

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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And eighth, now we're getting to the deeper parts of belonging. We were made for relationships. You know that. It's a theological point. I think it's empirical as well, because the companionship and the intimacy and the support and the reciprocity that comes from friends is essential to our thriving. It's a part of our flourishing. All the other dimensions I've talked about of belonging can be done at arm's length. Befriending starts to take belonging to a deeper level, I think.

And I love Sue Mosteller's quote here. She is a long-time member of the L'Arche Community in Toronto. She says, "Alone we are poor. Together we are rich." And we know that to be true firsthand. And yet the friendships so fundamental to our own flourishing are elusive for so many kids with disabilities.

For example, one nationally representative study of adolescents with autism found that 51% had not been invited to any other kids' social activity at all in the last year, not a birthday party, not a sleepover, not a football game, nothing. And more than one out of every four adults with intellectual disability who are in our service systems have no friendships or caring relationships in their life beyond family members or staff who are paid to be there, who are often a revolving support staff. You work with other kids. I've put in your handouts just some of what the portrait is there as well.

My point is that the relationship networks of kids with disabilities tend to be quite different than those without similar labels, not in the number of people in their lives. There's lots of people in the lives of folks with intellectual disability and autism. There's family members. There's friends. There's close companions. These are people who are in your life. Right? You have acquaintances. You have classmates, people you work with. And then you have people who are paid to be in your life. Right? You know, your doctor, your auto mechanic, your defense attorney. I don't know your story. Right?

[LAUGHTER]

Whatever it might be. Lots of people in our lives. For so many people with intellectual and development disabilities, there's no shortage of names. But they tend to show up in that inner circle of family members and this outer circle of paid staff. And I think this is the place where, as a church, we can make an incredible, incredible impact.

I want to just highlight here that when we think about befriending people, I'm really talking about the importance of what takes place between Sundays. You can't address a friendship in three hours on a Sunday morning substantively. This is about life lived together beyond the walls of the congregation. It's really what pushes us from acquaintances to friendships. And that means inviting someone to share a cup of coffee, participate in a favorite hobby, watch the big game, visit the mall, go for a walk in the park, join the same small group. And those ordinary gestures are things that rarely take place outside of the service system unless we step into that space. And what's great about this is being someone's friend requires no training, no expertise, no Ph.D. here. This is something we all know how to do, but we may not see how important it is to be intentional about it.

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Which takes us to number nine. The individuals and the families that we spoke with said they come to feel needed when the people in their congregation see them as bringing gifts and talents that benefit the whole community and are central to its thriving. This is ministry not to people with disabilities, but ministry by people with disabilities. And it recognizes, I think it's a reflection like anyone else that they are indispensable members of the Body. Because as those relationships start to form, that's when we start to see our need for one another. And a lot of times, churches sort of begin stepping into this as a ministry to people with disabilities, thinking what they are going to bring into people's lives. But people who've been on that journey long enough start talking about the reciprocity and the mutuality in that. And the idea of who is the giver and who's the receiver, who's the one serving, who's the one being served aren't static roles. And they often get overturned as you step into that space. And I think that's really where we need to see that there's a group of people that we need to be in relationship with as much as they need to be in relationship with us. And I shouldn't even use the us and them. But you get my point in all of that.

That's why I love this church sign so much. I hope you'll see the connection to this. I stopped to take this picture. It's at a church right next to my son's school a few years ago. Because to me, it suggests the posture that I think every congregation should be adopting when they think about their community that includes people with disabilities. "We need you here ASAP." And the idea is the church is incomplete without the presence and participation of people with disabilities.

I put on your screen the paraphrase of First Corinthians 12, which is what they were referencing. And I want you to think about it in the light of what we're talking about today. Because when we're convinced this is true, that every part is dependent on every other part, that when one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt and in the healing. And if one part flourishes, every other part enters into exuberance, we no longer think about inclusion as a nice thing to do because it's good for someone else. We start thinking about inclusion as important because it actually strengthens the Body.

When we believe this is true, we're not satisfied to wait until people arrive. We start extending new invitations. We start pursuing people whose gifts are missing. And we start extending invitations widely and wildly throughout our community. And I think we also stop tinkering and trying to retrofit our churches to make them work for people who might show up, and we start moving people with disabilities from an afterthought to a forethought. We design everything we do with the community in mind that includes people with disabilities as well.

And that leads us to our tenth dimension of belonging. And that, of course, is love. And if you are worried that a social scientist is about to lecture on love, don't worry. I'm not. You don't need me to explain what love has to do with belonging.

But some of you might know the work of Wolf Wolfensberger. He was a pioneer in our field, an advocate for people with disabilities, and talked about the principle of social role valorization. And he offered the observation that healing for wounded people with disabilities begins with three messages: that you're valuable, that you are as valuable as any other person, and that you are loved by those around you.

And as Henri Nouwen reminded us, that really lies, what lies among all of our deepest questions is that question of, is there anybody who loves me? Well, the Scriptures remind us over and over and over that all we do and all we are has to be marked by love. And a service system, the public service systems are not designed to love. But the church is. And that's a place we can step in uniquely to promote belonging.