

# Better Together:



## Transformed by God's Variety of Gifts

The following people prayerfully considered the implementation issues addressed by Item 21-02 (*Minutes*, 2012, Part I, pp. 65, 1692–95) and jointly developed the framework for this curriculum. A team of three developed and drafted this training material, *Better Together: Transformed by God's Variety of Gifts*. We hope you find it helpful as we work together for the inclusion of people with disabilities into the full life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

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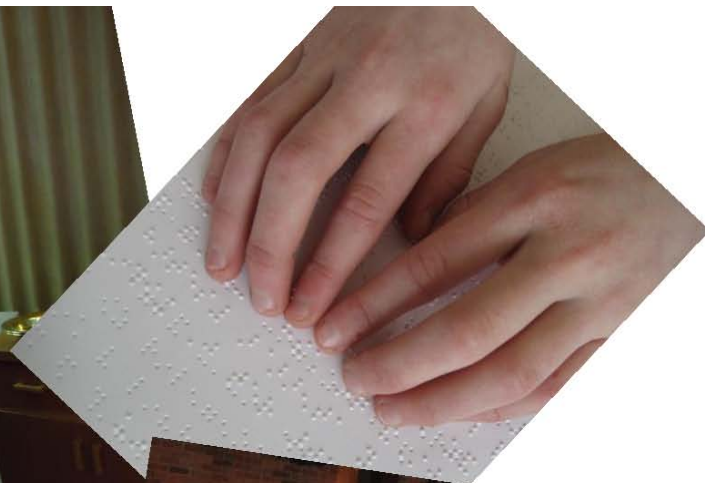
# Introduction

## How Did We Get Here?

During a commissioners' committee meeting held at the 211th General Assembly (1999), the committee voted to have all speakers walk to the microphone where they could be seen and heard. One of the commissioners raised her hand to speak. When she started, the moderator stopped her and instructed her to go to the microphone. She said that as a paraplegic she was unable to get to the microphone. Later she raised her hand to speak and was again chastised by the moderator for not walking to the microphone. She explained, for the second time, that she was a paraplegic and unable to walk to the microphone. She then said that she would if she could, but that unless the moderator was Jesus, she would not be able to walk. For those in the room, it was a moment when everyone realized the critical need for disability awareness to be a priority ministry need throughout the PC(USA).

This experience gave birth to a commissioners' resolution for the development of a PC(USA) disability social witness policy. *Living into the Body of Christ: Towards Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities* was approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006). In spite of the policy, many people living with disabilities who have attended General Assembly and other PC(USA) events have shared experiences when attitudes, misunderstandings, and other barriers have affected their participation.

The training materials presented here come from the stories and experiences our PC(USA) brothers and sisters have shared. These resources also lift up the vision and hope that all God's people, without any exclusionary clauses, can join together to worship, serve, and enjoy God forever.



# Part One:

## Foundations of Inclusion

*“In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community” (Book of Confessions, A Brief Statement of Faith, 10.3, Lines 29–32).*

### Opening Prayer

Loving God, as we begin this journey, may it be for us a spiritual journey. Help us to enter into the lives and experiences of those who have shared stories of new life in Christ. Help us to open our hearts and our minds to a new awareness of your creative love and the beauty of your creation. We pray in the name of Jesus, who came in love for all people. Amen.

### Focus for Part One

We shall begin to explore the biblical foundations for inclusion and the transforming power of knowing that we are created by God in the image of God and that we are baptized into one Spirit and one body.

### Scriptures for Part One

Genesis 1:26–31,  
Matthew 28:16–20,  
1 Corinthians 12:12–13,  
Galatians 3:27–28

### Opening Thoughts

Imagine a procession that is celebrating diversity in the church. Marchers are waving banners, skipping, dancing, clapping, singing. We see people of all colors and people who have come from distant countries. We see our neighbors and we see people we long to know. We are reminded of the great Pentecost in Jerusalem and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. We give God our thanks and praise.

But look again. Do we see people using wheelchairs or walkers? Do we see people with service animals or white canes? Do we see people with intellectual or neurological differences? Who is missing as the parade makes visible the body of Christ?

Imagine now that you are missing because you are “different” from people around you. Even in church you often feel alone and excluded. Sometimes you ask, “Why did God make me this way?” Try to put yourself into this true story.

#### *Sarah’s Story*

At one of the national meetings of Presbyterian Women, a young woman, along with her mother and grandmother, attended a workshop on disability inclusion. The young woman’s name is Sarah. During that workshop Sarah shared her faith story. Sarah is the daughter of Presbyterian parents and grandparents. Her family has been active in PC(USA) leadership roles as elders, deacons, and moderators of Presbyterian Women. Sarah’s uncle is an ordained PC(USA) pastor. From the day of her birth, Sarah has been immersed in the church and in the knowledge that God loves her and that Jesus loves her.

Sarah lives with a significant disability. What she shared changed the lives of every person in the room. She said, “All my life I have been told that Jesus and God love me, but it wasn’t until I met Dr.

Howard Rice that I could believe God loves me. I had never had anyone with a big disability like mine tell me God loves me. When Dr. Rice told me God loves me, for the first time I could believe it.”

Dr. Howard Rice—professor, theologian, and former Moderator of the PC(USA)—used a wheelchair for mobility due to spinal paralysis. Sarah’s words are a powerful reminder of how important it is for people living with disabilities to see and hear other people who, as Sarah said, “are just like me,” share their stories of faith.

What does Sarah’s story say to the church?

## In the Image of God

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:26–31)

Our spirits rise in wonder and awe as we contemplate God’s creation. We give thanks to the One who pronounced all creation “good.” That included humankind who, alone, were described as created “in the image of God.”

Disabilities were common in the ancient Middle East. The storytellers who gave us the first creation story were fully aware that we are not all alike, that when God created humankind, God created diversity. In the narrative, God does not say, “Let us create ‘perfect’ bodies or ‘perfect’ minds in our image.” There are no exceptions in God’s good creation!

Created in the image of God, we affirm that each person has within a spark of God’s creativity to be used in unique and surprising ways. Some who cannot speak write poetry; some who cannot see show wisdom; some who cannot walk pray. To welcome the abilities of all is to celebrate God’s creativity.

What do you think it means to be created in the image of God?

What do people of all abilities need to thrive?

How do you think the church would change if we acted upon the biblical theme that all persons are created in the image of God?

Created in the image of God, we are loved into being for God is love. As Jurgen Moltmann wrote, “To be created by God is to be loved by God.”<sup>1</sup> Knowing that we are loved, even with bodies or minds others may call “disabled,” gives us the freedom to love ourselves as God loves us.

Created in the image of God, we are called to live in relationship with others. Within community we discover that we are all connected; we all are interdependent. We are not alone. Our own abilities are complete when we join with others in joy and thanksgiving.

The creation story challenges all attempts to assign worth to persons based on what society judges to be “ability” or “disa-

<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, “Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 105–22.



bility.” It challenges all barriers to God’s creativity, God’s love, God’s community. The “image of God” allows no exception. Let us give thanks for God’s good creation and for the “new thing” God is still creating to amaze and delight us. (Isaiah 43:19)

## One Spirit, One Body

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16–20)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13)

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28)

Every time we baptize, we are obeying the words of Jesus, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ...” (Matthew 28:19). His commission included no exceptions. In his ministry, he called all, including those who were marginalized by illness or disability, to follow him.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13a) and “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). He went on to affirm the diversity in the body of Christ. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, ... slave or free, ... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Paul was naming the tensions within the growing church as it struggled to become one body. He could have included “able-bodied or disabled” but he did not need to do so. He himself lived with a disability and he knew that the covenant community included him (Galatians 4:13–14).

The Order for the Holy Baptism of the PC(USA) affirms the words of Scripture, beginning with Jesus’ commission. The minister proclaims, “Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established ... nurtured by the love of God and God’s people.” She blesses the newly baptized one, “\_\_name\_\_, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

The congregation promises, “... we are all one in Christ, we promise to love, encourage, and support you, to share the good news of the gospel with you, and to help you know and follow Christ.”

These words are clear. So why is a twelve-year-old boy, baptized into Christ, excluded from his church’s middle school program because the activities require physical skills he doesn’t have because he uses a wheelchair? Why were the parents of a baptized child with autism asked not to bring him to worship? Why was a girl with a cognitive disability left out of confirmation because she could not “understand” the lessons? Why is a baptized adult who lives with a mental illness afraid to attend worship because of the stereotypes church members hold about mental illness? Why do we exclude those whom Jesus included?

How would our churches change if we truly believed that we have all been baptized into “one Spirit, one body”?

### John's Story

John was baptized as an infant in the church but, due to his autism diagnosis, his family had not brought him to worship for several years. His mother called the pastor to help him understand John's unique behavioral patterns and needs before she brought him back to the church. She described John as a child who loved music and was always on the move—spinning, running, and using a variety of sounds to express himself. The mother did not want to spring her son on the congregation without preparing the pastor for what might be experienced. The pastor let some trusted and caring people in the congregation know John and his mother were coming and gave them some suggestions as to how to affirm both John and his mother.

During worship John got so rambunctious that his mother got up to “corral” him and take him home. The pastor stopped the service and said, “Your son is a baptized child of God. Don't take him home; he belongs here.”

How do you feel about the pastor's response when John's mother got up to leave?

If John and his mother would attend your church, would they be welcome in worship?

Now when John attends church, on some Sundays he is a typical restless kid in the pew. Other days he runs and spins. John's greatest gift is his love of music, for as he enters the sanctuary, he says, “Hello, music.” As he exits the sanctuary, he says, “Goodbye, music.”

When the leadership of a congregation sets the bar and lives the example, inclusion becomes a natural part of the church family's DNA. As John has become more and more a part of his church family, he is now opening his arms for hugs—a sure and certain sign of being loved and accepted.

### Carol's Story

In the following story we meet Alex and his mother, Carol. Both are persons of deep faith and are active Presbyterians. In Parts Two, Three, and Four, we shall learn more about the family story.

I took the phone call reporting the prenatal testing of our fourth child. The diagnosis was Down Syndrome. But it was amazing how God's Spirit worked in me.

Our first child was born with Trisomy 13, an extra thirteenth chromosome that causes severe physical and mental challenges and comes with a death sentence. While we were told he wouldn't live past the first year, he lived to be nearly seven years old. For his sister and brother, born nineteen months and thirty-one months later, we had genetic testing. So it followed that when we found ourselves expecting nine years later, we would have testing.

Upon hanging up the phone, I immediately thought, “Why God, why did you give us another child that will have challenges throughout life and require us to go through the ‘system’ all over again?” My next thought, thirty seconds later, was “Oh! Of course! God thought we were such wonderful parents that we were given another child with challenges.” Then peace washed over me. “No, but God will be with us as we parent this child, just as God was with us in parenting our firstborn.”

When confronted by a difficult diagnosis, parents who are people of faith may make different decisions but, like Carol, can know that God is with them. Carol recalls that when a close relative saw her first baby, the child who was born with Trisomy 13, he asked, “How can people say there is a God?” Compare this attitude to Carol's response to the diagnosis.

Our youngest is now twenty years old, and God has walked alongside us every step of the way. Thanks be to God!

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Sometimes when we see or meet a person with a disability, a first reaction may be fear or blame. Why? How can we overcome these feelings?
- People with disabilities are often portrayed or stereotyped in negative or demeaning ways. Name some negative images. For example, negative words include “retard” and “crip.”
- If you have a disability, what would you like to say to your church or to the broader church?

## Questions for Further Exploration

- If you have a disability, how willing are you to identify yourself as a person with a disability?
- Has a person with a disability influenced you in any way? Have you learned anything from this person? (Remember, most persons with disabilities do not want to be thought of as “super persons” or “heroes.” People with disabilities are diverse with different lifestyles, goals, and ways of adjusting to disability.)

## An Idea for Extending This Session

Invite a panel of four or five persons who live with different disabilities to speak at an intergenerational event or a youth group. Ask panel members to tell where they feel included and where they feel excluded in the life of the church.

## Thoughts to Ponder

What is in our hearts and minds when we see or meet persons with disabilities? Do we see the person first or the disability? How does God want us to see others—and ourselves?

## Closing Prayer

Creator God, we celebrate the rich diversity in your creation and rejoice that you have loved each one of us into being. Help us to know, in each person we meet, your divine image that we may work together to move your church to full inclusion. Make us one in Christ. We pray in the name of Christ the Reconciler. Amen.

### Did you know?

The definition of disability as given in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is

“An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. The ADA does not specifically name all of the impairments that are covered.”

Nearly 20 percent of Americans live with a disability according to the 2010 report from the U.S. Census Bureau.



## Part Two: What Can Inclusion Mean?

*“To hear the voices of peoples long silenced” (Book of Confessions, A Brief Statement of Faith, 10.4, Line 70).*

### Opening Prayer

O God, who knows all that is in our hearts and minds, forgive us for the times we have not listened to the voices that are soft or slow or hard for us to understand. Forgive us for the times we have not opened our hearts to those who communicate without speaking. Help us to welcome the gifts of people of all abilities that we may rejoice together when no one is an outsider. We pray in the name of Jesus who listened to those who were marginalized, the “silenced” of his day. Amen.

### Focus for Part Two

When barriers to inclusion, including “religious” barriers, come down we welcome and celebrate the gifts of people who live with mental or physical disabilities.

### Scriptures for Part Two

Luke 8:26–39

1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 12–26

### Opening Thoughts

Inclusion means more than letting people with disabilities enter our buildings. It means more than architectural accessibility, essential as that is. It means more than adding a “token” person with a disability to a committee or to a church staff.

We recently heard a story about two churches. One met all the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The second had architectural barriers that needed to be changed. Yet, most people with disabilities attended the second church.

We would like to have been able to ask, “What drew you to the church you chose? How did you feel included? Were there barriers in the ‘accessible’ church?”

In Part One we met Dr. Howard Rice, whose presence convinced Sarah that God really loves her. In the following story we learn Dr. Rice’s response to barriers that well-meaning Christians sometimes erect. These barriers could have deprived the church of the gifts of an extraordinary leader.

#### *Dr. Howard Rice’s Story*

During the meeting of the General Assembly in Milwaukee, people observed Dr. Howard Rice talking with people, moving around the assembly, listening, sharing ideas and thoughts, and being engaged in all that was transpiring in the committee and plenary meetings. From his wheelchair Dr. Rice spoke with people, interpreted actions of the assembly, and guided those who asked him questions about polity, procedure, and process. During worship Dr. Rice shared in the singing, the breaking of the bread, and the drinking of the cup. Dr. Rice moved through the General Assembly events just like everyone else. The only difference was that he used a wheelchair for mobility.

As the assembly moved through all of the business on the plenary floor, one of the overtures on problem pregnancies led to a great deal of debate about birth defects and why children are born with dis-

abilities. Many came to the microphone and spoke passionately about how God had blessed them with children born with disabilities. They spoke about how God willed disability and that as parents, their lives had been blessed by the presence of disabilities.

One speaker identified herself as a person with multiple sclerosis. She said God had chosen her to be his special child and given her MS as a blessing. The debate concerning God's will went on for some time. Speaker after speaker shared their thoughts.

Dr. Rice rolled his wheelchair up to a microphone. As a former General Assembly Moderator, he was recognized and given the privilege of the floor to speak. Dr. Rice extended his arms and with eight words ended the debate. Those eight words were, "This is not God's will for my life."

Dr. Rice's words proclaimed that life is life in whatever form or shape it takes. It's what believers do with life that defines who we are and gives us purpose and value. God does not will suffering. God provides us with the courage, strength, and wisdom to prevail. In faith, life goes on. Those eight simple words changed the tone and the spirit of the debate because the person speaking them lived them—and lived them with integrity and grace.

Imagine the silence that followed Dr. Rice's statement. What would have been going through your mind?

What would the church have missed had Dr. Rice not been included in church leadership?

## Inclusion: The Healing Community

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"—for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. (Luke 8:26–39)

Do I need to be "fixed" because I live with a disability? If I have enough faith, will I be "cured"? Is my disability a punishment for sin?

Some well-meaning people will answer "yes" to these questions. They may cite the stories of Jesus' healing ministry as "proof". But, if we take a careful approach to the healing stories, putting them into their historical context, we shall discover wisdom for today.

In Jesus' culture, people attributed disability to sin or demon possession. In John 9:1–4, however, Jesus rejected the idea that the man's blindness was punishment for his sin or the sins of his parents. In Mark 2:1–12 Jesus forgave sin but did not connect it with the man's paralysis. Jesus praised the faith, not of the man, but of his community.

In Jesus' time, "healing" was more than a physical "cure." It involved the whole person—body, mind, and spirit in community. Unlike the individualism of much of twenty-first century culture, people in Jesus' culture found their identity within the community. Because some disabilities and illnesses excluded persons from community rituals, Jesus' healing included restoration into the life of the community. Jesus' ministry was a ministry of inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus crossed the boundaries set by his culture. He spoke with lepers who were "unclean" and who lived outside the villages (Mark 1:40–45). He listened to the shouts of a man who was blind when the crowd tried to quiet him (Mark 10: 46–52). He healed a woman who had been "unclean" for twelve years (Mark 5:25–34). Each person was restored to the community.

In Luke 8:26–39 Jesus did not run from the man with mental illness. The man lived among the tombs, "dead" to his family and the townspeople. Because of his violent behavior, he was feared. He was isolated as are many today who live with mental illness.

To the villagers he was only a "demoniac," a person possessed by demons. To Jesus he was a person; he spoke with him and even asked his name. The man answered, "Legion," a term for a body of Roman troops who occupied the land. He may have been describing the "demons" who controlled his mind.

When the villagers, overcome by curiosity, came out to see what was happening, they did not rejoice when they found the man clothed and talking quietly with Jesus. They were afraid and begged Jesus to go away.

The man pled with Jesus to let him follow him but Jesus said, "Go back to your own village." Even then, the community would not accept him, so he went to the surrounding villages to spread the good news about Jesus.

In this story there is no mention of sin; demon possession was not a result or punishment for sin. The man came to faith only after his healing. Jesus' ministry to the man was unconditional. For Jesus, the man's mental illness held no stigma.<sup>3</sup>

The inclusive church can be a place of healing for the whole person. When there is no "cure," we can still be "healed." Thanks be to God for inclusive communities where we are made whole!

### ***Laura's Story***

As you read Laura's story, continue to reflect on the biblical story of the man who lived with mental illness. What similarities and what differences do you find in the attitudes of the first century villagers and today's "modern" people? How would your church respond if you faced the problems in Laura's church?

Laura is a young woman who has been diagnosed with serious mental illness. She was raised in the church and has been a faithful participant in the worship, fellowship, and education ministries of her congregation. Living with a serious mental illness is a daunting challenge that is made more painful by the way our culture misunderstands mental illness. Those misunderstandings lead to painful and often

Because I have a disability, do I need to be "fixed"? Did the article give you any new insights about the meaning of "healing" in Jesus' ministry?

How does the first century understanding of healing differ from our most common twenty-first century understanding?

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent analysis of the cultural values that influenced the meaning of "healing," see Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*, ch 2, 43–56.

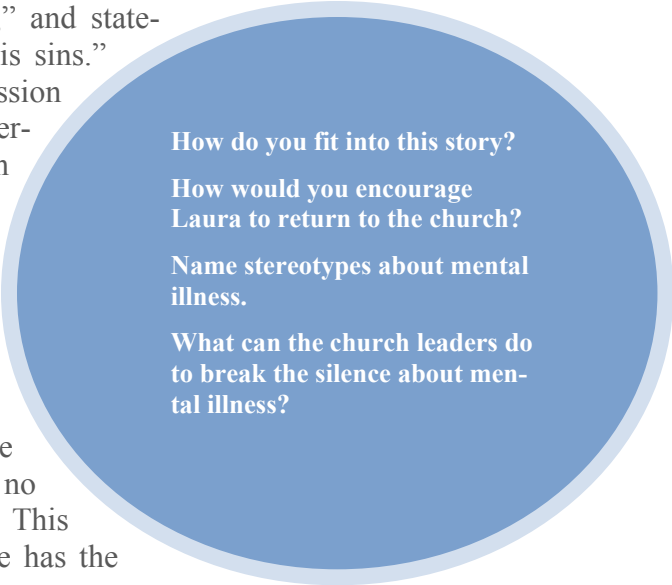
<sup>3</sup> Ibid. ch.7, 159–79. The writer is grateful to Kathy Black for her insight into this story.

untrue stereotypes. The words “crazy,” “looney,” “nutcase,” “unbalanced,” and “unstable” denigrate and demean the value of persons who live with mental illness.

For Laura the struggle and pain of living with mental illness was intensified when her congregation faced a difficult situation. Someone was sending threatening messages to the church, and the safety of anyone who entered the building was in jeopardy. Police began to patrol the building. People were fearful of the unknown messenger and terrified of the threatened violence.

Laura listened to the concerns and the way her church family perceived the person behind the threats. She heard the words “nutcase,” “crazy,” “looney,” and statements such as “Whoever it is needs to be punished for his sins.” Fear of the person sending the threats overpowered compassion and the need to understand what was happening in the person’s life to cause him or her to act in this way. If her church family would speak of a stranger in this way, how would they treat her if they knew the depth of her mental illness?

Hurt by the church she had loved all her life, the demeaning language she heard told her that she and anyone else living with mental illness wouldn’t find acceptance and love in this house. Her ministry needs for understanding and inclusion were destroyed by the pejorative language and the attitudes she experienced. Sadly, Laura feels she no longer has a church family and God has abandoned her. This doesn’t need to happen. Language in every place and time has the power to exclude or to include.



How do you fit into this story?

How would you encourage Laura to return to the church?

Name stereotypes about mental illness.

What can the church leaders do to break the silence about mental illness?

## **Inclusion: Varieties of Gifts**

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. (1 Corinthians 12:12–14)

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:21–26)

An inclusive church respects, welcomes, and celebrates the abilities of all its members. When we are baptized, we become members of one body, the body of Christ, and the abilities we possess are gifts of the Holy Spirit. We are given our gifts to use “for the common good.”

Paul made it very clear that there is no hierarchy, no ranking of the value of gifts we have been given. This is counter-cultural in our society where status, compensation, and respect depend upon what we “do.” In God’s economy, the gifts of the woman with a cognitive disability who passes out the books at Bible study are as honored as the gifts of the teacher. The gifts of the young man with Down syndrome who welcomes worshippers with a smile and a bulletin are as important as those of the preacher.



Because we are members of one body, we are interdependent. This, too, runs counter to our highly individualistic culture. When God called Moses to lead his people to freedom, Moses used every excuse possible to evade the call. When he complained that he could not speak clearly, God gave him a partner, his brother Aaron, to speak for him (Exodus 4:10–15). None of us is alone as we answer the call to use our gifts in discipleship.

But Paul continued, “And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31b). The “still more excellent way” is love. We were created, by the God of love, for love. That is the greatest of all gifts.

What does Paul’s theology of spiritual gifts say to people of all abilities?

How is Paul’s theology of spiritual gifts countercultural?

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Laura is a talented writer, but she does not use her gifts in church because of the attitudinal barriers. In the following two stories we meet Alex and his mother again and Harold, a talented artist.

### *Alex’s Story (as told by his mother)*

I felt that I needed to be Alex’s Sunday school teacher because I wanted him to be included in the life of our church. I had taught for our firstborn, then the second and third, so it just seemed natural. In looking back, I see that I kept others in the congregation from knowing who Alex is and the gifts he has to offer.

He loved to do little boy things—basketball, baseball, anything with a ball, coloring, snacks, playing on a playground, painting, listening to stories—everything the other kids were doing. But in having me as the teacher, I knew him and would do the adapting. When he grew to the age when typical children no longer wanted their parents around, Alex didn’t either. But people were reluctant to work with him at that age. They didn’t know his gifts, that even though he could not speak clearly, he loved to pray and had a profound love for God.

### *Harold’s Story*

Harold is a young man whose mother is no longer able to care for him. He came to live in a residential facility for people who have developmental disabilities. His life was severely affected by his obesity. He was lethargic, unable to walk, and with all the changes in his life, depressed. After a period of exercise and diet, Harold’s life was transformed. He was able to dance, ride a bicycle, and walk miles a day around campus.

During one of the day programs, he discovered that he loved art and began drawing with crayons. Harold’s artistry began to flower and his talents were profound. He would layer the white paper with various colors of crayon, then use his fingernails to layer the colors, giving them depth. His artwork was in the style of the great artist, Picasso.

What barriers needed to come down so that Alex and Harold could use their spiritual gifts?

How can we discover the spiritual gifts of people with disabilities and help them to flourish?

Harold's artwork soon won awards in Hershey and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in Washington, D.C., and in London and other cities around the world. When Harold was asked if his artwork could be used for church bulletins, his immediate response was, "Yes, God gave me gifts. I want to give back to God." He then took a deep bow, and with a huge flourish, kissed his hand and said, "Me Picasso."

Sadly, because Harold lived in a state-funded care facility, crayons were labeled as age inappropriate and his art medium was in jeopardy. Savvy and caring staff were able to restore his art medium by giving crayons a new name—wax pencils. Harold's new life blossomed through his awareness that God had given him the identity of a gifted artist. Harold sought to give back with joy—and gusto—what God had given him. And thanks be to God, he did.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What do the stories in Part Two suggest about what it means to be created in the image of God?
- How can an inclusive church be a healing community?
- How would you define "inclusion"? What is the difference between "inclusion" and "diversity"? (Someone has defined diversity as "being invited to the party" and inclusion as "being asked to dance".)

## Questions for Further Exploration

Choose one of the healing stories referred to in "Inclusion: The Healing Community": Mark 1:40–45; 5:25–34; 10:46–52.

- How did Jesus cross the boundaries of his culture to "hear the voices of the peoples long silenced"? How was "healing" more than a "cure"?

## An Idea for Extending This Session

- Consider forming a care team of persons who are knowledgeable about mental illness. Find out what a team can do to support someone who lives with mental illness and her or his family. Some teams have provided childcare and meals when a family member is hospitalized. Others have been available when family members need respite care. One care team worked with a person whose mental illness resulted in hoarding to help her organize her home.

## Thoughts to Ponder

In our church, whose are the voices of "peoples long silenced"? How can I be a brother or sister in Christ to a person who lives with mental illness?

## Closing Prayer

O God, who promises the gifts of the Spirit to all who seek to follow Jesus, surprise us with joy when we discover our own unused gifts and those of people we call "disabled." Help us to welcome and celebrate the abilities of all who use their gifts in new and different ways. Help us to join our gifts to-

gether in ways that affirm all people, build better communities, and respect all of your creation. We pray in the name of Jesus, who came to liberate and to heal. Amen.

**Did you know?**

“A recent survey conducted by Baylor University of 6,000 church members of several denominations found only about 27 percent of people with mental illness and their families attend church. One of the reasons cited for not attending: they do not feel welcome.” NAMI FaithNet

To learn more about mental illness, Google The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).



## Part Three: Including Everyone at the Tables

*The great ends of the church are: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. (Book of Order, F-1.0304)*

### Opening Prayer

O God, who calls us to come together with joy, challenge us to look around and discover who is missing as we gather, whose “voices” we do not hear, and whose gifts have not been welcomed. Strengthen us for the day when your people will come from “east and west and from north and south” and we shall celebrate as one your love and goodness. We pray in the name of Jesus who broke down the barriers of his day and calls us to be boundary breakers today. Amen.

### Focus for Part Three

In the inclusive church, people who live with disabilities use their spiritual gifts at all the “tables”: worship, fellowship, service, leadership, and employment.

### Scriptures for Part Three

Isaiah 43:5–9  
1 Corinthians 11:23–26  
Acts 2:43–47  
James 2:1–8

### Opening Thoughts

Is the Lord’s table a “joyful feast” for all who trust and seek to follow Jesus Christ? When people come “from east and west and north and south to sit at table in the kingdom of God,” will any who are in our midst be missing at the table? The joy of the feast can never be complete until all can join with the people of God.

Let’s think about the other “tables” in the life of our church, the tables where we learn from each other, support one another, serve, work, and make the important decisions that affect all of us. Every table is a gift of God’s grace. Every table is an invitation to people with all abilities to, as the artist in Part Two said, “give back to God.” But take care! Grace may come upon us unaware and we may be transformed.

#### *Joel’s Story*

In her wonderful book, *A Place Called Acceptance*, Kathleen Deyer Bolduc describes a God-event when ordinary time stopped. Her son, Joel, was seated between his parents in the front row of the sanctuary where he could not kick the pew ahead of him or grab somebody’s hair. Joel has autism and his mother describes worshiping with him at age eleven as “sitting on the edge of your seat during an action movie when you are not quite sure what’s going to happen next, you only know something is going to happen.”

In describing her son's behavior during communion she said, "He chews the bread, picking at the sticky stuff left in his teeth with his fingers. ... He slurps down the juice and sticks his tongue into the cup, determined to get every last drop."

"This particular Sunday, the pastor raised the plate high in the air and proclaimed, 'This is the body of Christ broken for you.' Then he raised the cup saying, 'And this is the blood of Christ, poured out that you might live.' Joel pulled on my sleeve. I looked down to see him grinning, his face lit up as if from within. He stood up tall, and tapped himself on the chest. 'For me! For me!' he cried joyfully. He turned around to the people behind us. 'For me!' he repeated. 'For me!'"

Ordinary time stopped. All that existed in that moment was the radiant look of understanding on Joel's face. Joel knew that God loved him. On a spiritual level he knew that God had sent Jesus for him. My body remained in the front pew of College Hill Presbyterian Church, but my spirit stood in the sacred presence of God."

None of us can understand fully the depth and mystery of God's grace, but Joel accepted God's love with joyous abandon. We are reminded of the words of the prophet, "A little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). Thanks be to God for the thin places in our lives, the times when grace breaks in upon us and we hear, "I am with you."

What gifts did Joel give to the congregation?

The Reverend Sue Montgomery, Lead Consultant on Disabilities for the PC(USA), says that for many who live with disabilities, communion is the most isolating time in church. Think about the way communion is served in your church. Is anyone singled out as being separated from the Body of Christ?

## The Joyful Feast

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, "It is true." (Isaiah 43:5–9)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23–26)

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43–47)

*Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God! They will come from the east and west, and from north and south, to sit at table in the kingdom of God.*

These familiar words invite all who trust in Jesus Christ to share in the Lord's table. There are no exceptions.

In Jesus' culture, it was very important to eat with the right people. "Good" people did not eat with "sinners." When religious leaders criticized Jesus for his inclusive table fellowship, he said, "... people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

Jesus' words echo those of the prophet in Isaiah 43:5–9a. The prophet was envisioning the gathering of the covenant people as they returned from exile. The prophet's message was clear. People with disabilities are included in the covenant and are to be part of the gathered assembly!

Every time we share in the Lord's Supper, we gather as the people of the new covenant, the inclusive covenant. The table is a sign of our life together as members of the body of Christ. It reminds us of all the "tables" we share with "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32).

In Acts 2:43–047 we are given a brief but significant glimpse into the life of the early church. The people were caring for those who were poor, spending time in fellowship, praising God in the temple and at home, and eating together with "good and gladsome hearts." We can be sure that many in the early church were living with disabilities, but this passage adds no exceptions. All who were "being saved" were welcome. Is it possible that the early church was more inclusive than our "modern" church?

## The Neighbor at the Table

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (James 2:1–8)

All was not perfect in the early church. The Letter of James came out of the church in Jerusalem, and the writer was addressing problems within the community. He knew the oral tradition about Jesus and some passages from the book read like commentaries on Jesus' teachings.

It is clear that church members, including the leaders, were discriminating against poor believers. They were awarding places of honor to the rich and assigning those who were poor to stand or sit in places that marked them as persons of less importance. The writer considered this so serious that he asked, "... do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" (James 2:1). Perhaps he remembered Jesus' ministry of inclusion and his table fellowship. Perhaps he knew Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel, "Blessed are you who are poor," and "... woe to you who are rich ..." (Luke 6:20, 24).

How is the modern church like, and how is it unlike, the first century church?

The author of James asks, "Do you really believe?" What issues in today's church challenge us with the same question?

Who were the poor in the church? Stories in the Gospels tell of people with disabilities who were forced to beg. We read of others who have spent all they had seeking cures. With lack of employment opportunities for people with disabilities, lack of supportive services, and the number of people with disabilities whose “homes” are the streets, the message of James is all too contemporary. It continues to ask, “Do you really believe?”

## **Gathering Around the Tables**

Each of the following stories raises an issue faced by church leaders. In each story a decision is made that either includes or excludes a person or persons who are living with disabilities. As you read each story, use these questions for reflection or discussion.

- What was the decision that needed to be made by church leaders?
- Do you agree with the decision that was made or can you suggest another solution?

The **Toolbox** after Part Four will give more ideas for including people with disabilities at all the tables.

### ***The Table of Worship: Bill and Mary's Story***

Bill and Mary worshipped regularly at the church where they had been members for many years. When Bill was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, the couple faced many changes but looked to their church family for support and nurture.

Like most of us, Bill and Mary sat in their “chosen” pew every Sunday. One morning after worship, a woman who shared their pew complained to the pastor that Bill's tremor was causing the pew to shake so much that she could not worship.

The pastor offered the “perfect” solution. He told Bill and Mary that they should “attend” worship by sitting in the church library and watching the service online. He reasoned that they could continue to go to church without Bill's tremor disturbing other worshippers.

Bill never again attended worship. Mary, who is now a widow, has continued to participate in worship and other church activities, but she grieves the fact that when Bill was having to face the loss of abilities, he also lost his relationship with his church family.

### ***The Table of Education: Alex's Mother's Story***

Our church offered a one-week camp experience for children in second grade through middle school. High school youth served as junior counselors, and college age members and friends served as counselors. Alex went to camp one year, but our family had to pay and provide support from outside our congregation. It created what I call “an island in the mainstream.”

Later the church offered opportunities for children and youth to go on a trip to Chicago. This was an incentive trip, but Alex needed no incentive. He loves to go to church; he loves to help with ushering, Vacation Bible School, and fellowship. Yet, he was not allowed to go to Chicago unless his parents or someone we paid from outside the congregation went with him. Other parents were concerned that the focus of the leaders would be on Alex and not their children.

Each time the children and youth prepared for camp or Chicago, a bit of me would grieve that Alex could not be a part of the experience. However, when a confirmation retreat was developed and planned, and I was told that he could not go, I had to reconsider our association with the church.

After more than a month of my own tears, prayers, arguing with God, asking God for guidance, looking at other churches, and looking at other denominations, Alex still wanted to go to “his church.” So I met with the leadership. The pastor was new, and the music director and Christian education director had been running things for a couple of years in the interim. All three of them met with me, and I laid out my case.



I will always be thankful for our new pastor who understood. She understood why parents should not have to advocate within their congregation. She understood why the congregation should provide the needed support and not someone from the outside. Most important of all, she understood that her leadership was needed. That was the leadership she provided.

### ***The Table of Fellowship: Cheryl's Story***

Cheryl is the mother of two teenaged children. She has nurtured them in the church since they were infants. All was fine until Tim and Heather were old enough to leave the sanctuary and head off to classes, parties, and fellowship events in the basement of their church.

It was then that Cheryl realized that even though she could get into any community facility for entertainment and food, this was not true in her church because she used a wheelchair for mobility. She said, "It was as if my church was telling me I was welcome to be in the sanctuary to pray, donate my money, and confess my sins. Where I wasn't welcome was in the fellowship areas of the church where I needed to be with my children. I could pay my money, confess my sins, but I couldn't have fun."

Ministry needs are more than worship, stewardship, and confession. The ministry needs of celebrating the love of family and God and being the church was sadly missing for Cheryl. Her voice needs to be heard.

### ***The Table of Service: Karen's Story***

Karen was thirteen and was preparing to attend communicants' class to prepare for church membership. Karen was also seeking ways to give back to her church. She wanted to serve God by helping at her church.

Karen's father went to the session to talk with them about Karen's ministry needs. He shared with them that Karen did not like to work with preschool children. As a teenager who lived with Down Syndrome, she wasn't a child and didn't like to be treated like a child, nor did she enjoy being with children. What Karen loved to do was wash dishes, do windows, clean counters and tables, mop floors, and prepare foods for cooking. She loved cleaning in every shape and form.

When the Christian Education leadership met to assign volunteer tasks to the members of the communicant's class, there was quite a bit of discussion about what Karen's father had shared. Karen was, nevertheless, assigned to the church's nursery to watch the children during worship.

Karen's father asked, "Why?" It seems that too many were concerned about her drooling on the dishes, hurting herself, or falling on wet floors. In other words, Karen was a liability and a danger. In the nursery there were people to watch her along with the toddlers and babies.

Karen and her father and mother left the church and found a new church family where there was no fear of Karen. What was more important was that they found a church family where Karen's gifts were celebrated and Karen was loved for who she was. Wouldn't it be nice to have Karen in every church home? We'd have the cleanest windows, floors, and dishes, all washed with a thankful spirit to the glory of God!

### ***The Table of Leadership: Sue's Story***

As the team leader for the General Assembly Disability Consultants, I was asked to lead a workshop for people living with disabilities. An accessible camp and conference facility was to host the event. Trained and skilled volunteers would be assisting and providing support for the participants.

In the early stages of the planning, the committee gave me the history of the annual retreat and told me what topics had been discussed in the past. They told me that a biblical focus was what the participants requested. No problem! Many new Bible studies have been written and published by people who live with disabilities. This was going to be fun.

Then I was told that there would be a closing worship service on Saturday after lunch and I was asked if I'd be willing to plan it. Traditionally the service included communion. As a teaching elder in the PC(USA) this was no problem. My response was, "I'd be glad to do so."

Then I asked, “Would the participants in the workshop like to participate in the worship service as leaders—read the scripture, share in the prayers, and if any were ruling elders, serve communion?” It was as if I’d asked the most inappropriate and unbelievable question anyone could have asked! The question was followed by dead silence, the kind of silence that let me know that the other people on the conference call were shocked.

Sensing the tension, I asked again, “Would the workshop participants like to assist in leading the worship service?” This time the silence was filled with a strong and stern voice. “Absolutely not. You wouldn’t be able to understand their words. You wouldn’t be able to hear them speak. What if one of them dropped the bread or the communion glasses?” The answer was clear, “No, no, and no. People with disabilities cannot lead worship. It must be done for them.”

So on the day the retreat opened, supper was served and the evening session opened. The Bible study was on the gifts of the people of God. We discussed the ancient traditions in Leviticus where people with disabilities were shunned from leadership roles. Due to the impurity of the disability, anyone with a lame foot or hand could not enter the holy and sacred places of the temple. No one with a disability could serve as a priest or in any leadership role.

The session opened up the discussion about the many gifts, talents, insights, and wisdom people with disabilities have and that the church needs if it is to be inclusive and complete in her ministries. We talked about persons who live with disabilities who are attending seminaries and serving as elders, teachers, counselors, and leaders in the church. At the conclusion of the session, I invited participants who would like to plan and lead Saturday’s worship service to meet with me after the closing prayer.

Nearly every participant stayed. There was excitement in the air. The joy of being asked and affirmed was palpable. For the rest of the retreat a young woman with developmental disabilities worked hard on reading the Twenty-third Psalm. Her caregiver, a volunteer, and I supported her as she diligently practiced the words and read them, at first with hesitation and then with full-blown confidence. A woman who was unable to read because of a traumatic brain injury asked her peers for their prayer concerns prior to Saturday. She memorized their concerns, and when new prayer concerns were raised during worship, she was able to incorporate them into the pastoral prayer. Her ability to memorize was phenomenal. Two women, little people, filled with spirit and joy twice their size, were ruling elders in their home churches. One was a recovering cancer survivor. They offered to serve communion. A young man living with cerebral palsy offered to read the New Testament scripture. His voice was halting, yet steady and firm. Everyone who spoke that day was heard and understood. No one dropped the communion elements. The service was led entirely by the community of the faithful.

It was one of those moments when everyone in the room knew God was speaking. It was time to put away all the old stereotypes about people living with disabilities being needy, helpless, and unable to participate or share in the ministry of worship. It was time to bury the purity laws of Leviticus and rejoice in what God is doing within the family of God. It was time to recognize that God embraces, affirms, and needs the gifts of all people created in the image of God. At the conclusion of the worship service, the participants knew what it meant to be wanted, included, valued, and appreciated.

The Reverend Richard Roderick, the PC(USA) consultant on low vision and blindness, has a friend who says, “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.” In that room the dance of the worship service was joyous. Worship of God with the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup was a dance that flowed from the heart. The dance welled up from the depths of the lives gathered around the communion table in worship, praise, prayer, and song. The dance was the faithful and grateful stewardship of gifts and life, God’s good gifts given to all.

### ***The Table of Employment: Torry’s Story***

While we were planning our Vacation Bible School, a mother approached me and asked if there might be an opportunity for her daughter to help in our program. Her daughter, Torry, who is in her late

teens and has intellectual and developmental disabilities, was working in a pet store shelving items. Her hope was that Torry would gain leadership skills working with young children.

I learned that she loves music, so we determined that the music area of VBS would be a good place for her to work. Next we found Rebecca, a young woman who had helped in our program for several years, to serve as a job coach. She met with Torry and her mother and then shadowed the job coach who had been working with Torry. This gave Rebecca the opportunity to understand the objectives of the experience and to learn the best ways to work with Torry. This also gave the young women the opportunity to interact before the beginning of VBS.

Rebecca and Torry assisted in the music room with kindergarteners through fifth graders. The goals were for Torry to greet each group of children as they came to the room, to model enthusiastic participation, and to help reset the room as needed. Torry willingly and enthusiastically performed all her jobs, even urging the kids to sing along with gusto.

Torry loved the experience, and the children sang with more joy and less self-consciousness because of her leadership. Our song leader, an associate professor of music at a nearby university, praised her assistance often and encouraged both Rebecca and Torry in their work with the children. Everyone shared in the gift of Torry's love for music. The children found a new VBS friend, Rebecca grew in her ability to guide the process, and Torry rejoiced in the new leadership skills she discovered as she joined her love for music with her wish to work with children.

## Questions for Reflections and Discussion

- Think about the tables in your church. Where are the people with disabilities present and where are they missing?
- What tables in your church are making decisions that affect people who live with disabilities?
- Are people with disabilities present at tables where important decisions are made?
- People who are unemployed or who cannot work often feel isolated in their congregations. What evidence is there that this is true or untrue in your congregation?

## Questions for Further Exploration

- What can churches do about the high unemployment rate among people with disabilities? Can your church offer a volunteer or a paid internship to a person with a disability? Can you employ a person with a disability?

A ruling elder in one of our Presbyterian churches discovered that well-qualified persons who are blind are often not able to find employment in spite of the availability of assistive technology. He organized an internship program in his own company that provided work experience. Interns who completed the program were able to move into other positions. The program became a model for other companies and a model for churches or church agencies. How can your congregation, your presbytery, or your PC(USA) entity develop a plan for employment?

## Thoughts to Ponder

How is God working at the “tables” in your church?

## Closing prayer

O God, who meets us at our tables, help us to be open to your Spirit as we come together to worship, serve, learn, and enjoy each other. We thank you for the joy of discovering new gifts, new friends, and new ways of being present with one another. May your love be known in all we do. We pray in the name of Jesus who came to show us perfect love. Amen.



## Part Four: Next Steps and Resources

*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

*God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which God has called [the] church are the heart of the gospel in any age. (Book of Confessions, The Confession of 1967, 9.06)*

### Opening Prayer

O God, who has called us to a ministry of reconciliation, we thank you that, in Jesus Christ, the walls that divide us have come down. We rejoice that in Christ there is no longer “Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free, . . . male and female.” And we rejoice that there is no division between people of different abilities for we are all one in Christ. Help us to move forward together on our journey toward inclusion with wisdom, with knowledge, and with the gifts we use together. We pray in the name of Jesus the Reconciler. Amen.

### Focus for Part Four

As we advocate with and for people with disabilities, what does it mean to “do justice”? How can we use our gifts together to be part of God’s reconciling work in the church and in our communities?

### Scriptures for Part Four

John 13:34–35; 17:20–23

1 John 4:19–21

### Opening Thoughts

Inclusion is God’s love and justice made real in the daily lives of people of all abilities in the church and in society. During this study we have reflected upon our belief that all people are created in the image of God and that, as Christians, we have been baptized into one body and one Spirit. We discovered Jesus’ works of healing to be a ministry of inclusion and we affirmed Paul’s words that all persons have gifts of the Spirit to use “for the common good.” We have asked ourselves, “Are all persons welcome at the Table and at all the tables in our churches and in our communities?”

During this concluding session we hope that you will consider prayerfully the next steps you will take toward inclusion in your own setting. There are no easy answers or prescriptions that will fit every situation, but the Toolbox will offer practical help as you begin this journey or as you continue the journey you have already begun. Above all, this is a spiritual journey, and those who venture forth, are richly blessed as they discover the “more excellent way” of love (1 Corinthians 12:31).

#### *Carol’s Story*

*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (James 3:17)*

From time to time, I try to imagine Alex without me, his mom, around to guide him. I don’t get very far with the imagining. I am sure nobody can take my place.

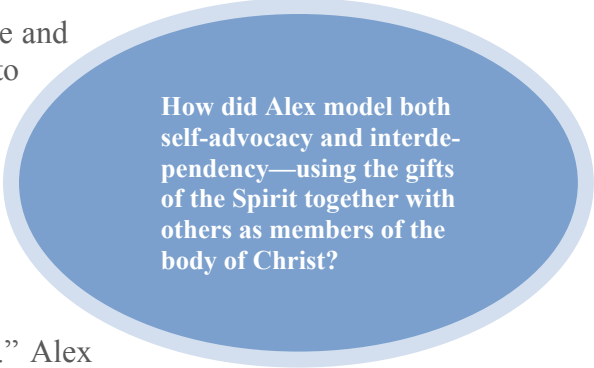
So on a Sunday morning last year, I was in my mom role. Alex was excited that his announcement about the Special Olympics was printed in the bulletin. I stepped into the church kitchen for a while and as I came down the hall, Alex was leaving Pastor Rhonda's office with that day's bulletin in hand. I thought, "Oh no, he's pestering Pastor Rhonda about his fundraiser."

We sat in the pew as service was about to start. Alex communicated to me that he was going to make an announcement. I said, "No, let's ask first. Let's wait until next week."

There were several folks making announcements, each one taking the portable microphone. Then Dave Skiendziel, the worship leader that morning, said that Alex had an announcement and handed him the microphone. I was flabbergasted! I was worried ... thinking, "What is he going to say? ... Will anyone understand what he says?"

Then I realized that he had already communicated to Dave and Pastor Rhonda that he had an announcement. I just needed to sit back and relax and let it play out. Well, Alex did a great job reading his announcement from the bulletin. It was probably hard for folks to understand all that he said, but they could read the announcement along with him. Then Dave summed it up by asking for support for Alex and the Special Olympics.

I was humbled and received some "wisdom from above." Alex will be just fine without his mom, and I need to be "willing to yield."



How did Alex model both self-advocacy and interdependency—using the gifts of the Spirit together with others as members of the body of Christ?

## Love and Justice in Action

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35)

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23)

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:19–21)

Bible study is more than an academic pursuit. It must change our lives—both personally and communally. The great Hebrew prophets were very clear about the futility of worship unless God's people, "learn to do good; seek justice ..." (Isaiah 1:17). Addressing the inequities of his day, Micah asked, "... what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah. 6:8). The question is as piercing for us today as it was for our biblical ancestors.

Inclusion is God's love and justice in action. When John the Baptist sent messengers to inquire of Jesus, wanting to know whether he was the Messiah, Jesus did not answer with a theological argument. He said, "Tell John what you hear and see." His work and the good news he announced were the most powerful argument he could make (Matthew 11:2–6).

The writer of 1 John directed the church to "love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John. 3:18). He used a powerful example: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20).

Inclusion is love made visible. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Every Sunday in a large midwestern church, a choir member who uses a wheelchair leads the choir down the center aisle of the sanctuary. At the 221st General Assembly (2014), a young man with Down Syndrome carried a banner as one of the dancers. This is God’s love and justice in action.

The question for each of us is, “How can I, in my own setting, work toward an inclusive church and a more just society? What does God’s love and justice require of me as I lead, serve, teach, hire, welcome? What is the good news I will share?”

The challenge is daunting, but remember that Jesus prayed for his followers in all times and in all places that they may be one, “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:23).

How can you respond to the challenges raised in this Bible study?

And we have the promise of Christ’s presence. “... I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b). We are not alone.

### *Linda’s Story*

Linda couldn’t wait to attend the meeting of the General Assembly. She planned ahead for every imaginable need. As a person who had a mobility disability, she knew long distance walking was going to be a challenge but believed she could do it. With determination and a little bit of stubbornness added to it, at first she did well. And then fatigue caught up with her.

The worship service was being held in a venue that was quite a distance from the convention center. Believing she could make it, off she went. Halfway there, due to elevators that didn’t work and the flights of stairs that had to be climbed, pain and fatigue overpowered her determined spirit. She sat down on a bench, and the tears of exhaustion and frustration flowed.

A woman came up to her, wrapped her in her arms and said, “Sit for a while and rest. You’ll make it. I know you can do it.” The woman offered to sit with her and accompany her the rest of the way. Not wanting to keep her from worship, Linda said, “Go on. Thanks for your words, I know now I can make it.”

A few minutes later another woman approached Linda. She said, “Our synod has an amazing disability retreat.” She handed Linda her card with all the contact information and urged her to get the information, sign up for the retreat, come, and participate. She then left. Linda sat there trying to figure out what had just happened.

Eventually Linda got to the worship service, just in time to participate in communion. Tired and weary, she shared in the communion meal, sang the closing hymn, listened to the benediction, and then realized—she had to walk all the way back to the hotel.

Fortunately, two people saw just how weary she was and offered to walk back to the hotel with her. They gave her helpful support and encouragement. At the hotel Linda realized, for the first time, that her mobility difficulties were going to require additional adaptive equipment if she was going to be able to participate in any activities without being in pain or being exhausted. For Linda it was an eye-opening God incident when she was enabled to understand in a new way the importance of healthy limitations.

If you live with a disability, what does Linda’s story say to you?

If you are “temporarily able-bodied,” what does Linda’s story say to you?

Limitations don’t always have to be negatives. God works in surprising ways, and so it was in the weariness and tears of a long walk to worship, Linda found the courage to

make the transition from using leg braces and crutches to the use of a wheelchair. By embracing the new understanding of healthy limitations, Linda got her life back tenfold.

### ***Lisa's Story***

For me as a blind person, the advent of the internet has marked a sea-change of independence, autonomy, and choice. With software that speaks what is on the screen and allows me to navigate, using a keyboard rather than a mouse, I am able to do a myriad of activities I would have previously needed sighted assistance or a lot more time and effort to accomplish. I can pay my bills, do my banking, order my groceries, shop for gifts, read the morning paper, and so much more. For someone like me, who grew up as a blind person before the digital age, the difference between THEN and NOW can't be overstated.

This doesn't mean, of course, that there aren't problems. There are a set of standards and guidelines that, when followed, make it possible for people using screen reading or screen magnifying software to access web pages, online forms, and social networks. But, technology is changing all the time, and designers of accessible software are always playing catch-up to stay current with the latest trends. What's more, even the most well-intentioned website designers, who care about making sure that everyone can use their site equally, can easily overlook some aspect of accessibility.

Such was the case recently when I visited the website of one of our Presbyterian church's conference centers. I was pleased when I found that I could fill out the registration form online and make my payment using PayPal. Quickly, I went through the form, filling in all the fields, until I got to the last.

The last field was one of those CAPTCHA images that require the user to identify a set of distorted numbers or letters and TYPE them in a box. Because of the way these images are rendered, the kind of software I use to read the screen can't make sense of them.

Websites are required to have some kind of alternative to the visual CAPTCHA that someone without sight can solve. Often this takes the form of an audio file to which the web user listens. Because these files also have to be impenetrable by online bots that could be programmed to identify words or numbers, the designers have had to distort the sound. Unfortunately, the largest provider of these CAPTCHA puzzles (a company now owned by Google) has so distorted the alternative audio files that it is virtually impossible for anyone to understand them.

Well, the website I visited didn't offer an audio alternative. I happened to know of a work-around that had been created for just such situations. To use it I had to open a different browser and start over again. Once more, I reached the end of the form, only to find that the little program that had been created to help identify CAPTCHA images was now broken. It had been created by volunteers, and eventually, there was no one around to keep it up-to-date.

As often happens, having been defeated twice, a certain dogged determination now set in. I opened up the form once again and sent it to my printer. I then used an old piece of technology called an Optacon. This uses a small camera to capture images and then replicates as a vibrating pattern on a finger pad. If the camera is on a letter S, for instance, the vibrating pins under my fingertip will form the same curvy shape. Using the Optacon I was able to figure out the letters in the box and fill in the remaining field and click "submit." Ah, the sweet click of success.

Before turning to other things, I sent the conference center director what I hoped was a friendly email. I explained the problem I had with the site and suggested that if the web designer chose to add an audio alternative to the site, that she make sure it could be understood. I suggested some other clever alternatives to CAPTCHAs that other sites employ and thanked him for taking the time to find a solution. Within a day, I received a very gracious note back from the director. They would make sure the problem was fixed so that their site could be used by everyone.



Even though it means some extra time, and even though most often I don't get a response, or at least not right away, I've tried to make it a practice to send an email to the web manager on sites where I encounter an accessibility problem. I do so because, first of all, I believe that people generally want to do the right thing, and they're glad to have the chance to make something work that hasn't been working. Second, it spreads awareness of the importance of accessibility. I've tried to adhere to three rules: be friendly, be specific, and be persistent.

I always assume goodwill, even with big corporate behemoths that care more about profits than accessibility. Even though I'm not much of a techie, I do my best to describe the accessibility problem and I offer solutions if I know of any. Finally, I try to remember to follow up if I don't get a response.

In the case of the website for the Presbyterian conference center, I'm really glad I spoke up. It led not only to positive change, but also to a nice connection. I'm sure, too, that down the line, someone else will be able to use the site to register for a conference. We all need the same opportunities to participate and contribute. Making sure that the web is accessible is just one way to create that kind of equality.

Check the Toolbox for another article by Lisa.

How is Lisa's self-advocacy and the response of the conference center a model for people with disabilities and a model for the church?

What does Lisa's story suggest for inclusion in the community and in employment?

## Continuing the Story of Inclusion

As members of the body of Christ, we are all part of the story. The following case studies are based on real-life experiences of people with disabilities. The stories will give you the opportunity to decide what you would do if the episode took place in your setting. Use the stories for reflection or discussion. Better yet, assign parts and act out the stories as a decision-making group.

Questions to consider as you discuss the case studies

- What issues, questions, or challenges are confronting the people in the story?
- Who should be part of the decision-making process?
- List some possible solutions. What do you think is the best choice?

Go to the **Toolbox** for helpful resources.

### *Case Study One*

Mary is a fourteen-year-old who has a cognitive disability. Her parents are talking with the pastor of Knox Church about the possibility of Mary's participation in a confirmation program. They have been active members of First Church but they were told that Mary would not be able to participate in confirmation because she would not understand the curriculum. Also, she would not be able to attend the confirmation retreat because her presence would take away from other youth.

Imagine the conversation between the pastor at Knox and Mary's parents. You may wish to continue with a conversation between the pastor and the Christian Education Committee.

### *Case Study Two*

Bill is a middle school student whose family attends First Presbyterian Church. He was baptized in this church and his parents are both ruling elders.

Bill is unable to participate in his church youth group because he has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair. The group's favorite activities include basketball, skate boarding, and biking. Bill's parents are meeting with the youth director who argues that the church has done "enough" because it is architecturally accessible with a ramp and an elevator. You are part of the conversation between the youth director and Bill's parents.

### ***Case Study Three***

Debby is forty-five years old and lives with a cognitive disability. She attends worship regularly and loves her church family. Her parents are both deacons and it is her dream to serve the church in that capacity. She speaks to the moderator of the nominating committee and volunteers to serve.

When the committee meets, some members express concern that the responsibilities of the deacons are already very heavy and they question whether Debby is able to do her part. You are on the nominating committee as they are preparing to present a slate of officers at the congregational meeting.

### ***Case Study Four***

The women's Bible study of North Church has been meeting weekly for many years. Some of the women have been attending for years and have formed close friendships. The group has been reaching out to new church members and to younger women.

Nancy, one of the "new" women, lives with a mental health condition. At times Nancy participates appropriately and is able to share insights that are helpful to the group. On other days she is disruptive because she is unable to sit still and wants to talk incessantly. The group leaders are meeting to talk about what can be "done."

### ***Case Study Five***

A fire destroyed Westminster Church and the congregation is meeting in a middle school building. The building committee has been working with an architect and is presenting the plans for the new church to the congregation. The committee announces that the new building will be totally accessible with elevators, entrances with no steps, and accessible restrooms. They say that when pews are installed there will be cutouts for wheelchairs. Committee members are pleased because they know that some church members who have not been able to attend will be able to participate again.

After the presentation John rolls his wheelchair to the front of the room, points to the three steps that go to the chancel, and says, "This plan says that I am not worthy to be a lay reader, sing in the choir, or be part of worship leadership in any way. I'm glad I can get into the church but you're excluding me from leadership. I remember that in the book of Leviticus, God's people are told that no one with a disability can approach the altar. This plan says that I cannot serve."

You are a member of the building committee. Imagine the discussion at the next meeting.

### ***Case Study Six***

Jane has been the pastor of Calvin Church for a year. She loves her ministry, and the church is developing a new sense of mission.

For some time she has realized that her sight is changing and that reading is becoming difficult. Her ophthalmologist's diagnosis is that she is losing central vision and that her condition is progressive. She fears that she will not be able to continue her ministry. You are present when she shares her concerns with the session.

### ***Case Study Seven***

Sarah has come to a meeting of the session of Central Church with a proposal that all church committees use person-first language in referring to people with disabilities. Two of the examples she uses are “the child has Down Syndrome” rather than “a Down Syndrome child” and “She uses a wheelchair” rather than “She is confined to a wheelchair.” In addition she suggests that worship leaders say, “Please rise in body or spirit” rather than, “Please rise if you are able.” You are there while the session engages in a lively debate.

### ***Case Study Eight***

The leadership team of your presbytery has received several appeals from retired members of the presbytery who can no longer attend meetings because most are held in churches that are not architecturally accessible. Most buildings are old and lack ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. Only three churches in the presbytery are accessible and the presbytery meets six times a year. In addition, commissioners need hearing devices that are not always available, and one new member is blind and wants to be active in presbytery. Imagine that you are on the leadership team and discussing this issue.

### ***Case Study Nine***

You are a commissioner to General Assembly. You use a wheelchair and have reserved an accessible hotel room. When you check into the hotel and go to your room, you discover that it is not accessible, that there is neither a roll-in shower or a transfer board for the bathtub. There are no handrails in the bathroom. You cannot reach hangers for your clothing and there is barely room to roll your chair around the bed.

You call the desk to inquire and the clerk says, “We give rooms on a first-come, first-serve basis. Someone else checked into the handicapped room. Sorry.” What are you going to do?

### ***Case Study Ten***

The General Assembly is meeting in your presbytery. You have been an advocate for inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church. You believe that it is important to make visible the whole body of Christ.

You have contacted the worship planners for the assembly and told them of your concern that people with disabilities participate in worship leadership. You have offered names of people who might be willing to be worship leaders.

You look forward to the first worship celebration. You wait, watch, and listen with anticipation, expecting a person with a disability to lead liturgy, read scripture, or serve communion. You can identify no one with a disability who is in a leadership role. You are deeply disappointed. What will you do?

## **Next Steps**

- What is your vision for inclusion in your own setting? Be specific about what you wish to have happen.
- What changes need to take place?
- What resources do you already have as you bring about change?
- What additional resources do you need?
- Who needs to be included in the conversation?
- What first steps can you take? When?
- How will you know if there is positive change?

## Thoughts to Ponder

- What is the most important insight or understanding you have gained through this study?
- What does the church's ministry with people who live with disabilities have to do with the call to "do justice"?
- How is inclusion related to reconciliation, the "heart of the gospel"?

### Access Your Heart

Please include us.  
It hurts to be excluded.  
A quick hi and a hug are not enough.  
We need real inclusion.  
When will you understand?

We are all members of the body of Christ.  
Some of us communicate in different ways.  
Some of us see differently.  
Some of us behave in ways we can't control.  
Some of us learn at different speeds.  
Some of us need wheelchairs.

Some of us walk differently.  
Some of us hear less.  
Some of us never get to come to church.  
Some of us are just left out.

We are all members of Christ's family.  
Why can't you be more welcoming?  
We are all in need of a church which welcomes and accepts us for who we are.  
We are made in God's image.  
When you forget to include us you are forgetting to include God.

Access is more than ramps and accessible bathrooms.  
The hearts of everyone need to be open and welcoming.  
When hearts are open we can really be a family in Christ.  
Open your heart.  
And let us in.

Sarah Nettleton (© 11/08/2000). *Living into the Body of Christ: Towards Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities*

## **Closing Prayer**

O God, who calls us to “do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God,” we thank you that we are not alone on our journey. You walk beside us and provide us what we need, to use our abilities with joy. Thank you for what we have learned from stories, from study, from reflection, and from sharing. May our journey be but a beginning toward a more inclusive church and society. We pray in the name of Jesus who promised to be with us always. Amen.



# Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



**Models for Transformation  
for Councils and Congregations**

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# Tools for Every Setting

## Congregational Audit of Disability Accessibility and Inclusion

A self-study that includes leadership, worship, ministry programs, fellowship, accessible communication, and architectural accessibility.

[www.pcusa.org/resource/congregational-audit-disability-accessibility-incl/](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/congregational-audit-disability-accessibility-incl/)

## Disability Concerns Consultants [PC(USA)]

The questions can be overwhelming:

- Help! I need curriculum help for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.
- Can you give me information about accessibility audits/checklists/surveys?
- My presbytery meets in a church that's not accessible. Don't they get it?
- How can our church begin a ministry with persons who are deaf?
- What do I say to a child who asks, "Why me?"

Four consultants hired by the Office of Social Welfare Ministries/PHEWA are available to help the church with questions like these.

To contact the consultants directly, the best procedure is via email. The consultants work in a variety of professional capacities and are glad to be of assistance. However, they can better serve you if given some time to focus on your question and gather information prior to calling you back or responding via email. Please leave a detailed message concerning your question or concern and how best to contact you. You may also call PHEWA at 800-728-7228 x5800.

**The Reverend Sue Montgomery**, Lead Consultant, Mobility/Accessibility, P.O. Box 16, Knox, PA 16232, 814-797-1226, Email: [suemontgomery@windstream.net](mailto:suemontgomery@windstream.net).

Sue Sterling Montgomery is the pastor of the Nickleville Presbyterian Church, Emlenton, Pennsylvania. She has also served as a chaplain at Polk Center, a residential facility for persons with intellectual disabilities since 1983. Sue has served on local and national boards addressing advocacy issues for persons with disabilities. She's no stranger to the barriers persons with mobility disabilities face. To address more than just the architectural barriers, Sue has done extensive study in the areas of theology, language, and philosophical approaches to life with a disability. She received the Women of Faith Award from the Women's Ministries Program Area of PC(USA) for her work with persons with disabilities.

**The Reverend Raymond Meester**, Consultant for Hearing, Heritage Presbyterian Church, 880 South 35th Street, Lincoln, NE 68510-3499, 402-477-3401/TTY 402-477-3429, Email: [Raymond@HeritagePres.org](mailto:Raymond@HeritagePres.org).

Raymond is the pastor of Heritage Presbyterian Church, Lincoln, Nebraska, where they have an active deaf ministry that includes an interpreted worship service. Ray's parents and four uncles and aunts were deaf, enabling him to be conversant in American Sign Language. In 2000, the Louisville Institute awarded him a twelve-week sabbatical grant to study deaf ministry from a deaf cultural perspective. He has served on the board of the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, was a founding member of Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC), and is a past moderator of the PDC, a network of PHEWA.

**The Reverend Rick Roderick**, Consultant for Visual Disabilities, 2215 Westridge Rd., Louisville, KY 40242, 502-423-8195 or 502-429-4460, Email: [rickrod@twc.com](mailto:rickrod@twc.com).

Rick worked in the blindness field for twenty-seven years. He began as a rehabilitation counselor and continued as an assistive technology specialist. Rick taught primarily internet and Braille note taking devices. He retired from the Kentucky Office for the Blind in 2007. Rick still does internet research in the blindness field and is active on several mailing lists dealing with these issues. Rick produces Braille for the PC(USA), primarily for the Office of the General Assembly. He has served on the Leadership Team for PHEWA's Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) and consults with the church on accessible technology. Rick enjoys leading worship when requested and participated in the worship leadership of the 213th General Assembly (2001).

**Mr. Milton Tyree**, Consultant for Intellectual Disabilities, P.O. Box 22638, Louisville, KY 40252, 502-333-2747, Email: [PDCmtyree@me.com](mailto:PDCmtyree@me.com).

Milton Tyree is a member of Springdale Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He has had numerous opportunities through the years to develop personal relationships with people who have disabilities and their family members. Milton has more than twenty-five years of experience in the design, development, and provision of supports and services that promote participation of people with disabilities with valued aspects of everyday life. He has worked in a number of capacities including teaching, curriculum development, consulting, and program administration. His real passion is in the area of personal advocacy. Milton currently works for the Human Development Institute at the University of Kentucky.

## **The Beatitudes for an Inclusive Church**

*Blessed* are those who value the gifts of all persons as members of the Body of Christ.

*Blessed* are those who treat people with disabilities as persons first, not as "the disabled."

*Blessed* are those who can be open about their own hidden disabilities.

*Blessed* are those who speak directly to people with disabilities, who do not speak to them through a companion.

*Blessed* are those who speak at eye level to people in wheelchairs.

*Blessed* are those who identify themselves when they speak to people who are blind or visually impaired and who do not walk away without saying so.

*Blessed* are those who do not shout at people who are hard of hearing, but who speak directly and clearly.

*Blessed* are those who take time to listen to people whose speech may sound "different."

*Blessed* are those who treat adults like adults, who resist the temptation to "talk down" or to pat the head of a person in a wheelchair.

*Blessed* are those who do not use hand signals but who use clear, verbal directions for people who are blind.

*Blessed* are those who would like to be helpful but who ask first, "Can I help you in any way?"

*Blessed* are those who do not grab and drag a person who is blind, but who offer an arm, usher style.

*Blessed* are those who "partner" with someone with a disability when going through a buffet line.

*Blessed* are those who leave table space and wide aisles for people using wheelchairs.

*Blessed* are those who do not stop to discuss hot issues on the stairways and keep handrails clear.

*Blessed* are those who do not lean on wheelchairs because they know these are like extensions of the body for persons who use them.

*Blessed* are those who save elevator space for those who need it and take the stairs or escalators themselves.

*Blessed* are those who do not pet or play with a guide or service dog.

*Blessed* are those who are aware of those around them in the event of an emergency.

*Rejoice* and be glad for you will make many new friends and gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be members of the Body of Christ.

*The Reverend Bebe Baldwin*

## Creating a Culture of Inclusion

This video, produced by First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Michigan, presents a series of vignettes followed by discussion on questions that are especially helpful for church groups that are serious about moving toward full inclusion. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkVjmn5zBw#t=247>

## People First Language (See next page.)

Examples of language that respects and empowers people with disabilities by recognizing the person before the disability is provided by the CDC.

## Top Eleven Things Your Congregation Can Do to Begin Inclusion

Part of a longer article, “Journey Toward Inclusion,” that lists basic beginning steps churches and governing bodies can take to welcome people with all abilities.

### 1. Begin with awareness.

- Plan a Disability Inclusion Sunday that affirms the congregation’s commitment to the inclusion of persons of all abilities.
- Invite a panel of people who live with disabilities to share times when they felt included or did not feel included.

Resources: worship, stories, and articles from PDC annual Disability Inclusion Resource Packets (especially the 2013 resource)

### 2. Ask the experts.

- People who live with disabilities are the “experts.” “Nothing about us without us” is a good rule.
- A task force of people with disabilities can help to lead and guide the process of inclusion.
- Remember, not all people with disabilities are alike!

Resource: *Congregational Audit of Disability Accessibility and Inclusion*, developed by PDC. It can be found at: [www.pcusa.org/resource/congregational-audit-disability-accessibility-incl/](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/congregational-audit-disability-accessibility-incl/).

# Communicating With and About People with Disabilities



About 50 million Americans report having a disability. Most Americans will experience a disability some time during the course of their lives. Disabilities can affect people in different ways, even when one person has the same type of disability as another person. Some disabilities may be hidden or not easy to see.

## People First Language

People first language is used to speak appropriately and respectfully about an individual with a disability. People first language emphasizes the person first not the disability. For example, when referring to a person with a disability, refer to the person first by using phrases such as: "a person who ...," "a person with ..." or, "person who has..."

Here are suggestions on how to communicate with and about people with disabilities.



**For more information about disability and health, visit [www.cdc.gov/disabilities](http://www.cdc.gov/disabilities)**

People First Language	Language to Avoid
Person with a disability	The disabled, handicapped
Person without a disability	Normal person, healthy person
Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability	Retarded, slow, simple, moronic, defective or retarded, afflicted, special person
Person with an emotional or behavioral disability, person with a mental health or a psychiatric disability	Insane, crazy, psycho, maniac, nuts
Person who is hard of hearing	Hearing impaired, suffers a hearing loss
Person who is deaf	Deaf and dumb, mute
Person who is blind/visually impaired	The blind
Person who has a communication disorder, is unable to speak, or uses a device to speak	Mute, dumb
Person who uses a wheelchair	Confined or restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound
Person with a physical disability, physically disabled	Crippled, lame, deformed, invalid, spastic
Person with autism	Autistic
Person with epilepsy or seizure disorder	Epileptic
Person with multiple sclerosis	Afflicted by MS
Person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
Accessible parking or bathrooms	Handicapped parking or bathroom
Person of short stature	Midget
Person with a congenital disability	Birth defect
Person with Down syndrome	Mongoloid
Person who is successful, productive	Has overcome his/her disability, is courageous

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities  
Office of the Director



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### 3. Use positive images.

- All persons are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). In preaching and teaching use stories and illustrations that portray people with disabilities in positive ways.
- Avoid linking disability to sinfulness or lack of faith.

Resource: *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* by Kathy Black

### 4. Use person-first language.

- Person-first language affirms that persons with disabilities are persons first, not their disabilities. Say “a person with a disability” or “a woman who is blind, not “a blind woman.”
- Avoid words like “crazy” or “crippled” or “wheel-chair-bound.”

Resource: *People First Language* by Kathy Snow at: <http://www.disabilityisnatural.com>.

### 5. Make space accessible.

- Do an audit of space both inside and around the church building. Be sure to include fellowship and education space as well as the sanctuary.
- Ask people who use wheelchairs or walkers to find additional barriers. Some may surprise you. Some may require only simple, inexpensive solutions.

Resource: “Our Commitment to Architectural Accessibility” in the *Congregational Audit*.

### 6. Make communications accessible.

- Ask persons with visual or hearing disabilities what alternative formats or assistive devices they need to participate fully in worship, education, service, and fellowship.

Resources: “Our Commitment to Accessible Communication,” *Congregational Audit*

### 7. Welcome the gifts.

- People with disabilities have gifts of the Spirit to use for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4–7). Find ways to include these unique gifts in the life of the church. Encourage “interdependence” so that people of all abilities work together in ways that we all use their gifts.
- Include people with disabilities in church leadership.

Resource: “Our Commitment to Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities,” *Congregational Audit*

### 8. Make worship accessible.

- Include people with disabilities in worship leadership.
- Invite all to the Table in ways that do not isolate persons with disabilities.
- Offer gluten-free elements at communion.
- Provide a scent-free environment.
- Train ushers to be sensitive to individual needs.

Resources: all PDC annual Disability Inclusion Resource packets

### **9. Advocate with families.**

- Be sensitive to the individual needs of children, adolescents, and parents. Ask what they need in order to participate fully.
- Surround families with a circle of friends who support and advocate with and for them.

Resource: the 2011 PDC resource, *Inclusion from the Inside Out: Welcoming God's Children of All Abilities*.

### **10. Practice disability-etiquette.**

Examples:

- Ask a person with a disability if she needs assistance. Do not assume that she needs help.
- Do not lean on a person's wheelchair.
- Do not shout at a person who is hard of hearing.
- Speak directly, on eye level, to the persons who use wheelchairs.

Resources: *Offering Our Gifts*, PDC resource for the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA) found at: [www.pcusa.org/resource/offering-our-gifts/](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/offering-our-gifts/)

*Creating a Culture of Inclusion* produced by First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham Michigan for the 2014 General Assembly of the PCUSA. It can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkVjmn50zBw#t=247>

### **11. Call for help.**

- Call the PC(USA) Disability Consultants with specific questions about inclusion of people with mobility/accessibility, visual, hearing, or development issues. Contact information for the consultants can be found on [pp. 37–38](#).

# Tools for Worship

## Tips for Planning Inclusive Worship and Gatherings

Suggestions gathered by Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) for church bodies of all sizes that wish to make meetings and worship, including communications, accessible for people with a range of disabilities.

All members of the Body of Christ are called to use their gifts and to participate fully in the worshipping community. Therefore, we offer the following suggestions for making worship accessible for persons living with disabilities.

- The site should be accessible for worship, business, fellowship, and dining.
- Language is important! Use “people first” language in referring to people with disabilities. For example: a woman with a disability (not a “disabled woman”); a child who is blind; a man who uses a wheelchair.
- Invite people with visible disabilities to serve as worship leaders—readers, ushers, communion servers, etc. Inclusive leadership makes a powerful statement that we all have gifts to share.
- Avoid using figures of speech that portray people with disabilities in negative ways. These reinforce society’s demeaning images of people with disabilities. For example: “blind to the truth”; “deaf to God’s word.”
- When asking congregations to stand, say “Please rise in body or in spirit” instead of “Please stand if you are able.”
- In serving communion, offer gluten-free and casein-free elements and individual separate liquid (wine/juice) containers ... not a common cup to dip gluten and non-gluten bread as that creates cross-contamination.
- When requested in a timely manner, provide ASL interpreters in an area that is close and in good sight of the platform/worship leader area. Reserve space in front for those who need an interpreter. Provide electronic or large print of all materials for interpreters.
- Provide appropriate lighting for the platform, pulpit, or lectern. Remember that not all people who are visually impaired need the same kind of lighting.
- Provide a ramp to the platform and adjustable height microphones for the speakers.
- Provide worship bulletins and hymns in large-print format. When requested in a timely manner, provide bulletins and hymns in Braille or electronic formats.
- Use microphones for worship and plenary sessions.
- Encourage speakers to read/summarize projected material.
- Provide wheelchair spaces in convenient places with seating for those who are accompanying persons who are using wheelchairs. Spaces should have good sight-lines.
- Offer seating areas for people who use walkers and those who accompany them. A walker is part of a person’s immediate needs and if removed to a distant area (such as along a wall to be “out of the way”), it leaves the person without independent mobility, especially in case of an emergency.

- When meals are served, reserve wheelchair space in easily accessible areas with wide aisles.
- When meals are served, provide for special dietary needs as requested in a timely manner.

ABOVE ALL, ASK PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES WHAT THEY NEED IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN WORSHIP. THEY ARE THE EXPERTS!

## **Inclusion: The Joyful Feast**

Sue Montgomery, the lead consultant on disabilities for the PC(USA), calls communion the “most isolating experience in the church for people with disabilities.” Sue advocates serving communion in a way that all can participate without marking some as less important or “different” members of the body of Christ.

Ruling elder Linda Wold from Valley Community Presbyterian Church in Golden Valley, Minnesota, describes the steps her church has taken towards being a more inclusive worshipping community. “The past found the congregation either coming forward to receive the bread and the cup or passing the elements along the pews. But not all could participate comfortably. Some were not able to take a portion of bread from the tray while holding it with the other hand. Some were unable to hold the tiny disposable communion cups without spilling because of hands that shook.”

An alternative plan was implemented. An elder serves the person on the aisle. Instead of taking the element for herself and then passing it on, she then holds the tray while she serves the person beside her, who then serves the next person. If someone cannot serve her neighbor, the person on either side will accommodate her.

The Sunday bulletin reminds worshippers, “Often we know the love of God through the presence of other persons. Please hold the bread until all have been served as a reminder of our unity in Christ and drink the cup as you are served as a reminder of our individual responsibility before God.”

## **Lisa's Story: Inclusion in Worship**

For me, there's nothing better than singing in church. Now every week, I go to church carrying a copy of the order of service in Braille so I can read it. Included in my order of service are all the words for that morning's hymns. Here's the story of how that Braille order of service gets to me each week.

When Jan, our church administrator, finishes the bulletin on Thursday or Friday, she emails it to me. I open it up and do some necessary reformatting. Then, I look for the hymn numbers for that week.

There's a book service called BookShare that makes books available in accessible electronic formats for people who can't read print. It allows me to download a book on to my computer and read it with the software I use that speaks what is on the screen. It so happens that the new Presbyterian hymnal, which our church uses, is available through BookShare. A very dedicated and skilled volunteer with BookShare worked on making this version of the hymnal easy to use for people who are blind. I copy the texts of the hymns from my BookShare edition and put them in my reformatted version of the bulletin. Then I email that document to my sister.

My sister works with Braille transcriptionists, and for her work she needs a Braille embosser. A Braille embosser works a little like a printer. You send a document to it from your computer and it produces a hard copy in Braille.



These machines are very expensive, running in the thousands of dollars, so a few years ago, I helped my sister look for one on EBay. We found one for one hundred dollars, but the catch was that the seller in Texas would only deliver it to someone who lived close by and would not ship it out of state.

I called a friend I knew through working at the national church level. She lives in Dallas so she got the embosser and then shipped it to my sister. It was another instance where church connections made a big difference.

On Saturday afternoon I walk over to my sister's house. Once there, I open the document I emailed her, do a little more configuring, and send it to the Braille embosser. The embosser uses pins to punch the Braille dots into the paper, so it sounds a little like the popcorn machine at a movie theater. The next morning I'm in church, reciting the prayers, saying the litanies, and most of all, singing the hymns with everyone else.

The story of how I get my order of service in Braille each week is a story that involves lots of people and several twists and turns. Sometimes, the church bulletin is something we take for granted, but having a bulletin I can read is something that still thrills me, and something I hope never to take for granted.

*Lisa Largess*

## **A Planning Process for a Rejoicing Spirits Community**

The Rejoicing Spirits Community (RSC) at First Presbyterian Church Birmingham is an intentional community in which persons of all abilities, as well as a variety of religious backgrounds, are building relationships and honoring the spiritual needs and gifts of all. The life of our RSC consists of three parts: worship, intentional community wide social events, and individual, family or group home interactions.

The worship life of the Rejoicing Spirits Community consists of two no-shush services a month during the school year and one worship service a month over the summer. The planning process follows the calendar year, which means the planning team, consisting of both clergy and laity, begins the planning for each year in October or November of the preceding year.

Step one is choosing an annual theme and accompanying scriptures. The theme directs the selection of scripture passages, which then guide the content of the services. The first service of the month is based on an Old Testament text and the second service of the month is centered on a New Testament text. Our theme for 2013 is "water." The stories we have selected run from Moses striking the rock at Massah for water in the wilderness to Jesus stilling the storm.

Step two is organizing the two services for the coming month. We begin by choosing a summary phrase around which the two services will be organized. The phrases chosen have ranged from God Gives Us Peace, to God Gives us Helpers, to God Doesn't Lose Us. This phrase is used as the heart of the call to worship, the prayer of confession, and the interactive sermon. The signing for the phrase is taught at the beginning of each service in order that people sign it together every time it appears in the service. The planning continues with a discussion about appropriate music. We try and use simple and repetitive music that is accessible to all worshippers and is thematically tied to the monthly phrase. Next we plan as many ways as possible for worshippers to be actively involved in the service. This can range from "Setting the Table of Community" (bringing forward Bible, candle, and offering plate), to being actors in the retelling of the story, to taking up the offering, to helping with prayer time.

Step three is dividing up the responsibilities. The team clearly lays out who is responsible for the overall PowerPoint presentation, creating the music slides, getting any props necessary for retelling the weekly story, writing prayer liturgy, leading the service and the service music, reading particular portions of the liturgy, carrying the roving microphone for prayers, organizing the welcome tables,

and organizing after service snacks/meal. In this way the services, while often appearing to be chaotic (remember it is truly a no-shush service), run smoothly and honor the gifts and spirituality of all members of the community.

Our intentional community-wide social events occur quarterly. They can include events such as dances, movies, ice-cream socials, and game nights. These events are planned at the end of one calendar year for the following year. Our All Abilities Inclusion Ministry team, in consultation with representatives from the various group homes and families who are part of the community, set out the schedule and divide up responsibilities for each event.

The final piece of our RSC focuses on individual, family, and group home interactions. The most significant aspect of this portion of our community involves one of our members who provides regular spiritual enrichment for several of the group homes. In addition, we have individual members, along with our inclusion coordinators, who occasionally share their gifts (crafts, etc.) with members of the RSC.

*The Reverend Dr. John Judson*

## **Producing a Braille Bulletin, a Success Story**

I have been a Presbyterian all my life, but total participation in worship was denied to me until the 90s. Responsive readings often sounded like collective mumbling. Words to hymns were equally incomprehensible. In 1990, this changed. This is the model that makes worship accessible for people who are blind. It is the model used by Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Here are the steps we use.

1. Our church administrator, Patti Marcum, produces the bulletin in Microsoft Publisher. She copies it to a Word file.
2. Marcum removes boldface and puts "Leader:" and "People:" in front of the appropriate parts. She replaces colons with number signs in Scripture references, the proper Braille format.
3. She inserts any hymns from *Sing the Faith* or other sources than the *Presbyterian Hymnal*.
4. Marcum emails the bulletin to me.
5. I open the Word Document into my Braille program, MegaDots, and issue the translation command. This command substitutes Braille symbols for print ones.
6. I issue formatting commands so that various parts of the bulletin are in the correct styles. The Prayer of Confession would be a paragraph. Hymns appear as poetry.
7. I add hymns from the *Presbyterian Hymnal*, which I have in electronic Braille. When I produce a new hymn from cutting and pasting from one of the hymnal volumes, I save the file. When I need it again, I can then insert it into the proper place in the service.

The *Presbyterian Hymnal* was available from a volunteer service that has been discontinued. However, the volumes are available in Braille files and are available from the Braille and Audio Download service of the National Library Service for the blind and Physically Handicapped: <https://nlsbard.loc.gov>. In order to use this site, one must be a user of this service.

8. I produce the number of Braille bulletins that will be needed. One person prefers an electronic copy of the bulletin that he can read on a note-taking device. I produce this as well.

I may not Braille the whole bulletin. After others have become familiar with the structure of the

service, I may not put in the headings for different parts of the service. I may leave out responses that have become standard through repeated use if they are short. I usually put refrains at the end of each verse of hymns that have them. If the Braille readers also receive the Word copy of the bulletin, I may leave out the announcements. Bulletins can either be bound or stapled, according to reader preference.

A few warnings: First, the bulletin should be complete for any newcomers. Second, a transcriber should not leave things out until users become familiar with the structure of worship. If a likelihood exists of other people who are blind coming to church, at least one extra copy should be prepared.

The Braille ministry that we have at Crescent Hill has opened a whole new world to me and to those who are blind who worship with me. Although not all who are blind read Braille, those who do usually value it very highly. Modern technology has revolutionized Braille production. If you want to start a similar program, look within your congregation. The resources may be there. If not, check with agencies serving the blind or blindness organizations, and someone may be able to assist you.

People with disabilities, like all of us, have varying needs and preferences in how adaptive resources are integrated to our lives. It is important to start with the people in the church community who would benefit from adaptive technology. It is important to seek their input as it is the only way personal needs are met; your ministry becomes rich with an inclusive spirit. Keep in mind that in this case, one size does not fit all. By working with those who need adaptation and those who can provide it, your ministry can become truly inclusive.

*The Reverend Rick Roderick*

## **Eavesdropping Opens the Door to a New Way of Thinking**

Imagine yourself listening in on the following conversations:

One, a family is meeting with the pastor to plan the funeral for their father. The father was deaf, and was proud of being a member of the deaf community, a linguistic minority. His deafness was not a disability; it was a gift from God. The children explain to the pastor their father's lifelong wishes, that when he died the officiating pastor would not say anything about him hearing in heaven. There would be no comments that in death he could finally hear the birds, music, laughter, rain, or thunder. In heaven, he would be not only a Son of God in the family of God, but he would be as deaf in heaven as he was on earth. The children tell the pastor their father warned them, "If anything is said against my will, I'll wake from the dead, sit up in the casket, and correct the pastor."

Two, a young teenager with multiple disabilities has just lost his grandfather in death. He is asking many questions about heaven. He asks, "When I get to heaven will I be able to walk, talk, run, and do everything everyone else does?" The pastor with whom he was speaking was cautious and responded, "I don't know, but this I do know: you will be you, those who love you will recognize you and God will embrace you with eternal love." The young man lowered his head and then looked up and said, "Thanks. I am me and sometimes I think people want me to die so I can meet their expectations of being healed and whole. Although I'd like to be like everyone else, I like being loved for who I am, just as I am. Why is it that people feel free to tell me that I will be like them when I get to heaven? It hurts. I want to be loved for who I am. I want to be me now and in heaven. I want to be loved as I am in life not as what someone wants me to be in death."

Three, a chaplain who was retiring after forty-five years of ministry with people who have intellectual/developmental disabilities was discussing his funeral plans with some colleagues over coffee at McDonalds. Here is what he said: "When I die, I don't want anyone preaching at my funeral to call me a saint for working with men and women with intellectual/developmental disabilities. I am no saint! My

work is doing what God has called me to do; there is nothing saintly or special in it, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing honorable or elevated to a special status. I have always done what God called me to do; I have been who I am. My daughter and the funeral home director have received these instructions, and so, too, have you. Ministry with persons with disabilities is not something reserved for saints. Ministry is being a brother or sister in Christ to those around us. It is nothing more. Whenever people say that I am a saint for working with people with disabilities, it demeans the people I love and care for with all my heart.”

Three conversations—three insights into the profound thoughts and unique identities of people who live with disabilities, their families, advocates, and friends. People who live with disabilities want their funeral services to be a celebration of the resurrection and a celebration of their faith and life. Here are some suggestions pastors can consider when writing funeral services for people who have lived with disabilities or who have been pastors with people who live with disabilities.

Do not focus on the disability unless it is absolutely necessary. The person was far more than the disability. Speak of the spiritual gifts the person shared. Share stories of the person’s faith. The gifts and stories can include the disability, but usually the stories of faith don’t need the disability framework.

The person is more than their smile. Although a person can have a smile that lights up a room, speak about why the smile is so important and what the smile gave to those who saw it. Persons living with disabilities often are frustrated and demeaned by always being known only for their smiles, as if that’s all they could ever do. Being expected to smile all the time further reduces and destroys their humanness. People with disabilities, as people of faith, know how to walk through the valleys of the shadow of death and despair. Expect faithfulness, questioning, and profound faith—don’t lower the life of a person with a disability to the role of always smiling.

Don’t be afraid to share the struggles the person endured. Don’t turn them into moments of inspiration or heroic acts. Share how the person addressed adversity, just like everyone else, through faith, mutual ministry, and through the communal support of family and the worshipping community.

Don’t speak of the person with a disability as being one of God’s angels or state that as one of God’s angels, forgiveness and entrance into God’s kingdom is guaranteed. Such language perpetuates the image of the eternal child. People with disabilities, including cognitive disabilities, can and do make decisions of faith and professions of faith. Share how the person came to know Christ and chose to live their faith in Christ. People who are called to serve God in specialized ministries with people with disabilities ask that their ministries not be elevated above other ministries. Such thinking makes the statement that ministry with people with disabilities is more difficult and further demeans the lives and gifts people living with disabilities bring to their communities.

Unless you know where the person living with the disability stood on the theological issues of heaven and the heavenly body, do not speak of the perfect body in heaven where eyes see, ears hear, legs walk, hands move, and people dance with God. People living with disabilities already dance on earth, walk in the Lord, see and hear in different ways. No one knows what the heavenly body will be like. What we do know is this: when the disabled earthly body is replaced with a perfect body in heaven, the message becomes quite clear—the body of a person with a disability is never acceptable except in death. Only the heavenly body is whole, complete, and honorable. A person living with a disability will never be accepted until they are dead and their body is made whole in heaven. This is a powerfully painful statement to those who live with bodies that are disabled. Many people with disabilities will say that they don’t want a healed or perfect body, they want to be who they are, loved for who they are; there is pride and gratitude to be found in the bodies God has given them.

Make sure the service is held in an accessible venue. When the friends and colleagues of people with disabilities cannot participate or share in the funeral service it is a disservice to all. Seek to meet the ministry needs of those who need sign interpretation, hearing amplification, Braille bulletins or larger print, architectural access—including restrooms—emotional support, and/or an environment that enables those with autism or other cognitive disabilities to participate fully. Extend this to the traditional dinner held following funerals. People with disabilities also enjoy sharing and creating new memories around tables where bread is broken.

As the meditation and service is written, review it and ask, am I doing this differently than I would for anyone else? Go back and review the content—how can it be rewritten to affirm the person’s life and faith without a heavy focus on the disability? People living with disabilities simply want to be just like everyone else, the person, the son or daughter of God whom God created—nothing else.

*The Reverend Sue Montgomery*

## **A Question of Marriage**

In 1980, when first introduced to a large group of men and women who lived with intellectual and developmental disabilities, there were several who said to me, “I’m going to marry Cindy, I’m going to marry Henry.” The staff members who were introducing me to the young, excited people talking about marriage, looked at me, winked, and moved on to other tasks. The dreams of the young men and women were basically perceived by the staff as foolish, unrealistic; therefore, the staff needed to “protect” them from such foolish thoughts. Then, as well as now, many perceive young people who live with intellectual/developmental disabilities as eternal, perpetual children who will never mature into responsible adults.

Over the last forty-four years, I’ve looked into the history of the men and women who live with intellectual/developmental disabilities, with particular attention to how relationships have shaped lives, family, and faith. Due to the extended history of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities being placed in institutional settings, the early history is not positive. Institutional abuse led to documented cases of sexual abuse between staff and peers. When a female became pregnant, both she and her child were then institutionalized, as no one would adopt the child of a parent with a history of disability. Sadly, many women were forcibly sterilized, a strategy to keep women “safe” from pregnancy.

Fortunately, times have changed. Institutionalism is no longer the primary accepted practice for parents and medical professionals. Yet at the same time, the vision of allowing people who live with intellectual or developmental disabilities to marry is discouraged. Actually, marriage is frequently discouraged for all people who live with disabilities. The level of disability is often used as a factor to determine capability. Pastors are now being approached by parents, who are accompanied by their sons and daughters with intellectual/developmental disabilities, asking the pastor to guide them in their marriage plans. Parents have always been advocates for their sons and daughters. The journey into marriage is a new one and raises many questions. Should there be an actual “marriage covenant?” Would a Blessing of the Union suffice? These questions are real, in that there are multiple ramifications of a marriage license. Legal marriage affects medical insurance, Social Security Disability, and/or Social Security Supplemental Income benefits. If either partner is the recipient of death benefits of a parent, legal marriage can affect the continuation of those benefits, as well.

The good news is that young couples with disabilities are fulfilling their dream of marriage and living within a loving relationship. Group home and community placement services are being challenged by this new development. Pastors, sessions, and congregations are being challenged in their understandings of traditional marriage by these emerging dreams. With support, married couples can live as hus-

band and wife; with mentors and guidance, young couples can even take the journey into home ownership, responsible employment, and becoming parents. There's a whole new world opening up the frontiers of maturity and adulthood to people who live with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

This is the story of one young couple. Mary lives with Down Syndrome, Tom lives with Cerebral Palsy. Following several years of dating and living in two different group home settings, their care staff found an apartment for them and arranged for support staff to enable them to live safely in the apartment. Tom and Mary shared several happy and fulfilling years. Due to her Down Syndrome, Mary began to experience a rapid decline in her heart and respiratory health. Mary's abilities to care for herself began to decline. Tom did all that he could, but Mary needed more care. Mary was moved to a skilled nursing center where Tom now visits her every day after work. Throughout their journey, Tom and Mary have done what every other married couple does, love and care for one another. And as Tom would say, again and again, as he visited Mary, "I'm just doing what everybody does, I love my wife."

The question of marriage among people living with disabilities, especially significant disabilities, is often left unanswered or answered with an unequivocal "no," simply because of the debilitating image of the eternal child placed on youth when they reach the age of dating and marriage. The difficulty is, each relationship and setting is unique and has to be woven into all that it can be, with creativity of thought, openness to the Spirit moving in the relationship, understanding of state laws and guidelines relating to marriage, medicare/medicaid, Social Security assistance programs, and a willingness to work with what could or might happen with social service providers, community living support staff, and family. The good news is that marriages or blessed unions are no longer a dream, they are realities that are coming true for couples that have dared to dream and have rooted their futures in the love, trust, and hopes of someone they love.

The question of marriage extends beyond persons who live with disabilities. It also extends to older adults or the survivors of spouses who lived with disabilities. Spouses of Vietnam veterans who have died find that they cannot remarry until they are a certain age—usually 57 or older. If they remarry, they lose the death benefits their spouse's service-related death provided for him or her. For the same reasons, persons living with disabilities face barriers to marriage, as do older adults. The serious and life-threatening risks that accompany the loss of medical and other financial benefits are hefty and frightening. Persons with disabilities who receive community support services to maintain their independence also face the risks of losing health and home care benefits. Legal marriage can nullify or significantly reduce benefits. Blessings of Unions are one of many solutions some churches and pastors are choosing. Many older couples seeking to live together, affirming their love in faith and in a covenantal relationship, often don't have time for civil laws and guidelines to change.

The church and pastors, along with the couples who are seeking to be married, and those who love and care for one another, are facing moral and ethical dilemmas. Spiritual and religious understandings of marriage are being examined. The time has come to move beyond what can't, mustn't, or shouldn't be, and move into a time of asking what is God doing? Certainly, just as with all couples, God is at work in bringing two people together to love one another. And so, with the guidance of God, scripture, our creeds, and traditions, the time is now to ask the questions, find the solutions, and even though every situation will be uniquely different, how can the love of God flow through those who love one another? It isn't just a dream, it is God's good gift to those who dare to dream and even more so, dare to love.

*The Reverend Sue Montgomery*

## Hymns

Hymn Suggestions from *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, Published 2013 by Westminster John Knox Press:

- #3 “Womb of Life and Source of Being”; Text: Ruth Duck, 1986, 1990, alt.; Music: Skinner Chavez-Melo, 1983.
- #19 “God of Great and God of Small”; Text: Natalie Sleeth; Music: Natalie Sleeth, 1973.
- #27 “Sacred the Body”; Text: Ruth Duck, 1997; Music: Colin Gibson, 1992.
- #297 “In Christ Called to Baptize”; Text: Ruth Duck, 1995; Music: Welsh folk melody; adapt in *Caniadau y Cyssegr*, 1839.
- #302 “When Hands Reach Out and Fingers Trace”; Text: Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, 2001; Music: English folk melody; harm. John Weaver, 1988.
- #372 “O for a World”; Text: Miriam Therese Winter; Music: Carl Gotthelf Glaser, 1828; arr. Lowell Mason, 1839.
- #653 “Give Thanks to God Who Hears Our Cries”; Text: Ruth Duck, 2007; Music: Wyeth’s *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, 1813; harm. Richard Proulx, 1975.
- #692 “Spirit, Open My Heart”; Text: Ruth Duck, 1994; Music: Irish melody; arr. Alfred V. Fedak, 2011.
- #754 “Help Us Accept Each Other”; Text: Fred Kaan, 1974; Music: Doreen Potter, 1974.
- #769 “For Everyone Born”; Text: Shirley Erena Murray, 1998; Music: Brian Mann, 2006.
- #770 “I’m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table”; Text: African American spiritual, alt.; Music: African American spiritual; arr. Carl Diton, 1980, alt.
- #806 “I’ll Praise My Maker”; Text: Isaac Watts, 1719, adapt, John Wesley, 1736, alt.; Music: Attr. Matthaus Greiter, 1525; harm. V. Earle Copes, 1963.
- #807 “When We Must Bear Persistent Pain”; Text: Ruth Duck, 2004; Music: Walker’s *Southern Harmony*, 1835; harm. David N. Johnson, 1968.
- #808 “When Memory Fails”; Text: Mary Louise Bringle, 2000; Music: Jean Sibelius, 1899; arr. *The Hymnal*, 1933, alt.





# Tools for Christian Education

## Adapting Christian Education for All Learners

Carol Brown, the mother of Alex, whose stories you have been reading in this resource, is a public school educator who works with students with learning disabilities. She says, “Use various learning styles: visual, tactile, audio.” She suggests that in planning a lesson, the teacher should set a main theme and provide resources for deeper understanding of the message.

She compares learning for students of all abilities to a pyramid. The base represents what everyone should learn. For example, in teaching the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, the base of the pyramid would be that God is the creator of the universe and that we can be thankful for the beauty and wonder of God’s creation. The next step up the pyramid represents more details in the same story and expansion of the main theme. At the peak (or apex) of the pyramid would be more complex, possibly abstract, ideas. Using the pyramid and a variety of resources can encourage learners to use art, music, creative writing, and drama to express their own unique understanding of creation.

## Pringles vs Chex Mix: Ideas to Try for ADHD and ASD

There is something nice and neat about a can of Pringles. They stack so perfectly into that round can, and the taste and shape are entirely predictable. A bag of Chex Mix, however, has variety in taste, shape, texture, and look. When you put your hand in that bag, it’s never entirely clear what to expect.

Church volunteers often expect the children to resemble that can of Pringles. The reality is, however, that God’s creative variety is fully evidenced in every group of children! From learning styles to differences in personality, looks, IQ, abilities, and interests, children’s groups far more resemble Chex Mix than Pringles!

To better equip the volunteers, this article will explain some of the differences associated with children who have been diagnosed with AD/HD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) and those with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Volunteers who are armed with information, as well as ideas to try, often find greater delight in the group of Chex Mix children!

### *AD/HD*

One job of the brain is to help us attend to the tasks we do each day. The brain has chemicals that allow us to focus on a task, control behavior, and keep the body still when needed. When these chemicals, or neurotransmitters are in short supply, a person is known as having AD/HD. There are three types of AD/HD:

A child with *AD/HD Inattentive Type* may find it difficult to focus on the Bible story or group discussion. Following all four parts of the directions, organizing supplies or materials, and following through on projects and tasks may also be difficult.

A child with *AD/HD Impulsive Type* may struggle to keep the body from fidgeting, squirming, and moving as well as staying seated during worship or small group times. Other challenges may be playing quietly, waiting to answer a question or take a turn without interrupting, or blurting out an answer, or thinking carefully about the consequences of an action.

For a child with *AD/HD Combined Type*, you will see signs of inattention as well as impulsivity.

Ideas to try:

1. While the area of attention may be weaker, this child will certainly have areas of gifting. Find those areas and use them as a way to engage and encourage. Illustrating the Bible story as you speak, leading the group in exercises, constructing a portion of your story with blocks, or setting up a word search for others based on the lesson might make the child more a part of the experience. Act out, build, move, stretch, construct. Let the child shine.
2. Give choices in seating and activities. Instead of only offering chairs, consider supplying an exercise ball or a seat cushion. Give children a choice to complete an activity while sitting, standing, kneeling, or rocking in a rocking chair.
3. Provide breaks as needed. Running errands or doing short movements or exercises mixed inside lessons or worship can be very helpful.
4. Use visuals. Posting rules, directions, samples, and expectations allows children to have the boundaries and instructions always visible.
5. Be understanding. Some children may take medication that allows an individual to pay attention. Some of these medications, however, may be in the process of running out during late afternoon or evening hours. Some parents may choose to have children off medication on weekend days. Both of these situations can make evening church meetings and Sunday settings more challenging for a child with AD/HD. Also, would leaders ever consider bribing or punishing a child with diabetes for not making insulin? Remember, AD/HD is a biological issue. Keep that in mind as you set up expectations for the child.
6. Provide leaders with additional information. *Learning Disabilities and the Church: Including All God's Kids in Your Education and Worship* by Cynthia Holder Rich and Martha Ross-Mockaitis (Faith Alive Resources) would be helpful.

### ***ASD***

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological difference. Children with ASD exhibit a wide spectrum of differences in six areas:

**Language Understanding.** Children may be unable to use spoken words and may communicate through sign language or systems involving pictures. Other children may have an excellent ability to speak but may understand words very literally, being surprised that it's "raining cats and dogs" or that someone would suggest you should "give your heart to Jesus."

**Social skills.** Children may try to hide from or escape social settings or be confused with body language and facial expressions. Others may make social errors or blunders, often not recognizing their words or actions were inappropriate. Some children incorrectly analyze the best course of action in a social setting.

**Repetitive themes and behaviors.** Children may have a great fascination with one topic such as trains, a particular movie, or computers. Others may repeat the same action, such as lining up toy cars or making sure each chair is sitting in exactly the correct spot. Children may be limited in the types of activities they enjoy.

**Desire for routine.** Children may seek to know the schedule, routine, or order of worship and get upset when that schedule is altered or suspended without advance warning in a way they will understand.

**Perspective-taking ability.** Children may know only their own perspective and advocate for their idea with great passion. They may also find it hard to accurately know what others might be thinking, feeling, and experiencing.

**Sensory responses.** Children may have one or more sensory system that processes information differently. Sounds might be very loud to one person while another child may need extra volume to penetrate the senses. One child may crave heavy, hard touch while another child might get hurt from someone brushing against him lightly. These differences may happen in sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touches, balance, and pressure.

Ideas to Try:

1. Get to know the individual child. Find out what activities that child really enjoys and what might be difficult. Find out especially what sensory system may have differences and what that will mean for your church setting.
2. Visual supports are very important. Vision is often a very stable sensory system, so using picture or word schedules, devising behavior systems using visual supports, and illustrating a biblical concept with pictures or real objects can often enhance communication.
3. Create a predictable schedule or routine. If that routine needs to be changed, give advance warning in a way that individual will understand (moving pictures around on a picture schedule, providing an alternate order of worship for the day).
4. Understand how that child interprets words. Telling a child who interprets words literally that they are “covered with the blood of Jesus,” for example, can be a frightening thing. If a child can point to pictures, get some pictures. If a child knows some sign language, learn those signs.
5. Allow peer groups to better understand that child by giving accurate, positive, and honest information about ASD.
6. Provide leaders with additional information. Consider purchasing *Autism and Your Church* and *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* by Barbara J. Newman (Faith Alive Resources) as well as *Autism: A Christian Response Training DVD* and *Church Welcome Story* by Barbara J. Newman (CLC Network).

\*\*Reprinted with permission from the Winter 2012 edition of *The Advocate*, Journal of the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators.

Barbara Newman

## The Story Behind Our Quiet Room

This is the story of how a small congregation with limited resources learned how to respond to a need in their own church, and from that have learned they can do something about other needs in their community, and do it.

First United Presbyterian Church of Baldwin, Wisconsin, is a congregation of 110 members in a community of 3,984 people. At the Officers Retreat in January 2010, a newly elected elder shared with the group the experience one of her friends had with a child with special needs when she was met at the door of the church by the priest and told she and her son were not welcome because her son was too disruptive. The group agreed this was one of the saddest things they had ever heard, and began

discussing how they could be a church where all God's children were welcome. That phrase has become their mission statement in reaching out to children with special needs.

Being Presbyterian, the issue was referred to the Outreach Committee. They picked it up enthusiastically and began visiting another congregation in the area that had built up a large ministry, from scratch, with children with special needs. The committee also started studying printed information. There were two pieces of advice they kept hearing over and over: start with the children you have, and make sure you ask parents what will meet the needs of their children and themselves. We have two young boys with autism, and their mother was on the committee, so that is where we began to address the issue. We decided to put together a room with special toys and tools for children with autism.

The session designated a room to be used as the Quiet Room. We applied for and received a \$900 mission grant from the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area. With \$689 of the grant money we purchased two gym mats, a mirror, chalk, markers, a weighted vest, two therapy balls, and a mini trampoline. Donations by members of the congregation included homemade afghans, a boom box, and a small pup tent. The balance of the grant money went into the fund for renovating the men's and women's bathrooms to be wheelchair accessible.

As the pastor, I kept hearing people from the congregation ask, "Why do we need a Quiet Room?" Then, at one of the Presbyterian Women's meetings, a woman who had grown up in the congregation and moved away after she married, shared with the group what it meant when the church and pastor in the town where she was living made a special effort to reach out to her daughter who has Down Syndrome. I never heard people ask why a Quiet Room was needed again.

The Quiet Room has become the most popular room and is usually not very quiet! It is the place where all of the children play together, with the understanding that if a parent needs the room for their child, everyone else will leave without discussion. One Sunday morning as the room was being organized, two of the women from the Outreach Committee met with all the children to put together the rules for the room. This is what they came up with:

- The room is to be used for children with special needs, along with parents. Other children should ask permission to come in and should always use their inside voice.
- One person at a time is allowed on the equipment—TAKE TURNS!!!
- The trampoline is to be used for jumping only—NO FLIPS!!! (And the hand rails are for hands only!!!)
- NO SHOES!!!

In addition, Children's Message times in worship and Sunday school have been used to help educate all the children about autism and welcoming other children.

Some parents need time away to focus on their spiritual needs and want a place where they know their children will be safe, cared for, and will learn about God's love for them. One parent wishes her children to attend worship and Sunday school with everyone else, but needs a place with sensory items for them to become calm again. When other parents come with their children, we are set up to interview them individually about how the church can not only meet their children's needs, but the parents' needs as well.

We are still working on getting the word out about our Quiet Room through a flyer and a church website. Setting up a church website is a chronic issue but we are getting closer to the solution. The big-

gest blessing of all has been to watch our two toddlers grow into young boys who feel this church is their church, and are determined to participate in all parts of it.

*The Reverend Janet Ruark*

## Including Youth with Disabilities in PYC Functions

The Presbyterian Youth Connection (PYC) is a partnership of youth and adults with a shared ministry.

A particular PYC is an ever-changing community made up of diverse and developing individuals. Every person in the community is graced with different abilities and disabilities that, because they are youth, can change. There are youth for whom studying is a breeze and those who are struggling, youth from supportive families and youth carrying the burden of broken family relationships, youth who are athletic and those who can't throw a ball, youth who are talkative and youth who seldom say anything in a group. There are youth with personality challenges, with temporary disabilities when they are injured, and youth with ongoing disabilities. A PYC will strive to include everyone in their community, knowing that everyone is an important part to the whole PYC. This is not always easy. What are some of the things we can do to help the youth who have particular challenges to feeling included in the community?

A good place to start is by doing the things that make *every* youth feel welcomed. Every youth thrives under appropriate, genuine, focused attention. If activities are planned and set up in advance, the PYC leadership can spend quality time with each youth. If there is at least one adult for every 5–7 youth, there is a greater likelihood that each youth will experience the PYC as a caring community. Sometimes a youth with particular challenges will benefit from an additional adult or a caring peer who is there for everyone but charged with becoming a partner in participation with a particular youth. It is always a blessing for the group to have adults, who love God and youth, present with no programming responsibility, just to be there with the youth.

Some youth love to talk and others thrive on listening and reflecting or may have a hard time sharing in a group. Eric Law of the Kaleidoscope Institute ([www.kscopeinstitute.org](http://www.kscopeinstitute.org)) suggests using “invitational conversation” to help break down barriers to communication within a group. An invitational conversation begins as the facilitator asks a question and then leaves time for everyone to think about their answer. The facilitator then asks someone, like the person with the shortest hair, to begin. This person can answer the question, pass until later, or pass. If they choose to answer, they speak and no one else in the group can respond until everyone has spoken. The speaker *invites* the next person, by name, to speak, and so on, until everyone has had the opportunity to speak. This process gives everyone the opportunity to be heard and feel included. The group can move from fairly safe discussions to much deeper questions in about three rounds. A foam ball or paper wad may be passed to invite the next person to speak. Using invitational conversation not only provides the quieter person a safe place for their voice to be heard but also facilitates listening and communication among the whole community. If a large group is having difficulty sharing with one another, break the group up into pairs, or groups of four or eight.

One of the paradoxes in the lives of many youth is having high energy and a need for time and space with God. Youth with AD/HD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) may be challenged by too much structure or not enough structure.

Everyone has difficulty focusing at one time or another. If there is a stationary bicycle or a set of bicycle exercising pedals in the room where the PYC has conversations, anyone who is having trouble sitting still can ride the bike or pedal during a group conversation without distracting other youth. That person can still hear and participate in the conversations but can move at the same time.

Giving all of the youth something to do with their hands, like “squunchy” or craft dough to form and reform as the conversation moves along, can be helpful. Using clay to provide movement for the hands so that the heart and mind can focus can be introduced by leading the group in a guided meditation with the instructions to form and reform the clay as the Spirit leads them.

Having any type of quiet space to “get away” for a few minutes can be helpful for people who need their own space in the midst of a noisy group. This can be a comfortable high-backed chair or a partially screened corner of a room or a prayer space. Having a prayer space with interactive prayer stations can help everyone grow in faith. Youth so often don't have time just to “be” with God and many have a hard time being still in God's presence. An interactive prayer space can include prayer beads to make, a fountain, a bucket to drop rocks into to represent feelings or concerns to give up or prayers, a labyrinth, finger labyrinths, a space for written prayers, map and newspaper or computer news clippings and a basket for prayers for others, a space for confessions, a cross wall, pictures of a particular time in the life of Jesus, Bibles, prayer books, journals, markers, flameless candles, quiet music, a sand box, video clips, etc. There are many options for prayer space activities, which can be rotated over time.

Youth can also develop other spiritual practices that involve movement. For example, youth can pray individually or say a Bible verse while dribbling a basketball or running, walking a course, or climbing stairs, or, as a group, saying a prayer or verse while passing a basketball back and forth with a dribble in between.

It is important for recreation leaders, youth or adults, to think through the activity with everyone in mind so that everyone is included in recreation activities. There are many kinds of cooperative games that are suitable for everyone and can be adapted for a particular group's needs.

Avoid games that eliminate people from the group and use games that build community. If some youth group members are very skilled or are more challenged by an activity, change the rules to negate the advantage of the more skilled players. For instance, maybe everyone has to hop or can only use one arm or must play the game seated.

Beth Gunn, an experienced PC(USA) recreation leader and co-creator of the soon to be updated resource, “Recreation Express,” suggests these sources for community building games that can be easily adapted: [http://www.bannermanfamily.com/hose\\_play.htm](http://www.bannermanfamily.com/hose_play.htm) and <http://www.bannermanfamily.com/Products.htm>.

It is also important to include everyone in ministry that the PYC does together. Thinking about access for activities and alternative ways of doing things can be an opportunity to build community as challenges are tackled together.

Open, caring communication about a youth's particular disability or challenge goes a long way in creating a caring community partnership. Helping a person become self-aware of their particular challenges is important. What would facilitate their full inclusion in the PYC? Is it helpful for them to eat or not eat before youth group? Is a quiet space or a noisy space a plus or a minus? Would a posted list of plans for that day bring some peace of mind? For the group to function well, parents, adults, and peer partners are included in the conversation about what facilitates inclusion for a particular youth. Connecting with recommended behavioral routines that are a part of the rest of the week for a youth removes some of the stress from new situations. Another partnership model might include a mutually agreed upon behavioral covenant or agreed upon subtle hand motions as reminders to focus. In other words, ask the youth what works for them and, if appropriate, brainstorm together about new ways to accomplish their full participation in the community and in its ministry together.

The actions that are taken to include youth with particular disabilities or challenges often benefit the whole community and lead everyone into a deeper walk with God and one another. With God's

Spirit surrounding us, may we be thoughtful, respectful, prayerful, creative, and energetic in reaching out to one another with the love of Christ.

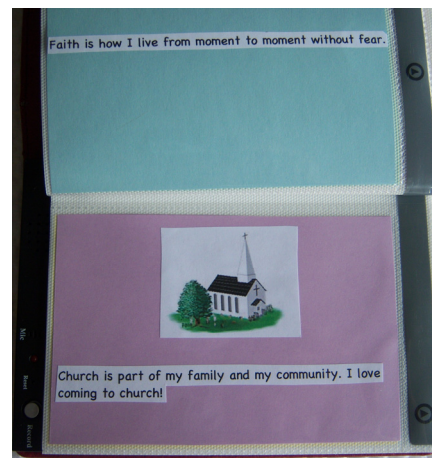
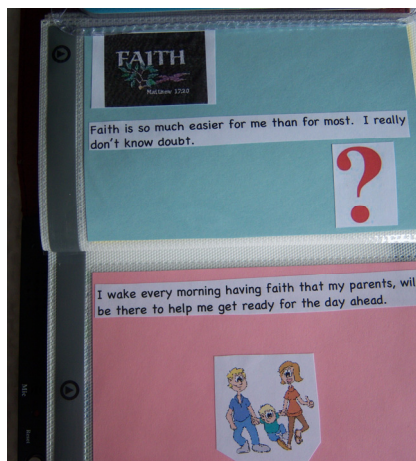
The Reverend Jean Davidson

## Confirmation: Tools for Inclusion

Several years ago I happened to see a photograph of three 8th grade girls in our confirmation class that filled me with deep sadness. Two of the youth stood smiling with arms draped around one another's shoulders, while the third stood slightly off to the side looking painfully uncomfortable. This was *not* a picture of inclusion, and it haunts me to this day. Emily had a rare developmental disability, and we struggled that year with fully including her in confirmation class. Inclusion of all our youth has been our goal, and yet we have all too often missed the mark.

Inclusion truly is one person at a time and there is no easy formula or one-size-fits-all method to ensure its happening. Just as the ways to lead youth through the confirmation experience are numerous, so are the paths that lead to inclusion of people of all abilities. In our journey toward inclusion we have sought ways to help our youth, who are often uncomfortable in their own skin at the age of 13 or 14, to include their peers with disabilities.

A part of our confirmation experience has included the public presentation of faith statement to the session, parents, and the class. That expression of faith may be a verbal statement or an artistic representation such as a poem, song, a collage, or a painting. One tool used by a recent confirmand who did not have speech, is a talking photo album. As her mother said in her introduction to Elizabeth's presentation of her faith statement, "Elizabeth doesn't have speech, but she certainly has a lot to say." On each page of her talking photo album, a ten-second message was recorded in the voice of one of her friends. A script and pictures accompanied the recorded message on each page. Elizabeth then pushed the button marked with an arrow on each page to play the message accompanying the text and picture. You can see a video of Elizabeth presenting her statement of faith on our church website at [www.fpcbirmingham.org](http://www.fpcbirmingham.org). The photographs to the right and below are pages from her album.



Talking photo albums are available at <http://www.attainmentcompany.com> and numerous other places on the internet at a cost of \$29. We have found them to be a wonderful tool to provide opportunities for students to interact with one another and for persons with various disabilities to get to know a larger group of people. These photo albums have numerous applications as a tool to aid with communication both in and out of the classroom. Each album holds twenty-four 4 x 6 inch photos and allows for a ten-second message to be recorded on each page.

In another application of the same album, we created a friendship book for a young man with multiple disabilities and visual impairment by inviting each of his classmates to record a ten-second message, saying something on the order of "Hi Clay, my name is \_\_\_\_ and I like \_\_\_\_ or whatever message they chose to create for him. Now when he comes to class, his classmates greet him with something similar to their message in his book, which he keeps at home and plays repeatedly. We also took a digital photograph of each person and inserted it in the page corresponding with the message so that someone who is sighted could follow along. We have since made more albums for other children and youth to help them become better acquainted with their classmates.

Since our confirmation class is a two-year program, we are working with Clay through the use of narrative stories, music, and tactile manipulatives by using these albums as well as other tools we hope to create. The six concepts upon which we are focusing include: (1) God created the world including you and me, (2) Clay is a child of God, (3) God gave us Jesus who loves us, (4) The church is the family of God, (5) In baptism we become part of God's family, (6) In communion we participate in a family meal.



By using the talking photo albums to present stories to teach these concepts, others, including Clay's peers and his family, can work with him. During Advent we created a book that tells the nativity story and has a nativity set that is used along with the recorded story. A new character (an angel, Joseph, Mary, a shepherd) in the story is introduced one page and one figure at a time to reinforce learning. Dymo-tape Braille labels that say "Good News" were also added to each page to provide a tactile component for him.

Wherever Clay goes, he usually carries an MP3 player, and he loves to listen to music. We found that it was very simple to record a song in these talking photo albums one phrase at a time as well as on his MP3 player. "I Can See the Fingerprints of God" by Steven Curtis Chapman is a wonderful song for this purpose and can be purchased on iTunes.

Finally, we have used this same talking photo album to create a visual and auditory story about communion. We took photographs of communion in our church including the whole process from beginning to end and then recorded a message on each page. In addition to our confirmands, we are using this with younger children who are also learning about the sacraments. As we continue to seek ways to include all of our children and youth in the full life of the church, we cannot help but experience a fullness of God's gracious Spirit as we gather together at the Table to partake of the gifts of God for *all* the people of God.

*Cindy Merten, Christian Ed. Director and Moderator PDC*



## Reflections on Confirmed Church Membership for Youth and Adults with Pervasive Disabilities

Introduction: This article was written in response to a parent's search for guidance in enabling her young adult son who is medically fragile and lives with pervasive disabilities to become a communicant member of the church. The family belonged and participated regularly in the life and mission of their church.

These words introduce the vision of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that is presented in the 2006 *Living into the Body of Christ: Towards the Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities*, a social witness policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

As the Body of Christ, we are open to welcome everyone to the banquet Feast of God's love in this world. The Feast of God's love is open to all and fully inclusive of people from all pathways of life. We envision a church in which the designation or naming of a person's disability is less important than who that person is as one of God's people. (*Living into the Body of Christ: Towards the Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities*, <http://oga.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/living-into-the-body-of-christ.pdf>, p. 1.)

These words become the background and the guide for today's church as she seeks to answer the big question of how the church can meet the ministry needs of our youth and young adults living with pervasive disabilities to become active confirmed members. Many times because the young adults and adults cannot speak for themselves, their families are the ones who approach the pastor and seek ways for them to become communicant members of Christ's church. This is a valid question for both the parents, the persons living with the disability, the session of the church, and the pastor. How should a session and pastor respond to this question? How could today's church respond to the question, maintain the integrity of church membership, and at the same time be inclusive and nurturing of people with severe intellectual or cognitive disabilities?

Over the years the church has answered this question in a variety of ways. For some parents, and their pastors, the question of church membership has never been important. The belief was that since the child or young adult could not speak for him/herself, church membership wasn't necessary. The underlying theological message was that persons with intellectual disabilities were "eternal children," or "eternal angels." Therefore, confirmation and the act of making a personal statement of faith were unnecessary. This theological viewpoint remains alive and well today and it is as gravely wrong now as it was years ago. During the 1950s the parents of children born with disabilities began to embrace with a renewed commitment and understanding the concept of the family. For the first time parents began to say an emphatic and resounding "no" to the medical professionals whose recommendations were to institutionalize the children who were born with disabilities.

When today's church is asked the question about confirmation, the church is being asked to do what parents chose to do years ago, and that is to affirm and embrace what it means to be the family of God. Youth and young adults do want to be a part of the church, God's family. Youth and young adults can make faith decisions. The church simply needs to learn how to listen to the youth and to their families. Today's church needs to learn how to perceive faith in new ways. These new ways may include learning how to understand nonverbal communication, communication expressed through facial and hand gestures, or to embrace creative use of symbols that reflect the meaning of faith. Today's church needs to learn how to embrace compassionate caring, even when it simply means embracing the presence of a nonverbal youth or young adult in the activities and ministries. One family said: "Our son is included in all our family activities. To the outsider he appears to be just sitting there, yet we know he is listening, watching, and sensing that he is loved and he is family. I wish the church could learn this gift that he has taught us." Today's church, like our academic institutions, is so focused on product outcomes, that the person is often forgotten.

When a teacher gets to know a person with pervasive disabilities, it becomes evident rather quickly that the typical approach to adapting a confirmation class curriculum to match the abilities and comprehension level of the class members with profound disabilities will not always be an effective approach. Here is where it is vital for the teachers to get to know the confirmand and his/her parents or caregivers. By including the confirmand in all the discussions, a team is developed to nurture the youth or young adult through the learning process. Because all of us have been given the gift of life, we have all been given the gift of being able to perceive God, faith, and to express that faith. It is imperative for the church to explore the ministry needs of the person with the disability and the family in their desire to secure church membership. As the support team gets to know the confirmand and how he/she communicates, the doors to learning and sharing lives for everyone will be opened. This is important not only for the teacher of the class, but the young adult's peers as well.

One way to seek to meet the ministry needs of the persons involved is to approach the question of how the confirmand learns from the perspective of the parents and caregivers. The parents or caregivers can provide wisdom and understanding on how to communicate with the youth or young adult with the disability. It's always difficult to gauge or measure how much a person is grasping the information around them. The church is good at asking these types of questions. For decades the church has required a certain level of comprehension and understanding to validate church membership. However, when a child is born with disabilities within a family, the family does not place any criteria on the child for acceptance and love. This is the gift of being a family. The church, as the family of God, is being called on now to embrace that profound definition and gift of being God's family. People with profound disabilities do have faith needs and gifts of faith. It is the task of the church to learn how to enter into a relationship with the persons with the disabilities and their families.

The next question often asked, then, is, where do we go from here? The typical statements of faith, recitations of creeds, memorization of prayers and scripture may be outside the realm of what is possible for those with profound disabilities, in terms of class product outcome and expectations. Does this mean that persons with pervasive disabilities should never become members of the congregation? What's to be gained and what's to be lost in the development of an alternative statement of faith, perhaps one where the entire class of confirmands work together? This is the moral and ethical dilemma that pastors and sessions are charged with as they bear the responsibility of maintaining the integrity of church membership and affirmations of faith. Again, when we understand that we are all a part of God's creation and as such are the family of God, disability cannot ever be an acceptable exclusionary clause to church membership.

Here is where pastors and sessions are faced with the real questions of their ministry—does the church as the family of God exist solely to maintain structure and order, or does the church as the family of God exist to meet the ministry needs of her people? For persons living with disabilities and their families, the call to meet the ministry needs of the family takes priority. When a parent requests church membership for their son or daughter with a disability, the session, pastor, parents, and the confirmand, can enter into a covenant agreement to nurture, mentor, and support one another in church membership. It also means that within this covenant relationship the confirmand is a full member of the church, just like everybody else. He/she has made their statement of faith and is a part of the ministry and mission of the church. Such a covenantal relationship signifies that, although the confirmand due to disability cannot function without supportive assistance, the church family is ready and willing to meet his/her ministry needs. This may lead to new understandings of ministry in how communion is served, how people are included through making transportation available, making buildings accessible, and the language a congregation uses to describe people living with disabilities. Such a ministry might bring new dimensions to how the congregation worships and brings in visual and sensory elements to enhance worship's traditional verbal context.

Church membership needs to be understood as much more than one's cognitive ability to make a statement of faith. Parents who are speaking on behalf of their youth and young adults understand that their sons and daughters want to live—and die—within a church family and community. When members of the church die, their obituaries state that they were members of a specific church. Parents and guardians, along with the youth and young adults they care for, seek that same identity and relationship with God's family and with the church.

Even more important is to develop relationships with the young person or young adult with the disability and with his or her family. This is where the church meets its greatest challenge. The traditional church ministries that are designed for people who are homebound or experiencing a crisis need to be re-examined in light of chronic and life-threatening disabilities. Church families can be supportive in ways that expand the traditional understanding of church. Families with long-term care needs often need someone who can just come, sit with them, listen, and offer prayer. The person with the disability longs for someone to touch them who is not a salaried care giver or family member. Having a church member care enough to visit, to extend the right hand of fellowship is what is longed for and cherished by people living with disabilities.

Recently at a large residential facility for persons with developmental disabilities, a family came searching for a long lost relative. During a genealogical search the family discovered they had an uncle who had been placed at the facility when he was a baby. Eighty years had passed; no one in the family knew he existed. His birth, at that time, was a tragic secret to be hidden. This family was Jewish. During his eighty years of life within the institution their uncle had been raised as a Protestant. When they were reunited with their uncle, he immediately received all the religious rites and special services of a lifetime as a Jew. No questions were asked about his intellectual ability to understand. He was a son of God and as a son of God was a member of the Jewish family—there was NO question. The faith of this family said that in creation all God's children belong to the family. The diversity of God's creation includes disability. Disability does not exclude anyone from the family of God. As their uncle received his yarmulke, his prayer shawl, the blessings of his faith and family, it was a moving witness of acceptance and profound love. Although the family respected his history of nurture in the Christian faith, they wanted him to receive the unconditional love, and the gift of his roots in the Jewish traditions. Our Christian covenant of baptism has no exclusionary clauses for disability. Although it is undeniable that there are no easy answers, disability is not a valid exclusionary clause to church membership. Despite the many questions there is one imperative guiding all the works of the church and that imperative is to meet the ministry needs of the family of God. The social witness policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also seeks to “encourage the self-advocacy and self-determination, and full participation of people with disabilities in congregational life, spiritually, physically and programmatically” (*Living into the Body of Christ: Towards the Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities*, <http://oga.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/living-into-the-body-of-christ.pdf>, p. 4).

As the church seeks to meet the ministry needs of persons with pervasive disabilities and their families, the words of the parable of the workers in the vineyards found in of the Gospel of Matthew 20: 1–16 guide us. In the parable of the vineyard laborers, despite the length and quality of their work, all are treated equally. The covenant agreement to work in the vineyard is more important than what the laborers receive in return. Is it not the same in the church? And who is to say that persons with pervasive disabilities don't have gifts to offer? “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” It is in that humble ministry that we stand and with faith embrace and celebrate the presence and the gifts of persons with pervasive disabilities into full active membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

*The Reverend Sue Montgomery*



# Tools for Employment

## Good Employment as One Important Expression of Self, Vocation, and Contribution

*“What do you do?”* “It’s a familiar, friendly, although mildly intrusive and vaguely judgmental question directed toward new neighbors, parents attending their kids’ soccer games, and even visitors of our neighborhood Presbyterian churches. Most people reflexively translate and reply to the questions behind the question: “What kind of employment do you have and where do you work?”

Whether or not a person is employed, and *if* employed then the kind of work performed, influences the person’s identity, including his or her sense of belonging and place in the world. In our hypercompetitive society, there’s no doubt that employment and job status have become way too important. For example, stay-at-home moms and dads often experience certain levels of misapprehension because they’re “not working.”

While it’s important to temper the seductiveness of competition and social status, as well as recognizing the virtue of all honest labor, it’s equally necessary to acknowledge historical patterns of socially devalued people being relegated to low-paying, low-status jobs or chronic unemployment. For people with disabilities, this has traditionally meant few real work options, with estimates hovering around 80 percent unemployment. When work is offered, it’s often the kind predetermined to be suitable for “people with disabilities.” Others make these decisions prior to knowing anything about an actual person. Or sometimes what’s given is an employment substitution called “work activities,” grouping together people with disabilities, solely on the basis of having a disability. Even when such responses are rooted in good intentions, the results are overwhelmingly limiting, often leading people to wonder: *What can I do? Where do I belong? Do I belong?*

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11, NIV). Though captured by low expectations, rather than by the Babylonians, people with disabilities can draw from these words the promise that God knows everyone *personally*, offering hope and a future. (“I know the plans I have for you.” *Not*, “I know the plans I have for y’all.”)

*“Where there is no vision, the people perish”* (Prov. 29:18, KJV). Fortunately, over the last several decades there’s been an emerging vision of citizenship, *including* good employment for people with disabilities. Much has been learned about making this vision a reality. Countless books have been written, weeklong seminars delivered. The following are a few of the principles that have helped move things along in a positive and hopeful way:

*The presumption of employability*—“Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits” (1 Cor. 12:7, MSG). It’s a radical idea: (a) *Every* person has a God-given purpose, and its expression is good for everyone. (b) And every person’s calling may be expressed through employment. The Apostle Paul is responsible for saying the first part, the understanding about the universality of personal vocation. The employment-for-all part came many centuries later. Historically, human service professionals have been granted authority to determine who’s in and who’s out, who’s employable and who’s not—effectively shutting down the collective imagination. The presumption of employability defies this deeply rooted historical way, offering a presumed employability firmly based in biblical truth. “Okay. Fine. But *surely* you don’t mean Dan. Just look at him!” Yes. We mean Dan, at least until we’ve exhausted all available ideas. And even if we run out of ideas, then that still doesn’t prove Dan can’t work. It only means we’ve run out of ideas. Isn’t this a more healthy, honest and authentic way of thinking about God’s people?

*Contribution versus competition*—The inherent need to contribute, doing something that matters, is especially important for those who so often find themselves on the receiving end of help. “From the fruit of their lips people are filled with good things, and the work of their hands brings them reward” (Prov. 12:14, NIV). Mike Callahan, one who’s devoted much of his life to the presumption of employability, had the insight that *everyone* can contribute, but *not* everyone can compete. This awareness reframes rules and relationships about the work that needs to be done and the people performing the work. In what ways do personal gifts and talents intersect with employer needs? Often referred to as *customized employment*, competition is replaced with a voluntary negotiation of jobs that pairs employer needs with personal competence and contribution. It opens the door for the dignity of contribution, offering something personal, something that matters. This U.S. Department of Labor link provides additional information about the concept of customized employment: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/deliverables/index.htm>

*Discovery*—“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10, NIV). Working is a common way of offering personal talents and gifts. However, people with disabilities have often grown up without work expectations, their lives void of the typical childhood questioning, “What do you want to be (when you grow up)?” What should people do when they’ve never explored their talents, perhaps to the point of being convinced they have nothing to offer? Discovery provides a way of discerning personal gifts and talents previously unrecognized and translating these into characteristics of fitting employment. It’s a process of learning with people about fitting conditions for work—when and where people are at their best, finding a spark related to a particular interest, stirring a passion formerly unknown. Discovery offers hope and positive possibility through fitting employment, a way of answering those nagging questions: What can I do? Where do I belong? Do I belong?

*What are ways for a faith community to respond to its members with disabilities needing good employment?*

- *Begin by reframing this question* by deleting two words. What are ways for a faith community to respond to its members ~~with disabilities~~ needing good employment? If any member needs a job, then what are the ordinary ways of responding? Begin with the typical and valued approaches, and then adapt these if needed. For instance, networking is a primary way that everyone finds work. Just think of the networking possibilities within groups, formal and informal, in your faith community, and then expand this to all of the connections and people known outside of the faith community. Jake has a real knack with things mechanical, and he’s seeking work where he can contribute by using this talent. Perhaps Jake needs some consideration around job design. Promote ways for Jake to connect with an employer where what Jake has to offer meets the work demands of the employer. If your church already has an employment ministry, then be sure people with disabilities seeking work are involved.
- *Sign-on to “The Statement of Solidarity by the Religious Community Around Employment of People with Disabilities”* drafted by the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition (IDAC): <http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/interfaith/idac-statement-of-solidarity.html> The name of the statement says it all. Faith communities have an essential role to fill.
- *Learn about things others are doing.* “Putting Faith to Work” is the name of a Kessler Foundation two-year initiative just beginning (at the time of writing this article) involving a partnership of universities in Tennessee, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Texas—all studying, learning about, and exploring ways that faith communities can further good jobs for members with disabilities. (You may contact Milton Tyree, through contact information as shown on [p. 38](#), if you’re interested in learning about the initiative.)

“Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up” (Rom. 15:2, NIV). Be an ally. Explore with people their interests and talents. Presume employability. Engage your imagination. It’s possible that supporting others to learn and express their God-given vocations through employment turns out to be an important expression of your own vocation.

Acknowledgement: This article relies on a variety of ideas, insights, and theories related to social integration and employment—none of which originated with the author.

*Milton Tyree*



Are people with disabilities  
and with the skills of Lorie  
employed by the Presbyterian  
Church (U.S.A.)

### **Lori Thompson—Office Specialist**

Lori works at the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy. As an office specialist in the front office, she deals with pharmacy license renewals, telephone and email questions, and data entry. The data entry includes information such as licensing payments and web updates.

She moved to Minnesota to attend a nationally recognized “adjustment to blindness” training after an illness that resulted in a major loss of vision. She reflected on her job interview for her current job and recalls it as a very positive experience. It was not assumed that she could not do the job because she is blind. Rather, she was asked how she would do the required work, and she knew the person was really listening.

During her “adjustment to blindness” training, which included independent living skills, white cane travel, and Braille, she was introduced to a new world of technology. This “new world” provides a variety of tools for people who have lost all or part of their vision and enables them to be independent and productive in work environments. For Lori this includes the following:

- A software program that functions as a screen reader—any words on a computer screen are converted to a voice output. The speed and type of voice (male, female, base, soprano, etc.) can be selected based on the user’s preference.
- A digital scanner for printed material.
- Closed circuit television (CCTV) for enlarging any type of printed material.
- Voice recognition for copier or other device control.

Lori affirmed the listening skills of her current employer. During a short interview he gained the understanding of her ability to do the job by utilizing available and affordable tools to access and process information. The payoff is a fully capable employee who is proud of her job, has a great work ethic, works well with a team, and is eager to keep up with technology to improve her efficiency.

Lori keeps current with technology by listening to podcasts such as *AudiBoom* and *BlindAbilities*. Both of these are networks of people who are blind and who are asking questions and sharing their expertise on technology.



Are people with disabilities  
and with the skills of  
Jim employed by the  
Presbyterian Church  
(U.S.A.)?

### **Jim Purtle—Senior Account Executive**

Jim's workday starts when he seats himself on the train for his forty-minute commute to downtown Minneapolis for work at a brokerage and investment firm. Because Jim is blind, he listens to some of the one hundred plus news sources he monitors each day on his WiFi connected laptop. The speech output of what a sighted person sees on the screen takes place through the technology of **Jobs Access With Speech (JAWS)**. The high speed of this voice output allows Jim to be competitive with a person who is sighted.

When he arrives in his office, Jim has access to all computer information with both JAWS and an eighty-cell Braille display. The volume of JAWS is turned down and the tactile Braille display at the base of his keyboard gives Jim access to financial information in real time or to any needed resource information when he is on the phone with a client.

Jim was a sophomore at the University of Minnesota when he lost his vision and had to take an unplanned detour in his life to take "adjustment to blindness" training at a learning center. This "adjustment" included independent living skills like using the white cane for mobility, accessing information by Braille or voice output, and daily living skills like cooking, shopping, and personal care. Jim nurtured his strong interest in finance as he continued his education. After graduating from St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, he launched his career in professional investment.

He enjoys his contact with clients at all stages of their investing, including planning for retirement. He also gets a great deal of satisfaction helping new ventures get started on sound footing by helping to raise their initial capital. Some of his work is with a partner as they team to make presentations that communicate the "big picture" with the desirable visual content to which many customers relate.



Although Jim did not play golf when he had vision, he enjoys the challenges and the satisfaction of playing in the annual fundraiser for Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, and playing with colleagues and clients. He is very proud of the crystal trophy that his foursome won in a recent golf tournament.



Are people with disabilities and with the skills of Steve employed by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

### Steve Jacobson—Data Quality Analyst

Steve’s advice to employers who are interviewing a potential employee who has a disability is to “focus on the capability not the disability.” Steve has worked for a large manufacturing company in St. Paul, Minnesota, for more than thirty years. His position as a data quality analyst requires use of the latest technology for extracting relational information in the areas of finance, product, and customers.

Steve has seen many changes as information technology has advanced from using Cobol computer language for relational databases to the latest versions of SQL (Structured Query Language). Staying current and proficient has evolved from employer-sponsored courses to individual responsibility.

One of Steve’s responsibilities is to work with newly acquired companies to make their data systems compatible with the parent company system. Steve and his partner are responsible for the information being available for analysis in a common format whether those acquisitions are in Brazil, China, Japan, or other countries.

Because Steve is blind, he was strongly discouraged by college personnel from pursuing a degree in mathematics. His persistence paid off in this field where one has to “prove stuff.” He graduated with a degree in math in 1969. He found it was a small step into computer programming.

Steve accesses his computer with a Braille output device and a screen reader called “Window Eyes.” The synthesized speech of the words on the screen is “read” by Steve at a very rapid rate.

Steve has a duplicate of his office workstation in his home for “snow days” or family illness. However, since he values the face-to-face meetings in the office environment, the office remains his location of work choice.

Staying up-to-date in the ever-changing technology field is a challenge. His work as vice president of the National Federation for the Blind Computer Science Division keeps him on the cutting edge. Sometimes his reading about new software leads him to try it out on personal projects to determine if it might be useful for work—like the time he used *Access* spreadsheet software to generate relationship information from a fundraiser’s candy sale.

Steve gets a lot of enjoyment out of his hobby of sound editing. Part of that involves taking the noise out of old analog recordings. He then converts them to the digital format for greatly improved personal and family recordings.

*Rolland Baldwin*

# Tools for Presbyteries

## Organizing a Presbytery Disability Concerns Ministry to Model Inclusion

“Gentle but very clear” was the way one member of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area (PTCA) described the message of the PTCA Disability Concerns Ministry. Our message has been consistent: Inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of congregations and in the presbytery.

The original presbytery group grew out of a disability concerns committee organized in the early 1980s at North Como Presbyterian Church in Roseville, Minnesota. A group of people who were living with disabilities began to meet, to support each other, and to raise the awareness of the congregation on the need for a more accessible church. We advocated for church members with disabilities, led discussions, and presented programs in order to convince the congregation that it was time for a change.

Our group caught the attention of the associate executive presbyter who encouraged us to expand our membership and our work to become a committee of presbytery. That was the beginning of our PTCA Disability Concerns Ministry. There have been some gaps in our existence as presbytery has undergone several reorganizations, but the committee/task force/ministry has always come back in whatever form fits into the organization of presbytery.

Our original work focused primarily on architectural accessibility. That will always be an important focus of our ministry, but we have broadened our services to local churches and presbytery. We offer speakers on a wide variety of subjects that include living with disabilities, mental illness, veterans’ issues, and the Bible and disabilities. We work with churches that are planning for greater accessibility and inclusion. We present presbytery-wide workshops; a November 2012 pre-presbytery meeting, “The Gifts of Aging,” was based on the 2012 PDC resources. We submit articles and information on disability issues for our PTCA website. We developed a policy on inclusion that was approved unanimously by presbytery. We took an overture on inclusion to the 220th General Assembly (2012). It was approved by General Assembly and a report on progress was made at the 221st General Assembly (2014).

We would like to offer several suggestions for those who wish to move their own presbyteries forward.

- Learn how and where you can fit into the structure of presbytery. You need a voice, a place at the table, and a budget. Seek the support of key people, including your executive presbyter. In our presbytery, we are a ministry of the Mission and Witness Committee and we receive great support from the Presbytery Council and the executive presbyter.
- Organize with others who are knowledgeable and willing and able to advocate. Our group has fifteen active members, each of whom either lives with a disability or has other personal or professional experience. Make sure that your own meetings are accessible! We have an ASL interpreter and we meet in a location with good public transportation.
- Connect! Don’t try to go it alone. We both contribute to and use the annual PDC resources. We work with our PC(USA) disability consultants and members of the PDC Leadership Team.
- Don’t try to do everything at once! We choose annual themes so that we can focus our time and resources. (That doesn’t mean we don’t respond to other requests like organizing a panel of speakers for a church that is just beginning to think seriously about inclusion.)
- Now that you are in the presbytery system, don’t stop there. Encourage committee members and others who are living with disabilities to seek leadership positions in the presbytery. Extend your ability to advocate.

We believe that our presence in presbytery is making a difference and that our presbytery is modeling inclusion for local churches. Nothing is perfect; we have much more to do. But, we are committed to our ministry and will welcome opportunities to communicate and share with other presbytery groups who wish to begin the journey. We can learn from each other!

*The Reverend Bebe L. Baldwin is a retired minister and past moderator of the PTCA Disability Concerns Ministry. She is a former moderator of PDC and serves on the PDC Advisory Committee.*

## **Journeys Toward Inclusion**

***People with disabilities answer the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all.”***

Christmas trees piled high on a truck; a pale white moon that haunted sleep; a medic running away from battle—these were Roger Ezell’s recurring dreams. For several months he had unfolded his story, adding a few more details with each retelling. His audience was the Disability Concerns Ministry of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area (PTCA).

Ezell endured years of tortured sleep before coming to awareness: The trees were black body bags on a truck in Vietnam. The moon was the face of his first fatality. *He* was the medic—except in reality he had been decorated twice for valor while running into, not away from, a firefight in Vietnam.

After his discharge, he earned a master of fine arts in music, but his teaching career ended when he blew up in class and threw a music stand.

He had always been active in church and had always found school to be a safe place, so he went to seminary. He served congregations in Missouri and Minnesota, but exhibited more symptoms.

Then a word from a friend brought new clarity. “One day I was visiting good friends, the former church custodians,” Ezell says. “They had a little yappy dog. Every time he barked or jumped, it set off my startle response. My friends were ordinary people, not psychologists, not highly educated, but they recognized my symptoms and told me where I could go for help.” When a therapist gave Roger a pamphlet called “You’re not crazy. You have PTSD,” Ezell began the long road to recovery.

For those of us listening to Ezell tell his story, the experience woke us up to the reality that PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is not just something reported on the nightly news. It affects people we know and love—people in our congregations. We also learned that “ordinary people” can be part of the healing community by identifying symptoms and reaching out. We resolved that the church must walk this journey with the silenced and the wounded.

That passion matched a growing concern of Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC), a national network of the Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association (PHEWA). The result was *The Wounds of War: The Church as a Healing Community*, a 2010 resource for Disability Inclusion Sunday. Ezell’s story was one of the articles.

Veterans are just some of the 56.7 million people in the United States who, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, have one kind of disability or another. That’s nearly one out of every five people in the country. For veterans, this may be a physical injury sustained during combat, but it can also take the form of PTSD, moral injury, and other “invisible” wounds.

For those 56.7 million people, disabilities include, among many others, blindness and low vision, mobility issues, speech and language disabilities, brain injuries, mental illness, learning disabilities, dementia, genetic disorders like Down syndrome, and hearing loss and deafness.

People with disabilities face discrimination not only in the workplace but also in the church, where congregations are often poorly equipped to create welcoming, safe environments. Many people with disabilities consequently find themselves shut out from the life of the church.

Some Presbyterians, however, are seeking to change all that. These ministries of inclusion, like the veterans' ministry of the PTCA, emerge not in response to an abstract idea but out of the lived experience of people with disabilities, many of whom make up the leadership of PDC.

### ***It's been a long road***

For the PTCA, the journey began in the early 1980s at North Como Presbyterian Church in Roseville, Minnesota. I, Bebe Baldwin, was the congregation's pastor when I began losing my central vision, the acute vision needed for reading. I was terrified. I loved my work and wanted to continue my ministry. I wanted to be able to see the faces of my husband and children. I'm a bibliophile and could not imagine a life without reading.

Confused as I was, I had one good instinct. I knew that I needed support from others who were living with disabilities. So I gathered a small group. We met regularly, shared our frustration, and discussed ways the church could be more welcoming to people with disabilities. One of our first projects was advocating for better hearing devices in the sanctuary.

Then word about what the group was doing began to get out, and we were invited to become a committee of the presbytery.

"First we had to convince people in churches that they had people with disabilities," says Manley Olson, a longtime member of both the PTCA and PDC. "We had to let churches know that there were lots of things they could do. What do you do if you can't see very well and all they are using is a big screen? Or people will insist, 'You can hear me; I don't need a microphone.' It's an attitude kind of thing."

Continuing strong to this day, we meet only in space that is accessible to our members with limited mobility, always have an American Sign Language interpreter for one member who is deaf, and provide electronic communications for members who are blind. One member, who lives with Asperger's syndrome, works to gain better services for people with autism. Taking minutes has been a role that works well for him and his particular gifts. Another is a music therapist who cannot sing because of a neurological tremor, so instead she composes our hymns. Another has a son with muscular dystrophy and is providing guidance as we plan for a 2015 conference on children and youth in the church. Several of us either live with mental illness or have family members who do, and we have drawn on our experiences to shape seminars on the topic.

All of this adds up to one thing: when we speak at worship services or presbytery meetings, we do so out of our own lived experience. And that's really the crux of this ministry: that the people who live with these disabilities take the lead.

### ***A Wider Movement***

The history and diversity of our ministry in the Twin Cities area is part of the wider history of the movement for inclusion and access across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1977, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America—the PC(USA)'s antecedent in the North—approved *That All May Enter: Responding to the Concerns of the Handicapped*. This was the first action of its kind by a major denomination. It directed the church to explore ministries with people with disabilities. The Presbyterian Church in the United States—the PC(USA)'s antecedent in the South—passed similar resolutions.

The main shortfall of these resolutions was their insider-outsider language and failure to recognize that people with disabilities *were already* a part of the church. In response, the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns Caucus was formed in 1981 as a network of PHEWA. In 1987, its name was changed to PDC.

Just as with the PTCA, many of the founding members of PDC drew from their personal knowledge and experience. Ray Meester, a pastor and one of those founders, recalls that after their first meeting, a member with a visible disability was forced off a plane when she tried to return home.

Nancy Jennings, one of the first moderators of PDC, also faced fear and prejudice because of seizures. She was accused of having an “evil eye.” One mother would not allow her child to play with Jennings’s child because she was “demon possessed.” Like many people with disabilities, she was told that if she only had more faith, she would be cured.

The history of our presbytery and PDC demonstrates the benefits that come when local and national organizations work together. The PC(USA) Disability Concerns Consultants are a prime example. These consultants are experts in the areas of mobility and accessibility, hearing, vision, and developmental issues. They answer questions as varied as “How can we include a middle school student with cerebral palsy in our youth group?” and “What is the best resource on disabilities in the Bible?”

### *A persisting need*

Thanks to these consultants, a lot of headway has been made. Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go.

When we hear stories of young people who cannot be confirmed because they have intellectual disabilities, or of parents who are asked not to bring children with developmental disabilities to worship, or of the elderly man with Parkinson’s disease who was told to sit outside the sanctuary, we know our work is not done.

Our calling, through the Great Commission, is not just to make space for people living with disabilities; it is to discover the myriad ways our brothers and sisters can serve as disciples of Christ.

“It’s the stigma,” says Cathy Smith, who lives with bipolar disorder, as she explains why, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 75 to 90 percent of people with serious mental illness do not attend church. “We need to talk about mental illness in church, to put words to it.” She suggests breaking the silence by including people with mental illness in pastoral prayers during worship.

For Smith, having a “place of usefulness” is vitally important. A busy mother of two, including a son with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, she is a ruling elder and a deacon at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. She often speaks in public about mental illness. After her talks, people gather around her to share their experiences and ask questions. One of her favorite stories is about a woman who “came out” as a person with mental illness during one of Smith’s programs and later gained the confidence to begin serving as a member of the session.

Artist, memoirist, and poet Kate Wolfe-Jenson describes “dancing” with the “monster” of chronic illness since her diagnosis of multiple sclerosis when she was twenty. “I came to North Como Presbyterian Church because it is wheelchair accessible,” she says. When she moved with her husband and daughter to Roseville, Minnesota, she called several churches to inquire about accessibility. “I had no attachment to the Presbyterian church at that time,” she says.

The first congregations she called said things like “I *think* we are accessible” or “You’ll have to talk with the pastor.”

When she finally called North Como Presbyterian, the receptionist told her that the church had ramps, an elevator, and accessible restrooms. “I knew the church had made an effort,” she says. Because the church is accessible, Wolfe-Jenson can sing in the choir, lead worship, and has even preached.

How poor the church would be without people like Cathy Smith and Kate Wolfe-Jenson! The body of Christ is broken when any are excluded. Those of us who live with disabilities know that we are more than our disabilities. We know that we are created in the image of God and have gifts to share as members of the body of Christ.

*Bebe Baldwin and Lisa Larges*

## Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area Disability Inclusion Policy

### Recommendation

1. Continue to hold stated meetings and other presbytery-wide events in settings that are accessible for worship, business, fellowship, and dining. (Provide information on building accessibility in the call to the meeting).
2. Provide **ASL interpreter** when requested in a timely manner.
3. Provide printed materials in alternative formats (large print or digital) as requested.
4. Encourage speakers to read aloud projected materials that have not previously been made available.
5. Urge that all loan requests for funding new construction or remodeling of church property include provision for accessibility.
6. Encourage speakers and leaders to use person-first language when referring to persons with disabilities. For example, use “a woman who is blind,” rather than “a blind woman.” Use inclusive language. For example, use a statement like “Please rise in body or in spirit” rather than “Please rise.”
7. Encourage the nominating committee and COR to seek out persons with disabilities for leadership positions in presbytery, synod, and General Assembly.
8. Encourage inclusion of people with disabilities in worship leadership.

### Suggestion for Implementation

1. Churches will make accessibility information available in a timely manner to the stated clerk before the meeting is scheduled.
2. Request for **ASL interpreter** will be submitted to the presbytery office two weeks before the scheduled meeting.
3. Requests for alternative formats will be submitted two weeks before the event.
4. The moderator will lead this effort to make new information available to all who are present.
5. The requestor will review provisions for accessibility with the trustees. Ward Sessing is a presbytery resource person.
6. The council will model the person-first language. (The Disability Concerns Task Force is a resource)
7. The executive presbyter and the stated clerk will include this as part of their committee resourcing.
8. The moderator and worship planners will seek out participants with the help of pastors.