



Title: "Best Friends", Artwork done by Betsy Higgins, an artist from the art studio of Stone Belt Arc Inc.

Image description: Blue background that is textured by brush strokes. Painted pieces of paper in colors of blue, pink, purple, green, orange and yellow look to have been cut up and then formatted and pieced together onto the blue background to create an image of two people. A combination of black straight and curvy lines are around the figures, possibly indicating movement.

Tips, Techniques, and Technologies:

Toward Meeting the Needs of Persons with Disabilities to
Experience Belonging in their Community of Faith.



On behalf of the entire PDC Leadership team, thank you for your work Toward Meeting the Needs of Persons with Disabilities to Experience Belonging in their Community of Faith. We hope that the following resources are helpful in your ministry.

Susan E. Lydick, Ph.D.

Table of Contents

Radical Wholeness: The Complete Faith Community

Milton Tyree

Worship Liturgy: focused on disability inclusion

Rev. Sarah McKenney

Preaching the Gospels' Healing Narratives in ways that Honor Lived Experiences of Disability

Rev. Dr. Bethany McKinney Fox

Congregational Outreach Survey

Erik Carter Ph.D.

Religious Education Support Plan for Children and Youth

Erik Carter Ph.D.

Welcome...You Belong! Preparing a Sunday School Class for Inclusion of a New Member with Disabilities.

Rev. Evelyn McMullen contributes

Volunteer Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the Life of the Church

Rev. Dr. Bethany McKinney Fox

Creating a Sense of Belonging: The Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Mission/Service Projects

Elizabeth Lydick contributes

Considering Different Sensory Sensitivities to Encourage Inclusion in Church Experiences

Jean Buffardi

Utilizing Sign Language Interpreters for Congregations

Rev. Ray Meester

I Can Hear Clearly Now: Making the Church Accessible to Those with Hearing Loss

Rick Roderick

Technology: Gifts for Members with Visual Impairments

Terry Chaney

Reading from the Same Page

Rev. Debra Trevino

What to Say & What Not to Say When a New Baby is Born into the Faith Community and Has a Genetic Disorder

Rev. Christian Norman

When Faced with Chronic Illness or Debilitating Illness, What to Say, What Not to Say to the Person and Families

Rev. Sue Montgomery

Radical Wholeness: The Complete Faith Community

The following piece was written by Milton Tyree, PHEWA Disability Concerns Consultant for Intellectual Disabilities

People are always learning something about belonging: Who's invited and who's left out? Who belongs and who doesn't? Who belongs with whom? Who's important and who's not? And why? Belonging and un-belonging messages are relentlessly sent — purposely or not, consciously or unconsciously received.

This article is about congregational belonging with people who have disabilities -- people all too often kept apart and away. If the church is called to break this cycle of exclusion, then where can we begin?

We need a radical way. Not militant, not aggressive, but decidedly counter-cultural. We need a peaceful, thoughtful, caring, and deliberate recalling of the roots of our faith. Involving and including people rejected. Understanding those misunderstood. Discovering and using gifts and talents of those believed by many to have nothing to offer. Building up the very people the larger society has a way of putting down. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Ephesians 4:29)

So, what do people with disabilities need? To be included, involved, and understood. To have their gifts and talents recognized, used, and appreciated. To be known and valued individually as essential congregational members. To be loved. There you have it. People with disabilities need the same things that everyone needs.

The good news is that there are positive ways of moving forward — approaches that are tried and true, deriving from or aligning perfectly with our Christian tenets, and with potential for energizing a congregation as it seeks to become more complete:

Valuing those that the world devalues. Jesus dealt quite directly with social devaluation, turning upside-down our human tendency to rank order people and their perceived social significance. The gospels are full of instances where Jesus reminds, "... those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." (Luke 13:30)

Feeding the hunger to belong — discovering personal talents and interest, one person at a time. Just about everyone wants to belong -- including those who can't express it. Unfortunately, the human construct of "disability" first compares people using arbitrary norms, and then describes people in terms of their "deficiencies." So, it's no wonder that people's gifts, talents, and interests are often unrecognized, minimized, or outright lost. Some may become so powerfully socialized into a disability identity, that they've become convinced that they have nothing to offer, that they *shouldn't* belong. Therefore, there are individuals that need others to assist in personal discovery — partnering with people having high expectations and insight to see talents and ways of contribution that have gone previously unrecognized.

This is perhaps the most essential facet of building a complete congregation—people who've been required to be on the receiving end of assistance, instead taking their rightful place as contributing congregational members.

Moving beyond “special.” There’s no doubt about it; “special” is deeply embedded in our society. People having intellectual or developmental disabilities are particularly vulnerable to finding themselves in “special placements,” that is, being placed in groupings that gather together people with disabilities and separate them from non-disabled people involved in the same life functions. For example, in congregational life it’s still common nowadays to see special classes for adults with disabilities that are separate from Christian education offered other adults in the same congregation. This follows patterns in the larger culture where there remains an abundance of special places to live, work, and go to school for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, all having decades-old histories where special programs were developed for people who’d been profoundly rejected and excluded. The response to this injustice was developing special approximations of the real thing, instead of the real thing. It’s important to recognize roots of this initial impulse, to do what’s right in the midst of things that were terribly wrong.

So, it’s not a matter of feeling bad about having separate special programs, *it’s just time to move on*. Much has been learned since the 1950s about what would be better — for everyone! More and more the social costs of “special” have been recognized and addressed. Very easily and unconsciously, “regular” congregational members begin to believe that everyone in the “special” congregational group is really the same — all having the same interests, needing the same things, or learning in the same ways. “Special” takes on a life of its own — a separate and distinct life.

Especially over the last 30 years, many have been asking: Why not provide access to the vast menu of possibilities and benefits through regular employment instead of placing people in limited options of special employment? Why group people with disabilities together in special schools, when participation in typical education raises the bar for personalized learning and development? *And*, instead of accentuating difference and intensifying social distance, why not move toward everyday participation and contribution within congregational life, opening the doors for authentic membership, mutuality, and reciprocity? We need a *community* of faith, not a *collection* of groups of people, especially not people grouped because of a commonly held socially devalued characteristic.

Seeking typical and valued congregational roles and ways of fitting in. Every congregation has its distinctive culture and norms. Here’s the central question: What do people of the same age and gender, having similar interests and talents, do within your faith community, and what will it take for this person to be involved? It’s not necessary to do everything at once. But it is necessary to do something, finding a comfortable starting place, using accommodations and adaptations as needed.

Belonging is not a new program; it’s a new identity. Opening doors. Offering the invitations. Leading, not following. Valuing people devalued by the larger society. Honoring Jesus’ example. Embracing a radical wholeness. We have the opportunity to model complete community. It’s an imperative and a privilege.

November 2018 - This article is a rewrite from the 2011 PDC Resource Packet titled, “Radical Wholeness: All Children, All Youth and the Complete Faith Community.” Milton Tyree is the PDC consultant for people having developmental or intellectual disabilities. You may reach him with comments or questions via e-mail at PDCmtyree@me.com.



Worship Liturgy: focused on disability inclusion

The following was submitted by Rev. Sarah VanderZee McKenney, PDC Moderator and Spiritual Support and Volunteer Coordinator, Stone Belt Arc Inc.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: All are members of the Body of Christ.

People: We come as we are—in the body and spirit God created.

Leader: All are members of the Body of Christ.

People: Individually weak, communally strong.

Leader: All are members of the Body of Christ.

People: Where “Us” and “Them” become woven into One.

Leader: All are members of the Body of Christ.

People: Together we fight against the structures of separation.

Leader: All are members of the Body of Christ.

People: We are present in our own unique way to worship God

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We confess that often we separate ourselves from others who are different from us, and judge the ability and gifts of those who we may not understand. We confess that often we expect others to heal and care for themselves, instead of being a community who supports and carries one another. We confess that we often expect healing to look and be a certain way, instead of trusting You, the creator of us all—body, mind, and spirit. We confess that we, individually and as a church, have considered healing in narrow and harmful ways, inserting our own ideas of what others need. You created each of us, O God, with unique and wonderful gifts and yet we do not always celebrate and recognize this in others. Forgive our sin of prejudice and small-mindedness, and make us more like Jesus.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Thanks be to God, who created us and called us into community as one in Christ. Individually in need, together supporting, it is in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that our sins are forgiven.

Alleluia!



HYMN Options from the Presbyterian USA Glory to God Hymnal

#7 Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth

#15 All Creatures From Our God and King

#27 Sacred Body

#29 O God, You Search Me

#308 O God In Whom All Life Begins

#733 We All Are One In Mission

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION quotes from Rev. Dr. Bethany McKinney Fox' book *Disability and The Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*

May we go from here “to really heal in the way of Jesus” with “true compassion.” Let us “break down the structures and practices that create pits, and work together to fill with holy dirt. Healing in the way of Jesus that calls for something entirely new where everyone’s full participation is valued.” May Christ’s healing love be with you this day and forever.

Preaching the Gospels' Healing Narratives in ways that Honor Lived Experiences of Disability

The following was submitted by Rev. Dr. Bethany McKinney Fox, author of *Disability and The Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*

In the Gospels Jesus offers love, liberation, and wholeness to people who need it in the midst of structures and systems that didn't always do the same. Some of this happened for people with various illnesses and/or disabilities, and people experienced radical transformation and healing in their lives on multiple levels. When understood holistically, Jesus' healing interactions with people in the Gospels can be powerful ways to underscore what it looks like to be communities of healing in faithful ways that actually do heal.

How we understand and define "disability" tends to impact what we notice in the healing narratives. Often in our biomedical culture we tend to equate "healing" with "curing," so when we say "healing" in relation to someone with a diagnosis or disability, we typically mean changing their body or brain. But that wasn't the full picture of health or healing in Jesus' day (or our own). In the first century Mediterranean context, the concept of health or well-being (*shalom*) was much more holistic – it included not just our physical characteristics but other things, like: our social relationships, connection to God, and how we were regarded by our larger community. Understanding that point helps us recognize why some of the narratives of Jesus healing someone in the Bible are so long. If the only thing that mattered for someone blind was that they be able to see again, their story could be told in a couple of verses. But when we understand healing to be a comprehensive work in someone's life as people in the first century did, it makes sense that the Gospel writers include so many other details, like: how the crowd responded, Jesus' words to the person, and how the person's spiritual life and sense of personal identity changed as well.

This is also brought to light when we pay attention to the voices and perspectives of scholars, ministers, and others with disabilities who share about their experiences today. A number of people with disabilities explain that while there may be chronic pain or other discomfort tied specifically to their disability, often what is at least as limiting (and sometimes more so) are the ways physical, social, institutional, and intellectual structures are created to be exclusive of certain types of bodies/brains. The medical model of disability is a way of understanding disability that locates the "problem" in need of healing in the body/mind of the individual. There's also another way of framing the concept of disability, the social model, which locates the problem in our physical and social structures. According to the social model, healing would mean changing our structures so that they are accessible to people who think and move through the world in all kinds of different ways. So depending on which model of disability we emphasize (and these are just two of many), we tend to notice different things in the narratives of Jesus healing. After all, what we regard as the "healing" that takes place in the text would depend on what "problem" we believe is in need of healing in the first place. Adopting more holistic understandings of both disability and healing lead to more holistic and thorough readings of the healing texts.

**Note: While in most interactions of healing Jesus does cure a person's body, that doesn't mean healing in the way of Jesus must entail a cure today. God is wildly free and can do whatever God wants to do, but it is also possible for someone to experience transformation and to be healed without a cure of their disability or medical condition. Following Jesus would mean paying attention to people's bodies, as Jesus did, but that could mean a lot of other paths to physical transformation and care, for example: advocating for accessible health care, making sure people to have space to rest, therapeutic touch, or friendly/affectionate touch (as desired and appropriate). It also might mean access to assistive technology that supports their body being able to do what it needs to do in the world, to increase access and participation in community even if their body/mind remains the same. All of these things could be considered "bodily healing" even if they are not a "cure" in the typical sense.¹*

Notes on a Few Specific Healing Narratives from the Gospels

Below are brief notes and ideas on each text demonstrating how different conceptualizations of disability/healing can lead to attention to different aspects of the healing event. The notes point out some aspects of what "healing" might look like that sometimes get ignored in our modern, Western contexts that tend to think of disability mostly through a biomedical lens. These are not meant to be exhaustive, just a way to get the wheels turning for noticing the more holistic ways of healing Jesus was practicing, and what it might mean to be a community of healing in the way of Jesus today.

1) Man with Paralysis Lowered through the Roof: Matt 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26

Healing that happens according to the medical model of disability:

- Man with paralysis was able to walk again after his encounter with Jesus

Healing according to a more holistic understanding of disability:

- Access is created when people accompanying a man with paralysis destroy a perfectly good (but inaccessible) structure in order to get to Jesus (and Jesus commends their faith for it)
- Jesus declares the man's sins forgiven, yet the man remains paralyzed (breaking the cultural association between sin as the cause of disability)
- Man experiences forgiveness and thanks God (showing some spiritual transformation)
- The surrounding leaders and crowd who witness this event are amazed, and their view of both Jesus and the man is corrected and clarified

¹ For more information and explanation around the healing narratives and different approaches to interpretation, as well as an examination of the practices that flow from varying interpretations, the following book might be helpful: Fox, Bethany McKinney, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (IVP Academic, 2019). Another helpful resource is: Black, Kathy, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Abingdon, 1996).

- Jesus calls the man “son” or “friend” – making sure the man himself and those in the community are clear on who this man is: a member of Jesus’ family, the family of God, welcomed deeply into the community
- The crowd is transformed as well through the encounter (it isn’t just between Jesus and the individual)

2) Woman with an Issue of Bleeding: Mark 5:24-34

Healing that happens according to the medical model of disability:

- Woman with issue of bleeding is cured of this condition by Jesus, even though all the doctors in her time were not able to help her

Healing according to a more holistic understanding of disability:

- Jesus isn’t satisfied just with her bodily healing (the narrative could have stopped much earlier if that’s all that mattered), he stops everything to make sure he can interact with her - not letting others deter him until he is able to engage with her directly
- He is compassionately present to her and listens to her whole story
- He calls her “daughter” in front of everyone, thereby clarifying her identity and place in Jesus’ family and the broader family of God
- Jesus also commends her as a person of faith in front of the community
- She goes from approaching Jesus from behind, to coming to him face-to-face
- The woman demonstrates great perseverance
- Her financial situation will potentially be different going forward, since medical bills had led to her bankruptcy

3) Zacchaeus: Luke 19:1-10

**This doesn’t usually get framed as a healing narrative because Zacchaeus doesn’t experience bodily transformation. However, it bears striking resemblance to other Gospel healing narratives because we get a physical description of Zacchaeus (which only ever happens for people who get “healed” in the Gospels), and the word “salvation” is used, which Luke also often uses in cases of physical healing. This helps us notice that what “healing” means for Gospel writers might not be the same as how we think about it in terms of just bodily transformation or cure.*

Healing that happens according to the medical model of disability:

- None. Zacchaeus’ body is the same at the end of the narrative as at the beginning.

Healing according to a more holistic understanding of disability:

- Zacchaeus demonstrates creativity in making accessibility for himself in an inaccessible environment (something lots of folks with various disabilities often have to do)
- Zacchaeus completely alters his life financially, demonstrating a deep commitment to honesty and integrity
- Jesus declares Zacchaeus “saved” in front of everyone, thereby the crowd also is transformed in how they perceive him (since he was first called a “known sinner”)
- Jesus affirms Zacchaeus as a “child of Abraham” and part of the community



This Congregational Survey can be displayed at your Welcome Center. Encourage everyone to fill this out and communicate to you their interests, gifts, challenges, and areas of need of support.

Congregational Outreach Survey

Our congregation is called to have an impact on our community. We desire to be an inviting congregation that is intentional about finding ways to worship among, mutually support, and serve alongside people with disabilities and their families in fellowship. We invite you to help us realize this vision. Do you know people with disabilities who might want to attend our congregations? Are there needs we can help meet or support we can provide? Would you like to help welcome people with disabilities and their families into our faith community? Your answers to this brief questionnaire will help us identify steps we can take to become a congregation known for our hospitality.

1. How would you describe yourself? Check all that apply.

- ☐ I have a disability.
- ☐ I have a child with a disability.
- ☐ I have a sibling or relative with a disability.
- ☐ I have a friend or neighbor with a disability.
- ☐ I interact with people with disabilities at my workplace.
- ☐ I do not know anyone with a disability.
- ☐ Other: _____

2. If you or a family member has a disability, which of the following supports might help you participate more fully in congregational life or meet a personal need? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Transportation:
 - ☐ To worship services
 - ☐ To other congregational activities throughout the week
 - ☐ To other events in the community
- ☐ Additional support to participate in
 - ☐ Worship services
 - ☐ Children's programs
 - ☐ Youth programs
 - ☐ Adult programs
- ☐ Respite care (e.g., offering a periodic break to parents of children with disabilities)
 - ☐ To attend worship services
 - ☐ To participate in other congregational activities
 - ☐ At other times throughout the week
- ☐ Support group for parents, siblings, and other caregivers
- ☐ Pastoral counseling
- ☐ Financial or other material assistance: _____
- ☐ Information about faith-based services and program within our community

In the space below, we encourage you to share with us other needs not already listed:

3. As we consider new ways of welcoming people with developmental and other disabilities into our congregation, would you be interested in learning more about how you might serve in any of the following ways?

- ☐ Periodically giving someone a ride to services or other congregational activities
- ☐ Serving as a companion or partner during congregational activities
- ☐ Inviting someone with disabilities to sit with you during worship services
- ☐ Inviting someone over for a meal and fellowship periodically
- ☐ Joining a ministry team to improve our welcome to people with disabilities
- ☐ Serving as a helper or buddy to a person with disabilities during children's and youth programs
- ☐ Volunteering to help us provide respite care activities
- ☐ Attending an informational workshop about disabilities and our congregation's welcome
- ☐ Serving on the team that reviews and acts on the responses to this survey
- ☐ Other: _____

4. People often have gifts that they never thought of using to welcome and support people with developmental disabilities – an ongoing personality, a specific hobby or talent, or a knack for making connections among people. Perhaps there are things you care deeply about. List one or two things that you are really good at or have a passion for doing.

5. Will you commit to inviting your friends and neighbors with disabilities to attend services and activities within our congregation?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'd like to learn more about how to do this.

6. If you would like to talk further about the information you provided on this survey, please let us know your name and the best way to contact you.

Name: _____

☐ Telephone: _____

☐ Email: _____

7. Are there any questions, concerns, or comments you would like to share with us?

Please return to _____ by _____



This is a survey and support plan form designed for children, however feel free to adjust this for adults our youth as needed.

Religious Education Support Plan for Children and Youth

I. Overview

We are excited that your child will be involved in our programs! We would like to ask you to provide the following information so that we can ensure that our programs meet the needs of your child.

Date: _____

Child's name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Parent's/caregiver's name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

If absolutely necessary, where can we find you while we are with your child?

☐ Main sanctuary ☐ Classroom ☐ Other: _____

What are some things that your child really enjoys doing?

In what ways does your child learn best? Are there teaching strategies that work particularly well?

How does your child communicate with others?

What types of assistance (if any) will your child need with eating, getting around, or using the restroom?

What behavioral challenges might we encounter when interacting with your child (if any)?

-
-
-
-

For each challenge, what are some strategies for responding that seem to work well?

-
-
-
-

Derived from: *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*, by Erik W. Carter. ©2007 Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved.

How would you describe where your child is right now in his or her faith journey?

What gifts, special interests, and talents does your child have?

Other information:

Describe any allergies that we should know about:

Is your child on medications that may impact his or her behavior? If so, describe.

Is your child at increased risk for getting sick from other children? How can we reduce this risk?

Are there other medical issues of which we should be aware? If so, how should we be prepared to respond to these issues?

Do you have any other specific concerns or goals that we can try to address?

II. Participation Plan

Describe the strategies and supports that will be used to involve the child in the following aspects of congregational life:

Activities	What will the child's/youth's involvement look like?	What supports will the child/youth need to participate
Small group activities		
Large group activities		
Summer programs and camps		
Other programs for children and youth (children's choir, recreational activities, etc.)		
Worship services		
Rites of passage, preparational classes, and other activities (Bar/Bat-mitzvah, confirmation, membership classes, etc.)		
Service and outreach opportunities		

Derived from: *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*, by Erik W. Carter. ©2007 Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved.

Welcome...You Belong! Preparing a Sunday School class (children, youth, or adult) for inclusion of new member with disabilities.

The following article was written by Dr. Evelyn W. McMullen, Secretary for the PDC and Executive Director of Bright Threads Ministries 1323 Timberidge Dr., Lakeland, FL 33809 www.BrightThreadsMinistries.org

As congregations begin conversations about becoming inclusive Christian communities we are challenged to move beyond ramps to relationships--from passive "All are Welcome," to "You and I Belong."

When a person with a disability first visits a Sunday School class, focusing on relationships builds a foundation for Belonging.

Let's begin with **adults**.

This new individual is a person seeking spiritual growth and Christian fellowship. Adults often have a choice of groups. If they choose a lecture class they may be more interested in content than in fellowship. But even in a lecture class relationships can be nurtured. How are people welcomed to your group? How do you introduce yourself?

- Speak directly to the individual...not to an attendant or accompanying friend. Speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Don't make assumptions about a disability. If your class begins with coffee, ask first, "Would you like some help with coffee?"
- Personal space. Do not move or lean on mobility aids, such as canes or wheelchairs. Remember, ask first
- Allow time for responses in discussion. If the class seems uncomfortable with silence, remind the group that we need to give the Holy Spirit time to speak through each of us.
- Vary verbal responses with "thumbs up" to include more people.

Other tips may be found at <http://www.uiaccess.com/accessucd/interact.html>

For **teen** groups, begin by getting to know the individual well enough so that he/she is introduced as someone with interests or talents in common with others in the group. Then the individual is introduced to others who like animé, for instance.

- In your first conversation with a parent, please remember that this parent has to advocate for their child 24/7. They are also facing typical adolescent issues. A genuine "What would help ____ have a good experience this morning?" is much more helpful than "What is ____'s diagnosis."
- Let the first group experience be a small, active project: sorting school supplies for backpacks; setting up for a church dinner, etc. Bring the group together for pizza and take time for a group conversation and prayer about their time together.
- If your youth ministry operates in a silo, kids with varying abilities can be a bridge between church ministries and generations.
- Ben Conner issues this challenge to youth ministry leaders: **Young people with disabilities are not only an essential part of the diversity of the human experience but their contribution, gifts, perspectives, and**

weaknesses are also necessary if the church is to have a relevant witness.

<http://iym.ptsem.edu/disability1/> Modeling this value is important for the health of the group.

Excellent introductions for children's ministry are found in Barbara Newman's books, *Your Feet, My Shoes* (clcnetwork.org) and *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* (FaithAliveResources.org). We celebrate the way God made us similar and unique.

- Leaders need to model the value that each child brings to the group. As we show that God loves each one of us, classmates will be likely to demonstrate that love and acceptance as well.
- If there may be challenging behaviors, let children know that sometimes we communicate with our bodies, and that a child's behaviors aren't "bad;" they are trying to show how they are feeling. We need to stay safe and find a place to calm down.
- Children in the class could participate in taking pictures for a "Church Welcome" social story. Ask a special education teacher or find a template at <https://asburyonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Copy-of-Sunday-School-Social-Story.pdf>
- Help new children find others with similar interests. Or find a way that a child's focused interest can be used in the class. If a child is focused on trains, she could add prayer pictures to a "prayer train."

As we gather as a church family, we discover that these small steps help people recognize and value the gifts that each person brings to congregation. With time, the Holy Spirit strengthens relationships in the Body of Christ. We have moved from merely saying "Welcome!" to recognizing that we all Belong.



Title: "River Rainbow". Artist is Sabrina Wicks, an artist from the art studio of Stone Belt Arc Inc.

Image Description: Background is white. The piece is created by torn up and cut up pieces of colored paper. In the upper middle part of the piece you see light blue, dark blue and white pieces of paper pieced together to create an image of sky and clouds. The upper right hand side has strips of red, orange, yellow, green placed vertical coming out of the sky. Below this and in the middle there are pieces of different blues, whites, and greys pieced on top of each other to create an image of water or stream. There are brown rounded pieces placed among the blue, white and grey pieces. On the left side there are slender strips of light and dark green, maybe indicating grass.

Volunteer Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the Life of the Church

The following piece was written by Rev. Bethany McKinney Fox, PDC member and author of the book, *Disability and The Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*.

People with disabilities can volunteer in any aspect of church life, though sometimes supports, adaptations, or assistive technology may be needed to remove barriers and make our structures and rhythms accessible. What these are will vary depending on the activity and the type of disability, but where there's a will, there's always a way! The Holy Spirit is not short on creativity. PDC also has lots of suggestions and resources, and is available for input if you want to brainstorm some ways forward in a particular situation.

So, rather than type a list of all the volunteer opportunities possible in a church context, I'll instead list some examples of actual ways people with disabilities are currently serving as volunteers in PC(USA) congregations. While this is just a small sampling of the many ways people with disabilities are participating in the lives of our congregations, hopefully it will get the ideas flowing as you discern all the ways the gifts of people with disabilities can flourish and enrich your community.

A few ways people with disabilities are using their gifts as volunteers in churches:

Sunday Morning Worship:

- Singing in the choir (adult choir, children's choir, etc.)
- Serving as liturgists (praying, reading scripture, other aspects of liturgy)
- Greeting
- Ushering
- Communion server
- Offering: passing around offering plates and/or bringing the plates forward

Church Roles and Functions:

- Teaching Sunday school
- Making coffee on Sunday mornings
- Serving in an ordained role: deacon, elder
- Collecting attendance registration sheets
- Helping with sound and A/V tech needs

Congregational Care:

- Visitation and prayer for members at home or living in senior living centers
- Making crafts and decorations to give members (especially when they are sick or going through a difficult time) or to visitors as gifts

Community Outreach:

- Helping train dogs in a dog therapy program, including serving as a handler for some of the dogs being trained
- Coaching in sports programs
- Helping organize balance classes (classes for seniors that focus on improving and maintaining balance)
- Help with sorting, bagging, clean up for food pantry program
- Attending mission trips

Some of the supports and/or adaptations named as helpful by the leaders of the churches where people with disabilities are serving as volunteers:

- Elevators, ramps, accessible seating, adaptability in the worship context (letting people do their part at different speeds, or from a different location in the church, or partnering with another person), noise-canceling headphones, legos or other hands-on activities to help engage/calm folks, step-stool for getting into a church van/bus, leadership choosing to remain seated during readings or prayers when liturgist is using a wheelchair.

Creating a Sense of Belonging:

The Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Mission/Service Projects

The following piece was contributed by Elizabeth Lydick, Leader, Burke Presbyterian Church TreeHouse Ministry

Mission or service projects are a great way to include persons with disabilities in the life of the church. Often times, people assume a person with a disability may not have anything to offer. In reality, we all have things to offer or gifts to share. It is a matter of looking at each person's ability level and considering making adaptations to the activity so that each person can contribute or participate. There is something very special about people who have their own struggles in life being able to help others. This is truly God's work happening in people's lives.

Here are some basic principles our leaders in the Burke Presbyterian Church TreeHouse Ministry use to guide our inclusion of persons with disabilities in our mission projects. I hope that these principles will be helpful as you work to translate them to apply to your efforts to include persons with disabilities in your mission project:

1. When someone unfamiliar to you and who has an obvious disability arrives to participate in your church Mission project, consider how often well-intentioned efforts to "avoid staring" may actually inhibit opportunity for genuine interactions with the individual.
2. As much as possible, make eye contact with the person, say hello, and make it clear that their presence at your Mission activity is valued, a first step toward a feeling of belonging.
3. Continue your individual efforts to make the person and their family feel welcome by smiling and chatting for a few minutes and then asking them to sit with you to begin work on the project.
4. As an alternative, introduce them to another person who you have previously identified as being at ease interacting with persons with disabilities. Have this person partner with them to allow the individual to contribute in whatever way(s) their abilities allow even if that is simply sitting and being present.
5. Have the "at ease" person continue to partner until other project participants have had time to observe and begin to model welcoming and partnering behavior.
6. If a person is not behaving like we expect during an activity (for example: different kinds of movements, making different vocalizations, not speaking, not making eye contact) we need to make every effort to show the person that they are participating in the activity in their own way and that that is welcomed.



For many years we have been putting together 50 gift bags for men and women at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who are unable to leave the hospital during Christmastime. These bags include various fun and life affirming gifts of food, cozy blankets, and games that fill the Meetinghouse at Burke Presbyterian Church. Several persons with disabilities participate in the filling of these bags. Often it works best to work in pairs so the person with the disability has a buddy with them to help.

One person may read from the list of items that needs to go in the bags while the other person picks up items. In one case we have an individual in a wheelchair who has limited eyesight and hearing. This person contributes by carrying the gift bag in his lap. His buddy hands him items so that he can place them in the gift bag.

At the end of the evening, when 50 bags have been filled, we make a point of taking the time to take a group photo of the filled bags and all participants. This allows us to celebrate our belief that each and every person has filled a special and important role in completing the project. When we work together to make service projects doable for persons with disabilities, we all gain a sense of accomplishment and a greater sense of our own belonging.

Considering Different Sensory Sensitivities to Encourage Inclusion in Church Experiences

The following piece was written by M. Jean Buffardi, MS, CCC-SLP, retired speech/language pathologist, retired special educator in early childhood, and member of Burke Presbyterian Church, Burke, Virginia.

People of all ages and abilities learn and respond to their environment through their senses. We are familiar with the senses of *vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch*. There are two more that are important: *vestibular*, which gives us information about balance, movement and our position relative to the space around us, and *proprioceptive*, which gives us information through our muscles and joints. People can be more sensitive in one or more area, such as light that is too bright or not bright enough; sounds that are too loud, at an unpleasant pitch, or too quiet; smells that are associated with pleasant aromas or smells that are repulsive that others do not notice; or touch that is too light so it is threatening or too strong that it hurts.

As we seek to provide a space and experiences that enhance our learning, feeling of belonging, and conveying of God's love, we can consider differing responses to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and movements during worship, educational activities, fellowship, and service. People's behavior and responses will guide adjustments that need to be made so that people with different sensory needs participate fully in the life of the church, acknowledging that the community is not whole when one person is left out.

Related resource materials have been prepared in previous years and may be found in:

- 2013 *Inclusion of People of All Abilities*, including: "The Meaning of Inclusion," "Ideas to try for AD/HD and ASD," and "The Story behind Our Quiet Room."
- 2011 *Inclusion from the Inside Out*, including: "Multisensory Worship Ideas," "Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew," and "Tips for Church School Teachers: working with Children Who Have High Energy and/or Challenges with Focusing and Staying on Task."
- Reference for this article included information that was adapted from [The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun](#) by Carol Stock Kranowitz.

Signs that warrant consideration of adjustment in the environment may include:

- *Vision*: shielding eyes to screen out sights, close or cover one eye, or squinting; seeing double; having difficulty shifting eye gaze from one object to another; having difficulty following a moving object; being uncomfortable or overwhelmed by moving objects or people; fatiguing easily during visual activities; and withdrawing from participation and avoiding group activities.
- *Hearing*: being sensitive to loud noises or voices/instruments of particular pitches; not understanding the language used, especially when there are other conversations or sounds occurring; looking at others for clues about what to say before responding; or having trouble attending to and remembering what the person just heard.
- *Smell*: avoiding or craving certain smells associated with particular activities such as foods, perfumes, flowers, or incense.

- *Taste*: being sensitive to tastes, textures, or temperatures of foods or licking, chewing on, or tasting inedible objects.
- *Touch*: being sensitive to touch, especially when it is light or unexpected; reacting to certain textures or touch in “fight or flight” ways; avoiding or seeking messy activities; and seeking strong touch such as bumping pushing, or crashing into objects or people or touching objects and people often.
- *Proprioceptive*: Leaning, bumping, or crashing against objects and people; pulling or twisting clothing, chewing on cuffs, pencils, or other inedible objects; slapping feet when walking; sitting on feet; poking cheeks; pulling on fingers; or cracking knuckles; falling and tripping frequently.
- *Vestibular*: overreacting negatively and emotionally to ordinary movement; being cautious, slow moving, and hesitant to take risks; being tense and rigid to avoid changes in head position; appearing to be willful, manipulative, uncooperative, or meek; wanting physical support from a trusted peer or adult.

Setting the stage for meaningful experiences at church to include people with different sensory sensitivities:

DO: Talk to the person, family members or close friends to find out what is helpful and what the person likes to do or particular interests and strengths. Obtain information about what seems to be calming and organizing and what behavior indicates stress or distress.

DO: Provide opportunities for modifying sight, sound, movement, smell, taste, touch, and movement.

DO: Incorporate sensory experiences in educational, fellowship, and service activities.

Suggestions of some activities and adjustments that may be incorporated in educational, fellowship, or service activities.

Vision:

- Use pictures or written words to show the order of steps for activities and during storytelling. If there is a change in the schedule, use the visual schedule to explain before the change happens.
- Adjust lighting to fit the specific needs. Some people need natural lighting, others need brighter or more focused light. For example, use a flashlight to point to pictures or words to highlight a story, schedule, or steps to accomplish the activity. This may help guide the visual tracking. Some people are sensitive to florescent lighting. If so, minimize or use natural lighting.
- When telling a Bible story, discussing responses to scripture, or doing group discussion about a topic, use clear and colored pictures, objects, or large printed words visually in the order that fits the sequence (in English placed left to right and top to bottom).
- Provide penlights or flashlights for participants to use to accompany a song or story about light with models of when and how they may be used, such as turning them on with the word “shine” in This Little Light of Mine song. Provide clear behavioral guidelines of where to shine the light (up or forward, not in another person’s eyes).

Hearing:

- Minimize the number of conversations or background sounds as much as possible with guidance for conversational turn-taking when each participant has a turn to talk and to listen.
- Model use of a conversational level of speech with slightly lower pitch if possible. If a child becomes loud, excited, demanding, or explosive, lower your voice to re-establish calm.
- Use songs and instruments to include language relevant to the activity with rhythm and melody. Vary the songs to include people's names or favorite activities to personalize the songs.
- Add pictures, movements or gestures to songs and stories to add meaning to the words.
- Stand face to face with others in close proximity to decrease the need to use a loud voice and to help others use facial expressions and intonation patterns as well as speech to understand the message.
- Use props, puppets, or people with hats or costumes to act out stories as they add storylines, sing songs, or move to demonstrate understanding of what is being said or sung. Using different voices for different characters helps clarify and increases interest.
- Use signs and gestures to clarify and emphasize directions, stories, conversations, or songs.
- Use amplification as needed.

Smell:

- Include pleasant smells to playdough, paints, or other craft materials if participants enjoy scents or seek them out as they explore their environment.
- Avoid adding smells if the participants react, such as turning away, crinkling their noses, or say, "This smells bad."
- Talk about how different people notice or don't notice smells on nature walks or when guessing hidden foods to relate smells to the uniqueness of God's creations. Note participants' comments and responses to set the stage for positive experiences in the future.
- When using scented candles or incense, notice participants' reactions for future planning. Continue to be mindful that individual reactions can be very different and may be associated with an emotional reaction (positive or negative).

Touch (tactile):

- Include experiences with materials that give sensations that some children crave and others avoid. Examples include:
 - Using shaving cream, hand lotion, or damp sand in a tray with soapy water and towels available. Consider if they are scented or unscented, depending on the participants' sensitivities or needs.
 - Using playdough with and without cookie cutters related to a theme or story. Firm touch like kneading (related to a story about bread), rolling, patting, and poking gives resistance and can be calming. Notice the participants' reactions.

- Hiding objects related to the theme or story in putty, a bin of pebbles or sand.
- Providing “no-mess messy play” by putting two colors of paint or playdough in a ziplock plastic bag to squeeze or mix. A bag inside a bag helps prevent unwanted spills but encourages firm squeezes. Allow children to use tools instead of touching playdough or use glue until they acclimate to how it feels.
- Using activities to help a child who is about to have a meltdown because she has just touched something messy or uncomfortable or is reacting to the possibility of touching something unpleasant to him. Model saying, “ooo, icky-sticky,” “Go away, glue!” in either a talking voice or a whisper. Then, rub with deep pressure hands or feet, “pull” imaginary glue off fingers, or pretend to “shake” it off with a song of “Shake, shake shake my sillies (glue, other substance) off” (Raffi song adaptations). Finally, model a few deep breaths and add, “That’s better. Now we can ... (next activity).”
- Using a “tactile road” relating it to a journey from a Bible story or to a planned activity. Place different textures around the room as a road for participants to walk the road, using parts of the story or singing a song at a calming rate. The “road” could be constructed with swatches of carpet squares, large pieces of velvet, corduroy, satin or other cloths, fake fur, bubble wrap, “egg crate” bedding, or pillowcases filled with beans or rice (and securely fastened closed.) Have a clear beginning and end and encourage walking at a pace so participants’ feet can feel and adjust to each texture, rather than racing through quickly.

Vestibular (balance and movement)

- When leading movements, keep in mind that fast starts and stops are alerting and slow rocking is usually soothing and calming. Include these kinds of movements in songs or activities to fit the person’s needs.
- Avoid imposing experiences requiring changes in head position, balance, and movement if the participant is reluctant or avoidant. Plan with family members or the participant about what kinds of activities are helpful and which are not. Some which MAY be helpful include:
 - Rowboat (possibly related to one of the many Bible stories about boats). Two people sit facing each other as they hold hands and put soles or toes against each other’s feet. Rhythmically move forward and back in rhythm to a song, such as, *Row, row, row your boat*.
 - Wheelbarrow walks when one person holds the other’s knees or feet while (s)he walks with hands, perhaps pretending to carry a load to a location related to a story.
 - Placing pictures of locations related to a story on pillows or bean bag cushions and walk to each location, balancing on the pillows.
 - Swinging forward and backward on equipment. Slow swinging is usually calming while faster swinging usually increases alertness.

Proprioceptive (body position)

- Using “bottle babies,” with empty 2 liter plastic bottles without labels. Fill with interesting contents such as tempera paint, food coloring, mineral oil, sparkles or sequences, or other small items such as buttons, small shells, or tiny pebbles. Relate their use to the theme or story such as:
 - Carrying it like a baby in arms and rocking
 - Buying, selling, or trading at a pretend market
 - Putting in a back pack or jacket like a load during a journey, a treasure, or a gift.
 - Push or kick across the room or outside.
 - Bury it in a sandbox.
- Let children carry, push, or pull somewhat heavy loads, appropriate for their weight and size. “Heavy work” is usually calming and organizing. Some suggestions which might be related to activities include:
 - Carrying or pushing items in a crate during set-up of an activity or clean-up.
 - Putting stuffed animals or puppets in a pillowcase and take them up a ramp, down an incline, or up and down stairs as part of a story.
 - Putting items in a backpack or suitcase to take them from one area or room to another.
 - Doing chores such as sweeping, mopping, or pushing chairs to the table after a snack.
 - Using vehicles to move across a surface, pushing the toy while crawling on hands and knees.
 - Coloring or painting a rainbow or other scenes on a large piece of paper or sheet on the floor while the child is on hands and knees.
 - Doing “animal walks,” such as when acting out Noah’s Ark.

Make a home or building from a large, cardboard box (left over from an appliance delivery) that the child can go into and line with different textures. This could relate to a story setting or be available to crawl into for some quiet time.

In conclusion, when considering inclusion, the participants are the guides. Watch for reactions, listen for suggestions, and adjust as needed so that everyone has the sense of belonging. As in 1 Corinthians 12:26-27: “If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ’s body and each of you is a part of it. “

Drafted by: M. Jean Buffardi, MS, CCC-SLP, retired speech/language pathologist, retired special educator in early childhood, and member of Burke Presbyterian Church, Burke, Virginia.

Utilizing Sign Language Interpreters For Congregations

The following piece was submitted by Rev Raymond Meester, PHEWA Disability Concerns Consultant for Hearing, Stated Clerk, Homestead Presbytery, Lincoln NE

American Sign Language (ASL) is the traditional sign system used by the deaf in the United States. There is no universal sign language. (For example, British Sign Language is very different from American Sign Language.) ASL is not signed English for it has a different syntax and grammar. There are other sign systems used in the United States that utilize some word signs of ASL, but try to follow the grammar and syntax of English. Thus, a congregation should determine the sign system used by the deaf persons the congregation wants to include.

An important consideration is that there are some deaf who see themselves as members of a linguistic minority group, much like Hispanics or Koreans, who have a distinct language and culture. They do not consider themselves disabled. Instead they see themselves as members of a cultural minority. Quite often those who see themselves as members of a cultural minority group are referred to as “Deaf,” with the capitalized “D.” Many Deaf people see their deafness, their culture, and their language as a gift.

How does a congregation find qualified interpreters? Deaf persons might have recommendations. Most states have a state agency for the deaf. Those agencies often provide a list of interpreters and/or provide an interpreter referral service. There are also local private businesses in large urban areas that refer interpreters. Perhaps the easiest thing to do is to simply google “sign language interpreters” and include the city or state in the search. These agencies can provide information about costs and answer any questions a congregation may have about employing an interpreter.

It is extremely important to obtain a qualified interpreter. One deaf person shared the following experience:

I went to a church a few years ago that advertised they were providing “sign language interpretation” for their main service. Great! I eagerly showed up and sat down in front. But when the interpreter started signing, I could hardly understand a thing! It was painful to watch her the whole service. Afterward, I went up to her to ask her how she learned sign language. At first, she couldn’t understand me, but then when she finally did, she said she enrolled in her SECOND COURSE!! She also confessed she didn’t understand the theological language of the pastor very well. Needless to say, I didn’t go back.” (National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. No Barriers for Deaf People in Churches. New York, 1997. p. 2.)

Interpreter referral agencies can provide information about the qualifications of interpreters. Is it not a waste of financial resources to pay an unskilled interpreter? An unskilled interpreter can do more harm than good. Congregations should expect to compensate interpreters for this is their livelihood. Churches do not expect their pastors and other staff to work for nothing. Likewise, congregations cannot expect interpreters to work without compensation.

If the worship or event goes beyond one or two hours, additional interpreters may be required. Sign language interpreting, unlike any other language interpreting, is physically demanding. The costs for sign language interpreters can be more than that of other language interpreters.

It is beneficial to forward as much of the liturgical materials as possible to the interpreter(s) in advance of the worship service, including the sermon, scripture readings, music, prayers, etc. The terminology of religious services can be more challenging for interpreters than that of other situations.

The placement of the deaf and the interpreter in the sanctuary is another consideration. Obviously, line of sight and lighting is important for the deaf and the interpreter. It is also helpful for deaf congregants to be able to see worship leaders and liturgists while watching the interpreter. Sometimes it may be necessary for the interpreter to “shadow” the pastors and worship leaders: standing next to the pulpit, the communion table, or the baptismal font, etc.

Remember communication is a two-way street. Interpreters are not just for the deaf, but also for the hearing. If the pastor asks for prayer requests or if there are other announcements, the interpreter will voice the signs of the deaf congregants. There can be some lag time between what is voiced and the interpreter’s signs, so allow time for the deaf to be able to respond. Full inclusion also means involving deaf persons as worship leaders. The interpreter can voice what the deaf leader is signing.

Jesus healed the deaf man (Mark 7:31-37). Healing, in the understanding of the ancient Mediterranean world, was more than being cured of a physical ailment. Healing made it possible to fully participate in the life of the community. The healing ministry of the church involves including the deaf in the life of our congregations

I Can Hear Clearly Now: Making the Church Accessible to Those with Hearing Loss

The following piece was written by Rick Roderick, PHEWA Visual Disability Concerns Consultant

Many people would like to participate in worship and congregational life, but can't do so because of a hearing loss. They may hear what is going on, but it may all be a blur. They may hear in quiet situations, but have difficulty when there is a lot of background noise, echo, or distortion. This can be very isolating. Fortunately, much can be done by congregations to alleviate this problem

An important distinction must be made. The term "hearing impaired" is too broad to be exact. People who are deaf may need sign language interpreters or other means of communications. Most of us who are hard-of-hearing are looking for quality sound.

Before I look at particular settings, I want to give some general considerations. The easiest rooms to hear in are those with low ceilings and soft surfaces. Acoustic tile can be very helpful. When a new sanctuary or meeting rooms are built, this should be kept in mind. When these things are not considered, echo can result, making sound difficult to hear.

Microphones can be helpful or problematic. When a PA system is used, the mic can be too close, causing distortion, or too far away, picking up ambient noise or not getting proper volume. Some preachers will talk loudly and back up to prevent too much volume. Ambience will make this procedure difficult for some to understand. Keep the mic about six to eighteen inches away from the mouth. Keep a clear line of sight to the microphone. The same principle applies to using a phone. If your voice isn't clear to someone, keep the phone close, but don't shout. Talking loudly can make things worse.

If you need to talk to someone on an individual basis, you might be best doing so in a quiet place or by using a microphone, if they have one.

Worship

The experience is influenced by the ambience of the building, the PA system, and assistive listening devices provided.

Some sanctuaries have low ceilings and soft surfaces. Some people who are hard-of-hearing may be able to function by sitting upfront or near a loudspeaker. Depending on loudspeaker placement, the best place to sit may be in the back. In such cases, make sure that all worship participants use the microphone.

In cases of poor acoustics for speech, assistive listening devices may be necessary. Most congregations use FM systems, though infrared systems may also be available. The main thing here is to have several output mechanisms. Many congregations have only earphones or ear buds. These may not work well in conjunction with hearing aids or cochlear implant processors. I use telephone switches in my hearing equipment, and holding up the earphone all the time and hearing only on one side can make things difficult.



In addition to earphones for people with mild losses, have neck loops for people who have telephone coils in their hearing aids.

Some sanctuaries are equipped with audio loops that surround the worship space. This works extremely well for people with telecoils, but converters will be necessary for those who don't.

If prayers of the people are spoken by members of the congregation, passing around a microphone will make them easy to hear for everyone.

During the Passing of the Peace, don't play an organ or other instruments. This makes identification of people more difficult because of background noise.

Meetings

Hold meetings in acoustically dead rooms, when possible.

Make sure chairs are close together.

If people are in a circle, and a conference mic is used to go to assistive listening devices, make sure that a table is in the middle to place it.

If the meeting breaks up into small group discussions, make sure each group is in a separate room, so that cross talk is not a problem.

In both meetings and conference calls, only one person should talk at a time. It also helps if speakers state their names before making remarks.

If a conversation needs to occur with a member who is hard-of-hearing, it may be necessary to move to a quieter setting during the fellowship hour.

However, one rule binds all of these things. Ask members and attendees who are hard-of-hearing about their needs. What equipment do they have? What accommodations can the congregation provide to make participation possible? If this is done, hearing will be believing.

Technology: Gifts for Members with Visual Impairments

The following piece was written by Terry Chaney, PDC Member

If you are reading this, I assume that you believe that there is, or soon may be, a person with some level of visual impairment in your congregation and that you wish to help them participate in the work of your congregation. As someone who has navigated that situation myself, I want you to know that there is good news: with conversations and digging and organization things can work out very well for the congregation and the member. I'd like for you to step back a minute and think about the folk you have in mind when you envision people with vision issues.

Your congregation might come to know people like me or my wife Marcie. We are church people for whom participating in church is important. We met at a residential school for the blind in the sixties, are proficient in Braille and other "skills of blindness" including the use of computers and smart phones. Fitting in where we do is not that hard. We get an electronic copy of the order of worship well ahead of time and can Braille it, put it on a note taker, [more about them later in this document] or whatever we want. Since agendas for meetings are distributed as attachments to email and we have the software to read them, being on committees is no more of a challenge than it is for anyone else. When the Choir does something new that isn't readily available, Marcie is usually sent the words in electronic format by a volunteer. Things work out pretty well.

On the other hand, you might encounter someone much younger than me. This person may have very different Church experiences and have really good computer and phone skills that may, or may not include the use of Braille. They could probably teach you a thing or two about technology like most millennials.

Before going to the most likely scenario for your congregation please let me give you some information that I hope will help you understand the issues you are facing. When Marcie and I were preparing for college we were told that it would be necessary to hire readers, and when writing a paper that it would be necessary to meticulously transcribe any reference into Braille. It would then be necessary to exactly transcribe it again when typing the paper. Many people my age faced similar issues in a late night dash to get a paper done. But Marcie and I had the additional challenge of organizing tapes or readers or both.

With technology, it is far easier to get into documents and lift citations electronically. It isn't a silver bullet, and it may not be as quick and easy as it is for our sighted friends, but it is a lot more possible now than it was even fifteen years ago. Now, back to your probable challenge.

Most likely, there is someone in your congregation experiencing some kind of vision issue due to aging, accident, or other reasons. If that is the case we hope that the following resources will help you begin to learn how you can help in walking with them through a difficult time. As you do so, remember that we no longer live in the sixties or even late twentieth century. There is a lot of interesting technology available, much of it the same technology that all of us use every day. With training and making some adjustments, the prospect is far better for participation in the work of your congregation for someone dealing with any kind of visual impairment than it has ever been before. Encourage them to get the training that is available, listen, and be there knowing that there are ways through and that technology will help a lot.

Websites for Blind and Visually Impaired (2019)

<https://carroll.org/store/> The Carroll Center for the Blind



<https://aira.io/> Aira's goal is to provide instant access to visual information for anyone, anywhere, anytime

<https://www.loc.gov/nls/> National Library Service (NLS) is a free braille and talking book library service for people with temporary or permanent low vision, blindness, or a physical disability that prevents them from reading or holding the printed page. Through a national network of cooperating libraries, NLS circulates books and magazines in braille or audio formats, delivered by postage-free mail or instantly downloadable.

<https://www.maxiaids.com/electronic-video-magnifiers> A source for video magnifiers

Reading from the Same Page

The following piece was submitted by Rev Debra Trevino, PDC member

Every person is uniquely created by God. We all differ in appearance, personality and preferences, even learning styles.

I would like to consider two individuals who are blind or visually impaired, are in different stages of life and how to best include them in congregational life.

Miss Jones taught elementary school for 41 years. She grew up in this congregation and has been active in the work of the church. Most of the adults were lovingly taught Sunday School by Miss Jones.

When she developed macular degeneration and retired from teaching in the local school, members of the church assumed she should retire from teaching Sunday School. She was presented with a beautiful rocking chair with a plaque on the back of it, thanking her for her many years of care for the children of the church.

These days, Miss Jones feels like a fish out of water. She has learned daily living skills to manage her home with diminishing sight. She places colored stickers on some items in the kitchen so that she knows what they are on the day she can't quite read the labels. She has raised dots on the 50-degree points so that she can set the oven by touch. She uses "sock locks" which keep her socks together in the laundry so they will stay matched. She uses detergent for the laundry and dishwasher which comes in pods so that she doesn't have to measure it. Because her vision loss has been gradual, she uses screen magnification which enlarges the print in her books. She takes the bulletin home and reviews it using her magnification tools. She knows she could use creative strategies to modify her teaching methods so that she could keep an orderly classroom. She wishes the congregation would once more invite her to teach the children.

Lara is seven years old and she wishes the teacher would have passed around a stuffed elephant instead of the picture she used last week in a story about the animals in Noah's Ark. Lara is curious and eager to learn but she sometimes feels like she's not part of the class. She is totally blind and her teacher in second grade teaches using things Lara can touch. When the children have arts and crafts and are coloring pictures, Lara strings beads or works with Playdough. She is learning to read and write braille and reads along with her classmates who can see. Every Saturday night, her mom reads the story that will be discussed in Sunday School so that she knows what to expect.

Each of us wants to feel that we belong and provide something essential to our congregation. The barriers to full participation often cause profound grief to persons who are disabled. When considering equal access in the church, a brief examination of an accessibility audit will reveal many suggestions to improve the physical space so that it is more welcoming to all. Work on the access issues which apply to your congregation and don't try to accomplish the entire list of changes in the audit at one time.

Miss Jones is adjusting well to her vision loss. She has learned many "tricks" which help her handle print materials. Adequate lighting and larger font with bolder text may make it possible for her to use the bulletin

rather than needing to take it home to read it. She has a wealth of knowledge in teaching and could manage a classroom with a teaching assistant, maybe the students themselves, to report misconduct. It is very likely that Miss Jones will have ideas and resources which can help educate the congregation in vision loss.

As she goes through the educational system, Lara will have materials provided in braille and she will learn to use some amazing technology to access printed materials. Screen readers make computers talk, iDevices speak at no additional cost and they require only a few adjustments to the settings menu. There are digital players which Lara can use to listen to thousands of books. If she is encouraged to value braille, Lara will have access to more in-depth study than she would if limited to speech alone.

Just as Miss Jones has learned a great deal about living with her vision loss, Lara and her mom are learning to keep her competitive with her classmates. They can provide many of the answers you seek in welcoming them into the congregation. Blindness and vision loss provide one more opportunity for the congregation to grow and expand its resources. The most important thing to remember is that we are all more alike than we are different. As we grasp this truth, we are emboldened to ask questions. Miss Jones and Lara are the best first resource as they can teach you much about living with their disability. Focus on your similarities, ask questions and learn, and before you know it you will all be reading from the same page.

What to say and what not to say when new baby is born into the faith community and has a genetic disorder?

The following piece was written by Rev. Christin J. Norman, PDC Member

Unfortunately, there is not nearly as much support around coaching, counseling and supporting parents *after* genetic testing as much as there is support (money-wise, policy-wise, etc.) around simply *running* genetic tests. The systems at work make it harder for a baby with a genetic disorder to be celebrated and welcomed into the world. How can the church be a voice of advocacy so that babies with genetic disorders are **welcomed** into our world?

With this in mind, as disciples of Christ we get to join the “cloud of witnesses” who testify to Jesus’ love by proclaiming every child of God to be a miracle and worth immeasurable love. This is, of course, what our baptismal liturgy boasts every time we watch the water drops fall onto an infant’s head.

Know that your church family’s encouragement and compassion can make a great impact on this family as they navigate a tremendous transition of becoming parents.

Take time to read about the baby’s genetic disorder from a trusted source (like WebMD or Mayo Clinic).

Resist making assumptions. For example, don’t assume that you know how the parents are feeling about the baby’s genetic disorder.

What NOT to say:

- I am sorry.
- That’s terrible.
- How sad.
- Anything negative. Let the parents take the lead on expressing their own feelings and perspective so that you get to be the listener and learner.

Consider Asking Open Ended Questions:

- How can we, as the body of Christ, the Church, celebrate the birth of every individual with respect to each baby’s personhood and uniqueness?
 - **How can we celebrate with you?** Be ready to offer specific ideas that are personalized to the family. There may be an awareness day or month around the genetic disorder that could be a ministry of the mission committee to celebrate with prayer or liturgy. The PDC packets have lots of ideas of celebrations that the congregation can also participate in. Offer a scripture passage, prayer or blessing (in person or in a card) for the child and his/her family.
 - **How can we support you?** Be ready to offer specific ideas: meals, babysitting, request permission to add the family to the congregation’s prayer list.

When Faced with Chronic or Debilitating Illness, What to Say, What Not to Say to the Person & Family

The following piece was written by Rev Sue S. Montgomery, PHEWA Disability Concerns Consultant for Mobility/Accessibility, Pastor Nickleville Presbyterian Church, Chaplain Polk Center, Knox PA

For people who have been newly diagnosed or have lived for an extended period of time with illnesses or other disabling conditions, words used by family and friends play a significant role. Language is power. Words bring a new identity to a person who is in transition from being able bodied to living with a disability. Being identified as “chronically ill or disabled” is tough. When life identities are changing, these images are difficult to claim for one’s self. People who care about each other truly do want to say what is helpful and be supportive. However, many times well-intentioned words simply create deeper and more profound pain. When I entered the hospital room of a man who was living with stage four colon cancer, he was visibly shaking. Normally a man of profound faith and a positive outlook in the midst of difficulties, he was trembling. As I encircled him with a hug, the tears flowed. After a while he calmed down and I dared to ask, “Can you help me understand, what happened?” What he shared was more painful than all the chemotherapy treatments and surgeries he had endured. His bone shattering and heart wrenching spiritual pain was the result of a well-meaning volunteer chaplain who had told him “If you only had more faith, if only you would pray harder, you would be healed.” Through his tears he shared, “I have never stopped praying nor believing—I cannot pray harder or believe more.” I assured him he was one of the strongest men of faith I had ever known and God would never bring this illness or pain into his life for him to have to prove he could pray harder or believe more. There is a deep and wide theological spectrum of beliefs that Christians have in how we answer the questions of disability, chronic illness, and why bad things happen to good people. The spectrum sadly ranges from unhealthy belief systems that are spiritually abusive to theological world views that strengthen and provide hope, even when hope is deemed impossible.

As to the question of what to say and what not to say, the first place to start is to find out where the person is on the spectrum of belief. Some people wholeheartedly and unequivocally embrace the understanding that disability, catastrophic illness is God’s will or plan for their lives. Perhaps this decision has been reached after a long period of soul searching, or is something that has been taught and never questioned. For others, such a statement defies their understanding of a loving God. For others such a statement sets a barrier of anger and despair between God and themselves that defies life rather than gives life. Words are powerful forms of teaching both good and bad. A good question to raise in this situation is to ask—is what you have learned or are using as your guide to life working for you? Each person needs to walk their own journey and develop their faith answers as to the questions of why. These frequently shared, well intended statements, are actually sayings that comfort the one saying them. Phrases such as: “This is God’s will, this is God’s plan, God only gives us what we can handle” can only deepen the sense of loss and pain a person living with catastrophic illness is facing. It is far better to share the truth—we don’t know what is God’s will or God’s plan. Only God knows the answers to those questions. What we do know and what we can say is, “I don’t have all the answers. This I know, God loves you, I love and care about you. I promise I will walk with you and be with you through every part of this new journey.” When faced with the deepest of sorrows, the words of The Rev. Dr. William Sloan Coffin come to mind. When his son Alex drowned in a tragic car accident in the Hudson

River, he stood on the river bank where the car entered the water and shared this statement of faith, “...when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” Knowing God cries with us when we are broken, wounded, and hurting is a source of strength.

In learning what to say and what not to say we have to get to know one another and first seek to understand one another. In the face of disability or serious illness there is no one answer that is helpful to everyone, each person needs to explore their own relationship with God in Christ and where they are in that journey of faith. Sometimes silence is the best form of communication—as long as the silence includes your presence! One of the worst experiences people with newly diagnosed serious illnesses face is the sudden absence of friends and family. There are many reasons for this experience—fear of not knowing what to say, fear of saying the wrong thing, or the real fear that if something like this happened to my friend, it could happen to me. Sadly, the reality, despite modern science and medicine, is that people still believe serious illness is contagious, or worse yet, a form of punishment from God. We humans can be difficult to understand!

Phrases that are meant to encourage again seem to only have meaning for those who share them. Instructional and inspirational phrases such as “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps, keep your chin up, it’s for the best” mean nothing to someone who is hurting. What does mean something is the honest offerings of ourselves in the words, “I’m sorry this happened to you, I’m here for you.” “Your pain is real. Can I pray for you? If you need a listening ear, I’m here for you.” One of the most common phrases yet most damaging things anyone can say is “I understand.” Unless you have walked the same walk as the person who is hurting, never say “I understand.” A person who has never endured chemotherapy, the loss of a child, experienced the diagnosis of a terminal illness, cannot possibly understand the pain of someone living with the hurt and unending questions. Instead, simply offer the truthful and humble words, “I cannot possibly understand all you are going through, I’m here for you—even if all I can do is sit with you, I care, I’m here,” Instead of offering advice—and as a person who lives with a disability who receives unsolicited advice all the time—stop it! Unless the person asks for advice, don’t give it! One Sunday while we were on vacation my husband and I visited a church and attended worship. We left with two doctor’s phone numbers, pamphlets and brochures on alternative treatments, and heavy hearts. Although we vacation in that area regularly, we’ve never been back to worship with this congregation. The message was until the advice was received and I had been healed—like them—I was not welcome in the church family. There is no doubt intentions were good, the advice was offered in Christ-like ways. However, without knowing the story, the faith journey of the person being advised, the actions and words were unintentionally hurtful and judgmental.

Again, we humans can be difficult to understand! Understanding of one another, finding out where each person is on their faith journey all starts with listening ears and compassionate hearts to hear the stories of persons who are living with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Some of the most loving conversation starters include these words: “Will you share your story with me?” “Can you help me understand?” So often we say, “If you need anything let me know.” An idea shared by a person living with chronic illness that is helpful is this. Instead of simply saying, “if you need anything...,” offer personally made gift cards for a listening ear, house cleaning, a meal, a dessert, a trip to the doctor, grocery shopping, a lunch out together, an activity the person enjoys. When a gift card is exchanged, the relationship is affirmed. The person is inviting you to share



in their journey in a comfortable and meaningful way. The gift is your presence. Trust in yourself and above all, your love.

As people of faith, this we do know, in the midst of all in life, the good, the bad, and the ugly, God's grace is unending and steadfast. Sometimes the greatest journey of faith is walking in the unknown and without answers. The journey is deepened and strengthened by faith and faith alone. May it be so as we all seek to be with one another, even in silence, and share the faith journey of God with us wherever we find ourselves. May our words be abundant with understanding, compassion, and Christ's love.