

**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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Well, maybe your starting point becomes one of inviting, extending new invitations. Because belonging begins with personal invitations. That's the second dimension that we heard from these families. Because when we're not intentional about reaching out to people with disabilities in our communities personally, we inadvertently leave people out.

And there was a pastor who said this really well. "It's not that we deliberately excluded people with disabilities. We just weren't deliberate at all. And that was the problem."

Many congregations proclaim that they're welcoming. They do that on their websites. They do that in their church signs, their outreach materials. And we often presume that's sufficient, that that is an invitation that we say everyone is welcome. But I would just push you to think that an announcement is very different than an invitation. One is a personal, right? And one is not. One says, "I'm thinking about you, and I want you here." The other leaves that open. An announcement leaves open that possibility that there's a little asterisk or a footnote or some unspoken qualifier that says "Maybe you, maybe not you." And there have been a lot of asterisks in the lives of families and people with disabilities. Those generic promises of a warm reception aren't always honored. And so families who have been wounded in the past wonder whether that might happen again when you say you welcome them.

A colleague of mine, Bill Gaventa, once recounted a conference panel of mothers who have kids with disabilities who shared the number of congregations they had that had asked their family to leave. One counted 13. Another parent counted 17 different congregations. One out of three families in our studies have said, "We've left our congregation because that welcome, that support just wasn't there."

And so, those are families that are going to need some added assurance that this time is going to be different, that that proclamation of everyone is welcome really does penetrate your practices. And I think, again, that's where those personal invitations become really important. Now, I'm not saying don't also announce that you're a welcoming place and accessible. Definitely do that, because the imagery and the language and the messages that you incorporate on your websites really do communicate to families that, "Hey, we're thinking about you."

I just put up on the screen some examples of ones I did from a quick web search just of the area of some congregations that seem to have made this an intentional commitment and somehow put that in their imagery on their website. There's definitely symbols that you can download and put on your site to indicate the accessibility features of your church or your parish that can be downloaded free.

And there's even some communities that are starting to establish faith community inclusion networks, where they're beginning to just kind of map, what are all the congregations in our area that offer a respite, or inclusive ministries for kids with disabilities, or accessibility features, or support groups for families, and making that information available for any family in the community who's looking for a congregation that offers that. This is just an example from the Faith Inclusion Network in Virginia.

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And I'm not familiar with anything like that in Boston. But wouldn't that be great that there was a network of congregations that say, "Here, we're committed to that"?

So again, those active invitations become most powerful. And I was reading in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey that says 75% of people who come to a worship service say the first time they came, they came because someone they know invited them. So start doing some invitations. And if you don't know how to find families and others who are impacted by disability, there are groups in this community who do, and can help you share that invitation out with them. And I've just put some examples on the screen of some places you might do that.

Third, so presence, invited, and now welcomed. And this is not really from what we heard from the families about necessarily what you say. It's more what is felt. I think the idea here is the host is not the one who determines what feels welcoming. It's the guest who determines that. And that welcome comes from personal encounters.

And you know, I think the thing that we often see in a lot of congregations is there are people, like there are in any corner of society, who are uncertain about what to say or what to do. They're worried they'll say the wrong thing. They might offend. And that uncertainty almost always leads to avoidance, almost always. And when people are avoided or go unacknowledged or overlooked or ignored, they eventually stop coming.

My sense is that, so often, we kind of arrange how we gather to make sure it feels welcoming to us, and we forget that we have to design our welcome so that it is welcoming for the stranger. We don't want to be this church that I've put up there, that I'm the one who feels welcomed. We want it to be someone else.

So let me return back to a quote from Bill Gaventa, where he recounted a committee that he was on, that I think this quote reminds us that we have to take that proclamation of welcome very seriously. Here's what he said. He said, "Several years ago, the Bethsaida Task Force, a committee working on accessibility and inclusion issues for Episcopal congregations in the diocese of Newark, New Jersey, brought a resolution to the annual meeting of the diocese. The resolution proposed that any church that had a sign on its front lawn stating the name of the church and the phrase, everyone's welcome, should have to take the welcome phrase off by a certain date if the building was not accessible to everyone, especially people with disabilities." And he goes on to say, the resolution did not pass. But it made a compelling point. Right? We want our practices to match our proclamation.

So what is hospitality? What does welcome look like? Well, it's greeting new families when they arrive. It's introducing them to others, drawing them into conversations, inviting them to church events, involving them in your small group, and noticing when they're not there and following up to find out why. Those are ordinary actions that communicate what this parent said in our study. "We just felt like we were wanted; that we were wanted, not welcomed, but wanted."

The principal requirement here is not disability-related expertise or even experience. And you should not delegate the work of welcoming people to your hospitality committee. That's all of our responsibility.

But sometimes congregational staff, sometimes volunteers, can feel more confident if they've had some guidance on etiquette, or language, or the support you offer as a congregation. Sometimes you have to provide more specific information to them about how to approach someone who has complex communication challenges, or who behaves in unfamiliar ways, or who has extensive support needs. That can be helpful to give people that confidence. So that's all part of the being welcomed.

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Fourth, what we heard from families is that an important aspect of belonging was being known. And as Christians, we're called to welcome the stranger, of course. But the stranger is not supposed to remain a stranger. And it's becoming easier and easier on Sunday morning to navigate the same space and never really come to know people. So that's a bigger problem in our society. But people with disabilities are particularly at risk of not being known personally, of being known about, but not known personally.

So whether people are known was part of what belonging, was addressed by these families. But that's not what they parked on. What they parked on was how their son and daughter was known. Because so many people with intellectual and developmental disciplines are known first and foremost by their labels, not by their names, and by their deficits, not by their strengths and their gifts. And the disability service system does this extraordinarily well in terms of knowing people or viewing people in terms of diagnostic terms.

If you think about the labels we use in professional circles in society, they almost always emphasize what people can't do, or what they struggle to do. And that makes it a really hard introduction for a church that's trying to figure out, how do we weave a kid with autism into our Sunday school classes? How do we welcome an adult with significant intellectual disability? If all they have in their mind is an image of what people can't do or struggle to do, it's hard to envision a place for that kind of introduction.

So the challenge for the church is to think differently about everyone, but particularly young people with disabilities. And can we think about young people in terms of their strengths and their gifts, that they have important gifts to be received? Well, as we're prone to do, we did a study on this. Can parents, do parents view their sons and daughters with autism and intellectual disability in terms of gifts that would be attractive to others and to a community? And indeed, they do. In our study of 500 parents, when we asked, we had a great measure. We gave them a scale that didn't say, "What's going wrong with your son or daughter," but "What's going right."

We asked them about traits like— well, I'll share with you—traits that you see on your screen. We said, "To what extent are these traits like your son or daughter?" And the blue bar is the percentage of parents who said, "That's just like my son or daughter." 93% of these parents said "My son or daughter is happy and filled with joy." 86% said, "My child enjoys life and is thankful for life's simple pleasures. They have a great sense of humor." Or, "They're thoughtful and helpful to others. They demonstrate care for others. My son or daughter is bothered or concerned or upset when someone else is distressed or uncomfortable. My child's courageous. My child bounces back easily." I love this one: "My son or daughter doesn't try to retaliate or get back at others who have hurt them." And half said their child didn't lose their temper. But remember, these are children and adolescents. So that sounds about right.

A point in this is it's a different storyline about people. Can we find a place for these kinds of strengths in our congregations and our communities? And how many faith communities can find a place for someone known for their gratitude and their empathy and their kindness? How many people would love to develop a friendship with someone who's known as funny and happy and thoughtful? And how many of you who are clergy would love to see your congregation filled with people with these traits? Hopefully, all of you. Right? So we start extending some invitations. But we also come to know people in different ways.

We all are a combination of challenges and deficits and strengths and gifts. Why is it for some people, we only perseverate on this side and forget about the other side? We can't do that in the church. That's not how we come to know people.