

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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Fifth, what we learned from these families is belonging involves acceptance. And acceptance comes not, again, from being known about, or from an information or awareness campaign, but from being personally known. And the families talked about their child being welcomed without condition and treated like family and embraced for who they are.

And attitudes have changed a lot over time. But you know also, the attitudes that are in society permeate our churches as well. And when we asked parents in one of our studies to share their perspectives on the extent to which their current congregation was accepting of their son or daughter, we were surprised that only 55% said, “My congregational leader is accepting of my child.” And only 48% felt congregation members were accepting of their child. This is the church that they go to, not the one that they aren't at or left.

And you see kind of these sayings, or things that people say that reflect attitudinal barriers in our churches that are often subtle, but they reflect deeper views about how we think about people who are, have disability labels, or who have other labels as well. I put these in your handout so you can read through these. These are all variations on things I've heard in my conversations with churches.

So I think there is a place for kind of awareness activities. It might be a disability awareness or an inclusion awareness Sunday, or a curricular unit you put in your religious education. Those are formal ways of doing it. And there's value in that. But again, what we've learned about attitude change with other groups is, attitudes are most likely to change when you get in relationship with someone, not when you have an informational campaign. So don't do one without the other.

And if you need resources on how to do inclusion awareness events, I put some in your handouts. There's lots of different denominations and traditions that also have resources that I'm glad to point you to. Some congregations put bulletin inserts periodically to help raise awareness about different issues. Some put bulletin inserts highlighting things around mental illness or employment issues for people with disabilities, or just awareness of the presence of people with disabilities in their community.

I won't pause to say much about disability awareness efforts, only to say I tend to see it done more often poorly than well. So get some input if you're going to do awareness efforts in your congregation from a local disability agency or families before you pursue that as well.

And since I'm at a theological school, let me emphasize that what is communicated from the pulpit matters incredibly when it comes to acceptance. If you have a pastor who is going to be unfazed when someone answers his rhetorical questions, that is huge. Someone who designates the entire sanctuary a no-shush zone, awesome. Right? It's that pastor who says, “Instead of having the people who make a little noise go to the cry room, let's have all the people who can only worship in complete silence go to the cry room. And the rest of us can move a little bit.” Right?

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[LAUGHTER]

It's the pastor who can just say, we're going to consider some alternatives to the way we've always done it if it brings people into community.

We did a national study on how theological schools are addressing the intersection of faith and disability, or were often not. I'm glad to share more about that in the Q&A if you're interested and point you to what we found from that.

Sixth, families we spoke with needed support. Sometimes that support was substantial, and sometimes it wasn't. But I think what was different about the supports is the need for them to be intentional and individualized for different kids. And this isn't a place to make presumptions. Actually, you just want to invite input, have conversations with parents about, what would it look like to make Sunday morning or Wednesday night or whenever you gather the best day of the week for your son or daughter? What can we do to make that happen? So many parents say, we've never been asked about how best to support our son or daughter.

So ask good questions. Take someone out. Invite him for coffee. I put in your handout some of the kinds of questions that you might ask, not as a way to exclude their son or daughter, but as a way to make sure the supports are in place for them on Sunday or whenever you gather.

So these are the kinds of questions that we would ask, all aimed at not having the parent have to be the advocate in the congregation. But we would sit down, we'd listen to the family, and then we would go and do their asking for them. They have to advocate in schools and in medical facilities and all kinds of places all week long. They shouldn't have to be those advocates in the church as well. And so this is a way you can find out what might be helpful to them.

I don't know what you're going to find if you talk with families. I can tell you what we learned when we surveyed 500 families about the supports that they would like. Here's some things that they said would be helpful for their church to do. 70% said, "Some kind of disability awareness effort in our church would be somewhat to very helpful to including my son or daughter." Some said, "An advocate for family, someone who's just going to help us ask for the things that we need so we don't have to do the asking. Resources for us—trying to navigate the service system and all the things on the other six days of the week is really hard. Are there ways you can help us connect with the supports and services we need?" Counseling from a pastor or spiritual leader. Posting a support group for parents. Offering respite.

I know a church that once a year—this is their disability ministry. They buy a hotel room for parents who have kids with disabilities on their anniversary and say, go. We're going to watch your kids. Have a great night out. And for those parents, that's profound, because it's the only time of year they have that opportunity.

Modifications to religious education, support plans, so we're intentional about how we support kids. Support during religious education. Some talked about services that were designed with people with disabilities in mind at the outset as well. Financial support didn't come up a lot, but sometimes it's just like that. There's a little help with this assistive technology that the insurance won't cover. Transportation is a big issue.

But look what's interesting. The thing that families said was the least needed was the ramp. And that's often our starting point and our ending point for disability ministry. Now, I should say, if you can't get in the building, the ramp is the most important thing. My point is that's not the most important, collectively.

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I just posted down the side the percentage of churches that actually do any one of these. Only 10% do disability awareness. Only 6% have an advocate for families. Only 4% have resources for families. Only one-third have any kind of spiritual counseling for these families. And it goes all the way down. An opportunity for ministries and the gap between those numbers of what would be helpful and what's available. If you're wanting to learn more about that—I know I threw that up really quickly—we have a downloadable guide completely free, walks through those 14 supports and helps you think about how you might implement them in your church as well.

All right, I know you're watching the time. We're at number seven. Hang in there.

Healthy families are marked by care, deep care for one another. They strive to meet the spiritual, the emotional, and the practical needs of their members. And I think care is also important for families impacted by disability. And it turns out there's no shortage of congregations that could provide that care, sometimes in Nashville, one on every corner. There's 335,000 congregations in the United States. Now, most of them are in Nashville. Every red dot is one in Nashville. But it turns out there are about 450 just in this county alone. Every dot is one. If your dot is not big enough, you're not paying enough to Google, I guess. So thinking about how can the church make an impact the other six days of the week.

You know, the poverty rate for people with disabilities is twice what it is for people without disabilities. The employment rate for people with intellectual disabilities is 10%. That was the employment rate. The unemployment rate is 90%. Inadequate housing options abound. Twice as many people with disabilities have no access to transportation. These are areas where collectively, as the church, we can do something about it.

I won't say much about it unless you have questions. But we've got a wonderful model called Putting Faith to Work that has a congregation come around to their members with disabilities, figure out what their gifts are, network through the congregation, and connect them to jobs. It's what we do for anyone in our church already. We just forget to do it for people with disabilities because we think a service system's going to take care of it.

There are congregations that are also moving in the space of residential options. Inclusive or faith-based residential options for people with disabilities are really in short supply. Churches can make movements in that place as well. So how can we stitch together collectively the work of people of faith to change the landscape those other six days after the benediction as well?