


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

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

Moving In, But Not Necessarily Moving Forward

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

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

But once a person with a disability has been welcomed within a congregation or parish, people with all types of disabilities—including physical, social, intellectual, developmental, hidden, medical, and sensory disabilities, along with people with mental illness—of both genders and all ages experience the next hurdle or set of obstacles: the challenge of being fully included in the ongoing activities and programmatic life of communities of faith. This is a barrier of more than accessibility or attitude. It is an issue of justice requiring that members of a church be educated to understand the God-given gifts of people with disabilities, and the necessity of adapting to the presence of people with disabilities. Herein lies the next step of the Church's pilgrimage toward full inclusion: *moving beyond simply welcoming people with disabilities in the life of a church—or treating people with disabilities as a "special ministry" where they participate in separate worship, education programs, and fellowship opportunities—and enabling them to become full, active, and voting, members in a faith community*. The challenge is the full integration or inclusion of people with disabilities in the practice of worship, education, fellowship, youth group activities, small group activities, choir or music programs, art programs, or service opportunities (e.g., mission programs). This will involve confronting the awkwardness that some church members experience, both from the vantage point of the non-disabled member simply being with a member with a disability, as well as the member with disabilities feeling uncomfortable with the awkwardness of the member who is able-bodied. ***This is the next challenge for the Church: total inclusion of people with disabilities.***

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

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

Analysis of the Problem of Segregation of People with Disabilities

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

When hearing or reading the word *school*, many people in the church revert to how we were and are taught in Sunday school, youth groups, and seminaries. We were and are taught to understand education in what John Westerhoff would often call a "schooling-instruction paradigm" for which there is a time, place, and practice considered "education" in the hectic life of a church. In other words, education in a church is often an extension of the way we are educated in other contexts that give themselves the name *school*. Christian education is typically held in certain set-off rooms in an educational wing or hallway of a church, in which there are certain kinds of curriculum (paper), activities, and media aids (e.g., film projectors, PowerPoint projectors, and audio-recorders), held during an hour that was set apart from the other distinct activities of the church (e.g., worship, preaching, choir rehearsals, counseling, administration, biblical studies, fellowship, service projects). And the content of these classes focuses primarily on the biblical history, theology, and the philosophy of the church, taught largely through linguistic communication modes (Webb-Mitchell, 2003).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Educating Toward Full Inclusion

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

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

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

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

The Context: The Body of Christ

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fourth, the gifts and services of this body extend to one and all, regardless of one's seeming ability or limitation (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). Every member—with and without disabilities—has been given a gift (charisma, meaning grace-given) by the Holy Spirit. And every gift is of equal dignity. As John Howard Yoder (1992) writes, "Each bearer of any gift is called, first of all, to reciprocal recognition of all the others, by giving 'special honor to the less comely members'" (48). This is significant insight because it points to the deeper mystery of Christ's body, where all who are baptized—women and men, poor and rich, disabled and non-disabled, gay and straight, young and old, of all ethnic heritages—are bearers of God-given gifts and services for the good of Christ's body. Therefore, one goal of the body of believers in our congregations should be to aid others in discovering, naming, and growing into their gift. By doing so we become a church that embraces a Pauline vision of "every-member counts empowerment, where there would be no one un-gifted, no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated. Only that would live up to Paul's call to 'lead a life worthy of our calling'" (Yoder, 48).

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

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

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

An Argument for Inclusive Education in the Body of Christ

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

In the 1970s, many school districts approached special education through a "mainstreaming" approach. Mainstreaming involved placing a child with a disability into a public classroom with his or her peers throughout most of the day, making no special adaptations per se in the classroom itself, and offering remedial courses in another corner of the classroom or a special education classroom in another part of the building. Again, the Church in many ways followed this approach, merely placing a person with a disability in worship, Sunday school, adult Bible studies, and youth group, with no adaptations on behalf of the person with a disability or the congregation per se. This approach still did not erase the "us" versus "them" mentality.

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

The Common Practices within the Body of Christ: Gestures

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end, our habit or way of being in the world, shaped by our habits of Christian gestures, makes us gesturers of the Word of God, and that living Word is Christ. Jesus performed many gestures in God's name: he healed the sick, cared for the poor, proclaimed the goodness of God's kingdom, and enacted it in his charitable, grace-filled gestures. As gesturers we all—whether people are with or without disabilities—can participate and perform the gestures we were called to enact as part of the body of Christ. Performing the gestures of the body of Christ, we embody Christ for others in this world. Christ has no hands but our hands in reaching out to those who need assistance, just as we need his hands when we ourselves feel fragile, or his arms when we feel alone (Webb-Mitchell, 2003). For example, we become the embodiment of Christ's peace as we share a handshake or hug during worship, say after a period of Confession, expressing to one another, "peace of Christ," with either our lips or a handshake, or possibly a hug.

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

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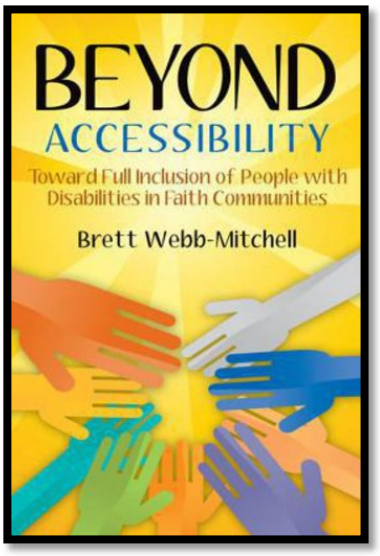

Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities

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

A Vision of a Post-Disability Ministry Church

Brett Webb-Mitchell

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

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