

## **Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities**

*The Reformed Church in America's 2008 General Synod approved the RCA Commission on Theology paper, "Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities." A shorter version also is available.*

### *I. Purpose*

This paper explores the theological and spiritual issues at stake in the church's response to persons with disabilities. The focus here is not so much on practical considerations about accessibility and accommodation, important as they may be. Nor is the focus primarily on the experience of persons who have a disability, though those issues will always be in view. Rather, this study focuses primarily on the experience of the church, the Christian community, as it responds—whether positively or negatively—to the presence of persons with disabilities. What is at stake, from a theological perspective, when the church engages persons with disabilities? How can the church grow in its self-understanding and in its responsiveness to the Triune God, through deeper reflection on its encounter with persons with disabilities?

This study therefore does not attempt to speak "for" persons with disabilities. Nor does it attempt to speak "to" persons with disabilities. Rather, it speaks to the RCA as a denomination, and to individual congregations within the RCA, in an attempt to invite deeper reflection on how the RCA can simply become more obedient to Jesus Christ. In the practice of such obedience, the RCA may also discover how it can grow in its capacity to welcome persons with disabilities, and how it can grow spiritually as a result of such practices of welcome.

### *II. Relational Communities*

How does one define "persons with disabilities"? The very word "disability" might suggest that the entire range of human experience can be neatly divided into two camps: the "able-bodied" and the "disabled." Such divisions can give the appearance of making the world more manageable and understandable, but they can obscure other important truths. In reality, human beings are all differently-abled. We do not all have the same intelligence, athletic ability, flexibility, vision, or mobility. Many of these differences among us are evident to all. Other differences are hidden to almost everyone: differences of psychological makeup, emotional experience, or cognitive processing. We differ from each other in countless ways that evade simple categorization.

Moreover, we are all dependent on each other in varying and complex ways; none of us can live without our relationships with others. Yet by dividing the world into the "able-bodied" and the "disabled," those who see themselves as "able-bodied" may be

tempted to reassure themselves of their “normalcy,” and obscure from themselves their deep dependency upon others in society as a whole, and even more importantly, within the body of Christ.

In reality, both “wholeness” and “disability” acquire their full meaning only within the shared contexts of communities of persons. People sometimes only recognize and identify a “disability” in comparison to others whose experience differs from theirs. In this specific sense, the very notion of disability is a relative and communally shaped concept. But at a deeper and more important level, persons with disabilities find wholeness in the shared experience of community. We experience wholeness, ultimately, when we find a place in community marked by contentment, acceptance, mutual caring, and love. These communities are always diverse and dynamic, made up of people with changing experiences, changing capacities to participate in community, and changing relationships within community.

For the sake of convenience and efficiency, then, we use a word such as “disability,” but we must acknowledge, from the beginning, its potential dangers. We must recognize that in speaking of disabilities, we are speaking of a range of conditions and a range of experiences that will resist easy categorizing. We are also speaking of dynamic communities of persons, whose changing experience is “on the way,” moving toward God’s redemptive future.

It may be that one of the most helpful biblical categories to assist the church in reflecting on its welcome of persons with disabilities is the biblical discussion of “welcoming the stranger.” Of course, almost every congregation has members with disabilities—members who are not “strangers” at all to the rest of the congregation, but rather people who are known and loved. But at another level, persons with disabilities are indeed strangers to their more able-bodied neighbors. Those who can walk have difficulty fully understanding the experience of someone confined to a wheelchair. Those with “normal” intelligence cannot fully fathom the experience of someone who is cognitively impaired. Moreover, more able-bodied people often experience a subtle, low-grade anxiety in the presence of persons with disabilities. The thought of losing one’s mobility, cognitive ability, health, or strength is not a welcome thought. People with disabilities often awaken feelings of loss or discomfort in other, more able-bodied people. In this more particular sense, persons with disabilities are “strangers” to more able-bodied people. Their experience of the world is different and alien in profound ways.

Persons with disabilities are also “strangers” who can help the church learn something important about hospitality in another sense. Persons with disabilities often do not “fit” into the normal patterns of social life. They cannot always navigate society’s buildings. They may not “fit” into the church’s educational programs. They may not always exhibit the social graces that others expect. As a result, they are often

marginalized, excluded, made to feel inferior and unwelcome. In this respect as well, they are often treated as “strangers” in the midst of the church.

Yet in biblical parlance, the stranger is always potentially the friend not yet discovered, the brother or sister not yet recognized, the presence of Jesus not yet discerned. Throughout Scripture, there is a powerful mandate to welcome such strangers. This is a challenge, not to persons with disabilities, but to the church that often struggles to recognize and welcome them as full members of the body of Christ.

A closer look at the biblical discussion of “welcoming the stranger” bears this out. The Bible was written in the ancient world, and the ancient world was a clannish place. To be a “stranger” in the ancient world was to live a precarious existence on the margins of society, without the normal supports of village, clan, and family. People might become “strangers” in migration for a variety of reasons—economic hardship, military campaigns, escape from famine or plague—but the lot of the stranger was never easy. Beyond mere loneliness and isolation, strangers faced daunting practical problems. They often had no place to sleep at night, and no way to prepare food, even if they could afford to buy it. They were vulnerable to thugs and thieves. It was not an easy existence.

In this light, it is striking that the Bible places such a high value on hospitality to strangers. God is proclaimed in the Bible, not only as the vindicator of the orphan and the widow, but also as the friend of the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Israel was always to remember that Abraham—the father of Israel as a nation—was a wanderer and a stranger (Genesis 23:4; Deuteronomy 26:5). Therefore it is the responsibility of all of God’s people to attend to the needs of the stranger (Job 29:16).

Nowhere is this concern for the stranger more evident than in Jesus’ gripping account of the final judgment narrated in Matthew 25:31f. Here all the nations are judged on whether, in caring for the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the stranger, they cared for Jesus himself. Jesus declares, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

Here we come to the crux of the matter from a spiritual and theological perspective: Insofar as persons with disabilities are strangers in the midst of the church (that is, insofar as they embody what may seem alien to their more able-bodied neighbors), they also represent—as all strangers do—the presence of Jesus in the midst of the church. The more the church grows in its capacity to welcome such persons who are strangers, the more deeply the church will welcome and serve Jesus.

### *III. Our Embodied Existence*

This is not merely pious rhetoric. Welcoming the stranger, in biblical parlance, is an exercise in welcoming whatever it is that threatens us about our own humanity. None of us as human beings can be completely whole in our relationship with ourselves if we cannot welcome those who are strangers to us, because we are always, in some important sense, strangers to ourselves. We all know, at the deepest level, the

precariousness of our own embodied existence, our own vulnerability to loss. And almost all of us, if we live long enough, will experience some sort of disability, as our bodies grow more frail. Persons with disabilities thus can assist the church to discover more deeply and powerfully the mystery of its own embodied existence, the diverse ways in which we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). The ability of the Christian community to welcome persons with disabilities, and the ability of persons with disabilities to live joyfully in the midst of the church, will be an important measure of the church’s ability to live fearlessly and joyfully in the midst of a broken world, as it awaits the restoration of the whole creation.

As the church welcomes persons with disabilities, it will thus necessarily confront more deeply the mystery of its own embodied existence. Our bodily existence is indeed complex, and full of paradox. Paul speaks of our “mortal bodies,” subject to the power of death and beset by weakness (Romans 6:12, 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:53f.). At the same time, Christians celebrate and affirm the resurrection of the body. Bodily existence is not something for this life alone. Our bodies matter so much that they will be raised in the life to come. This importance of the body is what leads Paul to summon believers to “glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20). In welcoming persons with disabilities, the church necessarily confronts the joys, sorrows, limitations, and beauties of its embodied existence—tasting the mortality and weakness of life in the body, but also reveling in its exquisite and eternal beauty. In so doing, the church becomes more deeply what Jesus declares it to be: the light of the world, the pointer to a deeper joy that awaits the whole creation.

But if the church is to become such a light in this world, it must also recognize and confront its shadow side. Precisely because persons with disabilities can be strangers to the church—disruptive, alien, and threatening—the natural human tendency is to try to make such strangeness more manageable. One of the ways this happens is by objectifying and categorizing people with disabilities. Far too often, the person becomes defined by their disability: “Jack is blind.” “Maggie has Down Syndrome.” “Mike is mentally ill.” “Susan is a paraplegic.” These labels then acquire a kind of defining power that shapes the way others interact with these people. What seems most obvious (the disability) to more able-bodied people who may not know the person well becomes the only thing to be noted about a person. In so doing, the church can lose sight of the manifold unique ways in which each person is gifted and called by God to his or her unique place in the body of Christ.

If labeling and categorizing is one way in which humans objectify and depersonalize others, another is the subtle tendency to identify persons with disabilities as “disruptions” in the shared life of the church. Persons with disabilities don’t always arrive on time. They can’t always sit in neat rows. They may not be able to read the church’s mass-produced bulletins. They may not be able to remain still for the prescribed length of the worship service. They may not be able to understand the

material presented in church-school classrooms. They may not be able to fill their own plates at the congregational potluck. In our modern culture, with its love of standardization, these “disruptions” are often unwelcome. They “upset the flow” of things, and many congregations find innumerable ways, both overt and implied, to discourage and shame such “disruptors” of the status quo, and to re-establish the “normal” order of things. The tragedy, of course, is that this shaming of “disruptions” diminishes all our humanness, replacing the rich diversity of the body of Christ with a boring and oppressive uniformity. To say this is not to reject the orderly life of the church, but to challenge the church to widen and deepen its understanding of how the “good order” of the church can be most fully welcoming, and most fully reflective of the diversity God intends for the body of Christ.

These tendencies to objectify persons with disabilities may also appear in particularly problematic ways in the spiritual life of the Christian community. One characteristic problem is the tendency to associate disability with sin or uncleanness. Parents of children with mental illness may be tempted to blame themselves for their child’s problems, and other onlookers may harbor the same suspicions. There is at times in our hearts an almost instinctive response to failure and loss—wondering what we have done to deserve such misfortune. Jesus’ disciples, when confronted with a man born blind, assumed that someone must have sinned to cause this state of affairs (John 9:2), and yet Jesus rejected these assumptions, and demonstrated a very different perspective, which reveals that what passes for blindness is often real vision, and what passes for sight may conceal a deeper blindness. The church must say loudly, and believe heartily, that disability is not a divine punishment.

But this tendency to link disability and sin can take subtler forms as well. Those facing disability may be encouraged to pray for healing, and may be led, sometimes in subtle and indirect ways, to doubt their own faith if the prayed-for healing does not arrive. Indeed, the church’s bold proclamation of the power of God to heal can have unintended consequences in the lives of persons with disabilities, as they find themselves forced to choose between either rejecting such proclamation as inadequate or rejecting their own faith as inadequate.

A particularly subtle way of marginalizing persons with disabilities can take the form of excessive admiration. Sometimes, rather than being overtly marginalized and objectified, persons with disabilities are treated as “super-spiritual” persons whose extraordinary courage and spiritual strength places them in a class by themselves. In other cases, parents of children who experience disability may be idealized for their incredible devotion. These expressions of respect may indeed be warranted, but these tendencies to idealize can also be another way in which the church creates boundaries that mark off persons with disabilities, inhibiting the capacity of the church to be a fully welcoming community for all persons who are sinners, saved by grace.

How is the church to address such problems, and to grow in its ability to be a welcoming community for persons with disabilities? There are wonderful resources in Scripture and the Christian tradition to help the church to grow. Interestingly, we see within Scripture itself a growing movement in which the vocation of the people of God as a welcoming community deepens over time. Early in the history of the people of God, eunuchs are singled out and excluded from worship at the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1). Similarly, women who could not bear children were routinely marginalized in the cultures of the biblical world. Both men and women who could not fulfill society's ideal of "fruitfulness" were second-class citizens at best. Yet the Old Testament also contains numerous promises of blessing and inclusion for the barren woman (Isaiah 54:1). The book of Acts records the conversion of a eunuch (also a stranger from Ethiopia) as one of the early converts to Christianity, welcomed into the people of God (Acts 8:27).

Jesus himself embodies this posture of welcome to the stranger, the marginalized, and the excluded. He touched the "unclean." He shocked the crowds by going to dinner with Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector who was also short in stature. He regularly showed interest in people who could not walk, who could not speak, who could not hear, who were disfigured through leprosy. He was surrounded by crowds seeking healing. His normal entourage was not made up of "normal" people, but people with a wide variety of disabilities.

The early church followed Jesus' lead when confronted with gentiles who accepted the good news of the gospel. Though the decision took a major council of the church to implement (Acts 15), early Christians quickly began to welcome gentile "strangers" into their midst, without requiring them to eat kosher, to observe Sabbath as Jews did, or to be circumcised. The mandate of welcome into the people of God took priority over the need for uniformity in cultural practice. To be sure, the inclusion of gentiles raised all sorts of new challenges and problems. We see almost all of Paul's letters wrestling with the challenges faced by these communities, as they tried to live out God's welcoming grace in the midst of deep diversity. Yet it might be observed that where the church is no longer struggling with such challenges, it has ceased, in important ways, to be the welcoming church God calls it to be.

These challenges persist today in churches that seek to follow Jesus in fully welcoming persons with disabilities. One of these challenges arises from the church's need to find balance in its proclamation of the healing power of the gospel. The church rightly proclaims God's healing power, and recognizes that there are times when, by the mercy and power of God, some people are set free from some disabilities. Jesus points to the times in his ministry when "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:5). Yet throughout the experience of the church, healing does not always happen, and a one-sided emphasis only upon healing will almost always have the effect of marginalizing and stigmatizing persons with disabilities who have not

experienced physical healing. Indeed, an excessive preoccupation with physical healing may be driven more by human anxiety than by the hope of the gospel, as we become desperate for God to “fix” us and to return us to a societal ideal of “normalcy.”

At a deeper level still, the church must wrestle with the question of whether wholeness can coexist with disability. If persons are defined by their disability, then their whole existence becomes defined by an absence, a lack, an aberrancy. The church must boldly proclaim that Christian identity—both for more “able-bodied” persons and for persons with disabilities—does not arise from what we can and cannot do, but rather from our union with Christ and with Christ’s church. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). This core identity in Christ permits the apostle to boast even about his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:30f.). It is only this deep and fundamental transformation in Christ that can free the church to be most deeply welcoming, both when healing comes and when it does not come. Who knows whether, just as the resurrected body of Jesus still showed its wounds, so our resurrected bodies will still bear the marks of our disabilities as well, not as limitations on our existence before God, but as the traces of divine grace, the signs of our deepest union with the Christ who shared our sufferings?<sup>1</sup>

#### *IV. Endurance and Hope*

This recovery of core Christian identity in welcoming persons with disabilities—an identity that can endure through all sorts of suffering or loss—invites the church to rediscover and revalue a virtue common in the New Testament, but often overlooked in our success-oriented North American culture: the virtue of endurance. The question is not whether the church is called to endure persons with disabilities, but whether the church can learn something more about the endurance to which Scripture calls all Christians, through sharing life with persons who struggle with disabilities. In Romans 5:3f., Paul speaks of how “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”

Endurance is a complex virtue. In the New Testament, it involves not only the capacity to “put up with” losses and troubles; it is the discovery and embodiment of a deeper hope and joy, in the midst of such troubles and losses. This hope is not for a quick fix. This joy is not a passing giddiness. Rather, Christian endurance is grounded in the deeper hope that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, who shared our suffering, and with whom we will share eternal joy. It grows from the whisper of the Spirit in the heart, in the midst of the darkest night, that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”<sup>2</sup> The experience of disability is just one of the many ways in which the church is called to endurance, but the capacity of the church to deeply and fully welcome persons with disabilities will be an index of the church’s embrace of its deep calling to live lives of endurance with joy (Hebrews 12:2).

This call to endurance brings us to that curious way in which thanksgiving and lament blend with each other in Christian faith and experience. In welcoming persons with disabilities, the church recognizes two paradoxical truths: on the one hand, each life—including the lives of those who experience disability—is pure gift, to be received with grateful thanksgiving from the providential hand of God. On the other hand, as Paul says, “while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Corinthians 5:4). Even among persons with disabilities, the complex balance between gratitude and hope, between praise and lament, will vary, depending on the season in life and the specific point in one’s spiritual journey. For example, those who have lost capacities of the body or mind experience their disability differently from those who have never known those capacities to begin with. The church’s embrace of both gratitude and lament is one of the richest and most unpredictable of its spiritual movements. In welcoming persons with disabilities, whose lives are deeply shaped by this complex spirituality, the church may learn more about and enter more deeply into its distinctive vocation to live “between the times,” groaning with the whole creation, while also sharing in a foretaste of the age to come.

The hospitality commended in this paper will naturally find its culmination when persons with disabilities are no longer merely the “recipients” of the church’s ministry, but when they find their rightful place within the body of Christ, assisting the church as a whole to embody the good news of Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that Christ’s capacity to save us flows directly from his incarnation—the fact that he shared our life in all its weakness and vulnerability (Hebrews 2:18). If this is true, it is reasonable also to expect that the church’s own witness will come to its fullest expression when it is mediated through the voices, bodies, and stories of those who have tasted, by divine grace, both the losses and riches, the weaknesses and strength that flow from life in this groaning world, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

This paper thus invites the church not only to deepen its welcome to persons with disabilities, but to take the opportunity, in its encounter with persons with disabilities, to deepen its grasp of the gospel, and to enter more deeply into its union with Christ, not only in his resurrection, but also in his suffering (Philippians 3:10-11). For it is only in practicing such welcome that we ourselves will find our own deepest welcome before God. A fully welcoming encounter with persons with disabilities will almost inevitably lead the church into the very center of the gospel, and deepen the church’s capacity to follow Jesus. In short, the church must welcome persons with disabilities, not just because persons with disabilities need to be welcomed; the church must welcome persons with disabilities because, without such welcome, the church will not fully discover the unspeakable riches of its life in Christ.



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