

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
“From Barriers to Belonging:
The Church and People with Disabilities”

presented on October 4, 2017 by
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But let's start with presence. I want to walk through each of these. Because belonging always begins with presence. And yet in so many congregations, the principal barrier to belonging may simply be the absence of people with disabilities and their families from worship, from service, from religious education, from social activities, all the things that make up congregational life. You cannot have a presence if you are not present. You can't have a presence if you're not present. It's hard to feel like you're part of a community from the outside.

And so I want to pause here to dispel a myth that kind of underlies a lot of the conversations that I have around this topic with churches and other groups as well. And I'm sure none of you have said this or had these conversations. I hope not. But they always involve some variations on the phrase, “Well, we don't have any people with disabilities in our congregation. Otherwise, if we did, we certainly would welcome them well and weave them into all we do.” Or, “We'd be glad to make some changes in our church if there was actually any people with disabilities who went here. But since there aren't, there's not really the need to make those changes.”

I'm seeing you start to smile. You're getting the theme of this, right? It's the idea that we'd build a ramp if there was someone who needed it. Right? Right. Maybe the explanation is, well, for presence, is “There simply aren't people with disabilities in our community.”

So in Nashville, you would shout out, and say, “No, absolutely not. Of course, there are people with disabilities in our community.” That can't be the barrier to presence. But I think that's the unspoken conclusion actually of lots of people, if they were to look around their sanctuary.

Jeff McNair, who's the director of church relations for an organization called Joni and Friends, wrote a really intriguing essay a few years ago. And he titled it with the quote that reflected the conclusion of his brother, who had never encountered people with intellectual disability in his church, or in his workplace, or elsewhere. “There are No People with Disabilities in St. Louis.” Now, I've edited the quote a lot because of a lot of reasons. But . . . and I've changed it to Boston.

But it should, I think, prompt an important question. What would someone conclude about who lives in your neighborhood or in your community if all they had was a glimpse of who gathered together on Sunday morning? What would they think?

So those of you who are here tonight, I know you know the title of that essay is absolutely not true, because there are 60 million Americans with disabilities. 19% of any community fits that label, one in five residents. And about 2% to 3% of any community identifies as having a label like autism or Down syndrome or intellectual disability. And those are numbers that cut across every demographic group. It doesn't matter what group you're talking about. Those numbers hold up pretty steady because disability is a natural part of the human experience.

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So let's do a little math. You all probably didn't come here to do math. But we'll do it. What is one-fifth of Norwood or Braintree or Medford or Weston? Or where you live? But here we are in the Boston metro area. If we did the math here, there are 4.6 million people living in the metro Boston area. That means there are 92,000 children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. And there are 870-plus-1,000 people with disabilities in this community right here. And as you heard earlier referenced, over half of all people over 65 have a disability. And so we hear that biblical question, who is my neighbor? My neighbor includes people with disabilities.

Those of you who didn't come here to do math, let me make those numbers a bit more or less abstract. 19% of this, 3% of that, how do we make them more concrete? So well, what if we all got up and we left this room—it would make for an interesting talk—and we walked into the neighborhoods that surrounded this particular building? What if we were all to get up together and walk out and see the neighborhoods that surround this particular college campus?

I took the liberty of hiring Google to take some images for me. And I've put them up on your screen, neighborhoods all around this campus. And I just decided to pick one just for the sake of illustrating this point. So here's a neighborhood not too far. Maybe it's one you live in.

If we were to go into this neighborhood that could surround your church or your parish or wherever you worship, and started knocking on doors, what we would find is that one out of every three households we knocked on would be a family that has a member with a disability of some kind. And to illustrate, I've just put a little yellow dot on every third or fourth house in our neighborhood.

My point is, we can't wait to be welcoming until people show up. They don't show up because we're not welcoming. And we have to start pursuing people who are in our communities and inviting them back into community. I park on presence because most available metrics that I'm familiar with as a researcher indicate that ministry apart from people with disabilities is the dominant ministry model across the country.

Think about some of these statistics that come from some of our studies. More than half of all adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States have not attended any kind of religious service in the last month. More than half of parents have kept their child from participating in religious activity because support was not provided for their child with disabilities. More than two-thirds of teenagers with disabilities are not attending any kind of youth group or small group. And this one is the hardest one to hear: more than one out of three parents have changed their place of worship because their child was not welcomed or included. And less than one out of five churches in our studies are said to offer any kind of support for children with developmental disabilities, or host a support group for families, or respite opportunities.

So what's standing in the way of presence as a point, as a starting point for belonging in our faith communities? Maybe it's barriers of awareness. Maybe it's barriers of attitude or access? They certainly abound in churches, as they do elsewhere in our society. Maybe it's even architectural barriers. Possibly that's it, right?

Well, what I would say is, you can't make the case that the barrier is the lack of faith and the importance of faith in the lives of people with disabilities. Right? That can't be; that would be another myth that I just want to highlight, that well, faith just must be less important. If it was just as important, our churches would be filled.

And let me be clear about this next point, because the presence of a disability is not at all a reliable predictor of people's aspirations for their life. And the presence of a disability is not at all a reliable

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predictor of people's faith. Faith is just as important in the lives of people with disabilities as it is anyone else.

And let me make that point in a way that only a researcher would think is a good way to do that, by showing you a graph. So every four years, the National Organization on Disability surveys Americans with and without disabilities, and I'm drawing from data from several years ago, a couple of iterations ago. And what they found is exactly the same proportion of people with and without disabilities say, "My faith is an important part of my life." So that can't be the barrier to participation in our congregations. It's got to be something else.

And there are other barriers. Because in the same studies, when you look at how often are people with disabilities attending church, and in this case, accessing worship services at least once a month, what you see is 43% of people with disabilities go to church once a month compared to 57% of people without disabilities. And when you layer the importance of faith on top of those data, you see some really key gaps that we want to address.

You see a gap in the attendance of people with and without disabilities. But you also see a more important gap, which is, people who want to be part of the faith community are not finding that community that's going to welcome them well. And that's the gap.

Now, if we had another conference or workshop, I'd talk about the gap for anyone in the States. But that's a whole other topic. So my point in all of that is presence is not due, is not limited because faith is not important in the lives of people. So something else is standing in the way.

Maybe it's architecture. There are some churches that are pretty inaccessible. I used to show this one, thinking this is the most inaccessible church in the world. And people started sending me other photos of churches that were even more inaccessible. Took it to new heights here, or this one in particular. Right? These pictures always get a chuckle. But subtler barriers, I think, send the same message.

So what does your building then say or communicate about your theology? What does that one step say, that altar that someone can't get to, the classrooms that are inaccessible, the curriculum that kids can't access? Does where you gather and how you gather suggest that you might be thinking about your community too narrowly? Sometimes our architecture is the first thing that reveals that.

Accessibility has got to be a fundamental commitment. It is in our society by legal mandate elsewhere. That's not so in the church. But it should be a commitment that we have.

There's a quote from Harold Wilke, an incredible disability advocate. This was from 30 or 40 years ago. I just love this quote: "In Las Vegas last year, in five different casinos, I asked five different people in wheelchairs whether they had encountered any barrier to the entrance, the answer always being, "No, should there be?" Gambling casinos, okay. Churches, no."

Why is it easier to get into so many other places than it is to get into some of the places where we gather as faith communities? We so often misidentify the real sources of the barrier and the call to be out front of society on these issues. As Ed Wood reminds us, "If shut-ins can go to Walmart, but not your church, well, they are shut out, they're not shut in." Right?