

## “The Other Six Days”

Keynote Address by Eric Carter, Ph.D.

[Summer Institute on Theology and Disability](#)

June 20, 2014, Dallas, Texas

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[Download](#) *Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families: A Practical Guide for Congregations*

### Notes on “The Other Six Days”

A social scientist, Erik Carter started his keynote address at the 2014 Summer Institute on Disability and Theology by saying he would be “preaching from Numbers.” With data, he established the opportunity congregations and other communities of faith have to “welcome, receive, and be hospitable” every day of the week.

#### For example, some numbers

- Members might spend three hours a week *in* church. That means they each spend 165 hours a week *outside* of church.
- People who have developmental disabilities are 2 to 3 percent of the population. Nineteen percent of all Americans have disabilities. Almost one of every three families has a family member with a disability.
- Houses of worship have a ubiquitous presence in every community across the country. There are 335,000 places of worship in the U.S.

“Churches already have the capacity to help members flourish in all aspects of life,” Carter said. “This is Human Needs Ministry not a Special Needs Ministry.” Jobs, homes, friends, a way to contribute and share gifts—this is “quite ordinary, not special,” Carter said. “Let’s look at what we all share in common.”

Carter went on to highlight four opportunities for congregations to make a transformational seven-day-a-week difference in the lives of members who have developmental disabilities: jobs, homes, friends and family support.

#### For example, jobs

In Texas, 75 percent of people with developmental disabilities are *unemployed*. Of those who are employed, only one out of 20 works in an integrated setting alongside people who are not disabled.

“How many of you got your first job because of a family member or friend?” asked Carter. Surveying the raised hands he noted, “It should be 87 percent of you.”

“Congregations already have the capacity—an extensive network of member employers and employees. The average congregation has 186 attendees. The

average person knows 150 to 600 people. As a result, faith communities are “an association of connections.”

Carter shared how a young woman with identified disabilities wanted to work in a dental office. There were members of her congregation working in four different dental offices. The standard service agency or organization does not have access to this wealth of referrals and connections.

The gift of these connections,” Carter said, “can transform lives.”

### **A practical guide for congregations**

As part of a two-year project, Carter and four other researchers from Vanderbilt University asked almost 500 parents of adolescents and young adults with developmental disabilities two questions:

- How helpful would each of 14 potential congregation-provided supports be to you in raising your children with an intellectual disability or autism?
- Is this particular support, now available in your congregation?

[\*Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families: A Practical Guide for Congregations\*](#), a helpful 18-page resource, summarizes project learnings and offers doable implementation ideas.

One example: 70 percent of the parents in the project identified congregation-wide disability awareness efforts as a helpful support. Just 10 percent said their congregations provided this support. The 60 percent difference highlights the opportunity, the potential, for faith communities to make a difference.

### **Consider**

Carter’s stories and statistics build a compelling case for congregations to engage people with disabilities and their families.

- The need is evident. People with developmental disabilities are likely to be unemployed and socially isolated.
- With time and attention devoted to “shared activities, valued roles and common interests,” and with diverse membership forming a network of connections, faith communities can respond effectively to the need.
- Faith communities have the capacity—“the connections, care and creativity”—to respond to the need.

“Maybe a program doesn’t have to be the first response,” Carter said. Instead of building special programs and hoping people will participate, Carter recommends focusing on one person at a time. “Ask what would be helpful,” he said. “Start the conversation with strengths and gifts, not deficits. Invite people to get involved with that individual,” he said. Remember, “An announcement is not the same as an invitation. You don’t attend a birthday party because of an announcement.”

Erik Carter, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*.

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The [Summer Institute on Theology and Disability](#) brings together academics, theologians, practitioners and others—people with and without labeled disabilities—to explore the inclusive intersections of theology and disabilities. The [Bethesda Institute](#) is the primary and organizing sponsor of this international and increasingly interfaith annual event.

—Sue Edison-Swift  
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