people with disabilities, not just a single person. The goal? To see that people with and without disabilities will not only see and hear but relate to one another not as “us” versus “them,” but as “we.” For we all benefit from learning, worshiping, serving, being in fellowship, and praying together (Webb-Mitchell, 2006).

The Common Practices within the Body of Christ: Gestures

In the body of Christ, what we are learning together are the physical gestures of Christ, which also incorporates the spirit and mind of the learner. While much education in the life of the Church has focused on the habits of the heart and habits of the mind, an emphasis of the body is also necessary. For example, how do we teach the habits of hospitality, goodness, and love to the other parts of the

body, as well as to others in the world? We do it through the teaching of more than mind and spirit, but also of the body, thus building up a bodily knowledge. It is when we focus on the gestures in the body of Christ—acts of care, courage, hope, and self-control for example—that we are capable of bringing in people with disability of body, mind, or spirit. Education for some people with physical, emotional, behavioral, visual, auditory, or developmental disabilities often begins with their bodies: the crafting of intentional movement from an array of possible actions (Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

What is a gesture? A gesture is a fusion of mind, body, and spirit in Christ's one body. They are learned, practiced, and performed by members of Christ's body. The community of Christ is re-created by the gestures that embody the story of God's gospel. Some gestures are particular for an individual's grace-given gift and service in Christ's body; others are performed in common and in coordination with other members of Christ's body; and there are some gestures that are performed within the context of worshipping God. These gestures are narrated by Scripture and the traditions of the church, as well as by the traditions of a congregation where the gestures are performed. The authenticity of any gesture requires it to be a performance of Scripture itself, as interpreted within the context of Christ's one body. Because of each gesture's origin, gestures both have a story and embody a story; the gestures share that story with others, passing it down to the next generation of Christians (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). For example, how does one teach acts of sharing what one has in this world but by showing others, physically, what it means to give, such as putting money in the offering plate, or by taking part in a soup kitchen, feeding others, as Christ would want us to do.

Learning the Gestures of the Body of Christ: Patterning, Performing, and Practicing

In Paul's letter to Titus he writes about "patterning" what is good and right in the way of Christ. "Urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects a pattern of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured" (Titus 2:6–8). Likewise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that Christ is to be our "pattern that we must follow as we walk as he walked, do as he has done, and love as he has loved" (344). By patterning, we are to set before each other an example of how we are to live as Christians, namely through the detailed actions of Jesus during his ministry upon this earth, as well as the instructions in Paul's Epistles, and use them as a "rule book" of sorts for how or what we are to perform. For example, consider the Beatitudes, in which Jesus invites his followers to literally "turn the other cheek" when faced with violence, thus teaching each other the very act of pacifism in the face of violence. Patterning is thus the first stage or step of learning a gesture, setting before us an example of how we are to live by observing someone who is a master at performing a gesture in the body of Christ.

Or consider this example, when teaching or re-teaching someone how to share an object with another person or a group of people, the gesture begins by someone holding on to the object that one wants or needs. Reading the story of "love your neighbor as yourself" from the Gospels, one is asked to slowly relinquish what is in one's hand to another person, even when the impulse is to hold on to it as one's own (Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

Second, we are to imitate this example, moving from simple to more complex

practices, with a tutor or mentor by our side as we learn the gestures. This will take the efforts of a community working in unity with our hands, minds, and spirits as we take apart and re-connect the lessons of pilgrimage. After all, as Ronald Rolheiser reminds us, Christ wants from us not admiration but imitation, not like a mime on a street corner but undergoing “his presence so as to enter into a community of life and celebration with him . . . as Christ is a presence to be seized and acted upon” (x).

Third, we move from awkward first performance and practice to habitual, ritualistic movements. In imitating Christ, we find ourselves moving from once-awkward gestures to now “holy habits.” Thomas Aquinas says that habits are acquired dispositions that form us “all the way down, at the level of the body, the will, and the intellect, shaping our entire being” (Webb-Mitchell, 2003, x). By practicing and performing the gestures of Christ often enough, they become habit, making it possible for us to produce an infinite number of gesture-bound practices that are diverse and able to be used in myriad of situations and places.

The Inclusive Church: Now You Are the Body of Christ and Individually Members of One Another

In the end, our habit or way of being in the world, shaped by our habits of Christian gestures, makes us gesturers of the Word of God, and that living Word is Christ. Jesus performed many gestures in God’s name: he healed the sick, cared for the poor, proclaimed the goodness of God’s kingdom, and enacted it in his charitable, grace-filled gestures. As gesturers we all—whether people are with or without disabilities—can participate and perform the gestures we were

called to enact as part of the body of Christ. Performing the gestures of the body of Christ, we embody Christ for others in this world. Christ has no hands but our hands in reaching out to those who need assistance, just as we need his hands when we ourselves feel fragile, or his arms when we feel alone (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). For example, we become the embodiment of Christ’s peace as we share a handshake or hug during worship, say after a period of Confession, expressing to one another, “peace of Christ,” with either our lips or a handshake, or possibly a hug.

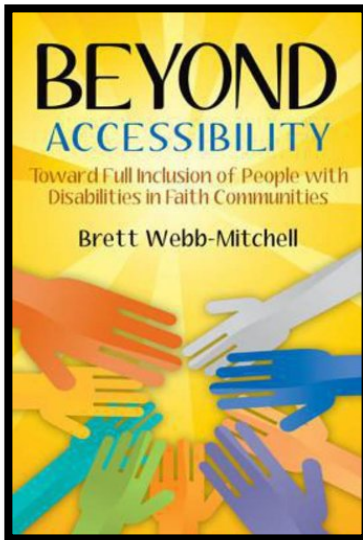
In conclusion, the educational goal of the Gospel is simple: we are to have the stamina of character to perform the gestures of Christ, seeing this world as God’s creation, and listening to it as if Christ were present among us today. We are to stop looking for the Spirit but see the Spirit in the eyes of the world’s population before us. God is present in the simplest of gestures that we all can perform, both people with and without disabilities alike, in acts of love in the all-inclusive body of Christ (Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

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Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities

Brett Webb-Mitchell (New York: Church Publishing, 2010)

A church has built an accessibility ramp and perhaps refitted its restrooms to accommodate a wheelchair. Now what? Beyond mere physical access, how can a church become a genuinely inclusive faith community? What would it mean, and how would it change the church itself, if people with disabilities participated in all aspects of congregational life, including contributing to and leading a church's governance and programs? This new resource offers a theological and practical approach for congregations, with clear, targeted strategies for full inclusion of all members, recognizing and using the gifts that each member brings to the congregation's life together.

A Vision of a Post-Disability Ministry Church

Brett Webb-Mitchell

Consider for a moment what a church might look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like in a day and age when special attention to people with disabilities and disability ministry is no longer necessary.

- There would be no more “handicapped parking” designated spots in parking lots. Such markings would not be needed because people would be conscientious enough to leave those spaces available for those who need to park closer to the doors of a sanctuary or fellowship hall.
- There would no longer be the announcement during worship by a liturgist or pastor “if you are able” when the congregation rises for singing or prayer because it would be assumed that people would do what they could or could not do, and not every hymn or prayer necessitates people standing automatically, whether a person is able-bodied or disabled.
- There would be flexible seating instead of hard wooden pews in sanctuaries, along with moveable seating in fellowship and educational rooms. Cutouts of pews would no longer be necessary.
- Worship would involve many ways of communicating and relating to each other, whether it is through music, art, mime, pottery, drama, dance, the spoken word, visual art, screens, or web design. All would learn the language of others who do not speak, read, or listen as many others do in educational, fellowship, worship, prayer, and service opportunities. Simply because a person does not speak, read, or listen does not mean that a person does not understand or know what is happening in his or her world. Leadership in worship is chosen or decided upon by the gifts that a person brings, rather than opting for worship being led by primarily those who are non-disabled.
- Allowances would be made for different transportation pathways around a church structure.
- Allowance of time and energy would be made for creating and participating in worship that is meaningful for all, regardless of what a person can or cannot do.
- All people would be available to assist one another in living the Christian life by communicating with one another around the needs of individuals and the community. It does not matter if some is “able-bodied” or “disabled;” all may be given an opportunity to serve one another in love.
- In this computer age, with all the resources that are available to us at the “click” or pressing of a button, there is no reason that all the materials that are published or produced could not be access for **all** members of a faith community, regardless of how they know and are known in this world.
- Leadership and participation in church governance, educational activities, youth programs, fellowship events, are open to all, made accessible to all, without remembering to include people with disabilities as an afterthought or “intentionally.” It is simply, and naturally, assumed that those chose to be part of any leadership role and function, as well as any and all activities within a parish or congregation, are those who have been called to lead and participate with little thought in the reality that we all bring our gifts and limitations to whatever activity we choose to participate in.

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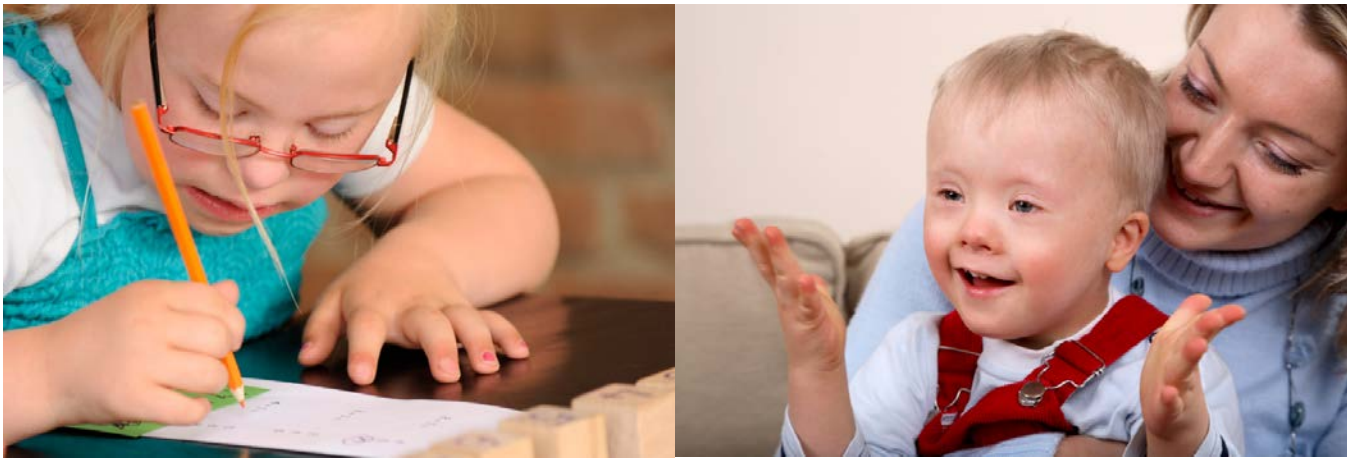
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Welcoming All: Intergenerational Faith Formation for People with Disabilities

Sharon Urbaniak

Faith is the greatest gift a parent can offer to their child. The faith I witnessed of my parents as they loved Tommy, my brother with disabilities has given me a priceless gift. God has blessed me with the opportunity to share this gift with my diocesan family for the past 13 years. For two years, we held an annual family retreat for children with disabilities at a parish on a weekend afternoon which concluded with a celebration of Mass with an interactive homily. People traveled from all over our diocese to attend. The third year, we decided to offer to take the retreat on the road to various regions in the diocese. Only one or two families registered, so they were cancelled. The need to offer a program for families still remained. Since then, I have developed an intergenerational faith formation program for people of all ages with disabilities for nine years.

Parents of a child with a disability may find it difficult to trust people in caring for their child as often they experience unpleasant situations with the medical professionals and/or educational personnel. Out of their unconditional love, they often want to cast a protective net over their child. Often in religious education programs, they may be given a textbook and told to teach their child at home. Where is our support to parents on their spiritual journey? Sometimes parents are asked or expected to sit in the class with their child. How does that make the child feel?

The *General Directory for Catechesis* says: The love of the Father for the weakest of His children and the continuous presence of Jesus and His Spirit gives assurance that every person,

Sharon Urbaniak is associate director in the Department of Lifelong Faith Formation of the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, NY where her ministry is catechesis of people with special needs. She provides consultation, collaboration, resources and training for pastors, catechetical leaders and parents. Sharon's gifts are experience with people with disabilities of all ages including a brother with disabilities. The program she created, *God's Family: Learning, Loving and Living Our Faith*—a monthly faith formation program for people of all ages with disabilities and their family and friends—was awarded the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership's 2012 New Wineskins Award and the Edward M. Shaughnessy III Inclusion Award for Serving All God's Children in July 2009.

however limited, is capable to growth in holiness. Education in the faith, which involves the family above all else, calls for personalized and adequate programs (189).

Unfortunately, the reality is that people with disabilities and their families often do not feel welcome in our church communities. Leaders often lack the proper training and insights to meet the diverse range of needs that a congregation presents.

Churches need to create an environment that welcomes families and where God's love can be felt? To that end we have created that environment in our program called, *God's Family: Living, Loving and Learning our Catholic Faith* (www.buffalodiocese.org/Evangelization/Disabilities.aspx). When a new model of intergenerational faith formation was introduced to our diocese, I was searching for a way to minister to young adults with intellectual disabilities that had made their confirmation, to adults injured from trauma, to children who just could not adjust to the regular classroom model, and to siblings and to parents. This model had great potential for meeting the needs of all, thus we began our journey to develop a diocesan program to address the catechetical needs of children and adults with physical and/or developmental disabilities.

We have created a model that emphasizes welcoming and respects each person's unique needs and abilities. For some this can be their only faith formation experience, for others this supplements their parish involvement, and for others this is a step toward membership in a local parish community.

Our team of five began with a year of training. We prayed that God would bring us His children to serve and a place to hold our monthly gathering. We are blessed to use a church facility named after Father Baker who welcomed homeless children into his facility in 1889. We began with a group of 30 participants, children, youth and adults.

The Diocese of Buffalo provided \$500 to begin and continues providing financial support. The team members are excellent

stewards of our resources and we have been blessed with a few generous benefactors. One year, a lady volunteered just to canvas business for donations which resulted in gift cards and discounts for our food and paper supplies. Now we have a parish donating paper supplies and allowing us to borrow their real silverware.

In our first year we used resources from the Generations of Faith Intergenerational Project (Center for Ministry Development) and met monthly for two hours to plan our three-hour program adapting resources to meet the needs of those we served. Usually, we combine resources from the children's program and adult program to achieve an interactive lesson at the fifth grade comprehension level.

Each month we transformed one large space into multiple activity areas. A large poster shares the day's routine with picture symbols. Our program is divided into four sections: **Gathering, Meal Time, Sharing Our Faith, and Prayer.**

Program Design

Part 1. Gathering

Since we meet monthly, **Gathering** is a time for us to reconnect with one another. We offer both structured activities and socialization time with beverages. We welcome people with colorful balloons on the door to indicate where to come. One team member decorates our welcome table with tablecloth, candles and seasonal items. Here families are greeted, given name tags, and sign greeting cards to celebrate our concern for one another—birthday, get well, thinking of you, and holiday cards.

Next our members put a sticker on an attendance chart. At the end of the year, we will put all the names of the people with perfect attendance into a basket and select one to receive a special religious gift to symbolize our year.

Items for our prayer procession are displayed as a team member signs people up for this ministry. There are routine items and special items added to correlate to our day's lesson. We utilize a 16 x 20 inch banner of Hook's portrait of Jesus. We can talk about Jesus being present, but with the people seeing Jesus or putting Jesus' picture on a chair as makes Jesus' presence seem more real. Routine items include our altar cloth, two battery operated candles, the Children's Lectionary, our prayer request notebook, and a squishy large red soft heart pillow. Our altar cloth was made from a hand print of each person with his or her first name on it. One of our children with autism has made the heart pillow their own as the texture calms him. He is often heard telling us that the pillow reminds us that "Jesus Loves Us." (Children with autism have an increased need for sensory stimulation. A box with sensory items such as squishy balls, hand lotion, Beanie babies and plastic animals is available for our family members who may need to hold onto an item as they learn.)

Our prayer request book is a white three-ring binder with a picture of a person praying and the words "Prayer Requests" on it. These prayers will be shared during our prayer time, and e-mailed to absent members. People are encouraged to write down their requests as we gather and a team member transcribes requests for those unable to write.

Participants make a craft that coordinates with the theme of the faith lesson to take home. The tables are placed in a large closed rectangle which allows for sharing supplies and facilitating group conversation.

Part 2. Meal Time

Sharing a meal is an important element of our gathering. We arrange tables so there are two or three together end to end to encourage people to sit with new people and to accommodate larger groups like group homes. Each table has a centerpiece that coordinates with the season or our theme for the day. On

special occasions, we connect the tables to form an open "U" and at Christmas time when we have visitors, we arrange the tables in larger squares. As people arrive, they assist in placing silverware and napkins at the place settings which is a simple way to get them involved and feel excited about helping.

One of our members leads us in grace, extending his arms out over the food to bless it and over the people to bless us. Then we join in the traditional grace. "Bless Us O Lord for These Thy Gifts" as our group likes routine.

Food preparation has been a learning experience. We began with a caterer who generously donated her time. Another year, the team planned and prepared the meals. One year an ambitious dad with a big heart began preparing us a gourmet lunch, but his schedule got too busy to continue. Now, we are gifted with a father who enjoys preparing delicious lunches. Twice a year, usually in December and the Easter season, families share in a pot luck meal. Favorite meals include chili, egg casseroles, turkey a la king, Lent soup and bread, pre-made party subs and grilled hot dogs. Most meals are served buffet style. One remarkable meal was the time a family of six prepared and served us plates of spaghetti. Another special time was an Easter breakfast complete with sausage, eggs and pastries. We have had a St. Joseph Table adorned with flowers and a statute of St. Joseph.

Identifying people's gifts and providing an opportunity for them to share it is an essential part of creating our special community. One of our young family members shares her love for baking by preparing cupcakes for our birthdays. Another young adult prepares dessert for our members with diabetes.

We added a ritual where the table with the birthday closest to the program date gets to eat first. Along with singing Happy Birthday, each person can select a birthday gift from our gift basket. One young boy selected a beautiful picture of Jesus which his family hung in the staircase and the boy now says:

“Good Morning, Jesus” as he comes down the stairs each day and says “Good Night, Jesus” on his way to bed. The mother asked if we could make sure his brother gets a Mary picture on his birthday, which we did. Now they say “Good Morning and Good Evening to Mary and Jesus.” The mom proclaimed this action has made a difference in their family and their faith.

Part 3. Sharing Our Faith

In our learning area, chairs are placed in a large oval with a table for our lesson materials. Our lessons incorporate interactive activities to engage people at all times. Our participants enjoy acting stories out, especially with costumes. Children volunteer to carry symbols of our faith around to each person. Flannel board pieces are utilized for storytelling. YouTube videos are used for their shortness and ability to take us back to biblical times. We have cooked bread in bread machines for the aroma when learning about Jesus’ special bread, Eucharist. We have closed our eyes and imagined meeting Jesus. We do small group work, make posters and create stories. Engaging people and repeating the key points in different way involving different senses enhances the learning.

We encourage learning and routines to continue throughout the month in the home with the materials provided in our take home kits. We also include flyers about social events for people with disabilities offered in parishes. Often materials are placed in clear plastic bags, lunch bags or bags color coordinated to the liturgical season.

Part 4. Prayer

We conclude with a prayer service which begins with a procession as the group needs the routine of ritual. We try to engage everyone in carrying an item or doing an action of reverence at the prayer table. We have blessed ourselves with holy water in a bowl that looks like a wave of water. Someone

made a large life size cross with an iron heart in the middle which we have bowed before as we added our pictures to the cross. Our theme song is “God has Made us a Family” by Carey Landry. The words are simple and states our purpose: “God has made us a family and together we will grow in love.” We are blessed with a guitarist and flutist to led our music ministry. The leader offers a simple spontaneous opening prayer.

Originally , we incorporated a reading and a psalm, but for our active group this made the service too long. We sign the three crosses as we sing “Your Word, O Lord is on our minds and on our lips and in our hearts”. We had several parents inform us that they never knew there were words or thoughts to go along with this gesture they have done for years. Singing the words as we do the action helps to guide our people into the correct action. We have added the words “Alleluia. Alleluia, Alleluia. Alleluia” and the simple sign for this word before and after our signing.

The Gospel is proclaimed from the Children’s Lectionary as this translation is easiest for our group to understand. The reading is usually selected to correlate with our lesson. The readings for the week may be downloaded at Pflaum’s website (www.pflaum.com/readings). Treehaus publications (www.treehaus1.com) has lectionaries adapted for children for all three cycles available.

Participants are guided through an interactive reflection of what they heard in the Gospel and are encouraged to share what they think Jesus is calling them to do. Our prayers are offered with us singing “Lord, hear our prayer” to the tune of the five golden rings from the 12 days of Christmas. We recite the Lord’s Prayer and offer each other a sign of peace. Sometimes after the Lord’s prayer, we all take a few steps inside our oval to do a group hug to feel our love for one another and end with a loud “Amen” in response to “And the Lord’s said”. We conclude with a spontaneous closing prayer asking God to send us forth to do whatever our lesson calls

us to do. We conclude in song. Announcements are made including when we will meet again.

Program Content

Liturgical Year

Our first year topic was the liturgical year. We encouraged families to find a place in their home to create a prayer space where they could spend time with their friend Jesus either alone or as a family. Each received a piece of felt to coordinate with the color of the liturgical season. We decorated glass votive candle holders and gave each person a battery operated tea light to put in it. We purchased stand up acrylic 5x7 picture frames for each family and provided a picture for their prayer space that changed monthly.. When a new Bishop arrived, we gave out his picture for the frame. We cut out pictures from old program covers such as Jesus, the shepherd pictures from reconciliation programs, Eucharist pictures from First Communion programs, and Holy Spirit pictures from Confirmation. For other seasons, we utilized calendar pictures, greeting cards, and pictures downloaded from the internet. We concluded the year with each person receiving a special picture of Jesus and a personalized message on the back.

Each year during various liturgical season, we still engage in routine opportunities. During Advent, we reach out to new groups. We invited a parish group to lead us in carols which were intertwined with our own nativity pageant. The backdrop for the stable was made from paper bags outlined with empty wrapping paper rolls. Our angels wore used First Communion dresses and our kings wore beautiful robes borrowed from a parish. When the tallest of the kings had a crown placed on his head, the large smile he had told us he felt like a king! The person who played Joseph was cursing and talking to imaginary voices until he was given baby Jesus

and a special grace feel upon him. The young lady who was Mary became a single mom the following year and we had a baby shower for her. A 65-year-old woman was an angel and carried a star in the procession that we lit when all were in place. She exclaimed "What an honor it is for me to be part of this." Someone asked who are we doing the pageant for and I answered "for us." The parents were overjoyed as their children were given the opportunity to be in these roles, something that never happened in their parish pageants. We taped the pageant and when one family relocated, we sent them a copy the next Christmas to remember the joy we shared together.

Another year, a Lutheran church's bell choir performed Christmas songs for us in between our holiday lessons. We were prayer partners to retired priests with disabilities one year. A musical group called Shepherd's Troupe comprised with members with disabilities performed Christian music through vocal singing, gesturing and liturgical expression another year. A Catholic elementary school chorus sang for us and we gave them bell ornaments as a remembrance of the blind child listening for the bells ringing to find baby Jesus. A team from a neighboring church presented a "Journey through Bethlehem" where we purchased items of Biblical time from the candle maker, the potter, the food market and the bread maker, and concluded at the stable with the Holy Family. In a simpler celebration, we passed out pieces to the manger scene and read the nativity story. When we discussed the gifts the kings brought, one very spirited energetic girl danced around saying "I have God's love to bring to everyone!" The joy she shared still lives on as each year she shares that comment with us. Each year, we welcome the opportunity to celebrate in a different way.

For Lent, we talked about the crucifix as our Lent symbol and asked each family to bring in a cross or a crucifix from their home to share. We purchased extras for those who

did not have one. The stories people shared of the history of their symbols bonded us in a very special way. When studying Scripture, families shared how family Bibles were passed down from generation to generation. An essential aspect of our program is allowing people the opportunity to share their faith stories. We role-played Palm Sunday with paper bags taped to the floor to make a brick road and coats lining the way. Everyone had a real palm to wave, which they took home and put in their prayer space. The person who played Jesus was a 38-year-old quiet gentleman in a wheelchair. After he celebrated Palm Sunday at his parish, he was eager to share how different this Palm Sunday was for him after playing this role and how it has transformed his faith.

In May, one of our team members died unexpectedly and because of transportation and work issues, few of our family members attended her service. We held our own service in a chapel at our next session. As we were sharing our memories, we noticed that the altar had inscribed all the qualities of Our Lady of Victory and these words were the expressed qualities Joanne had shared with us. We truly felt Jesus' loving presence with us. Joanne's mother joined our program the next year until her health kept her from being with us physically. She remained connected to us by making our phone calls. Seven years later, she converted to Catholicism celebrating her initiation at our closing liturgy.

The first year, the parents did not want to take the summer off, but our team needed time to plan the following year. So we found a parish to host a picnic for all the groups in our diocese who serve people with disabilities in July. This yearly event has grown from 30 people to 300 attending. In 2012 year we added an additional site for an August picnic. For some, we are their family and they attended both picnics.

Sacraments

Our second year focused on the seven sacraments. The most memorable experience was our celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation. We brought from our homes table lamps, end tables, and velvet blankets which were placed over the chairs for the priest and participants. We set up a corner of our large room as the Reconciliation room. Some of our brothers and sisters from the group home did not have the comprehension level to know when they are choosing to do wrong, but our loving priest suggested they come to the reconciliation area and say prayers with him so that they would feel included. When we gathered back in our prayer area, the sun shined through our glass doors reflecting the painted words "Welcome to God's Family" on two walls for all of us to see and know God's love was with us. One of our high school volunteer's aunt, with disabilities and living in a group home, received the sacrament of Confirmation at our year-end Mass.

When we talked about the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, we talked about our call to comfort people who are sick, which initiated a prayer scarf ministry in our group. Two ladies with developmental disabilities eagerly volunteered to knit our prayer scarves. At our monthly prayer service, we pray for those who are sick by touching the scarf while praying for the person hoping they will feel our love.

We also had homemade interactive spiral books for each sacrament that explained the sacrament in language all our members understood with pictures and movable pieces.

Prayer

Prayer was our theme for year three. We gave each person a photo box labeled "prayer items" to collect items to pray with. As new families joined us we would bless them and present them with a box with the liturgical colored felt pieces and plastic frame with

pictures. We have members who do not read, so we needed to rethink our take home materials. We were blessed to have a volunteer make us items to take home. We received finger rosaries, small hand painted Mary statues, Jesse tree ornaments, Advent pins, love rocks, cross necklaces, paper flower corsages for mothers day, Advent candles, crowns of thorns and spirit key chains.

Justice & Service

The fourth year focused on justice and service. The highlight was a presentation from a family of six refugees where we shared in the pain of their past as they fled from Burma and in the joy of their new life in America. We collected hygiene and cleaning supplies during Advent for refugees. A local animal shelter was recipient of our collection of blankets. We concluded the year with our session at a beautiful retreat center which many of our group had never experienced. When they entered the chapel, they were walking on holy ground and a glow of peace and comfort arose in them.

Year Five: Ten Commandments

In year five we focused on the Ten Commandments. We approached the commandments from a positive view of what we are called to do, and utilized shared presentations, role playing, small groups, and interactive activities with movement. We had a costume for Moses—a white hair Santa wig, black bathrobe with twine belt; the silver cardboard posters—one for each commandment. We would review each month what we had already learned because repetition is great for our participants. Our song for the year was “This Is My Commandment.”

The Bible

Through the generosity of the girls at a Catholic high school, each person received a Bible at their comprehension level for our sixth year on the “Proclamation of the Word.” Our theme song was “The B-I-B-L-E” and we made posters with each letter to engage our lively youth in our prayer service. We learned about the various parts of the Bible, especially the stories found in the Gospels. For Holy Week, we visited a learning station for each day of Holy Week where we listened to the Scripture readings and completed a ritual or activity associated with the day.

Year Seven: The Creed

For the year of the Creed, each person made a felt banner that said “I believe” and each month we placed a different card in the banner with a phrase and picture from the Apostles Creed book from the NICE at University of Dayton http://ipi.udayton.edu/nice_books.html. The Creed was recited in each prayer service. We utilized PowerPoint presentations and video clips as the foundations of our lessons.

Sharing the Good News

This year our theme is “Sharing the Good News.” We began the year with an adapted version of the parents, grandparents, and siblings as evangelizers retreat from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website: www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday/new-evangelization/index.cfm. We made evangelizer banners with the words “Know,” “Love and Serve” and picture symbols of Jesus. We are all called to be evangelizers who spread the message of God. We viewed Jesus choosing the twelve apostles at www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhuioVEiIQc and learned about six of the apostles. Team

members distributed stripes with apostle facts. Attentive listeners added the facts to the apostles picture poster as stories were told. The following month, the story is retold using flannel board pieces and people learn about the other six apostles. Each person is given cards with a holographic Jesus picture and the words, “Know, Love and Serve Jesus,” on one side and information about our program on the other side to share with their friends as we reach out to evangelize.

Sacramental Preparation

Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community (Canon 213). People have celebrated First Reconciliation, First Eucharist, Confirmation, and one person was initiated into the Catholic Church. Our Masses are held in our beautiful Basilica. Our music ministry accompanies us. Our celebrants have welcomed us and accommodated the variety of needs of our group. Afterwards, we host an elegant luncheon reception for our group and the family and friends of those celebrating reception of the sacrament

Last year, parents used the Adaptive Kit for sacramental preparation from Loyola Press with very positive results (www.loyolapress.com/special-needs-eucharist-products.htm). We gathered as a community in each person’s home for review sessions. At these session we practiced receiving Eucharist in both forms, we sang refrains to songs, we talked about Jesus’ special meal with his friends, and his special food to feed out hearts and we prayed. We set a regular table and then reset it with the items at the altar. The families shared what a gift it was for us to meet in their home as often people choose not to visit them. For their child to be a host (and make cookies for us), has become a treasured moment on the journey.

Reflections on Our Journey

We have held 10 sessions yearly, for a total of 80. Over the past eight years, we have served 161 people (71 with disabilities, 53 parents, 25 siblings and 14 team members). This year (2012-2013) we have added 23 more participants

In our nine years, we have had many graduates from our program. The first was a shy 15-year-old young man with Down Syndrome who was preparing for Confirmation and joined us for his regular religious education program. After a couple of years, he was initiating interaction with others and his family began ministry in our kitchen. After a year, the mom mentioned their church was going to a soup kitchen on the same Saturday of the month that we met and would like to try this with their son. A year later, the mom who is an Extraordinary Minister of Eucharist was at mass with her child and told him she needed to do her ministry and would leave him to be on the altar. Her son said to her “Mom, I would like to pass out the Jesus food.” She told me they never had called Communion Jesus food. My reply was “He wants to share Jesus with his church family—what greater act of love could he ask to do!” Another member has become a greeter at their parish.

We have seen families join a traditional parish after developing a relationship with our program. They needed a place to be welcomed, feel God’s love, and be empowered to become part of the larger church community. We have witnessed parents become more accepting of their child’s abilities and leave behind the feelings of guilt or anger. Our adults with disabilities, which include mental, physical and developmental and our parents, have an opportunity to minister to each other and not feel isolated from others.

Participants have offered these comments about the program and their experiences:

We love the day. Everyone made us feel welcomed and valued. We are so impressed with the loving care and attention to detail that is evident in every one of our meetings. The spirit of true Christianity is distilled wonderfully.

The residents of our group home truly enjoy attending. They have a place where they can go, learn about religion, share with others, and feel they belong here.

I feel encouraged and enriched after participating in the sessions. My memory was refreshed with the insights given on Catholic teachings.

We look forward very much to our gatherings. They review for us in a very vivid way the essence of Christianity.

We enjoy the lasting friendships we have made—with Christ as the center of our prayer.

Our team has changed throughout the years. We began with five members. Kathy, a lady who had served people with disabilities and now found herself disabled and unable to work offered her time and talent. She utilized her knowledge of the needs of those served with her creative skills and experiences as a den mother to prepare our take home kits and craft projects. She spent hours surfing the internet for ideas and more hours preparing what she found. Stephanie, a catechetical leader who had assisted with the two family retreats joined the team along with Sr. Margaret who was a chaplain with an agency serving people with disabilities. Joanne, a faith-filled teacher with a deep spirituality coordinated our prayer services. My husband was recruited to lead our music ministry. After Joanne's sudden death, Father Ray joined our team for two years, after we had

sent a brochure about our program with our Christmas cards to our retired priests. His reflections on our Gospel were inspirational for our adults and his gentle spirit helped our members with mental illness feel the gift of peace. He was honored when our Bishop granted him permission to confirm one of our members.

We have had youth provide service as part of their requirement for Confirmation with some transitioning to jobs in their field. We have had five parents and two of our participants join our team. The leader who hosted our first family retreats retired and now serves on our team. We had a deacon lead our prayer services for a year and now we have a deacon candidate on our team. Another member who cared for her brother with disabilities until his return to the Lord, donates her time in his memory. She often brings her grandchildren to assist. God has blessed us with the people we need.

Our team meets in July for a pot luck meal and to evaluate the year. We identify the topic for our next year and begin our brainstorming. In August, we meet to plan our first gathering. Then we meet monthly for two hours to plan our sessions.

Concluding Reflections

Participants are welcomed and seen as our brothers and sisters. At our meetings, we learn about their disabilities, but all are seen for their abilities. We truly see the person first and then their disability. Our group has included people of all ages with Down Syndrome, adults with physical disabilities due to aging and accidents, adults with mental illness and children with Autism, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder) OCD (obsessive compulsion disorder) or cognitive disabilities.

The role that group homes play in creating and maintaining a healthy environment for their clients includes spiritual care. Agencies have expressed gratitude for a place for their Catholic residents to go because they may not

feel welcomed in parishes or do not have the support system to get to know parishioners. We have seen group homes becoming involved in their local parishes as a result of our program. Even the hearts of some of the case workers and aides have been touched.

This experience and the feedback from the parents has empowered us to become stronger advocates for people with disabilities. We have initiated an "Open Doors Disability Awareness Mass" in our parishes where we highlight the inclusion of people with disabilities in the ministries of the Mass. Our program has been featured on our syndicated television program, *Our Daily Bread*, hosted by a diocesan priest who mixes faith and cooking. Last year, our Office of Communications received a grant to create both public service announcements and a disability awareness video highlighting the role of our brothers and sisters with disabilities within the church.

When we began nine years ago, we opened a door to a new program. By listening to the Holy Spirit, we have transformed the spiritual life of people with disabilities empowering them to be the church God calls us to be. Joys

are doubled and pains are halved in our community. New people are welcomed and others find their wings and move onto new horizons always carrying Christ's love to all they meet.

Our church must bring Christ's compassion to each of our brothers and sisters with disabilities and their families. Each person was baptized into our Catholic faith and has a gift to share to build our church. We must see through Jesus' loving eyes, meet them where they are, and journey with them. They must be given the opportunity to share their abilities. Parents need our loving support and siblings need to witness our acceptance and love of their sibling in our community.

Our Lord has called me to encourage you to open the doors in your congregation to create new programs to welcome and serve your brothers and sisters with disabilities. Listen not only with your ears, but with your heart. Our Lord will bring you team members, participants, and the means to develop this ministry. Hopefully this article will plant the seed to inspire you in this important ministry.



There Are No Barriers To God's Love

Mark I. Pinsky

The television commercials were disturbing. Images showed congregants at traditional-looking churches barring or even physically ejecting members of racial and ethnic minorities, gay couples, and people with disabilities. One tag line read, “Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.” This national ad campaign, which aired in 2004, was sponsored by the United Church of Christ and was designed to attract new members. “We included people with physical disabilities in these commercials—in a wheelchair or with a walker—as an extension of the call and hope that churches would be intentionally inclusive of ‘all the people,’” said the Reverend Gregg Brekke, a spokesman for the denomination.

Instead, the imagery provoked grumbling from some denominations because of its implied criticism of other faith traditions. Yet the criticism held more than a grain of truth. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are places where people with disabilities might not expect to feel excluded, isolated, or patronized, but that has often been the norm. For years congregations have effectively excluded people with disabilities from worship—whether by steps and narrow doorways or by strained attitudes—or segregated them in “special” services.

The U.S. Census in 2000 counted 54 million persons with disabilities—one in six Americans—and that number is growing. Wounded Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, including men and women with amputations, traumatic brain injuries, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are swelling this population. Thanks to dramatic technological advances and

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improvements in neonatal care, formerly at-risk infants with severe and multiple disabilities now survive into adulthood. With the aid of breathing and feeding technologies and adaptive devices such as electronically operated prosthetics and speech-synthesizing computers, they are able to navigate and communicate. And the huge baby boom generation will soon be aging into infirmity, with attendant challenges of disabilities in hearing, vision, mobility, and cognition.

Members of all these groups want to pray at houses of worship. Yet a 2010 survey by the Kessler Foundation and the National Organization on Disability found that people with disabilities are less likely to attend religious services at least once a month than are people without disabilities, by a 50 percent to 57 percent margin. The greater the disability, the less likely a person is to participate.

People with disabilities “can attend school, hold down jobs, and turn the key in the door of their own apartments,” wrote Erin R. DuBois in *The Mennonite* magazine. “They have won the legal battle for inclusion, but by the time they land in the pew at church, they may be too exhausted to fight for something more precious than their rights. Friendship is a gift the law can never guarantee to people with developmental disabilities. Churches across the United States, however, are reaping the rewards of building genuine relationships with those in their midst who are epitomized not by their disabilities but by their rare abilities to deepen the congregation’s spiritual life.”

The prophets, great thinkers, and scriptures of most faiths mandate, at least in spirit, the inclusion of everyone. For most of us, practices of faith can play a significant role in enriching the lives of people with disabilities and their families, friends, caregivers, and faith communities. But how far can—or should—modern religious congregations go to accommodate people with physical or intellectual disabilities?

Even congregations with the best of intentions can face challenges to fully embracing accessibility and inclusion. Seniors and people with disabilities can remind others uncomfortably of life’s fragility and of death. People with emotional and intellectual disabilities can distract other worshipers during solemn moments. Religious people generally want to be sincere, welcoming, and open, but like everyone else, they often lack the experience to respond in the right way. Yet as Mother Teresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity, put it, “We can do no great things; only small things with great love.”

To be sure, money is an issue, especially for small, cash-poor congregations. More than half the religious congregations in North America, many of them in small towns and rural areas, have fewer than one hundred members, which limits their ability to adapt their buildings for handicapped accessibility. Building a ramp out of plywood is one thing; installing an elevator is quite another.

“When it comes to spending for architectural accessibility, there is sometimes reluctance on the part of finance committees,” said Rabbi Lynne F. Landsberg, who herself suffered traumatic brain injury as the result of a traffic accident. Yet changing people’s attitudes, implementing programs, and making modest accommodations—as opposed to major changes in architecture and additions of paid staff—can be relatively inexpensive, even for smaller congregations.

Nationally, many denominations—and more recently, nondenominational evangelical groups, who view this as a mission—now have ministries and task forces that offer advice and educational curriculums for people with disabilities, as does the Interfaith Initiative of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD). These programs are often offered for free online or at a small cost for materials and are designed for volunteer leaders, teachers, and ordained clergy.

Potential benefits—often unintended and unforeseen—await congregations that are willing to invest in architecture and attitudes in order to become more accessible and welcoming. Mainline congregations with declining memberships, for example, have much to gain by making their sanctuaries, social halls, meeting rooms, and rest rooms accessible to all people with disabilities. Elevators and ramps benefit, among others, mothers with strollers and seniors who use canes, walkers, or wheelchairs and long to participate and contribute. More families with disabled members would attend religious services, experts say, if congregations made efforts to open their buildings and programs to them. Older people are more likely to attend services than the young, and they are faithful donors. Communities that adapt to the world of disability are more likely to survive and grow; those that do not will lose out.

The good news is that some churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are already welcoming people with disabilities and getting ready for the coming influx of wounded vets and creaky boomers. They are tapping technology and simple thoughtfulness to reach out in creative ways to this faith-hungry community:

- At Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Norfolk, Virginia, priest Joe Metzger instructs an eleven-year-old autistic girl in an empty sanctuary, wearing his vestments, so she'll feel at ease when she makes her first Communion.
- At Bet Shalom Congregation in Minnetonka, Minnesota, no sanctuary steps lead to the pulpit. Congregants approach it using a long ramp, symbolizing that all people come to the Torah equally. Similarly, when Temple Adath Israel in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, left its old building, the congregation built a new, accessible synagogue with a curved sanctuary and ramps on either side of the bimah—the

platform from which the scriptures are read—which look like embracing arms.

- At St. John's Episcopal Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exton, Pennsylvania, adult members with Down syndrome serve as altar servers, greeters, and Sunday morning ushers.

As these examples suggest, it takes more than just automatic door openers, large-print Bibles, and improved signage to make a congregation disability friendly. In recent years, many Christian and Jewish denominations have also established—sometimes under pressure—national outreach networks, which often are online resource centers, to make their congregations accessible.

Although pastoral leadership can be critical, making faith communities welcoming and accessible to people with disabilities should not be a mission that falls mainly on the shoulders of clergy or other advocates. It is largely a matter of attitude on the part of lay people in the pews, on folding chairs, and kneeling on the carpet. Making your congregation welcoming and accessible can be done because it has been done—somewhere, by people just like you.

“Of all the barriers to full participation and inclusion, the barrier of unexamined attitudes is the most difficult to address,” said Ginny Thornburgh, director of the AAPD Interfaith Initiative. The initiative's goal, she said, is “to bring the powerful and prophetic voice of the faith community to the twenty-first-century disability agenda” and to involve all religious communities. “There are no barriers to God's love,” she said. “There should be no barriers in God's house.”

Faith is a powerful thing, and children and adults with disabilities—regardless of how profound—benefit from expressing it and being part of a community of family, friends, and fellow believers who share it in worship.

Book Excerpt: “A Spirit of Hospitality”

(From: *Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion* by Mark I. Pinsky)

False starts—even bad beginnings—can sometimes lead to good endings. When care providers for people with intellectual disabilities in rural western Pennsylvania brought their members to some area churches, the group home residents were asked not to return—a painful rejection. A few church members had found the newcomers’ sometimes noisy behavior disruptive, or they felt uncomfortable because of the visitors’ physical characteristics or difficulty in speaking.

The caregivers then contacted the Reverend Sue Montgomery about holding a service for the residents at the Nickleville Presbyterian Church, a small congregation with a rich and profound sense of being a family. The Nickleville congregation was receptive. It had, after all, called Montgomery, who uses a wheelchair, to serve as its pastor. And more than fifty years earlier, a family in the congregation had decided not to institutionalize their son when he was born with a disability. Their decision, Montgomery said, flowed from an understanding of what it meant to be embraced in the family of God, including full integration into the church. The congregation’s spirit of hospitality and inclusion had since been extended to all—to people who had disabilities, who were confronting questions of sexual identity, who had served prison time, or who were struggling with addiction.

Still, Montgomery acknowledged, some members of her congregation felt nervous about the new ministry, and some confessed that they were afraid of the newcomers. But four people stepped forward and committed themselves to the ministry, which the church called the Training Towards Self Reliance ministry.

Two years into the program, the gifts the men and women with disabilities bring to worship at Nickleville Presbyterian have been rewarding. The group home residents are

considered active participants in the congregation. When they are included in morning worship services on Sunday, they are no longer thought of as visitors. The men and women of Training Towards Self Reliance (TTSR) are a part of the extended church family.

During their “Our Tuesday” morning worship services, they read the scriptures, some of them with a great deal of assistance and others almost unaided. Some have played the piano or sung solos for worship. Others have assisted with morning prayers. They are always in charge of receiving the offerings. One week one of the young men walked down the aisle shouting, “My preacher never lets me do this!”

“It was the defining moment of why we do what we do,” said Montgomery.

The congregation’s group home ministry has now expanded to other group homes in the community, with both on-site worship services and services at the church. “Our Tuesday” worship attendance now includes fifteen to twenty persons with developmental disabilities and fifteen to twenty-five caregiving and administrative staff. Many staff members had never previously attended church in the community, so the ministry helped them learn worship behaviors and etiquette. They now demonstrate to the group home residents appropriate worship behaviors, such as remaining quiet during prayer, finding hymns in the hymnal, and assisting with the offerings.

“We have watched a young man be transformed from a passive, unresponsive participant to one who now actively participates in a variety of ways,” Montgomery said by way of example. “This wouldn’t have happened without hands-on support being given to him during worship. Worship in this ministry, as it should be in every congregation, is a time of communal nurture.”

The TTSR ministry also involves people

with disabilities in raising money for the town's local food pantry. Every week, said Montgomery, "one of our women, as she goes out the door, says, 'I hope the children get their peanut butter and jelly.' And each time, she is reassured."

"Is it easy?" Montgomery asks. "No, but the spirit of inclusion is there, and that can never be destroyed. Are there difficulties? Yes, but tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of differences overcome all the uncertainty and discomfort among regular congregation members. Have we had people afraid? Yes, and they chose to keep their distance. The fear is that at their ages and frail conditions they might be hurt by aggressive behaviors. Their fears are respected and acknowledged.

The [group home] staff work with the men and women, and with that staff cooperation, we are assured that everything will be done to support both the men and women with the aggressive behaviors and the members of our congregation."

Sometimes the smallest things can make a difference. For example, the congregation modified the way it articulated worship. "Our speech is slowed to match the speech patterns of the men and women with difficulties speaking," Montgomery said. "We have learned to slow down. The Lord's Prayer is recited much more slowly and is no longer a running of the Indianapolis 500 in speed and pace."



Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion

Mark I. Pinsky (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2012)

Amazing Gifts is a remarkable collection of 64 stories about the way faith communities welcome and affirm people with disabilities in worship, ministry, fellowship, and leadership. Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, and other congregations do this not only because it is the right thing to do, but because they are made better by the gifts of all people. Mark Pinsky has taken special care to include the widest range of disabilities, including non-apparent disabilities like lupus, chronic pain, traumatic brain injury, depression, and mental illness. This book is for congregational leaders and others who may have no expertise or personal experience with disability, but who make the congregational decisions about accessibility and inclusion.



Affirming Presence: Spiritual Life and Friendship with Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities

Benjamin T. Conner

My first impression of Galen immediately brought to mind the description of Dr. James Mortimer by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The hound of the Baskervilles*: “He had large, quivering fingers as agile and restless as the antennae of an insect” (Doyle, 579). While the logic of the antennae’s movement is inscrutable to the observer, they are busily working to determine moisture, discern scents, taste surroundings, locate food or detect enemies. Galen’s motions are often as erratic to me, but I know they are purposeful.¹ Galen has an intellectual disability and autism which manifests itself physically through the typical repetitive motions and rituals (often involving wads of string or glasses) and peculiar responses to the variety of sensory stimuli that are part of the wallpaper of our lives. He has severely impaired reciprocal interaction and, therefore, has had a difficult time entering into friendships. To understand Galen primarily through his autism, however, does him a disservice and may cause one to miss what it is to know him as a friend.

If you desire a meaningful conversation with John, a young man with Asperger’s syndrome, and to engage him in a two-way conversation, you will need to talk to him while you assemble a 1200-piece puzzle together. The activity occupies his brain and has a calming effect on him that allows him to stay, more or less, on topic. I was recently evaluating a joint event with the

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activities coordinator of an organization that does a wonderful job providing community activities and advocating on behalf of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our community. We were discussing what activities we should keep, drop and what needs improvement to make it a better experience, more suited to those involved. She was describing one activity, a game that she believed needed to be dropped because one of her “clients” did not understand the game and spent the whole time doing the wrong thing. This client, however, was John, my friend, and I happen to know that, in his mind, he was playing the game precisely as it is to be played. She could never have known this because he was a client to her. Friendship opens us up to participating in others’ lives and connecting with them beyond the model of caregiver and patient, or service provider and client. The medical model is concerned with issues of aetiology, diagnosable signs and symptoms and is always interested in finding technical solutions to the problem of disability. The patient, therefore, is related to in terms of a specific, definable pathology, an individual problem to be eliminated—this model does not address the human as a person set in the context of a web of relations. The client of the social services provider receives services, training, benefits or opportunities—there is no need to share life with the person who happens to also be a client. In contrast, as John Swinton² has succinctly put it, “The priority of friends is the personhood of the other and not the illness” (Swinton 2000, 37). Friendship recognizes the disabled other not in terms of a patient with a pathology, or a client who receives good and services, but in terms of mutuality, and mutuality is essential to the experience of spirituality.

While Galen’s mother is pleased with the progress made in the United States with respect to disability rights and the many institutional barriers that have opened the way for him to be present in our society, she knows that legislation cannot address the

deeply entrenched cultural and community barriers that deny him the experience of belonging – the intimacy of friendship. One aspect of the disability rights movement that opened doors for Galen included opening up the exit doors of institutions, the deinstitutionalization which made it possible for people with intellectual disabilities to enter into the kind of relationships with others that made intimate connections and the development of a healthier identity possible. According to Amos Yong, it was important then, as it is vitally important now, that “this new paradigm emphasized social services professional support networks, and most importantly, the cultivation of genuine friendships” (Yong, 57). Hans Reinders, a professor of ethics and mental disability at the Free University of Amsterdam has made the same point:

The practices and politics of inclusion will not create a lasting change for persons with disabilities unless there will be people willing to invest in friendships with them. Without true friendships, disabled persons will enjoy the new opportunities created by their equal rights most likely as ‘strangers in a strange land.’ (Reinders, 187)

If spirituality is, among other things, a matter of “connectedness,” then how do we nurture Galen’s Christian spirituality? Can we discern it, measure it or foster it? Friendship is one important Christian model of spiritual connectedness that finds its origins in the initiative of God. In Christian theology people do not make friends with God; by an act of self-revelation God makes friends with people, offers them an affirming presence, and invites them to participate in the divine life. The issue is central to Reinders’ work:

I wish to confront the longstanding convictions in the Christian tradition with implications of exclusion that have never been properly questioned. . . . Every

human being is worth of being chosen as a friend simply because that is what God does – choose us to be friends. . . . friendship with fellow creatures is our vocation. (Reinders, 162)

For the congregation that is serious about including adolescents with special needs in its corporate life, friendship is the first practice in providing an affirming presence. The practice of friendship is a spiritual practice that provides a tangible way that we can nurture the spiritual lives of adolescents with developmental disabilities by extending to them a wider range of connectivity. It is also a practice that challenges contemporary understandings of what it means to be human and created in the image of God.

The Problem

When we attempt to assess spirituality in others, what do we look for? We could look at the manifestation of one's spirituality in terms of age-appropriate moral growth or verbal affirmations of faith. The assumption is that along with the spiritual encounter, adolescents will develop in their moral convictions with the complexity, intentionality and responsibility that is appropriate to other persons their age. But it must be considered that spiritual growth is not strictly tied to human development. It is also true that at different times, related to different intellectual and emotional capacities, the process of spiritual growth will take on different manifestations, as Kenda Dean has made clear in her work on the faith responses of adolescents. For example, adolescence opens up new possibilities for spiritual formation with the introduction of formal operational thinking, the ability to consider abstract possibilities, and the surge of passion that leaves them looking for something worth dying for. All of these new resources are activated in the spiritual encounter. But what happens to those who don't develop along the predictable course and don't seem to have

these capacities?

Karen-Marie Yust's observations about faith in children could be aptly applied to spirituality among adolescents with developmental disabilities. Consider the implications of this statement for understanding the spirituality of adolescents with disabilities:

My call for defining faith as a gift from God rather than a set of beliefs or a well-developed cognitive understanding of all things spiritual is, then, an attempt to encourage us to take seriously this tension from the "grace" side of the equation so that children are recognized as fully [spiritual] beings from birth. If we hold this definition of faith as an act of grace, then we make room for children to be actual people of faith rather than just potential people of faith in need of further development before they can truly engage in a spiritual life. If faith is not something we do but something we are given by God, then anyone can be a recipient of faith and respond with faithfulness, even if that person is incapable of rational reasoning. (Yust, 7)

At each age and stage of development children have certain abilities and primary activities. While developmental theory seems to push us forward to the next, emerging stage of spiritual development, Christian educators who are interested in spiritual formation must be attuned to the capabilities that emerge in each stage through which kids can embody their faith. But what if those capacities never emerge? Certainly spirituality is a multisensory experience, but what if you have sensory integration issues? A program of spiritual nurture that relies on the cognitive exercises of memorizing and repeating doctrine seems insufficient to the task. In the historic practice of Christian catechism, catechesis means to teach by word of mouth or, more literally, to "echo back". In order for Christian catechism to be inclusive, kids with

developmental disabilities need to be afforded a space in which they can “echo back” according to their own capacities and abilities and in their own manner. We cannot limit our expectations and impressions of the spiritual vitality of adolescents with developmental disabilities simply because they don’t proceed through the expected stages of human development. Instead, through participating together in Christian practices we allow a certain freedom for spiritual encounter and create an atmosphere or environment in which the adolescent with special needs can interiorize the symbols, respond to spiritual realities and experience community in their own way, according to their own abilities and disabilities, like everyone else.

Christian Practices as “Habitations of the Spirit”

I am arguing that by participating together with adolescents with developmental disabilities in Christian practices, especially the practice of friendship, we open up spaces where their spirituality and ours will be nurtured. While the past two decades have seen a proliferation of literature on Christian practices, Craig Dykstra is certainly a doyen of the practices discussion and my understanding of Christian practices is deeply influenced by his theology of Christian practices.³ Dykstra draws on Alasdair MacIntyre’s conception of practices as explained in *After virtue* and Edward Farley’s phenomenological theology.⁴ Dykstra draws upon MacIntyre’s theory of practices to make the distinction between a practice and actions, even strategic and patterned actions, carried out by professional agents to create change in other persons using social-scientific theories outside of larger moral considerations. Such a mechanical view of practice misses the transformative element of habitus. There is another meaning of practice, argues Dykstra, which is historically elongated and is a social

and communal way of responding to fundamental human conditions. Any normative moral tradition participates in, modifies and extends practices through which individuals and communities are able to realize goods that are internal to that tradition. These realities, the goods internal to the practice, become known in the context of participating in certain practices. To MacIntyre’s insights, Dykstra adds Farley’s appropriation of Edmund Husserl’s studies in phenomenology that tie the apprehensions of the realities of faith, or in our instance, spirituality, to a community. Farley’s notion of a pre-reflective, preconscious perceptivity that is brought into existence as it is mediated through the Christian community, what Farley calls *ecclesia*, has epistemological consequences. Whether or not one completely agrees with Farley’s argument, one can certainly agree that participation in a community of faith can have a transformative impact that may have more to do with intuition and impression and does not necessarily correspond to our intellectual or psychosocial development.

The communities’ life consists in practices that are historical, social, universal, local and transformational. Practices like healing, hospitality and Sabbath-keeping are entrusted to us from our living traditions and we shape them in the present to address our particular circumstances. Our practices persist in the present and are extended into the future because they find expression in social forms of embodiment. Our practices are universal in that they address fundamental human needs that are experienced across the globe yet they are contextualized such that each practice is shaped to fit each culture. The practice of healing outside of the city in a sub-Saharan African country like Malawi, for example, while maintaining a family resemblance to the practice of healing in my home town of Williamsburg, Virginia, is textured and informed by the fact that it is practiced in a setting that includes a wider world of ancestral spirits, superstition and witch

doctors.⁵ Whether in Malawi or Virginia, however, the practice of healing addresses the issues of illness, frailty and finitude. Finally, and most importantly for this essay, Christian practices have a transformational quality related to a spiritual reality such that participating in Christian practices puts one in a position to recognize, experience and participate in God's active presence for the world.

In Dykstra's own words, Christian practices are constitutive of "the kind of community life through which God's presence is palpably felt and known" (Dykstra 2005, 53) and "place us where we can receive a sense of the presence of God" (63). Participation in Christian practices opens the door for new ways of knowing through a kind of experiential knowledge that does not depend on one's cognitive capacities or developmental stage:

[I]n the context of participation in certain practices we come to see more than just the value of the "good" of certain human activities. Beyond that, we may come to awareness of certain realities that outside of these practices are beyond our ken.

Engagement in certain practices may give rise to new knowledge. (Dykstra 1991, 145)

From the standpoint of their capacity to create a space in which adolescent spirituality is nurtured, Christian practices are "habitations of the Spirit, in the midst of which we are invited to participate in the practices of God" (Dykstra 2005, 78). For Dykstra, and in this regard I certainly follow Dykstra, the practices create spaces or arenas that put us in a position where we can be formed spiritually and, I would add, are particularly suited for the spiritual nurture of persons with developmental disabilities.

The Practice of Friendship

The specific practice that I am advocating in this essay is the practice of friendship with adolescents with developmental disabilities. Along the lines of Dykstra's appropriation of MacIntyre's theory of practices, Swinton presents friendship as a practice. "Friendship," Swinton explains, "is not something that we embark upon on our own. Friendship is a skill that is learned in community and in turn contributes to the formation of a specific type of community. . . . The meaning and praxis of friendship can be understood only within the context of the particular community within which it is being practiced, and the specific moral tradition within which it is rooted" (Swinton 2000, 50). This is a nice MacIntyrian description of the practice of friendship, but what fundamental human need or experience does the practice of friendship address?

If healing addresses finitude and fragility, the practice of Sabbath-keeping attends to the fact that we are creatures who abide in time, and hospitality addresses the fact that we are all at one time or another the stranger, what fundamental human experience does friendship address? Loneliness and negation. Practical theologian James Loder addresses the concept of negation in terms of loneliness, rejection, embarrassment and disorientation or a sense of meaninglessness that stretches through our lives. The negation of such negation, argues Loder, is the key to transformation. Loder sees in the trauma of birth the psychoanalytical roots of existential negation. All of the newborn's activities are an attempt to adapt to this situation and to find postnatal equilibrium in the face of this crisis of birth. "What the child is seeking instinctively (as opposed to consciously)," explains Loder, "is a center around which to integrate this multiplicity of new activities and emerging competencies" (Loder, 170). This attempt to deal with an existential problem (our precariousness) with a functional solution (the employment of new competencies) fails us and the presence of a

face (a person who is present) becomes an interpersonal center of focus. In the caretaker the foundations of future trust are being laid. But there is always the fear of abandonment. The absence of the face has produced mistrust. A functional maneuver, adaptations in psychosocial development, cannot deal with an existential problem. Loneliness haunts us and we long for an affirming presence. As Loder explains:

The face-to-face relation is prototypical [of the transformation of existential negation at birth] because it embodies both the process and the ontology of religious experience. That is, the transformational process is affected by a cosmic ordering, self-confirming impact from the presence of a loving other. (173)

What intellectual capacities are required for this to happen? I would argue, none. Simply the self-confirming impact from the presence of a loving other:

Through the practice of spiritual friendship, a person with profound learning disabilities is no longer a member of an amorphous group – “the mentally handicapped” – excluded and alienated from sources of value and positive self-worth. Rather, in and through the gift of friendship, the learning disabled are enabled to develop a new identity as “persons in relation” with whom others desire to relate and are prepared to strive to find ways of relating, which operate beyond the boundaries of cognition and intellect. (Swinton and McIntosh 2000, 184)

The practice of friendship creates a space in which persons with developmental disabilities can experience the spiritual reality of being connected to God and others. This friendship is not utilitarian or instrumental to some other goal, but is simply “place-sharing”—

sharing life together and affords them a new identity.

I get the term “place-sharing” from Andy Root’s *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*. Root builds on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s approach to ethics to make the case that relationships, according to the model of the humanity of Jesus Christ, require that we take responsibility for the other and stand with him or her as an advocate. This place-sharing is not instrumental to some other goal, like evangelism, but is a reflection of the place-sharing God. Furthermore, place-sharing has a revelatory, sacramental aspect. Root quotes Clifford Green to make his point:

God’s transcendence is not remote otherness or absence; God’s otherness is embodied precisely in the other person who is real and present, encountering me in the heart of my existence with the judgment and grace of the gospel. (Root, 140)

As this relates to the argument of this essay, place-sharing is a form of affirming presence or spiritual friendship – a practice that creates a space in which a spiritual encounter occurs.

Franklin doesn’t run until he is sure you have seen him. When you look away for a second to respond to a question or return a greeting or pick up a Frisbee, you will notice that he is standing about 15 yards away from you. But he won’t run until you make eye contact and move toward him. Then he knows he has you. He knows you will come for him because you are his friend. He gives a coy smile and connects with your eyes and soul in a way that he rarely does in any other circumstances—then he runs, smiling, giggling, bouncing. In that moment you understand each other—you have communicated. You have experienced a deep spiritual connection. He only runs from those he loves. He knows you will come for him.

Conclusion

We are all connected. John Swinton draws on Scottish philosopher John Macmurray to insist, “It is a person’s relationships that constitute who they are as persons. I exist as an individual only in personal relation to other individuals” (Swinton 2003, 74). This connectedness is a reality, but the spiritual experience of this connectedness is something that so many with developmental disabilities never encounter. Our faith communities continue to participate in spiritually formative exercises that exclude those with special needs (Carter, 6–8). Those with intellectual disabilities get to be the “holy innocents”—understood to be close to God as a matter of course, but are rarely engaged in the mysterious self-revelatory spirituality of friendship. What would happen if people with developmental disabilities were not merely accepted or accommodated in our congregation’s spiritual life, but were instead included and invested in it through the practice of friendship?

When you ask 17-year-old Galen, “What is God like?” he will answer confidently, “He is a man.” This is a very concrete, physical and anthropomorphic response that is commensurate with his intellectual development, the typical response of a kindergartener or elementary school student. But his description of God does not account for Galen’s spirituality. It is his spirituality that informs his answer to the next question, “What does God think about you?” Having practiced his faith and been in the spaces that afford him a sense of God’s presence, a palpable reality, and having had the experience of friendship with some loving young men and women who have intentionally transgressed social boundaries to connect with him, Galen can answer, “He thinks I’m nice. He is my friend.” Theologically speaking, Galen has experienced a specific type of Christian connectedness called communion.

Notes

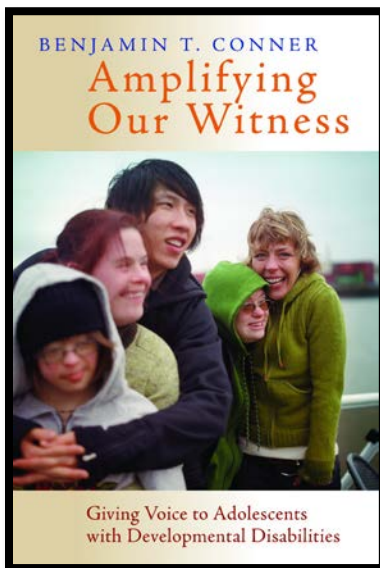
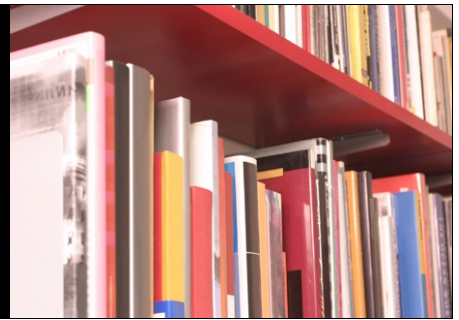
- ¹ Rosalind Picard is developing technological tools that can “bridge the chasm between internal feelings and external display” (Picard, 3576). She explains the difficulties in gauging the emotional temperature of persons with autism and describes how, according to her research, their repetitive motions can actually function to calm the autonomic nervous system.
- ² John Swinton is chair in Divinity and Religious Studies and Professor in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care at Kings College, University of Aberdeen. He is particularly situated to speak to this issue because, aside from his theological credentials, he holds a RMN (Registered Mental Nurse) and a RNMD (Registered Nurse for People with Learning Disabilities).
- ³ Craig Dykstra, in his role as a practical theologian and as senior vice-president, Religion of the Lilly Endowment, Inc., along with Dorothy Bass, has supported the Practicing Our Faith conversation, which has resulted in several books on the topic of Christian practices. The standard definition of practices according to this discourse is the following: “By ‘Christian practices’ we mean *things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for life of the world*” (Volf and Bass, 18, emphasis in original).
- ⁴ MacIntyre’s approach to practices is found in his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* and Farley’s phenomenological theology is articulated in *Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality*.
- ⁵ See, for example, Janet Brown’s work on HIV/AIDS in Malawi in: *HIV/AIDS Alienation: Between Prejudice and Acceptance*.

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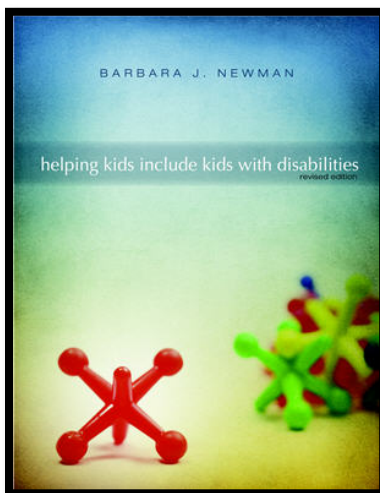
Book Resources Faith Formation & People with Special Needs



Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Disabilities

Benjamin T. Conner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012)

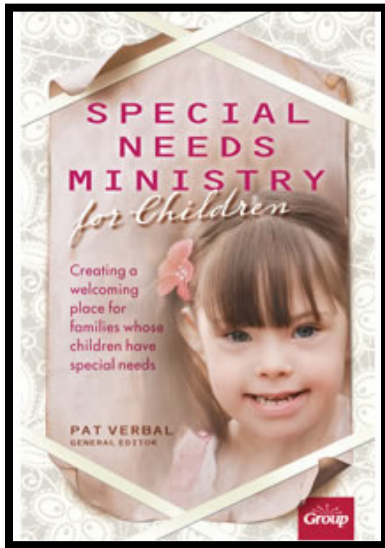
Nearly twenty percent of adolescents have developmental disabilities, yet far too often they are marginalized within churches. *Amplifying Our Witness* challenges congregations to adopt a new, practice-centered approach to congregational ministry—one that includes and amplifies the witness of adolescents with developmental disabilities. Replete with stories taken from Benjamin Conner's own extensive experience with befriending and discipling adolescents with developmental disabilities, *Amplifying Our Witness*, shows how churches exclude the mentally disabled in various structural and even theological ways; stresses the intrinsic value of kids with developmental disabilities; and re-conceptualizes evangelism to adolescents with developmental disabilities, emphasizing hospitality and friendship.



Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities (Revised Edition)

Barbara Newman (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2012)

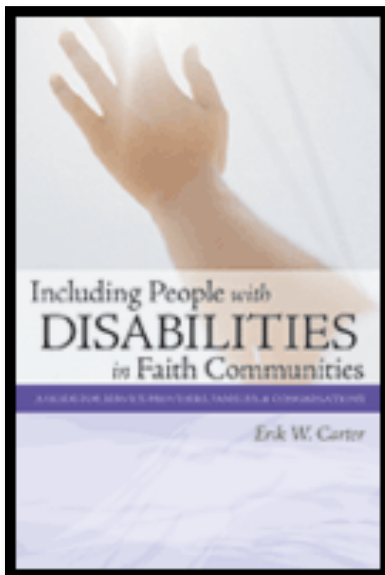
Children with disabilities are part of God's family, but people don't always treat them that way. In this book you'll discover how to help kids and their leaders welcome and include kids with disabilities at church or school. This revised edition contains a wealth of helpful information for understanding disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder; AD/HD; behavioral challenges; hearing, visual, and speech/language impairments; intellectual disabilities; physical disabilities; learning disabilities; and severe or multiple disabilities. This book also includes guidelines and forms to help churches identify and meet needs, lesson plans for presenting information on each area of disability, fact sheets about specific disabilities to share with adult leaders, and much more.



Special Needs Ministry for Children

Pat Verbal, general editor (Loveland: Group Publishing, 2012)

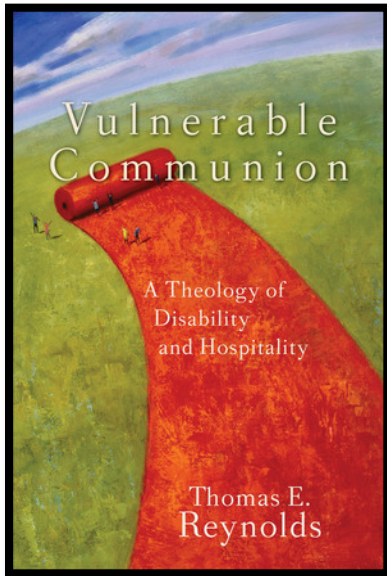
Odds are, you have children with special needs in your community. How do you know if their needs are being met? Do you know what it takes to make these kids—and their families—feel welcome in your church? And most importantly, do you know how to help them grow in their relationship with Jesus? This practical, insightful book is your guide to answering all those questions and more. Packed with case studies and personal stories from recognized experts in this ministry field, you'll learn about: 1) the best ways to reach the most overlooked group of people in your community; 2) how to launch a special needs ministry in your church; 3) how to promote your ministry and recruit the right volunteers; and 4) what families with children who have special needs really need from your church.



Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations

Erik W. Carter (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2007)

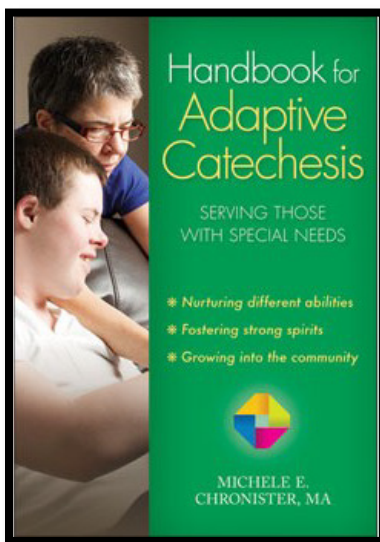
A congregational community is an ideal place to share and strengthen faith, form lasting relationships, and develop special gifts and talents. Too often, though, people with developmental and other disabilities lack the opportunities and supports to fully participate in the life of their faith community. That's why families and service providers need to read this groundbreaking guidebook—and share a copy with congregations that want to become places of welcome and belonging for people with disabilities. Bringing his practical ideas to life with anecdotes, quotes, and examples of successful strategies, Erik Carter helps readers 1) reflect on how welcoming their congregation is—and could be—for people with disabilities and their families; 2) articulate and pursue a bold vision of inclusion throughout their congregation, community, city, or state; 3) take steps to break down attitudinal, architectural, programmatic, and other barriers to inclusion; 4) design appropriate, inclusive religious education programs for children, youth, and adults; and 5) learn how service providers can actively support the spiritual preferences, strengths, and needs of people with disabilities.



Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality

Thomas E. Reynolds (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008)

As parents of a son with disabilities, Thomas Reynolds and his wife know what it's like to be misunderstood by a church community. In *Vulnerable Communion*, Reynolds draws upon that personal experience and a diverse body of literature to empower churches and individuals to foster deeper hospitality toward persons with disabilities. Reynolds shows that the Christian story is one of strength coming from weakness, of wholeness emerging from brokenness, and of power in vulnerability. Wholeness, he argues, comes not from self-sufficiency, but from the “genuinely inclusive communion” that results from sharing our humanity—including our lack of ability—with one another. Then, and only then, will we truly live in hospitality with one another and with people with disabilities. Reynolds offers valuable biblical, theological, and pastoral tools to understand and welcome those with disabilities. The book will be useful to academics, students, and pastors, as well as anyone touched by disability in some way. Readers will find penetrating examinations of the difficult questions of why God allows disability and what the church can learn from people with disabilities.



Handbook of Adaptive Catechesis: Serving Those With Special Needs

Michele Chronister (Liguori: Liguori Publishing, 2012)

This handbook reflects on the needs of individuals with a wide range of disabilities and calls on teachers and religious education programs to consider special needs students for their mainstream and specialized programs. The book covers a variety of the most-encountered special needs, along with approaches for meeting those needs. The author discusses strategies for having fruitful dialogues with parents, identifying students for your special needs program, recruiting effective teachers, and developing lesson plans. Throughout, the text and examples are straight-forward, practical, and easily understood.

Websites & Organizations



What Matters Most: Helping Youth with Disabilities and Their Families Flourish – Presentation by Erik Carter

Institute for Disability and Theology, Summer 2012

www.slideshare.net/shercarter/what-matters-most-helping-youth-with-disabilities-and-their-families-flourish



The Inclusive Church: Helping Churches Successfully Include Children with Special Needs

<http://theinclusivechurch.wordpress.com>



Presbyterians for Disability Concerns

www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/presbyterians-disability-concerns/



Church4Every Child Blog

<http://drgcevich.wordpress.com>

Key Ministry: A Church for Every Child (Website)

www.keyministry.org



Showcase: Disability within Faith Communities

<http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/showcase-disabilities>



Faith Ability

www.faithability.org