
A PLACE FOR ALL: INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

BY DEVITA PARNELL

I couldn't hold back the tears that were streaming down my face that day in worship. They were overflowing from a full heart deeply moved by the all-male youth group's creative movement to Andre Crouch's "The Lord's Prayer." Each motion and pose was perfectly and beautifully choreographed, each young man in sync with the other. I beamed with pride and gratitude to God, as did they.

Oh, and by the way, did I mention that these boys all have intellectual and severe emotional disabilities? Did I tell you that these youth have trouble keeping "it" together in group therapy and other situations? Nevertheless, I worshipped that day, thanks to these young men.

Ironically, many churches refuse even to allow these and other individuals with disabilities to be present in worship, much less allow them to lead. The church often has relegated people with disabilities to a separate part of the building and asked them not to disturb the rest of the members. Time and time again, they have been denied access to Sunday school classes, worship and fellowship times. Well-meaning individuals too often have been paternalistic and patronizing.

In the second chapter of Mark, we read an account of four friends who carry a man who is paralyzed to Jesus. Many obstacles stood in their way, including the crowd, the roof and the attitudes of the religious leaders. The church, too, must consider the barriers that prevent anyone, especially those with disabilities, from entering into Jesus' presence. Most churches have not been intentional about its ministry to and with people with disabilities. It is only when a child with a disability is born into the church or a long-time church member is diagnosed with a disability later in life that the church is forced to think about its response. The three obstacles that the church should consider proactively are language, accessibility and education.

Language

My pastor and I were sharing lunch together recently when he told me how a parishioner corrected him when he referred to her son as "autistic." She responded, "No, my son has autism."

The church is a place where all are welcomed as they are, beloved children made in the image of God. As a result, the church must be careful not to label individuals or groups of people in terms of lack or brokenness. Words such as disabled, handicapped and retarded define individuals by what they don't have rather than what they do have. The church's role is one of loving embrace that says to all that they are full of dignity and worth, uniquely gifted for service and ministry in the body of Christ.

If this is the church's calling, then labels have no place. So what are the linguistic alternatives? One church has embraced the language of "people who experience disabilities" to describe the disability as part of the individual, but not all of who he/she is. The language defines the individual by his or her experience. Others have proposed "differently abled" as another alternative to describe those who are quite capable of accomplishing a particular task or performing a particular function, only in a different manner (*The American Heritage Book of English Users*, 1996). The bottom line in choosing our language is sensitivity. We must be sensitive in our descriptions of people with disabilities, even to the extent that we not include those who don't describe themselves in such terms. People with disabilities must name themselves.

Accessibility

The church must evaluate its practices and facilities on the basis of whether or not they include or isolate. For example:

Worship. How sensitive is your church during its worship services to those who have visual or hearing dis-

abilities? Are large-print hymnals and enlarged worship orders available? What about hearing aids or sign language translation? How accessible is the platform, pulpit, or choir loft to those with physical disabilities? What about baptism and the the Lord's Supper? Are people with disabilities full participants in these sacraments?

Church facility. Are ramps, elevators and lifts a part of the church's physical plant? Are bathrooms and classrooms easily accessed? What about handicap parking? Are provisions made to transport people from parking lot to the building? Does the church bus or van have wheelchair capabilities?

Although accessibility seems to be a practical issue, it also is a theological one. When the church prohibits individuals from its facilities, rituals and practices, the church is making a statement about God.

Education

Educate, educate, educate – you can never overdo it! Church leaders must take every opportunity to expose the church to the issues that people with disabilities confront. There is a great deal of misinformation about certain disabilities. Parents and other family members of people with disabilities are often the best sources for information. They are the ones dealing with the issues daily. They are the ones working with therapists, public educators and in support groups. They are the ones with the greatest experience and insight to offer the church. Sunday school and other teachers, and even the family sitting on the pew next to the child with a disability, have much to learn. Some churches have even sought the benefit of inclusion specialists and other professionals outside the church to provide insight and guidance into the church learning environment.

Theological questions

These and other obstacles may prevent individuals with disabilities and their families from seeking a support system they so desperately need. Families are often asking hard, sometimes theological questions about their situation: Why did this happen to us? Why did God allow this? As a result, the church's role is to help make sense or meaning of life — or at the very least, walk alongside them in

their questions. In many cases, the church is a place where families and individuals can grieve a perceived loss. In addition, many families feel overwhelmed by the demands of caregiving. “For many families who have suffered great traumas, the message that each family unit is not meant to do everything in life by itself may be just what they need to hear” (*Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God's Children*, Brett Webb-Mitchell, p. 67-68). It is the church's role to provide a safe place where individuals with disabilities and their families can receive acceptance and support. It is the place where they are looked at with love and grace, instead of shame and embarrassment.

Reciprocally, these obstacles that exclude people with disabilities also may prevent the “rest of us” from a great blessing. The barriers the four friends faced in the Mark 2 story not only stood in the way of the one man's healing, but they also hindered worship for the crowd that gathered. It was not until these hurdles were overcome that both the man and the crowds were transformed. “And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’” (Mark 2:12)

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Resources

- Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).
- Mitchell-Webb, Brett. *Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God's Children* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1997).
- *That All May Worship*, published by the National Organization of Disability (www.nod.org). A resource designed to help congregations, faith groups and seminaries in welcoming people with disabilities by removing barriers of architecture, communication, and attitude.
- The United States Access Board (www.access-board.gov/). It provides information and guidelines on accessible design and links to disability organizations, codes and standards resources and state code contact lists.