

Boston College  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of  
“ From Barriers to Belonging:  
The Church and People with Disabilities ”

presented on October 4, 2017 by  
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Fifth, what we learned from these families is belonging involves acceptance. And acceptance comes not, again, from being known about, or from an information or awareness campaign, but from being personally known. And the families talked about their child being welcomed without condition and treated like family and embraced for who they are.

And attitudes have changed a lot over time. But you know also, the attitudes that are in society permeate our churches as well. And when we asked parents in one of our studies to share their perspectives on the extent to which their current congregation was accepting of their son or daughter, we were surprised that only 55% said, “My congregational leader is accepting of my child.” And only 48% felt congregation members were accepting of their child. This is the church that they go to, not the one that they aren’t at or left.

And you see kind of these sayings, or things that people say that reflect attitudinal barriers in our churches that are often subtle, but they reflect deeper views about how we think about people who are, have disability labels, or who have other labels as well. I put these in your handout so you can read through these. These are all variations on things I’ve heard in my conversations with churches. So don’t do one with

And if you need resources on how to do inclusion awareness events, handouts. There’s lots of different denominations and traditions that I’m glad to point you to. Some congregations put bulletin inserts periodically about different issues. Some put bulletin inserts highlighting things like employment issues for people with disabilities, or just awareness of the disabilities in their community.

I won’t pause to say much about disability awareness efforts, only to say they’re often poorly than well.

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[LAUGHTER]

It's the pastor who can just say, we're going to consider some alternatives to the way we've always done it if it brings people into community.

We did a national study on how theological schools are addressing the intersection of faith and disability, or were often not. I'm glad to share more about that in the Q&A if you're interested and point you to what we found from that.

Sixth, families we spoke with needed support. Sometimes that support was substantial, and sometimes it wasn't. But I think what was different about the supports is the need for them to be intentional and individualized for different kids. And this isn't a place to make presumptions. Actually, you just want to invite input, have conversations with parents about, what would it look like to make Sunday morning or Wednesday night or whenever you gather the best day of the week for your son or daughter? What can we do to make that happen? So many parents say, we've never been asked about how best to support our son or daughter.

So ask good questions. Take someone out. Invite him for coffee. I put in your handout some of the kinds of questions that you might ask, not as a way to exclude their son or daughter, but as a way to make sure the supports are in place for them on Sunday or whenever you gather.

So these are the kinds of questions that we would ask, all aimed at not having the parent have to be the advocate in the congregation. But we would sit down, we'd listen to the family, and then we would go and do their asking for them. a b

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I just posted down the side the percentage of churches that actually do any one of these. Only 10% do disability awareness. Only 6% have an advocate for families. Only 4% have resources for families. Only one-third have any kind of special services for the disabled.