

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
Dr. Erik W. Carter

So that brings us to our conversation tonight: belonging. Have you ever thought about just what it is that makes you feel like you belong somewhere, about the things that make you feel like you're really part of a community? And if you took a minute—and I could probably do this as audience participation, but I won't for time—what would you point to that tells you that you belong in your church, in your neighborhood, in a community?

I think belonging is kind of a hard concept to define. I think that's true of a lot of things that matter most. It's easy to affirm its importance. It's hard to pinpoint just what makes us feel like we belong. We definitely know when it's absent, when we don't have it, because we deeply feel that, don't we? But describing its presence is a little bit more challenging. But it's important to do if we're going to ask the church to move in ways that foster belonging. So what might the markers be of a community of belonging?

Well, answering that question has really been one strand of a project that we've been part of for the last number of years, a project we call Faith and Flourishing. We've interviewed about 50 young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. We've surveyed about 500 families about their experiences within their faith communities. We've talked with scores of clergy and church leaders and ministry leaders about their experiences within faith communities around this issue.

And so much of what we heard kept circling back to the attitudes and the actions and the experiences that promote belonging. So as we kind of culled through all of that data over the years, we identified 10 dimensions of belonging that really emerged from people with disabilities and their families that were part of this project.

And here's what we heard from those individuals. They indicated that belonging was felt when they were present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved.

Now, I bet you could add your own dimensions to this. And I'm not suggesting this is universal, that everyone would affirm this, or that it's exhaustive. But it does give us an important place of reflection as we think about our movements as churches and communities. What would it look like to make sure every person experienced these things?

So I hope you'll notice a few things about these dimensions. One is they remind us that belonging is not about location, which is what integration and inclusion prioritize. Location matters. Where people are matters. But belonging has much more to do with posture than it does place. And I'll elaborate on that.

The second thing I hope you'll notice is that belonging is ultimately fostered not by starting new programs, but through relationships. Relationships matter more than programs.

Boston College

And third, I hope you'll see as we walk through these that addressing these 10 dimensions of belonging within the church is more likely to require ordinary gestures than extraordinary responses. So you already know what you need to know to be able to do this on behalf of people with disabilities.

So let's take it back to some points of reflection. And as you think about your congregation, as you think about your church, the places where you're trying to make these movements, ask yourself these questions: Are people with and without disabilities personally invited? Are they present in all aspects of congregational activities? Are they experiencing a warm welcome when they arrive? Are they well-known throughout your faith community? Are they accepted without condition, without caveat? Are they provided the support they need to participate fully and meaningfully? Are they receiving the care they need to help them flourish in all aspects of life, spiritually, but also relationally in other areas? Are they developing friendships with others in your congregation? Are they seen as needed and indispensable to the thriving of your community? And are they loved deeply and unconditionally?

And you know I ordered these, I guess, in a way that kind of implies a deepening progression. But I'd argue that each dimension has to be in place. They all have special importance. Being present and being welcomed and being known, that's the requisite foundation for actually having a relationship with others. But being present and welcomed and known isn't enough to feel like you belong. And also, it's hard to be befriended and needed and loved if you're not there or known by others in your community. And so, maybe these are things that we can begin to think about, the areas that might help us foster belonging.