

Creating an Inclusive Community

BY ELIZABETH HINSON-HASTY



David Young

Practices must change in order to support equal and full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of Christian communities

Disability is not uncommon. A recent United States Census Bureau press release noted that nearly one in five Americans has some level of disability; one in eight is affected by severe disabilities. While more than 53 million people in the United States are affected, the special needs of persons with disabilities are often overlooked or misunderstood.

In recent years, congregations throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have made serious strides in addressing accessibility issues. The report “Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (Including Serious Mental Illness) and Disability Prevention” presented to the 211th General Assembly (Long Beach, California, 1999) noted that 75 percent of PC(USA) congregations have developed ways of addressing the needs of persons with disabilities. This report showed wonderful progress, but full inclusion of persons with disabilities has not yet been achieved. We need to learn much more about how practices

must change in order to support equal and full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of Christian communities.

Two years ago, a student with cerebral palsy who took the Spiritual Journeys course I was teaching at St. Andrews Presbyterian College asked me about Christian practices that might be helpful in his search to deepen his faith. As we sat together in my office, I scanned my memory of the history of Christian spirituality and the practices encouraged by Christian communities. When I factored in this student’s disability, cerebral palsy, I realized it would be difficult for him to participate in many of the practices and rituals that I was prepared to suggest unless he had personal care assistance. To some extent, the student’s disability prevented him from expressing his faith in the same ways as able-bodied churchgoers. Our brief conversation opened my mind to consider Christian thought and practice in a new way.

Beginning Conversations

Partnering with my husband, Lee Hinson-Hasty, director of church relations at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, I began work on a task for the Valparaiso Project for the Education and Formation of People of Faith. Our intent was to address the special needs of persons with disabilities within Christian community. Seven student fellows—persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons representing a wide variety of religious backgrounds and academic interests—were selected to enter into conversation with one another about Christian practice from the perspective of persons with disabilities. The students spent the fall semester reading and discussing several texts from *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), in addition to other texts focused on disability and Christian faith and practice. In the spring, the fellows proposed a project intended to

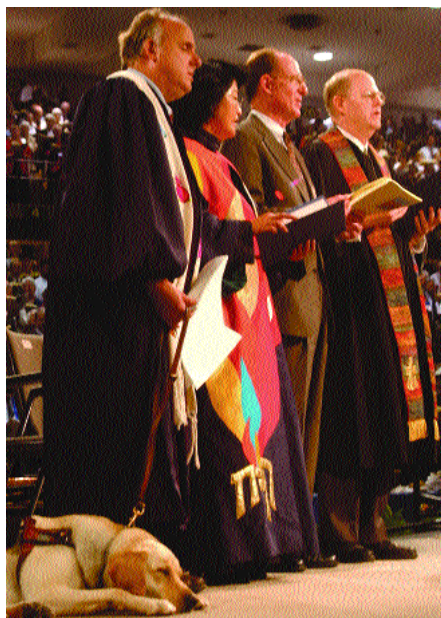
enable the distinctive voices of persons with disabilities to be heard.

The Valparaiso Fellows created an educational tool intended to raise helpful, thought-provoking questions regarding hospitality in Christian communities. In collaboration with other students, faculty and staff at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, they produced a video/DVD titled *Extending Hospitality*. The video/DVD recorded interviews the Valparaiso Fellows conducted with college men and women, asking questions that encouraged reflection on their experience as persons with disabilities within religious communities.

The students who were interviewed shared both positive and negative experiences of participating in faith communities. Willie Pokoj expressed his appreciation for the help that he received from other members of his church. “Whenever there is a need,” he said, “they’ve always been willing to help out.” Another student, Kelly Woodall, told the story of how her youth group tried to learn more about her life and identify with her experience by limiting their mobility while trying to accomplish daily tasks. This activity helped her peers to realize that she wasn’t that different from them. To use her words, “I’m just a girl who likes to sit down.”

Gaining Access

Those interviewed agreed that accessibility is often an issue in the congregations in which they have been involved. Jennifer Heinbockel described the sanctuary in her home church. “There are no handicapped spaces in the pews so I have to sit behind the last row of pews or way



Rev. Rick Roderick (left), consultant for visual disabilities for the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association, participated in the leadership of the 213th General Assembly.

up front. I’m not able to sit with my family . . . [and] that makes me feel as though I’m not really part of what is going on with the rest of the church.”

The interviews clearly showed that accessibility relates to more than just physical space. The language used and the theological ideas expressed in worship and through action can highlight disability and underscore difference in uncomfortable ways. Brandon Pittman recalled a song that his church sings that invited worshippers to raise their hands, remarking, “I can’t really raise my hands.”

Several students described situations in which people had stopped and surrounded them in public places, laid hands on them and prayed for healing. Laura Heinbockel remembered being “out at the mall with my mother and my sister, and this woman came up to me and just laid hands on me and started praying over my head

for healing. . . . Everybody was standing there . . . staring at us and it made me feel quite uncomfortable.”

Our study made some connections between the experiences described here and healing as it has been understood in Christian tradition. Christians have often interpreted healing stories literally. However, disability as we know it today is not represented in scriptural texts and early Christian traditions. Healing stories in the gospel narratives tend to either connect disability to sin or are intended to highlight Jesus’ divine authority. These stories have often been used to exclude persons with disabilities from Christian communities rather than to foster inclusion.

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One student we interviewed questioned whether scripture took account of the reality of his disability as he lived it. Mark Schomaker said, “Healing is happening all over the world but yet I haven’t been able to see it.” Andrew Blythe commented, “It is far-fetched to think that [God] can heal me completely,” reflecting Andrew’s belief that God empowered him just as he is—he just does things differently.

Awareness and Acceptance

Those interviewed expressed their desire for others to be willing to learn more about disabilities and to welcome people with disabilities as equal leaders and participants in all settings. There are many things that congregations can do to raise awareness about disability concerns and to encourage greater acceptance of persons with disabilities as full partners in Christian communities. The students we interviewed made the following suggestions:

- Make your worship service as accessible as possible by printing large-print bulletins (at least a 16-point font) and designating aides who are aware of special needs and willing to assist during worship services or during times of fellowship.
- In situations where it is difficult for persons with disabilities to get to church, bring the church to them. Provide transportation to and from the church or create opportunities to worship in home settings.
- Do some research and learn more about the nature of the disabilities among people in your congregation. Explore one or more of the resources recommended in the sidebar to this article.
- Examine your church facilities and think about how the physical space extends hospitality to persons with disabilities.
- Consider how persons with disabilities might view the language used and ideas expressed in worship. For example, show sensitivity

when inviting the congregation to participate in aspects of the worship service. Rather than inviting the congregation to stand for hymns or other parts of the liturgy, use alternate language such as “All who are able please stand.” When exploring difficult biblical texts in worship or study groups, try to read them from the perspective of persons with disabilities.

- Invite your congregation to discuss and respond to the special needs of persons with disabilities. 🍷

Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty served as assistant professor of religious studies at St. Andrews Presbyterian College. She has recently been appointed to the faculty of Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, as assistant professor of theology.

Notes

See Colleen Grant, “Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, edited by Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

For more information about the Valparaiso Project or to request a copy of *Extending Hospitality* (VHS or DVD), including a leader’s guide, contact Aaron Gatten at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, 1700 Dogwood Mile, Laurinburg, NC 28352. Limited copies are available.



When Flora MacDonald College and Presbyterian Junior College merged in 1958 to form St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina, welcoming students with disabilities was an important part of the mission of the newly formed institution. St. Andrews was one of the first institutions in the United States intended to be accessible to all people. Today the college welcomes students with disabilities and able-bodied students to a learning-living environment that promotes intellectual, social and spiritual growth. To learn more about St. Andrews, visit www.sapc.edu or call 800/763-0198.