

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

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

And here's the third of those myths. I think these dimensions of belonging reflect ordinary needs, not special needs. They're universal needs. They're not exceptional needs. I hope you'll agree. Because a lot of times, our conversations about disability ministry often accentuate the new or the distinct efforts we're going to make to support the presence and participation of people with disabilities. But the themes I heard from these conversations with families is that they're really relevant to the supporting and belonging of anyone.

And so hopefully they resonate, and we realize that the deepest needs people have—to belong, to be needed, to be loved—are not special needs. They're universal needs. How we might meet them might take some intentionality or some different ways of doing support. But more often, it's ordinary ways of meeting those ordinary needs.

The fourth myth that I wanted to share, I've actually never heard this spoken, so I may be projecting this. But I think it's implied in our practice that people need programs more than they need

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relationships. And I say this because the initial inclination of a lot of churches when they think about how to respond to the presence of people with intellectual disability in their community is well, let's start a new program, a new specialized experience. And they mirror a lot of what they see in our schools and in our workplaces and elsewhere. They start a separate Sunday school class, or a separate worship service, or separate social events, or just respite services.

And I'm not saying those are bad things. And we can have that in the Q&A. What I'm saying is, sometimes those make it difficult to become welcomed and known and befriended and needed by others. And we limit those inadvertently. So when we prioritize relationships first, we're only going to have programs that lead to those relationships. And if they don't, we find another way to do our programming. So hear me clearly. I'm not opposed to programs in that sense. But that's not what people need most. It's the relationships that lead to their flourishing and belonging.

And then the fifth myth is that you need some kind of special training or an advanced degree to promote inclusion in meaningful ways. Not so. The markers that families identified are already within the capacity of your congregation. You already know how to do these ten things. It's about helping people to see the importance of being intentional in doing that. And it turns out, there are some experts in your congregation who can help you if you're stuck. I promise you that. Your congregation is filled with people who also know about disability, but have never been asked to bridge their faith and their professional work into this place of promoting belonging.

All right, last myth. I know what you're all thinking right now. You're like, I hear you, Erik. This sounds really like something other churches ought to invest in. I really, I see the value of it. We are not sensing the call on our congregation to do this. And besides, there's lots of other churches doing disability ministry. So would it be okay if we just adopt a ministry of referral? Is that okay?

[LAUGHTER]

So that's myth six, that someone else . . . actually, that's not a myth. Someone else should definitely address this. But that someone else also includes you. It includes me. It includes us. And given our short time together, and that I'm wrapping up, and that I'm in a room, probably, with very diverse denominations reflected, I'm not going to linger on the scriptural or theological support for why you are called to this. But I will tell you I collect position statements. And so if you want to know what the theological call is and the scriptural support, here is my short abbreviated list of all of the position statements and resolutions and theological statements that denominations have issued saying we must be invested in this work. There's a lot of them. Most people collect baseball cards. I have this weird collection of position statements.

What's my point? We're really good at articulating positions. We need to be much better about putting them into practice. A position statement doesn't make anyone feel like they belong.