The Absence of Asterisks: The Inclusive Church and Children With Disabilities

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Abstract: Congregations are called to be communities of belonging. Yet, many churches struggle to meaningfully include children with disabilities and their families in all aspects of parish life. This article addresses 10 dimensions of belonging and their relevance to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in their faith communities. To belong involves being present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, cared for, supported, befriended, needed, and loved (Carter, Biggs, & Boehm, 2016). I address the importance of each of these areas, highlight relevant research, and suggest areas for reflection and response.

Keywords: religious communities, inclusion, disabilities, religious education, worship

Faith is central to the flourishing of individuals with disabilities and their families. Scores of studies confirm what so many anecdotes affirm—spirituality is an important and influential aspect of life for many individuals with disabilities (Baldwin et al., 2015; Boehm & Carter, 2019a; Liu et al., 2014). For example, a national survey conducted by the National Organization on Disability (2004) found that almost exactly the same percentage of Americans with and without disabilities described their faith as being somewhat or very important (i.e., 87% and 84%, respectively). Among families of children with disabilities, faith can also have special salience (Carter, 2019; Salkas et al., 2016; Speraw, 2006). The spiritual beliefs and church involvement of parents, siblings, and other relatives can be a crucial source of strength, support, and relationships in the midst of both ordinary and extraordinary challenges.

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Individuals with disabilities and their families also are central to the flourishing of faith communities. Like anyone else, they bring gifts, talents, and passions that are needed by others in their parish. Their testimonies and personal stories can positively contribute to the faith formation of fellow believers. Their life experiences and diverse perspectives can help broaden views of what it means to live faithfully in the world. Their friendships can bring life to people whom they encounter. And the avenues through which they serve can meet the needs of others in their midst. Indeed, churches are incomplete without the presence and participation of individuals with disabilities and their families.

The Call on Congregations

The call on congregations to be places of inclusion and belonging for individuals with disabilities and their families is clear and longstanding. The Scriptures are replete with commands to welcome the stranger (Matthew 25), to break down barriers to Jesus (Mark 2), to invite the overlooked (Luke 14), to affirm the image of God in every person (Genesis 1), to move the margins to the middle (Matthew 20), to upend societal hierarchies (Galatians 3), to see those who seem superfluous as utterly indispensable (1 Corinthians 12), and to love one another deeply (Matthew 22). In addition, a growing body of theological work has addressed themes of hospitality, belonging, healing, inclusion, and community in relation to disability (Fox, 2019; Reynolds, 2008; Yong, 2011).

Dozens of formal statements and resolutions issued by different religious denominations also address why and where faith communities should be inclusive of individuals with disabilities and their families (Carter, 2007). Within the Catholic Church, several strong statements from the Vatican and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops emphasize the importance of this call. For example, a 1999 statement, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework of Access and Inclusion*, emphasized: "Parish liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity" (p. 1). Moreover, the Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities culminated in the following powerful point: "There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities. We are one flock that follows a single shepherd" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1978, p. 9). In sum, the call to inclusion is not mere invitation; it stands as an explicit obligation.

The Response of Congregations

Unfortunately, this call is often met by an equivocal or evasive response. Although a growing number of churches are widening their welcome, far too many individuals with disabilities still experience wounding or rejection at the doorsteps of their parish. Several national surveys have documented significant gaps in the congregational participation of individuals with and without disabilities (e.g., Brucker, 2015 ; Li-Ching et al., 2008 ; Whitehead, 2018). For example, the

National Organization on Disability (2010) found that 45% of Americans who identified as having a severe disability reported attending a place of worship at least monthly compared to 57% of respondents without disabilities. Other studies have documented the presence of attitudinal barriers among congregation members and leaders (Howell & Pierson, 2010; McNair, 2007; Patka & McDonald, 2015). Similarly, surveys of parents have highlighted the absence of needed supports for children with disabilities Ault et al. (2013a); Carter, Boehm, et al. (2016), and multiple research projects have noted the presence of architectural features that inadvertently limit access and full participation in a church (Holland et al., 2016; Vierkant et al., 2006; White, 2014).

Although the public proclamations of most local parishes are open and inviting, the actual practices of too many churches reflect the presence of asterisks:

- *All are welcome* (*except those whose behaviors or bodies diverge too much from prevailing norms);

- *Nobody is excluded* (*except when resources, staff, or supports seem limited); and

- *Everyone serves* (*except those predesignated as the recipients of ministry efforts).

Such asterisks can quickly lead to absences. For example, Ault and colleagues (2013a) found that nearly one in three families (32%) reported having left their congregation because their daughter or son with disabilities was not welcomed or included. Similarly, more than one third (38%) of parents in a study by O'Hanlon (2013) said they considered switching congregations because of personal experiences related to their child with disabilities. Indeed, the church stories shared by many parents of children with developmental disabilities include statements that reveal the hidden limits of welcome (Gaventa, 2018; Poston & Turnbull, 2004):

- *We just are not equipped to serve your child.*

- *We don't really do disability ministry here.*

- *Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable at a church with a special program for her.*

- *How can we be certain she actually understands the meaning of communion?*

- *We aren't really sure he will get much out of being in our regular classes.*

- *Her behaviors are a bit of a distraction.*

How might parishes become communities without asterisks? How might they welcome and weave children with disabilities and their families fully into the life of their community? This article

addresses the importance of making movements that promote the belonging of *all* children in their local parish. To structure this discussion, I present a framework of belonging that has relevance across key areas of congregational life—worship, learning, service, and fellowship. In each of 10 areas, I suggest avenues through which parishes can reflect on their postures and practices. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for moving forward in this essential area of congregational ministry.

Dimensions of Belonging

Conversations about welcoming children with disabilities into parish life are not new Kemp (1957); Stubblefield (1964); United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1978, 1999). Yet, the focus of our pursuits has evolved over the years. At a time when individuals with disabilities were excluded from much of congregational and community life, emphasis was initially placed on promoting integration within the local parish. However, this response often led to separate religious education classes, specialized catechesis programs, and other parallel activities. That is, although individuals with and without disabilities attended the same parish, their lives may have rarely intersected with one another.

Another wave of movements promoted the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of parish life. This led to increasing numbers of children participating in religious education classes, worship services, service projects, and social activities right alongside their peers without disabilities. But although children with and without disabilities became more involved in shared activities, the relationships and reciprocity that should mark life together in community did not always or automatically emerge. Finally, in recent years, the discussion has shifted toward a goal that lies beyond integration and inclusion—making parishes communities of belonging for all of their members (Carter, 2016; Swinton, 2012).

What, then, does it mean to really belong somewhere? How might we discern whether children with disabilities are truly experiencing belonging within their parishes?

Several years ago, my colleagues and I posed these questions to young people with disabilities and their families (Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2014). In a multi-year, mixed-method study involving more than 500 families of children with intellectual disability, autism, and other developmental disabilities, 10 key themes emerged. We learned that belonging is experienced when people are present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved (see Figure 1). The individuals we interviewed spoke quite vividly about the ways in which they experienced each of these dimensions of belonging. Moreover, their stories were punctuated with examples of instances when each was noticeably absent.

In the remainder of this article, I adopt this framework to address what we know and where we might go in relation to each of these 10 dimensions of belonging. Moreover, I illustrate the ways in

Figure 1

Ten Dimensions of Belonging in Parish Life

which belonging might be fostered within four common aspects of parish life: worship, learning, service, and fellowship. For readers interested in reflecting on the postures and practices of their own parish in relation to belonging, the following questions should be considered in relation to each area (Forest & Pearpoint, 1997): *What are we doing well right now? What could we be doing better? What should we be doing quite differently? What can we begin doing right away to move us further toward this destination?*

To Be Present

In the United States, about one in seven children have a disability (McFarland et al., 2019). They may experience physical disabilities, cognitive impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, autism, speech/language difficulties, reading disabilities, emotional/behavioral challenges, or any number of other conditions. Sometimes, a child's disability is readily apparent; but in most cases, it is not immediately visible. Regardless, it is clear that numerous children with disabilities reside in the midst of every single church. *To what extent are these children with disabilities present in your parish? As you reflect on the children with disabilities who are already involved in your church, what proportion have disabilities?*

Presence provides the backdrop for belonging. Regular participation in the ordinary aspects of parish life provides the context in which children come to be welcomed, known, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved. Indeed, in any community, it is hard to feel like you belong if you are never or rarely there. Yet, dozens of studies highlight the diminished involvement

of children with disabilities from typical church activities (see Carter, in press). For example, substantial participation gaps have been documented for children with autism (Li-Ching et al., 2008), chronic health conditions (Whitehead, 2018), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) (Li-Ching et al., 2008), intellectual disability (Boehm & Carter, 2019b), and orthopedic impairments (Wagner et al., 2003). Although involvement in Mass and other worship services tends to be somewhat common, it is within youth programs, catechism classes, and other religious education classes that presence tends to be most diminished Ault et al. (2013a); Boehm & Carter (2019b).

What stands in the way of presence? A constellation of barriers has been highlighted in the literature. *Architectural barriers* can prevent individuals with disabilities from entering or navigating the locations in which parish life is shared (e.g., sanctuaries, classrooms, fellowship areas, congregants' homes) or participating fully in available activities (Holland et al., 2016; Vierkant et al., 2006). *Attitudinal barriers* can be reflected in the views people hold about disability, the hesitations they express, or the assumptions they make (Carter et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2012). *Awareness barriers* are evident when congregations overlook the presence of people with disabilities in their local communities or fail to recognize their needs and contributions. *Communication barriers* can take the form of inaccessible materials or be found in the absence of alternative communication formats (Riordan & Vasa, 1991). *Support barriers* emerge when either ubiquitous supports (i.e., those ordinarily available to anyone in the parish) or personalized supports (i.e., those individually tailored for a particular person) are not made available to children with disabilities. *Theological barriers* surrounding biblical understandings of disability issues can leave individuals with disabilities feeling excluded or diminished (Fox, 2019; Melchner et al., 2017). Finally, *expectation barriers* are evident when the boundaries of acceptable behavior are defined in unduly narrow ways or when an emphasis on conformity tramples a commitment to diversity. Collectively, these (and other barriers not named here) can coalesce in ways that contribute to the absence of people with disabilities.

To Be Invited

Increasing the presence of individuals with disabilities usually requires extending new invitations. People are assured they belong when they are sought out and personally invited. Rather than waiting passively (or merely hoping) for individuals with disabilities and their families to arrive, the posture of a parish committed to belonging shifts toward pursuing people who are not yet there. *Are children with disabilities and their families a named focus of your outreach efforts? Are congregation members actively inviting individuals with disabilities in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities?* For the many families whose history includes exclusion (Ault et al., 2013a), broad pronouncements that "everyone is welcome" may not resonate or sound convincing.

Parishes can adopt a variety of approaches to extending these invitations. For example, churches often incorporate imagery and language into their outreach materials (e.g., brochures, mailings, signage, social media, websites) that explicitly communicate their commitment to being a place of belonging for all of their community—including those with disabilities. This might involve crafting an inclusive mission or vision statement, detailing available supports and accommodations, incorporating photos or videos depicting the diversity of their membership, or describing disability-related programs (e.g., access ministry, respite programs, parent support groups) offered through the church. In addition, parishes can ask local disability agencies (e.g., independent living centers, employment providers, residential providers), disability advocacy groups (e.g., The Arc, Autism societies, Down syndrome associations, Easterseals, Goodwill Industries, United Cerebral Palsy), family support groups, schools, and other community programs to pass along invitations to the individuals and families whom they serve. Many families impacted by disability are connected to one or more of these entities.

Although passive announcements like these are worth pursuing, active invitations also are needed to convincingly communicate the absence of asterisks. Research suggests that most people who visit a church for the first time do so because they were invited by someone who already attends, not because they saw a general advertisement (Rainer, 2003). This same entry point matters for children with disabilities and their families. Such personal invitations can assure families that their presence is deeply desired and needed. However, a national study found that fewer than half (43%) of church members reported having invited someone to a worship service who was not already attending their congregation (Woolever & Bruce, 2002). Congregation members may need guidance and encouragement to extend such invitations in general, but particularly to families with members who have disabilities. Presence follows pursuit.

To Be Welcomed

As children with disabilities and their families arrive to church for the first time, they should encounter a warm reception. Hospitality should be central to the life and identity of any congregation; a gracious and generous welcome should permeate every parish (Pohl, 1999). Yet, the absence of such early encounters is an all-too-common refrain within the testimonies of young people and their families. The "church stories" of parents seem to culminate in wounding as often as they end in welcoming (Jacober, 2010; Richardson & Stoneman, 2015). *What is the prevailing response to the presence of children with disabilities in your parish? Is hospitality the gesture of choice when members are in the presence of strangers?*

Most parishes would describe themselves as welcoming communities. But it is not the host who determines what feels welcoming; rather, it is the guest. What does it look like to welcome children with disabilities and their families well? At one level, it involves ordinary gestures: learning their

names, seeking them out, asking about their week, inviting their participation, anticipating their needs, connecting them to others, offering supports, utilizing their gifts, praying together, and much more. However, it may also require asking families about additional steps you could take to make coming to church the very best part of the week for their child with disabilities.

Not everyone in a parish will initially feel comfortable with these new interactions. They may have had limited prior experience with children with disabilities or perceive they lack the knowledge they need to be effective. Unfortunately, such reluctance or hesitation almost always translates into avoidance. When people are uncertain about what to say or do—or what to avoid saying or doing—they almost always avoid the encounter altogether. It is here that guidance and modeling may be especially helpful. Providing information about disability etiquette, appropriate language, and available congregational resources can give people greater confidence to pursue new interactions (DeYoung & Stephenson, 2013). In addition, parishioners may benefit from receiving more in-depth training about how to engage with children who have complex communication needs, who require extensive supports, or who behave in unfamiliar ways.

To Be Known

It is one thing to be welcomed; it is quite another to be known. A recurring finding within studies addressing inclusive practices has been that it is possible for children with disabilities to be present in a place without having a real presence; to be integrated in a community while still feeling invisible (Carter et al., 2010; Kuntz & Carter, 2019). In other words, mere attendance does not automatically ensure that others in a community come to know someone well. Too often, individuals with disabilities become the quintessential "other" in a community—known about, but not known personally. Indeed, parents talk about their children being known primarily by their disability labels rather than by their names (e.g., "that kid with autism" or "those 'special needs' children";) (Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016). *How are children with disabilities known throughout your parish? What exactly are they known for?*

But there is another aspect of being known that should be emphasized here. Disability is often discussed using the language of deficits and challenges. For example, most diagnostic labels and special education categories place their accent on what someone cannot or struggle to do. What a narrow and incomplete way of coming to know someone within a church. Like anyone else, young people with disabilities also possess God-given gifts, skills, talents, and positive traits that make them indispensable. A growing number of strength-based studies are helping to change the current narrative about disability by placing their accent on the positive qualities and contributions of young people with disabilities (Carter et al., 2015; Niemiec et al., 2017). *Are children with disabilities in your parish recognized as individuals with remarkable gifts? Are they seen as having strengths to be shared more than needs to be met?*

Children with disabilities come to be known—and known positively—primarily through personal encounters. Supporting shared activities in which children with and without disabilities learn, serve, worship, and engage in fellowship alongside one another creates rich opportunities for social interaction and friendship formation. It is through these personal relationships that preconceived ideas about disabilities are most likely to be challenged and eventually overturned. At the same time, parishes should actively seek to identify, develop, and deploy the gifts of individuals with disabilities—just as they do for other members of the congregation. When individuals with disabilities are seen serving others—and not just being served—the ways in which they are viewed begin to change (Wolfensberger, 1983).

To Be Accepted

Attitudes toward disability in the United States have changed dramatically over the last 50 years (Scior & Werner, 2015). In general, awareness of disability, accurate knowledge about disability, and positive views toward people with disabilities have all tended to improve. Yet, true acceptance of children with disabilities remains mixed—both within and beyond the church. Stigma, labeling, stereotypes, and prejudice are all readily found in all areas of contemporary culture. Likewise, studies of congregational attitudes present a complicated portrait of attitudes. For example, Boehm & Carter (2016) found that most parents of children with intellectual disability or autism agreed that congregation members (89%) and congregational leaders (87%) accepted their child. On the other hand, almost one third (30%) were not very satisfied with how welcoming their congregation was of individuals with these particular disabilities. Similarly, a qualitative study by Poston & Turnbull (2004) reported that comparable numbers of parents of children with disabilities described their congregations as places of acceptance as did parents who described the considerable difficulties they faced in their faith community. *How would you characterize the attitudes in your parish? Are children with disabilities accepted unconditionally?*

Acceptance involves being welcomed wholeheartedly and received without precondition. It is the remedy for rejection, and reflects a posture that extends beyond mere tolerance. Parishes can take a number of steps to shift attitudes over time. For example, offering awareness events (e.g., disability or inclusion awareness Sunday), incorporating curricular units within religious education programs for children and adults, or sharing informational materials (e.g., brochures, videos) are formal avenues for promoting greater acceptance throughout a congregation. In addition, the messaging and modeling that comes from the pulpit and through parish leadership can help communicate the church's commitment to being a place of inclusion and belonging for all children. Providing occasional training for ministry leaders and volunteers ensures they have the knowledge and skills needed to welcome and support children with disabilities well in all of the parish's programming. Finally, personal contact is perhaps most critical to promoting acceptance. Research examining attitude change finds that supporting positive interactions over time may be the most promising

pathways for changing views toward persons with disabilities (Scior & Werner, 2015). In other words, true acceptance comes not from learning about someone, but from coming to know someone personally.

To Be Supported

Families of children with disabilities will need support to participate fully in the life of their local parish. Some of those supports can be quite ordinary—encouragement to participate, connections to others, invitations to serve, mentorship, or the provision of childcare. Other supports, however, may need to be much more individualized or intensive. For example, children with more extensive disabilities, communication difficulties, or challenging behaviors may require additional creativity and commitment to be supported well. But a church without asterisks sees this investment as essential rather than optional. *Are we providing children with the supports they need to participate meaningfully in a wide range of worship, learning, service, and fellowship activities? Do we extend this support with gladness and creativity?*

Individualizing supports for children with disabilities requires intentional and thoughtful planning. Surprisingly, Ault et al. (2013a) reported that nearly half (46%) of parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities reported that they had never been asked by someone in their church about how best to include their child in religious activities. Some parishes craft individualized plans (e.g., religious education plan, inclusion plan) for children with disabilities that outline the ways in which their full participation can be supported in Mass, religious education programs, and social activities. Borrowing from the best of person-centered approaches (Schwartz et al., 2000), written plans should ensure that individualized supports are considered as a forethought rather than addressed as an afterthought.

What supports might be especially helpful? Several studies have asked families which supports or programmatic offerings they would consider to be most helpful Ault et al. (2013a); Boehm & Carter (2016). These include support groups for parents, congregation-wide disability awareness initiatives, information about community resources for families, congregational advocates who can communicate the needs of families, spiritual counseling from a congregation leader, respite care, a spiritual formation plan that details necessary modifications and adaptations, assistance from a peer or adult during religious education programs, additional support from someone during worship services, adapted worship services, financial support from the congregation to assist with meeting the health needs of their child, transportation to congregational activities, and additional investments in the area of architectural accessibility. In all cases, supports should be individualized to meet the needs of a particular child with disabilities and her or his family. As in most areas of inclusive ministry, asking good questions is advocated over making advance assumptions.

To Be Cared For

The care of a congregation and its members can be very instrumental to the thriving of individuals with disabilities and their families. Research has documented a strong association between the religious faith of parents of children with developmental disabilities and the quality of life their families experience (Boehm et al., 2015; Carter, 2019; Poston & Turnbull, 2004). For parents, their spiritual beliefs and practices can offer a foundation for their understandings of disability, give a sense of purpose and direction, comprise a deep and enduring source of strength, influence the decisions they make about services and supports, and help families cope with both everyday stressors and extraordinary challenges. Likewise, involvement in a local parish can provide access to a wide variety of practical (e.g., respite), emotional (e.g., personal encouragement, pastoral counseling), and social supports (Carter, 2019; Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016). Findings like these are not surprising in light of the scores of studies linking spirituality to indicators of well being among the general population (Koenig et al., 2012). *Does your parish have a reputation for generous care? What might be done to address the spiritual, emotional, material, and other needs of individuals with disabilities and families in your midst?*

Although the postures and practices that families encounter in church on Sunday morning matter, care should extend throughout all seven days of the week (Carter, 2011). For parents of children with more extensive support needs, offering formal or informal periods of respite can represent a powerful gesture of care. Respite enables parents to attend to personal needs (e.g., medical appointments, shopping), to spend time with their spouse or other children, to serve within the parish, or to simply rest. Unfortunately, studies suggest that very few congregations (i.e., less than 10%) make respite available to their members (Boehm & Carter, 2016; Woolever & Bruce, 2002). Other avenues include facilitating support groups for parents or sibling, helping families make connections to community resources, or providing needed financial or other assistance.

For individuals with disabilities, care can also take a variety of forms. For example, churches have been involved in connecting transition-age youth with disabilities to jobs through the connections of congregation members (Carter, Endress, et al., 2016), establishing safe and inclusive residential options (Floding, 2012), assisting with transportation, and helping facilitate relationships with others in their community (Amado et al., 2013).

To Be Befriended

It is not good to be alone. This scriptural truth is affirmed in many empirical studies documenting the detrimental impacts of loneliness, isolation, and rejection (Chu et al., 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Human beings were created for community with one another, and to belong involves being befriended. For many children with disabilities, however, the friendships that can contribute to their flourishing are limited or lacking.

Table 1 displays findings from two nationally representative studies addressing the social experiences of elementary- and secondary-level students with disabilities from the perspectives of their parents. As illustrated in these tables, far too many children with disabilities are missing out on enjoyable and meaningful relationships with their peers. And far too many children without disabilities are missing out on the chance to encounter the friendship and faith of their peers with disabilities. *Are friendships developing among children with and without disabilities in your parish? To what extent are relationships prioritized as a focus of congregational ministry?*

A recent resolution issued by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (2018) emphasizes this essential investment in relationships:

> We further acknowledge that every Christian receives a divine call to service and fraternal love within the faith community. As members of the Body of Christ, persons with disabilities have the proper right to be active participants in the life of the Church. We recognize that the bare assertion and protection of rights can become a sterile exercise whenever it lacks the Christian presumption of our common call to friendship with one another in Christ.

Inclusive approaches to ministry provide regular opportunities for children with and without disabilities to meet one another, to spend time together, and to forge new friendships. In contrast, when ministry models are largely specialized or separate, such encounters may rarely or never occur. Children's friendship can never be forced; however, much is known about the conditions under which they are most likely to be forged. Put simply, friendships are typically built upon a foundation of shared activities over time around shared interests. Moreover, adults can serve as effective facilitators of these social connections by pairing children with and without disabilities based on the things they have in common, providing needed information about each another, assigning children with disabilities valued roles within inclusive activities, and providing just enough (but not too much) structured facilitation when interactions require additional support (Biggs & Carter, 2017). Peer-mediated support models may be an especially powerful approach for encouraging the development of new relationships and promoting full participation Ault et al. (2013b); Howell & Pierson (2010); Jacober (2010). For example, other same-age or older children without similar disabilities can be invited, equipped, and assisted to provide some of the support a peer with disabilities needs to participate in religious education classes, attend a social event, or contribute to a service project.

Table 1

Social Experiences of Elementary- and Secondary-Level Students with Disabilities

Disability category	Children ages 6-13[a]			Youth ages 13-16[b]		
	Not invited to social activities of other students (%)	Never or rarely receive phone calls often from friends (%)	Never visited with friends (%)	Not invited to social activities in the past 12 months (%)	Never or rarely receive phone calls often from friends (%)	Never got together with friends in past 12 months (%)
Autism	31.9	81.0	32.3	50.6	73.8	44.3
Deaf/blindness	-	-	-	34.6	49.3	26.7
Emotional disturbance	18.5	41.5	10.3	17.1	17.6	10.7
Hearing impairment	8.1	48.7	8.9	11.9	26.9	8.4
Intellectual disability	20.4	50.1	17.3	24.8	32.8	16.4
Learning disability	8.5	25.2	7.5	11.3	11.4	6.9
Multiple disabilities	26.2	64.3	21.3	43.5	54.0	30.0
Orthopedic impairment	14.2	40.7	12.0	29.7	34.2	20.0
Other health impairment	9.7	32.7	6.7	11.8	13.2	5.8
Speech/language impairment	6.4	30.4	7.4	10.9	14.1	8.8
Traumatic brain injury	14.9	33.0	12.7	19.6	22.0	7.8
Visual impairment	14.3	38.3	14.9	21.9	24.2	14.6

Note. [a]Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (www.seels.sri.org). [b]National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (www.nlts2.org).

To Be Needed

Although faith communities can be quick to notice the needs of individuals with disabilities, they often are much slower at recognizing their own need for the gifts, friendships, and presence of individuals with disabilities. A faithful community should be marked by both mutuality and reciprocity. Every person bears the image of God and is given spiritual gifts for the upbuilding of the body of Christ. In these areas there are no asterisks. Yet, many parishes struggle to push beyond an exclusive model of "ministry to" people with disabilities toward one that also reflects "ministry by" people with disabilities (Gaventa, 2018). *Are you helping children with disabilities and their families to discover, develop, and deploy their spiritual gifts in the service of others? Does your parish see every member as utterly indispensable?*

As noted in the National Directory for Catechesis (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005)

> All persons with disabilities have the capacity to proclaim the Gospel and to be living witnesses to its truth within the community of faith and offer valuable gifts. … They are not just the recipients of catechesis—they are also its agents. (p. 49)

Churches must identify ways for individuals with disabilities to serve within and beyond the parish. This should include any of the existing avenues through which other members serve, such as being a greeter or hospitality team member, serving as a reader or alter server, joining the choir or worship team, mentoring or encouraging others, visiting those who are sick or homebound, helping in the nursery or children's ministry, assisting in parish outreach programs, praying for others, serving beyond the walls of the church, and myriad other ways.

In their study of the congregational involvement of youth and young adults with intellectual disability and autism, Carter and Boehm (2019) found that involvement in leadership roles and service opportunities was limited. Of particular importance is the need to encourage young people with disabilities in their vocational calls toward formal ministry roles in the future. Holland et al. (2016) found that only 17% of Catholic parishes had a staff member with a disability and nearly half did not have any individuals with disabilities who ministered in their parish. Moreover, many theological schools still struggle to support access to their campuses and coursework, leaving individuals with disabilities with limited pathways for seminary training (Annandale & Carter, 2014). Individuals with disabilities considering ordained ministry should receive the information, counseling, and support they need to discern and pursue this calling (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017).

To Be Loved

The body of Christ must be known by its love. Indeed, love must be laced throughout all of the other dimensions of belonging discussed thus far. It is what compels us to invite, to welcome, to

accept, to support, to care for, and to befriend one another; it is what follows when we come to know and need each other. The Scriptures are replete with calls to love—one's neighbor, one's enemy, one another, and God. It is impossible to find any exceptions to this command to love. And yet churches have not always been loving or lovely places for individuals with disabilities and their families. *Does your parish abound in love for children with disabilities and their families? Is this love deep and unconditional?*

Reflecting on Parish Practices and Postures

There are more than 17,000 Catholic parishes across the United States. Each differs widely in its membership, cultures, priorities, needs, and current practices. Although this article identifies a number of key landmarks on the journey toward belonging, the pathways each parish takes toward this destination will be distinctive. For some, these 10 dimensions of belonging already pervade the parish. In others, the distance from here to there still seems quite far. How can parishes discern their starting point and next steps in this area of ministry?

Churches often establish a formal group to reflect on the postures and practices of their parish in relation to disability (Carter, 2007). Launching such a team brings both intentionality and accountability to a church's movements. The team should be comprised of individuals who see parish life from a variety of vantage points, including individuals with disabilities, family members, pastoral staff, ministry leaders, and other interested congregation members. In addition, teams can involve parish members who have professional roles related to disability or invite representatives from community agencies and organizations that serve individuals with disabilities. Rather than pursuing a prescribed set of steps imposed from the outside, the team prayerfully considers existing barriers, urgent (and emerging) needs, available resources, and ministry goals that are specific to their parish. A variety of tools and processes can be drawn upon to guide this parish-wide reflection. For example, Carter (2017) synthesized available reflection approaches as addressing architecture accessibility, congregational attitudes, indicators of welcome, congregational commitment, sense of belonging, and collective actions.

The team then invites input from others throughout the parish. This might entail surveying congregation members, interviewing selected individuals who are impacted by disability or lead particular ministries, conducting an accessibility audit, visiting other churches known for their inclusivity, or hosting open listening session. For example, Carter et al. (2017) advocate for the use of "community conversations" as a one unique way of soliciting diverse perspectives. Using an adaptation of the World Café approach (www.theworldcafe.org), a cross-section of parish members is invited to a two-hour event comprised of a series of small- and whole-group conversations addressing three key questions: What could we do to include individuals with disabilities and their families well in all aspects of parish life? What could we do to support their flourishing beyond the

walls of our congregation? What are the most promising ideas for moving forward in these areas? The focus question and conversation partners change during each 20-minute round of discussion, and notes are taken so that every idea expressed is captured. The core team considers the variety of ideas suggested by attendees and prioritizes those that are likely to be most impactful.

   Through prayer and thoughtful reflection on the information gathered, the team develops a written plan listing the steps the parish will take in the months and years ahead. For example, the team might prioritize (a) immediate needs related to supporting current members of the parish, (b) barriers that impact a large segment of the congregation, or (c) new initiatives that address unmet needs in the broader community (Carter, 2007). Other ideas may be put aside until a later time. By holding regular meetings, establishing an explicit timeline, and reporting on progress, the team ensures real movement is made in the direction of inclusion and belonging.

Summary

   Faith formation happens best within the context of life lived together in community with other believers. Supporting children with disabilities to participate fully and meaningfully within all aspects of parish life ensures they will access the relationships, experiences, and teaching that are so essential to their flourishing. For churches wondering what it looks like to make meaningful movements in this direction, the 10 dimensions of belonging outlined in this article may provide helpful points of reflection along this journey.

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