



# DISABILITY AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

by Jeanne Davies

*In the Style of Kairouan, by Paul Klee, 1914*

**W**hen the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted by the federal government in 1990, religious organizations were granted an exemption.

Unfortunately, that has meant that many congregations have been slow to make the changes that would make them more accessible to people with disabilities. These include some basic physical accommodations such as wheelchair ramps, automatic doors, accessible bathrooms, and elevators.

But it also includes making accommodations for people who have intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental illness, or other disabilities that create barriers to full participation in the life of a congregation.

Although the church is not compelled to include people with disabilities in our congregations by a government mandate, Christians can be inspired by the example of Jesus. Jesus embraced people with all kinds of impairments—physical, emotional, and social—and welcomed them into relationship with himself and others. His acts of healing often included restoring people to life in community.

If we are following in Christ's footsteps, we should be leading in the effort to create communities that include everyone. Unfortunately, many barriers to belonging for people with disabilities still exist.

One in four (26 percent) of adults in the United States has some kind of disability, according to the Centers for Disease

Control (CDC), and one in six children has a developmental disability. Most of us will acquire a disability related to sight, hearing, or mobility as we age. It is likely that we all have several disabled people in our congregations. And if we don't, we must ask ourselves why they are not present. What is keeping them away?

When I served as pastor for Parables Community, a congregation that welcomed people with intellectual disabilities and their families, I met a young man who had cerebral palsy. He sometimes used a walker or a wheelchair. He told me that when he attended church as a child he was taught that everyone was included, everyone belonged, and he believed that.

But when he got older, things changed. As a teenager, he was not able to drive. The youth would make plans but forget to give him a ride. Or if he made it to a youth event, they would often walk quickly and he would not be able to keep up. He said, "It was easy to leave me behind."

It's important that we not leave anyone behind, nor leave anyone out—not only for the good of people who are disabled but for the good of us all. At the 2016 Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, held at Hope College in Holland, Mich., Rabbi

## THREE THINGS YOU CAN DO

1. Listen, spend time, and be a friend to those in your congregation with disabilities. What accommodations might be helpful? What gifts do they have to share?
2. Consider who is not present and how you might better set the table.
3. Do an accessibility assessment of your congregation using a survey tool, [canaccess.org/accessibility/quick-checklist](https://canaccess.org/accessibility/quick-checklist). Then start with one change at a

## WE ALL HAVE WEAKNESSES. WE MAKE MISTAKES. WE ARE MORTAL. BUT THE BLESSING OF HUMAN LIMITATIONS IS THAT WE ALL NEED GOD AND WE NEED ONE ANOTHER.

Darby Leigh, who is deaf, said that we don't provide an ASL interpreter or build a ramp up to the *bima* (or the chancel) for disabled people. We do those things because we need disabled people to be part of our faith communities. Because if they are not there, we are incomplete.

The truth is that to be human is to be limited. God, in divine wisdom, created human beings with all kinds of limitations. We all have weaknesses. We make mistakes. We are mortal. But the blessing of human limitations is that we all need God and we need one another. We cannot make it alone. God designed us for relationship.

Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 12 when he describes us collectively as the body of Christ. Paul tells us that each member of the body is necessary to the functioning of the whole. And the parts that some consider less important are *especially* needed. It makes me wonder if we often overlook important qualities that God values. It would be wise for us to take ample time to consider the spiritual gifts that each individual brings to the whole.

Rebekah Taussig, a wheelchair user and author of *Sitting Pretty*, wrote on Facebook, "Being in a relationship—of any sort—is hard. And while each one will be unique, while disability adds and takes away in its own ways—every single lasting relationship involves caretaking. I would like the whole world to please stop assuming that being disabled is some kind of alien experience planets away from the rest of humanity. You need some version of care, I need another, and we're all here just trying our best to sort it out and find connection and love the best we can, forever and amen."

What's needed is deeper than accessibility, more profound than inclusion. We all need a place to belong. When we belong, people know our names. When we belong, we'd be missed if we were gone. When we belong, our gifts are valued. When we belong, we have friends who know us and love us.

"Belonging is rooted in relationships," says Erik Carter, who has written widely on including people with disabilities in faith communities. "Having people in our lives who know us, like us, need us, miss us, and love us is at the heart of our well-being. The same is true for individuals with significant disabilities. Their need for friendships and other supportive peer relationships is a universal need, one grounded in the core belief that humans were created for community."

It may seem daunting for congregations to make the changes necessary to accommodate people with disabilities. Where to begin? Perhaps begin by considering people with disabilities who are already in your congregation:

What do they need? What might make it easier to participate? What gifts might they like to share? Then consider those who are not in your congregation: What might make it easier for them to come?

Some changes could be simple, such as offering gluten-free communion bread. Others might be a little more complicated, such as installing an audio induction loop that feeds the sound system directly into hearing aids during worship. We might even make grand, collaborative plans with the larger community, such as building a community playground with both accessible and typical equipment so that all children can play together side by side.

One thing we know is that when we create an environment that is more welcoming and comfortable for people with disabilities, we create one that is better for all. 

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### RESOURCES

Anabaptist Disabilities Network is an organization supported by the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonites churches. Rebekah Flores, one of the ADN field associates, is disabilities advocate for the Church of the Brethren.

*Making Church Accessible to All: Including Disabled People in Church Life*, by Tony Phelps-Jones.

*Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*, by Benjamin T. Conner.

*Helping Kids Include Kids*, by Barbara J. Newman.

*From Longing to Belonging: A Practical Guide to Including People with Disabilities and Mental Health Conditions in Your Faith Community*, by Shelly Christiansen.