

Disabling Disability Integration Paper by Christine Guth February 28, 2007

Jesus scandalized the religious establishment of his day by hanging out with people on the margins of his society. Many of the people we meet in the gospel stories have some kind of limitation that has pushed them to the margins: paralysis, blindness, seizures, leprosy, impaired limbs, deafness, inability to speak, etc. None of these conditions was a barrier to Jesus' radical welcome. To the church's detriment, however, its inclusion of people with disabilities has often fallen short of Jesus' example. Acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities may bog down, in part, for theological reasons. Integrating the reality of disability with belief in a just, loving, and powerful God has typically led to theological constructions that claim a higher loyalty than supporting the lived experience of people with disabilities. "When disabilities have been considered at all, they have historically been looked at as symbols of sin (to be avoided), images of saintliness (to be admired), signs of God's limited power or capriciousness (to be pondered), or suffering personified (to be pitied)—very rarely were people with disabilities considered first as *people*," writes Deborah Creamer.¹

We who live with disability need biblical interpretation, theology, and practices of church life that give us life and do not participate in the stigmatizing and marginalizing of people with disability. A God who brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Lk. 4:18) invites and empowers the church to become a community where no barriers of belief or practice block the full respect, participation, and contribution of persons with diverse abilities and disabilities.

At the outset, I offer a few words to clarify my use of terminology and point of view. I draw on a social model of disability, which emphasizes the role of the surrounding culture in

¹ Deborah Creamer, "Theological Accessibility: The Contribution of Disability," *Disabilities Studies Quarterly* 26.4 (Fall 2006), n.p.<http://www.dsqsds.org/current_issue.html> (accessed January 31, 2007).

identifying who is disabled and who is not. Using this model, I distinguish between disability and impairment, understanding impairment as the loss or limitation in function of a limb or organ. Disability, in this view, is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a social setting that impedes the full participation of people with impairments.²

Although much of what I write here may apply to any disability, I look at disability through the lens of personal experience with particular disabilities that are not immediately obvious to others, disabilities that affect mood and behavior. Such conditions may go unrecognized as disabilities, but they are no less stigmatized for the lack of recognition. I write as one who lives with the disability of a lifelong mental illness, major depression. My perspective on disability has also been deeply formed by my family life with two sons and a spouse who have Asperger Syndrome, a condition related to autism.

From this perspective, then, I turn to reflect first on historical experiences of disability in the church and next on how our biblical interpretation and theology support and challenge church practices. I offer suggestions for practices of inclusion in the contemporary church in relation to one particular disability, Asperger Syndrome. Finally, I reflect on how these themes intersect with my personal sense of call to ministry.

Historical experiences of disability

Theological interpretations of disability have significantly shaped the church's relationship with people with disabilities throughout its history, suggests Nancy Eiesland. "The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned, the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero," writes Eiesland.³ She identifies three theological themes that have created obstacles for persons with disability: conflating disability with sin, virtuous suffering, and segregating charity. A belief that disability indicates punishment for wrongdoing and mars the

² Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, "Preface," *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), ix–x.

³ Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 70.

divine image in humans has frequently barred those with disabilities from positions of leadership, or stigmatized them for their lack of faith. Disability has been identified as suffering that must be endured in order to purify the righteous, a teaching that encouraged passive acceptance of social barriers for the sake of obedience to God. Charitable activity to provide for people with disabilities has at times been a means of creating justice; however, charity subverted justice when it segregated people with disabilities from the Christian community and kept them out of the public eye rather than empowering them for full religious and social participation.⁴

Specific ministry with people with disabilities among Mennonites had its origins in response to such segregation of people with disabilities.⁵ During World War II, some of the Mennonites who engaged in Civilian Public Service as an alternative to military duty encountered deplorable conditions within the deteriorating institutions set up to care for people with mental illness and disabilities. Following the war, Mennonites inspired by their CPS experience worked to establish community mental health centers and service organizations for adults with developmental disabilities. It is difficult to measure the extent of inclusion experienced by people with disabilities in Mennonite congregations, because this was and is highly variable from one congregation to the next. One indication that inclusion was not complete during the latter half of the twentieth century is the continuing presence of (and thus apparent need for) a disabilities advocacy group working among Mennonites. The shifting of sponsorship for this role from one church agency to another and its eventual elimination in 2002 from church agency sponsorship is an indication of the ambiguous status of disabilities ministry in the priorities of Mennonites. Seeing a need for continued disabilities advocacy among Mennonites, in 2003 a group of concerned people formed Anabaptist Disabilities Network. Paul Leichty, the young organization's director writes, "This group continues to remind the church that...themes that the church holds dear—peace, justice, and community—apply to persons with disabilities and need to be fleshed out in

⁴ Ibid., 73-74.

⁵ Information in this paragraph comes from Paul D. Leichty, "Mennonite Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities," *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health* 10.1/2 (2006): 195-205.

concrete actions of love and service.”⁶ The need for such a reminder suggests that barriers to full participation persist in Mennonite practice, along with convictions to the contrary.

Biblical perspectives on disability

Ambivalence toward disability in church practice has taken cues, logically enough, from a discernable ambivalence in the biblical witness. The Bible holds good news for persons with disabilities. However, this good news intermingles with texts that have been interpreted in oppressive ways. In order to avoid perpetuating oppressive interpretations, I hold that a hermeneutic of suspicion is needed for certain passages that reference disability. Traditional interpretations of these texts may reinforce stigma or exclusion.

The Genesis accounts of creation suggest that “to be human is to live a life that is marked both by the God-given good of creation and the brokenness that is part of human life”; so affirms the World Council of Churches’ interim statement on disability, “A Church of All and for All.”⁷ Disability, as a condition of our humanity, is part of this ambiguity. All who are human bear the divine image (1:27); Genesis suggests no restriction of the image of God to those with perfect bodies or a certain standard of mental functioning. Yet sin marks all human life and bars us from returning to the garden paradise where humanity knew no shame (2:25, 3:24). Banished from the garden, humanity confronts its vulnerability to brokenness and death (3:22-23). Disability is one manifestation of this vulnerability. A biblical view of disability holds divine image and vulnerability in tension, allowing neither to tell the whole story.⁸

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, a foundational value with great significance for people with disabilities is concern for the marginalized.⁹ The vulnerable within Israel characteristically are to receive provision and justice, not blame for their vulnerability. In the ancient world, no less than our own, people with disabilities were disproportionately represented among the poor. Thus, to provide for those on the margins was to ensure attention to the needs of those with disa-

⁶ Leichty, 205 (punctuation edited for emphasis).

⁷ Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), “A Church of All and for All,” in *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All*, 70, par. 20.

⁸ EDAN, 70, par. 20–21.

⁹ For example, Deut. 14:29, 15:11.

bilities. The Deuteronomist and the prophets call for special attention to the needs of the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien—those whose economic vulnerability grows out of poverty in relationships. When we look to our modern world to see who shares such vulnerability, we note that people who live with chronic mental illness and other disabilities affecting behavior frequently suffer from impoverishment in relationships because of their condition. These too deserve the justice demanded for those who are vulnerable among God’s people.¹⁰

Select references to disability in the Hebrew Bible defend or portray justice and inclusion for those with disabilities. Leviticus commands protection for those whose deafness or blindness renders them defenseless (19:14). Moses’ leadership of the people of Israel offers an example of a person with a disability—speech impairment (Ex. 4:10-16)—who fully participates in and contributes in major ways to the life of his community. Jeremiah’s vision of restored Israel involves inclusion of those who are vulnerable, among them the blind and the lame (31:8). Zephaniah’s eschatological vision involves salvation for the lame and outcast (3:19).

Two passages in the Hebrew Bible illustrate an ambivalent treatment of disability. Job defends his righteousness by claiming, “I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame” (29:15). This text appears at first glance to honor persons with disabilities by commending assistance to them. Yet it mentions helping people with disabilities as an example of Job’s outstanding virtue, rather than as a simple matter of course or as a matter of justice. Thus, people with disabilities here serve as objects for measuring the virtue of the one who assists them, rather than as people valued for their own sakes. Similarly, Isaiah’s eschatological visions that involve a reversal or elimination of disabling conditions (29:18, 35:5-6, 42:7, 16) would seem to be good news for persons with disabilities. Here are clear expressions that God cares about the challenges of disability. Yet words about eschatological healing offer limited consolation for living in this world where disability remains a daily lived experience. If the removal of disability is a sign of God’s action, what does it imply when disability is not miraculously removed? Has the person with a continuing disability been abandoned by God?

¹⁰ EDAN, 66–67, par. 4–5.

The Hebrew Bible also includes conceptions of disability that reinforce exclusion and blame. Disability is sometimes portrayed as God's curse or punishment. The Deuteronomist suggests that madness, blindness, and confusion of mind are a curse for disobeying the commandments (Deut 28:28, 34). Further examples that portray disability as a curse can be found in Zephaniah (1:17) and Zechariah (11:17). Numerous biblical references to disability are metaphorical, a use that typically portrays the figurative disability as a willful disregard of God's ways (Prov. 28:27, Isa. 29:9, 42:18-20, 43:8, 56:10, 59:10, Mic. 7:16). The biblical pattern of using disability metaphor as a negative symbol provides a ready element for building discriminatory attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

Leviticus prohibits anyone with a visible disability from offering sacrifice to the Lord (Lev. 21:17-23). Sarah Melcher argues persuasively that the world of Leviticus understood deviation from physical norms to be a sign of punishment from God.¹¹ Thus, disability gave obvious evidence of a person's sin. Such evident sinners were excluded from priestly roles in an effort to protect the people from God's further displeasure. The banning of any animal with an injury or imperfection from sacrifice reinforced the theme that imperfections are unacceptable to the Lord (Lev. 22:22, Deut. 15:21, Mal. 1:8, 13) and left only a small step to extend such unacceptability to humans. The exclusion of the impaired from approaching God became explicit in the saying quoted in 2 Samuel: "The blind and the lame shall not come into the house" (5:8, in reference to the temple eventually built). Melcher proposes that stigma that is socially constructed by biblical texts can be deconstructed by interpreting stigmatizing texts in light of others that support liberation. Thus, Melcher reinterprets the above prohibitions in light of Leviticus 19:14 and 19:18: "One way we can avoid reviling the deaf and putting a stumbling block before the blind is to allow both full access to the altar.... One way to love our neighbors is to refuse to devalue them and to resist using Scripture to justify our prejudice."¹²

¹¹Melcher, "Visualizing the Perfect Cult," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 61, 69.

¹²Ibid., 69.

The New Testament stories about Jesus healing people with disabling conditions at first examination seem to offer hope to people with disabilities. However, the liberating intention of these healing stories may be lost in layers of interpretation that these stories have received in the church.¹³ One of the layers of meaning given these stories is the metaphorical interpretation of disability, discussed above. Another is the challenge they present when people do not experience cure. The story of the Gerasene disciple from whom Jesus has cast out a legion of demons (Mk. 5:1–20, Lk. 8:26–39) is one that persons with mental illness often identify with.¹⁴ The promise that Jesus is more powerful than the inner forces that torment a person with mental illness is a sign of hope. However, the story can be oppressive and discouraging for the person whose experience does not match the rapid and complete healing of the man in the story. Suggesting, even obliquely, that behaviors like those of the Gerasene man are a result of complicity with evil may blame those in distress for the pain they are experiencing, thus adding to their suffering.¹⁵

The story of the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof by friends (Mk. 2:1–12 and parallels) is another healing story with ambiguous effect. Jesus suggests that the man's condition results from his sin when he extends the man forgiveness. The same suggestion occurs when Jesus heals a man who wishes for help to enter the pool of Beth-zatha (Jn. 5:2-14). Colleen Grant points out that the primary aim of these stories is supporting Jesus' divine authority, but adds, "They have also served as proof of the moral imperfection of people with illness or disabilities."¹⁶ Such blame, whether from self or others, is hardly an expression of the liberating, healing intention of Jesus in the story. Other healing stories that emphasize the faith of the person healed carry similar heavy implications for people with persistent disability.

Grant points out another potentially problematic aspect of the healing narratives: "The very fact that [people] are physically healed by Jesus suggests that physical restoration is a nec-

¹³ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 12.

¹⁴ Christine Guth, "An Insider's Look at the Gerasene Disciple (Mark 5:1-20): Biblical Interpretation from the Social Location of Mental Illness," unpublished paper (Elkhart, Ind.: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2006).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ Colleen C. Grant, "Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives," in *Human Disability and the Service of God*, 77.

essary component of their entry into the community.”¹⁷ Jesus restores the person’s access to the community, “but only on the terms of the able-bodied.”¹⁸ “A Church of All and for All” suggests an alternate interpretation of this pattern that shifts the focus of restoration from cure to community. If disability is a social construct (social model of disability), its removal must come about by social processes. By this understanding, Jesus’ healings are concerned above all with restoring people to their communities, not curing physiological conditions. “Forgiving sins here means removing the stigma imposed...by a culture in which disabilities were associated with sin.”¹⁹

Ambiguity in the gospel healing stories is balanced by an abundance of New Testament passages in which disability imposes no barriers to access to God and to receiving acceptance in the healing community. These inclusive images of Jesus and Paul offer a means to deconstruct the stigma suggested by New Testament texts that are infused with ambiguity. The company Jesus keeps, for example, speaks loud and clear of acceptance and inclusion. His choice of disciples demonstrates his willingness to associate with and depend on people who are far from perfect. Touching a leper (Mk. 1:40, Matt. 8:3) and eating in a leper’s home (Mk. 14:3) are specific ways that Jesus’ actions show a willingness to cross social boundaries. Jesus urges his Pharisee host to invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” to his banquet (Luke 14:13). In Jesus’ parable of the great banquet, people with these same impairments come in to fill the tables that the first invited guests had refused (14:21).

Paul’s writings add to the wealth of New Testament images that affirm a place for people with limitations, including disability. Paul asserts that the treasure of God’s transcendent power, is found in ordinary human bodies, fragile vessels of clay, the dust of the ground into which God has breathed the breath of life (1 Cor. 4:7, Gen. 2:7).²⁰ This fragility affects the entire church, not only people with disabilities, suggests “A Church of All and for All”: “We all hold the treas-

¹⁷ Ibid., 77.

¹⁸ Donald Senior, “Beware of the Canaanite Woman: Disability and the Bible,” in *Religion and Disability: Essays in Scripture, Theology and Ethics*, ed. Marilyn E. Bishop (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 12.

¹⁹ EDAN, 74–75, par. 39–40.

²⁰ Ibid., 80, par. 62.

ure of God's life in earthen vessels."²¹ Paul calls attention to his own human limitation, or thorn in the flesh, making much of the paradox that human inability (*ἀσθένεια*) is the locus of God's power. This assertion, writes Simon Horne, is a reversal of the Levitical tradition that prohibits those with impairments from approaching the divine presence, making the bold claim instead "that inabilities are the place where God's power is made complete" (2 Cor. 12:7–9).²² One final example of Paul's imagery of an inclusive church is his metaphor for the unity of the church as the body of Christ, composed of many members, each dependent on the others. Members that seem weaker he upholds as indispensable (1 Cor. 12:22). Thus, a defining characteristic of the church that Paul envisions is the full inclusion of all, regardless of members' abilities or inabilities.²³ This interdependent church where members carry one another (Gal. 6:2) suggests a place of belonging and contribution for people with all kinds of abilities.

Theological reflection on disability

The church's theological reflection, like its biblical interpretation, needs reexamination from the perspective of people with disability if it is to support rather than oppress people with disability. Core Christian beliefs may contribute to an elevation of disability's symbolic value at the expense of burdening people with disabilities with oppressive interpretations of their own life experience. We need to incorporate values of justice and equal access for persons with disabilities into our foundational understandings about God and God's people. Inclusive communities and the people with disability who belong to them need understandings of God and of disability that allow persons full access to God's grace and the life of the community without undue focus on the sin, sainthood, symbolism, or suffering of the person with disability. Creamer outlines three such images of God that affirm the experiences of persons with disability, images originating with Jennie Weiss Block, Kathy Black, and Nancy Eiesland.²⁴

²¹ EDAN, 87, par. 87.

²² Simon Horne, "Those Who Are Blind See: Some New Testament Uses of Impairment, Inability, and Paradox," in *Human Disability and the Service of God*, 95.

²³ EDAN, 87, par. 87.

²⁴ Creamer.

Block proposes a theology of access, modeled after Jesus' welcoming of all people, regardless of their physical condition. She suggests that the common ground of people with diverse disabilities is their experience of oppression by society and argues that "creating access for those on the margins is a Christian mandate."²⁵ Creamer suggests the Accessible God to name Block's image of the God who calls for an end to attitudes and structures that oppress and exclude people with disabilities.²⁶

Black offers a theology of interdependence. For Black, the Interdependent God (Creamer's term) does not willfully cause suffering, but is present to transform it. God does this by working interdependently with us, in interdependent human communities, to bring about human transformation. In such communities, "dependency is acknowledged and interdependency is valued."²⁷ Such a community can be a means of healing that embodies the healing work of Christ when cure of particular impairments is not possible.

Eiesland has proposed a powerful image of the Disabled God, present to humanity in the wounded hands, feet, and side of the resurrected Christ. The Disabled God counters any notion that disability results from a person's sin, and rejects pity and condescension toward disability. Eiesland further rejects a God with absolute power, emphasizing rather God's solidarity with the oppressed. "A liberatory theology," she writes, "sustains our difficult but ordinary lives, empowers and collaborates with individuals and groups of people with disabilities who struggle for justice in concrete situations, creates new ways of resisting the theological symbols that exclude and devalue us, and reclaims our hidden history in the presence of God on earth."²⁸

Each of these proposals moves away from an emphasis on God as all-powerful. Belief in an all-powerful, all-loving God creates the dilemma of theodicy when it confronts the reality of human suffering. Attempts to resolve the theodicy dilemma put pressure on people with disability as we try to account for our impairment while keeping the image of God intact. If my suffer-

²⁵ Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York, London: Continuum, 2002), 120.

²⁶ Creamer.

²⁷ Black, 41.

²⁸ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 86.

ing with depression is caused by my sin, I have myself to blame. If God imposes suffering to bring me closer to God, God is to blame. If the purpose of my suffering is to cultivate pity in others, God is at fault for capricious action against me. What is there to love about a God who uses power to deliberately afflict? Alternately, what is there to worship about a God who has no power to stop the deterioration of my mind? None of these interpretations offers the person with disabilities access to a God who cares about the everyday struggles of living within human limitation.

My own wrestlings with theodicy, shaped in part by the above authors, have brought me to an image of God who bears responsibility for human suffering, because God's creation of a finite world has inevitable costs. A created order that includes and is dependent on death means that all who live are subject to the possibility of death, and thus subject to the possibility of suffering and disability—death forestalled. Yet I reject a God who intentionally plans and imposes suffering or disability for God's purposes—one who would make a specific decision to shortchange me of what I need to respond to the gift of life with gratitude and pleasure. God has shouldered a responsibility for suffering creation by entering our world to suffer alongside us, through Jesus, who embraced our human vulnerability to wounding and death.²⁹ The wounded human community, redeemed by Christ, is a means of Christ's continuing, imperfect embodiment on earth while humanity awaits its final redemption. Within this transformed community, we encounter God with us through our interdependence with others. Impairments may remain, but they are no longer disabling within the empowered, eschatological community. Our abilities have become more significant than our disabilities.

A critical element of these proposed images of God is a refusal to accept the image of a God who uses disability as a tool to punish, purify, edify, or mystify. Such conceptions present a God who is inaccessible to those with disability, or accessible only at the high cost of accepting oneself as a pawn in the hands of a powerful and capricious God. A second essential element of

²⁹ I elaborate these conclusions and the sources that have influenced them in an unpublished paper, Christine Guth, "Suffering Creation," (Elkhart, Ind.: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2005). AMBS library student papers collection.

these images is solidarity—God’s solidarity with human limitation, and human solidarity with one another, empowered by God’s activity. Our beliefs about God and God’s people are fundamental to Christian faith. As Creamer asserts, these alternate images of God “show us that accessibility is about more than just ramps and inclusive language; the question of accessibility is important all the way through to the very core of our practices and our belief systems.”³⁰

Disability in the contemporary church: Asperger Syndrome

Transformation in the core of our beliefs prompts us to look for transforming ways of living together. Thus, from theological reflection, I turn to suggest practices for contemporary communities of faith inspired by a theology of inclusion. As a way to limit this section’s scope, I focus more narrowly here on inclusion of people with Asperger Syndrome (AS). Several factors suggest this choice: First, a primary disabling feature of AS is social impairment, for which the social model of disability is especially pertinent. Communities have a significant opportunity to minimize a person’s disability by responding to the social impairments of AS with inclusive practices—and a significant likelihood of aggravating it by their indifference. Second, churches are feeling the impact of AS. The numbers of people recognized with AS are increasing rapidly,³¹ and many congregations are encountering or will soon encounter people with AS. Finally, the need for understanding AS in the church is great. People unfamiliar with AS find it baffling, and resources about AS written from the perspective of Christian ministry are few.

“A community that excludes even one of its members is no community at all,” asserts a poster created by Dan Wilkins.³² *If a community excludes one of its members, chances are, the one excluded is a person with AS. A person with AS causes those of us who are not on the autism spectrum to have to work hard in order to build relationships and understanding. We readily*

³⁰ Creamer.

³¹ A recent U.S. analysis estimates that in the one person in 150 has AS or a related condition on the autism spectrum; Melody Stevens, et al., *Prevalence of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in Multiple Areas of the United States, 2000 and 2002: Community Report from the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007), 12, <<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/documents/AutismCommunityReport.pdf>> (accessed Feb. 15, 2007).

³² Dan Wilkins, The Nth Degree, 21325 Bradner Road, Luckey, OH 43445, <<http://www.thenthdegree.com/posters.asp>>.

misinterpret behaviors that are characteristic of AS. It is easy to become uncomfortable with expressions of intense interest, unusual mannerisms, or lack of conversational small talk. All too often, we take the easy way out of the dilemma a person with AS brings to us—we keep the person at a distance. By our response, we make the person an outsider. People with AS may be outsiders everywhere they go. Christ calls his body to be the exception, the community that takes the extra effort to invite outsiders to become insiders.

If we take on the goal of full inclusion of people with AS in our communities of faith, we might begin by recognizing that AS is a neurological condition that causes differences—some would say impairment—in social interaction.³³ Its behavior differences result from observable differences in brain structure, not obstinacy, rudeness, bad parenting, or low intelligence. Conspicuous disparities between a person’s cognitive and social abilities may make this insight less than intuitive. Information about AS respectfully shared with a congregation may curtail a tendency to draw inappropriate conclusions.³⁴

For those not on the autism spectrum, AS challenges us to learn to be uncharacteristically direct in expressing ourselves and in clarifying boundaries for appropriate behavior. Directness is often helpful, because people with AS have challenges reading others’ intentions and nonverbal communications, or knowing the “hidden curriculum” of everyday life. Making people with AS welcome may also lead us to alter our physical spaces for worship, education, and fellowship to allow for a little more background noise, more movement, more elbowroom, or to limit sensory overload from flickering fluorescent lights, loud sounds, or bothersome smells.

Inclusive communities will consider alternate strategies for integration into the life of the church community that do not rely heavily on typical social interactions. We will look for ways of celebrating and capitalizing on at least one of a person’s intense special interests, a trait highly characteristic of AS, because these sometimes-unusual gifts of God are what most engage that

³³ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing, 1994).

³⁴ Barbara Newman shares excellent examples of how go about this in *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2006), 49–58.

person's passions. This may well stretch the bounds of our traditional list of gifts to be exercised in church. If God has graced a person with a strong passion for deep-sea animals, for example, finding an appropriate avenue to share this grace with a congregation will take creativity, but promises to strengthen relationships and appreciation for the wonder of God's amazingly diverse creation. We further support inclusiveness when we offer affirmation, recognition, and support to adults who have the gift of enjoying the unusual interests and entering the divergent worlds of young people with AS. Friendship with adults may come more easily for these young people than friendship with peers. The intense interests of a person with AS may suggest an individualized approach to catechism that will engage the person more easily.

An important aspect of supporting inclusion is recognition that parents and family members of those with AS are likely to have strong needs for acceptance and support. Parents may be more likely than those with AS to feel the pain of inaccessible theological interpretation, such as implying that their child's disability is deserved punishment or a source of lessons the parents must learn. They may feel the pain of social stigma even more acutely than their child does. Parents may grieve in recurring stages for the loss of the child of their expectations. Regular inclusion of lament in congregational worship offers space to bring such loss to God. Parents may welcome tangible expressions of solidarity, such as respite care at home, a cell phone number to call when family tensions are erupting, someone to sit with the child or siblings during worship, or a volunteer to teach a child a particular practical skill.

Inclusion asks us to examine how much of our corporate experience is centered on feeling-oriented activity and to amplify, as needed, our cognitive approaches to worship, study of the Bible, Christian ethics, etc. We need to offer models for expression of Christian commitment that include ritual, intellectual analysis, and concrete action, and do not depend solely on abstract symbol, metaphor, or feeling the presence of God. Finding alternatives or supplements to treasured metaphors may challenge our settled notions about human nature and about what a relationship with God is like. Rearranging our deeply held ideas and perspectives is one of the gifts AS offers us, and another opportunity to marvel at the amazing diversity in God's creation.

If we are serious about inviting others into the transforming and redeeming community of Christ's body, responsibility and opportunity lie with those of us with greater social ability to ensure an accessible place in the body for those whose social ability is not as strong. Embracing this opportunity invites us to examine our expectations of conformity and to pare them down to what is truly essential for community life, allowing and celebrating divergent approaches that do no harm. Finally, I suggest, full inclusion asks us to respect our brothers and sisters with AS as equal partners in faith, capable of self-determination and valuable contribution.

Personal theology and ministry

Ministry with people who have AS and theological reflection on disability are themes that track important segments of my life experience. While reading and reflecting in the preparation of this paper, I have come to recognize that disability is not only about my family members. It is also an accurate way to think about my own lifelong journey with mental illness. Through God's gifts of a decade of seminary study, wondrous medications, communities of support, and even a challenging family life, the disability of this illness—for now—has been significantly disabled.

My call to ministry has been shaped by the image of Jesus reaching out to include those on the margins. His attention to people suffering from physical, emotional, and social conditions brought them healing. Jesus empowers his followers to carry on his ministry of healing through accompanying others. We have the opportunity, by God's grace, to embody Jesus's healing presence in our world. We need spiritual and intellectual discernment, as we accompany others, in order to avoid distortions of his gospel that inflict pain and further oppress the marginalized.

The sense of call that initially led me to explore ministry and has sustained me through difficult times is a call to embody the presence of Christ to those in pain—either open or hidden. The call is also to help the church articulate healing words of hope rather than words that add to the oppression of those who are already suffering. I have sensed that the church needs people who are wounded to follow the call of ministering with wounded people. The coupling of this early sense of call to ministry in the area of disabilities has been a more recent development. The match seems God given at this point, although in time conceivably it could translate into another

form of ministry. In ministry to the church, I offer my gifts: my presence, my wounds, my discernment, and my articulation, for God's glory.