

Here Am I, Send Me: People with Disabilities and Church Employment
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Here Am I, Send Me: People with Disabilities and Church Employment

Introduction

By Rev. Bebe Baldwin

The First Presbyterian Church in your town is seeking a new pastor, and you are a member of the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC). You have gone through an arduous but joyful process as you have struggled to discern God's will for your church. Now, however, you are facing a dilemma you never expected to encounter.

The PNC has been reading Personal Information Forms for several months, hoping and praying for the "perfect" pastor for your congregation. One applicant stands out above all the others. She is committed to creative worship, has a heart for pastoral care, and a passion for social justice. There is only one problem; the applicant is blind.

Does your church dare to call a pastor with a disability? What kinds of changes and accommodations will the congregation be willing to make? Can a pastor who is blind "succeed"?

The Leadership Team of Presbyterians for Disability Concerns is offering our 2017 resources to address issues that we urge Pastor Nominating Committees and Personnel Committees consider as they make decisions about employment of persons in both ordained and non-ordained positions. Our writers have contributed worship resources and articles out of their own experiences. The stories, struggles, and joys of both writers and congregations are real.

The worship resources place inclusion at the center of the life of the congregation. Inclusion in all areas of church life – including fair employment – is not a marginal issue. It is at the very heart of who we are as the body of Christ and our life together as faith communities.

Several themes have given us a foundation for both the worship resources and articles. We affirm that every person is created in the image of God. We affirm that each person has been given gifts by the Spirit and that the Bible gives us examples for interdependence. But, we also affirm that God has given churches the gift of holy creativity in order to "do justice" (Micah 6:8) in their employment policies.

It is our hope and prayer that you will use these resources on Disability Inclusion Sunday, but not only on that one Sunday. This year, the church planning calendar designates May 28 as Disability Inclusion Sunday, but you can plan according to your congregation's needs. We hope that you will find ways to make every Sunday and every other day of the week a time for inclusion of people with disabilities. And one other idea: the next time your church is looking

for someone to serve in either an ordained or a non-ordained position, please pass on this resource to the committee.

Our writers, along with many others who live with disabilities, have said, “Here am I; send me.” (Isa. 6:8) They have committed themselves to be faithful to God’s call. The question is: will the church be faithful?

Beyond Disability Inclusion Sunday

Did you know that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a policy that calls every church body to include people with disabilities in its life and leadership? In 2006 the PC(USA) General Assembly approved *Living into the Body of Christ: Towards Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities*. The church it envisions treasures the gifts of every person and eliminates barriers to inclusion in our faith communities and society.

Unfortunately, it is often easier to pass policies than to implement them.

Better Together: Transformed by God’s Variety of Gifts was developed to move the policy into action. This four session study guide includes Bible study that calls us to be inclusive, true stories about real people and the barriers they faced (and sometimes overcame), questions for lively discussion, case studies that challenge our creativity, and a “tool box” with practical strategies for inclusion.

A committed team of disability advocates from PDC, the Office of the General Assembly, the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program, the Presbyterian Foundation, and the Presbyterian Mission Agency worked together to design ***Better Together***.

We recommend the course for adult study and fellowship groups, intergenerational groups, leadership training, and more.

Better Together is available online at: <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/better-together-transformed-gods-variety-gifts/>

WORSHIP RESOURCES

Call to Worship

By Rev. Sarah McKenney

The Lord has searched us and knows us

Lord, who am I?

You are a child of God

Lord, who am I; who struggles to communicate

You, I know and understand your thoughts

Lord, who am I, who struggles to read and write

You I know, even before there is a word on your tongue

Lord, who am I, who struggles to see with my eyes

You are uniquely and wonderfully made

Lord, who am I, who struggles to hear with my ears

Your days I have been ordained for you

Lord, who am I, who doesn't walk with my feet

You are still with me

God's love is for everyone, not just for a few

Each and every one of us, God excludes no one. Let us worship together, as uniquely made children of God.

Inspired by Psalm 139

You can read Sarah's story in the Articles section.

Prayer of Confession

By Terry Chaney

Loving God:

We confess that often we reject the gifts you give us in the form of the people you send our way as your community. We do this by deciding that those who are different, because their physical or intellectual abilities are "different" than "ours" either cannot contribute or that their contributions are minimal at most.

Forgive us O god for forgetting that the Church is your Church, that the Table is your Table, and that our call is to welcome, and to make room for and to welcome all. Help us to see and celebrate the gifts of all for only in this way can all of your gifts be made to shine as you intend.

You can read Terry's story in the Articles section.

Liturgy of Confession and Pardon

By Rev. Rick Roderick

Leader: We are created in the image of God.

People: But often, we do not see this image in each other.

Leader: We have many gifts.

People: But they are often hidden by our doubts and fears about others and ourselves.

Leader: We say we welcome all people with disabilities. We have made our facilities accessible in many ways.

People: But a person using a wheelchair cannot get to the pulpit.

Leader: People with disabilities may teach Sunday school.

People: But no one with a disability has been employed by our congregation.

Leader: We are afraid that the person with a disability may not succeed.

People: But the freedom to fail is also the freedom to succeed.

Leader: We are afraid that hiring a person with a disability may mean more work for us.

People: We are afraid to open ourselves to offering help.

Leader: God forgive us.

People: For not recognizing the gifts of many around us and erecting barriers to keep them from serving.

Assurance:

Leader: Scripture says that we interdependent.

People: We need each other. We can enable each other.

Leader: There are many gifts but one giver.

People: We are the hands and feet of God. New opportunities will arise to use the talents of all people.

Leader: Believe the good news.

People: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

Leader: Let us go forth, being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

People: And empowering others.

Rick is one of four Disability Concerns Consultants who serve the PC(USA) in the areas of vision, mobility, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. Visit the PHEWA web site, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/disability-concerns-consultants/>

Prayers of the People

By Maribeth Culpepper

Gracious God,

You have called us together to be the church of Jesus Christ.

May we be one in faith, discipleship, and action.

May the lives we lead let the world know that You are love and we are Your children living in the light of Your truth.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Savior God, may we see You in our street and not walk by on the other side.

Help us to take responsibility for our attitude toward others, recognizing each person is Your child; no matter their color, their physical or mental abilities, their faith, their actions.

Give us the skills and the will to take our roles seriously, always seeking to play our part in reconciling, representing, and recognizing, so that good is acknowledged and bad is resisted, for the benefit of all, but mostly for Your sake.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

God of great things, help us in the small things, so that we can grow in hope. Equip us to lead, as well as follow. Inspire us to teach as well as learn.

May we be good disciples, fruitful prayers, loyal friends, and good Samaritans, wherever we go, whoever we are, in sickness and in health.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

God of grace, let judgement be in Your hands when we falter and fail in meeting our responsibilities to You.

And when we let each other down, through envy, greed, prejudice, fear and hatred, may justice be tinged with mercy, so that wrongdoing is justly punished, but retribution is left to You, who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Lord, give us the confidence to take the reins, as others fall by the wayside.

May our willingness to share others' burdens lead to others helping us with ours.

As all things must pass, so may all things come to fruition, with all of us playing our part, at home, at church, in society, but only with You as our help, our sole purpose, and our reason to believe.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Amen.

Marybeth serves on the Committee on Representation for the PC(USA) and is a member of the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) Leadership Team, a network of the Presbyterian Health, Education & Welfare Association (PHEWA).

Litany of Thanksgiving

By Rev. Susan Montgomery

(This litany was written following a day in the lives of people living with disabilities.)

Leader: Most gracious and loving God. You are with us in the dawning of
the morning, the break of dawn,
when the sun shines, and snow falls,
the winds blow, and in the stillness the night,
your voice is heard.

People: Our gratitude overflows for you alone are the giver of life,
You provide the touch of a friend, a caregiver, a family member,
You send a friend, a fellow disciple who chooses to be
a brother or sister in Christ.
You enable us to see each other as valued
children of God—your family loved
unconditionally.

Leader: God of life and hope, when all seems impossible
Your light shines in the darkness and we see
something we've never seen before
possibility, potential we see all we can be
not alone—together.

People: Thank you for the people who work who make our world—and our lives—
A place where hope is made real, where knowledge is gained,
skills are learned, lives are saved and faith is lifted up,
made visible and
celebrated!

Thank you for doctors who deliver babies and place them in the
arms of families who love and cherish each breath
exuding possibility.

Thank you for all who seek to build lives into all they can be
rather than judge to exclude.

For those who affirm and seek the presence of
others, especially when it is believed such a
presence has little worth.

Leader: Thank you God for giving worth to all your creation. Thank you for
the people who have dedicated their vocations, their lives to
clean water, the harvest of the land, the nurturing of
minds, making sure restrooms are clean, toilet paper within reach.

For first responders, firefighters, police, sanitation workers,
plumbers, housekeepers, cooks, and servers, those who
make our clothing, provide us with transportation.

People: Thank you God for all your creation, for butterflies that land on our
arms, wind blowing against our faces, sun that feels warm on
our skin, the gentle massage of a hand applying
lotion, the whisper of a comforting word in the dark-
ness of the night, in moments of both physical
or emotional pain.

Thank you for the soft fur of a dog nestling its head and looking
up with those big brown eyes filled with love. Thank you for
the cat who lives in a nursing home who seems to
know and visit when someone is going to die.
Thank you for not letting the cat
visit today!

Leader: For laughter, we thank you God. For tears that flow reminding us,
to love is to hurt, to love is to care.
For curiosity that opened new doors and windows of
understanding, For wonder that leaves us in
awe of your love.

People: For all we know and experience, we say Thank You God! Apart
from you we have and are nothing, apart from one another, we
are less than you ever created us to be.
With you, we have all that is ever needed
for with you, we have life
abundant and filled with joy.

ALL: For life our God named good, we say, thanks be to God! Alleluia. A-men.

*Sue is one of four Disability Concerns Consultants who serve the PC(USA) in the areas of vision,
mobility, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. Visit the PHEWA web site,
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/disability-concerns-consultants/>*

LITANY OF INCLUSION

By Debra Trevino

LEADER: Gracious and merciful God, you created the day and the night, the heavens and the
earth, the land and the seas, the sun, moon and stars, fish and fowl, the lion and the lamb, and
growing things to beautify and feed your creation.

PEOPLE: You created humanity in your image and charged us to care for your creation, to worship you and love one another.

LEADER: Then sin came into the world and we were all disabled by sin's power. We turned away from you and from caring for others and abused your creation.

PEOPLE: In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus to redeem us from sin, to renew our relationship with you and with your creation and to teach us how to love both our neighbor and the stranger among us.

LEADER: Even though Jesus told us not to be afraid, we patronize and avoid those who are different from ourselves. We avoid the stranger who is bleeding beside the road. We won't even touch the one who has AIDS or is HIV positive.

PEOPLE: Help us to overcome our fears. We want to reach out and learn that all people are needed in the body of Christ. We want to work, worship and befriend those unlike ourselves.

LEADER: Help us to offer assistance when we meet someone who is blind or visually impaired.

PEOPLE: We may be able to read, drive, distinguish colors, describe your glorious creation and develop a friendship.

LEADER: Help us to welcome those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

PEOPLE: We want to learn about hearing devices, interpreters, sign language, TTY, and other technology so that we can communicate and show God's love.

LEADER: Help us to show compassion for those suffering with mental or emotional damage.

PEOPLE: We want to share the burden as we listen to the stories of veterans needing to talk of war, lost loved ones and changed lives. We want to welcome those who are autistic, have dementia or Alzheimer's, understanding that God's love reaches into their spirits as we become vessels for that love.

LEADER: Help us to offer more than our money. We are proud of our wheelchair ramps and widened and automatic doors, thinking we have done enough.

PEOPLE: Help us to build relationships with those who use wheelchairs, scooters, guide or service animals, canes or walkers.

LEADER: People with disabilities are our family members. They live among us and do important work as our teachers, our attorneys, business owners and our pastors.

PEOPLE: We want to be advocates for justice and inclusion when our loved ones are shunned, bullied, turned away by the prejudicial attitudes of neighbors with good intentions.

LEADER: I will work to include all of God's people. I will welcome those who are able in ways different from my own.

PEOPLE: I can make a difference! I can turn aside my prejudices and thank God for technology that offers new ability. As I learn, I can teach others about hearing devices, iPhones and eReaders that read the screen aloud, making bulletins, scripture, restaurant menus, email and other texts accessible.

LEADER: Let us reach out and include all of God's people, helping one another to find our place of service in the body of Christ. Remind us that those living with disabilities are the largest minority group in the world. Help us help one another adapt to life's challenges.

PEOPLE: Let us work together to build a community of inclusiveness where every gift is celebrated and all abilities welcomed in service to Christ who enables and empowers all of us to the glory of God.

You can read Debra's story in the Articles section.

Affirmation of Faith

By Ray Meester

God is the creator of all; and all of God's creation God deemed good. We acknowledge that God's love is sovereign. God created a diversity of people, loved by the God of grace and mercy, and that nothing excludes anyone from God's love, not even the powers of death and darkness.

Jesus Christ revealed God's love in his body being broken on the cross. Jesus dismantled the barriers that separate God's people. Jesus realized God's intention for the well-being of humankind when the blind received their sight, the lame walked, and the deaf heard. Jesus called the church to "invite the crippled, the lame, and the blind." God's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable compels the church to include those who are considered outsiders. Healing comes from the full inclusion of all in the life of the body of Christ and society.

We believe that through the Holy Spirit God has given each and all gifts for the common good. No part of the body of Christ can deny the legitimacy or the use of their own gifts nor the gifts of others. The church, the body of Christ, is incomplete when gifts are denied.

We accept ourselves and love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand, except God's grace (Confession of 1967, 9.22).

Ray is one of four Disability Concerns Consultants who serve the PC(USA) in the areas of vision, mobility, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. Visit the PHEWA web site,

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/disability-concerns-consultants/>

Suggestions for Scripture

By Rev. Bebe Baldwin

Gen. 1:26-27

Disabilities were common in the ancient Middle East, but the first creation story affirmed that all were created in the image of God. There were no exceptions!

Ex. 4:10-17; 15:20-21

Moses used his disability as an excuse to evade God's call, but God called Aaron and Miriam to serve with him and lead their people to freedom.

Lev. 19:14; 21:16-24

Christians have, at times, used the ancient laws about holiness to exclude persons with disabilities from leadership, disregarding the call to justice in 19:14.

Isaiah 1:12-17; Micah 6:6-8

No one is excluded from the prophets' clarion call to justice for all.

Mark 10:46-52

Bartimaeus advocated boldly and courageously for himself, even when the crowd tried to silence him. Our faith calls us "to hear the voices of peoples long silenced." A Brief Statement of Faith, line 70, The Book of Confessions.

I Cor. 2:1-5; II Cor. 4:7-12; 12:7b-10; Gal. 4:13-15; 6:11

Paul wrote of his disability and how it affected his life and ministry. See also Acts 9:1-9.

I Cor. 12:4-26

All Christians are called to serve, especially those who appear to be "weaker" members of the body of Christ.

Gal. 3:28

In these words, which were probably from an early baptismal ritual, Paul affirmed our unity in Christ. As a person who lived with a disability, Paul knew that we are all included – even those with disabilities.

Bebe is a retired member of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, a former moderator of the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) Network of the Presbyterian Health, Education & Welfare Association (PHEWA).

Hymn Suggestions from Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal

Published 2013 by Westminster John Knox Press

#3 Womb of Life and Source of Being

Text: Ruth Duck, 1986, 1990, alt.

Music: Skinner Chavez-Melo, 1983

#19 God of Great and God of Small

Text: Natalie Sleeth
Music: Natalie Sleeth, 1973

#27 Sacred the Body

Text: Ruth Duck, 1997
Music: Colin Gibson, 1992

#297 In Christ Called to Baptize

Text: Ruth Duck, 1995
Music: Welsh folk melody; adapt in Caniadau y Cyssegr, 1839

#302 When Hands Reach Out and Fingers Trace

Text: Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, 2001
Music: English folk melody; harm. John Weaver, 1988

#372 O for a World

Text: Miriam Therese Winter
Music: Carl Gotthelf Glaser, 1828; arr. Lowell Mason, 1839

#653 Give Thanks to God Who Hears Our Cries

Text: Ruth Duck, 2007
Music: Wyeth's Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second, 1813; harm. Richard Proulx, 1975

#692 Spirit, Open My Heart

Text: Ruth Duck, 1994
Music: Irish melody; arr. Alfred V. Fedak, 2011

#754 Help Us Accept Each Other

Text: Fred Kaan, 1974
Music: Doreen Potter, 1974

#769 For Everyone Born

Text: Shirley Erena Murray, 1998
Music: Brian Mann, 2006

#770 I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table

Text: African American spiritual, alt.
Music: African American spiritual; arr. Carl Diton, 1980, alt.

#806 I'll Praise My Maker

Text: Isaac Watts, 1719, adapt, John Wesley, 1736, alt.
Music: Attr. Matthaues Greiter, 1525; harm.V. Earle Copes, 1963

#807 When We Must Bear Persistent Pain

Text: Ruth Duck, 2004

Music: Walker's Southern Harmony, 1835; harm. David N. Johnson, 1968

#808 When Memory Fails

Text: Mary Louise Bringle, 2000

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1899; arr. The Hymnal, 1933, alt.

List compiled by Cindy Merten, Director of Christian Education and All Abilities Inclusion Ministry, First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Michigan (Everybody's Church).

Charge and Benediction

By Reverend Dr. Carolyn Peters

Let us now open wide our hearts and minds and allow Almighty God to see our faith so we can hear his wisdom.

We know that our ability to see differently, to hear differently, to move differently does not define our characteristics.

Our Lord and Savior knew us before we were formed in our mother's womb.

Our Lord made the blind to see, the lame to walk and the deaf to hear.

Our Lord promises we can do all things through Christ Jesus, who strengthens us.

Go now and allow others to see the glory of God in you. Amen.

May God's glory shine through you this day and always, through Christ our LORD in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Carolyn is a member of the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) Leadership Team, a network of Presbyterians Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA).

ARTICLES

I DON'T WANT TO BE AMAZING

By Terry Chaney

Technically, my wife Marcie and I both attended the same school that granted a high school diploma to Steve Wonder. Although he was never specifically used as an example we should try to follow, his association with the Michigan School for the Blind in some ways reinforced a narrative that was constantly in the background at the school and that has haunted me for pretty much my entire life. Steve Wonder's musical gifts are truly authentic and amazing, even if like me you aren't a particular fan. In addition to the authentic talent, I believe that he also benefited from cultural biases that assume that the best path for folk who are blind to succeed are for them to be highly musical. In other words, the best model for success to follow for someone with a disability, or at least my disability is to have an incredible talent that makes you essentially indispensable. Well, that isn't me.

As I experienced it, The narrative that I received from my school, although implicit is familiar to many, especially members of any kind of racial, ethnic, disabled, or other minorities and it runs something like this: "If you want to get half as much, you'd better be twice as good." You'd better work at least twice as hard, be twice as smart, and remember where they get three or more strikes you are lucky if you get one." A corollary is that "if you want it done right, you'd better do it yourself. In other words, be amazing like Steve Wonder and maybe we'll let you in, or get ready to be left out.

Well, when I was in my twenties, although I did know that I didn't have Wonder's musical talent I thought that I did have enough amazing talent in other areas to "make it work for me" and so off I went. Now I'm in my sixties and have kind of figured out that there are a lot of smart, hardworking people out there, and that outsmarting and outworking all of them is a major task, a task that I wasn't really up to.

As I reflect on the lens I used to see the world, especially in my younger days, I don't think that I really celebrated my successes; instead spending a lot of time in fear waiting for the inevitable axe to fall when someone realized that I wasn't the amazing person that I thought that I needed to be.

Now is the place where I'd like to say that, with the help of a good therapist, a warm and nurturing community, and most importantly the Grace of God that I've been able to put this crippling lens on the world away, but honestly I can't. I have used a wonderful and wise therapist, and I am blessed to be a part of a fantastic community and I've learned that I am who I am, and that the work is often slow but worth it. In fact, I've learned that I have many gifts, among them are being a good liturgist and group leader and even more surprisingly, for a white male, the ability to ask for and even to use help.

I can attribute this directly to my being a person who is blind since I am often in situations that I can't manage on my own, at least not at first. I've learned to ask for help, and to use the help I get by being appreciative, giving constructive comments, and not asking for things that the helper can't give. I'll now explain how this works in one of the ministry contexts I am involved with in and for my congregation.

I am part of a four person group that sets up transportation for our rejoicing spirits services at First Birmingham, Michigan. The service was developed to appeal to persons with intellectual disabilities and is one of the most inclusive efforts my congregation has undertaken. I have assumed responsibility for providing transportation for people who can't drive, but who are otherwise able to function on their own possibly with a little guidance. I do this with a professional bus driver, my wife and our friend Dr. Peter and anyone else who wants to join the fun.

I do the coordinating, calling in the days before to see who wants to come. Marcie, Peter and I welcome and chat with those who come while in transit on our Church bus, and the great thing is that we can cover for each other no matter what happens.

I do what I do well, the driver does what he does well, if something happens to me Marcie or Peter can easily and seamlessly pick up the baton. More importantly, we are sharing a ministry we love using the gifts that God has given us and we don't have to worry about being "amazing" because we are a part of something that is amazing.

Modeling Justice and Hope

By Rev. Bebe Baldwin

As soon as I rose to speak, I sensed that something was wrong. Instead of the welcoming hush that usually follows the applause after a guest speaker is introduced, I heard barely muffled conversation, shifting in chairs as if I had already talked too long, and even some departing footsteps.

It was the annual convention of an organization that advocates for the rights of people who are blind. The theme of the conference was employment. I knew that, in spite of anti-discrimination laws and their own determination and ability to work, people in the audience still faced barriers to fair employment. Some had given up.

What could I, a minister, say at a conference on social justice? I suspected that many in my audience had not felt welcome in the church, had been excluded in the place where all should be valued. I felt that I had hit a wall of skepticism and suspicion. I wondered why I had been invited to speak.

But as I shared my experience serving the church, the mood began to change. I felt the wall around me crumbling. My church, my place of employment, had embraced my gifts. My church was modeling hope.

Too often, this is not true. Too many qualified candidates for ordination or for non-ordained positions have faced barriers in church. I am legally blind so I have many friends who are blind. Among these are a stockbroker, a receptionist, a therapist, an editor, and several writers. My husband, an executive for a large corporation, founded an internship program that offered people who were blind opportunities to hone skills and gain job experience. After he retired he expanded the program to include several corporations.

I have searched for people with disabilities who are employed by churches. I have discovered very few. The church is missing the opportunity to model justice.

The church is called to unveil popular attitudes toward people who have been marginalized. We are called to defy the “isms”; this includes ableism. We are called to expose

the popular myth of “perfection” of body and mind. Why then are we not challenging practices that bar people with disabilities from employment in churches?

As people of faith, we can turn to our biblical tradition for guidance. Our faith story offers good reasons why we not only must break down obstacles to fair employment, but reasons why the church needs the gifts of leadership and the unique witness of people with disabilities. These gifts can transform our ministries.

First, when we employ people with disabilities, we can model interdependence. Our dominant society values what I call a “cowboy” culture, one in which the hero single handedly drives out the villains and saves the community. Our biblical tradition offers a different model of leadership.

When God called Moses to lead the slaves out of Egypt, he tried his best to say “no” to the Lord. But when he had used up all his other arguments, he used his final excuse. “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Ex. 4:10) Pleading his disability did not excuse him from God’s call.

God had an answer – a simple but profound solution. Aaron, Moses’ brother, would speak for him. Moses would be the strategist; Aaron would be his spokesman. Then God called a third leader for the flight from Egypt, Moses’ sister, Miriam. When the Hebrews were safe across the Red Sea, she led them in songs of praise. The story gives us a model of interdependent leadership.

When my sight was deteriorating, I worried about being able to continue in ministry. A wise friend gave me some of the best advice I have ever received. “You’ll do everything you’ve been doing. You’ll just do it differently.” I had to learn interdependence.

I asked a wise and trusted woman with a heart for pastoral care to go with me on many of my hospital calls. She not only could drive, which I could not, but she and I shared what we had heard and observed and how the church could serve the person most faithfully. Our shared ministry enriched our work of pastoral care and provided a model of ministry.

Second, the church needs the wisdom, understanding, and lived experiences of people with disabilities. We understand what it means to be part of what Thomas E. Reynolds calls the Vulnerable Communion,* yet we live abundantly. We know that even when our bodies may not be “cured,” our lives can be healed. We understand the biblical concept of healing as more than a physical cure. Healing involves the whole person living in community.**

We can bring our own experience as we step into Scripture. For example, let’s think about the story of Jesus’ encounter with Bartimaeus, who was blind. (Mk10:46-50) When he called out to Jesus, the crowd ordered him to be quiet. They tried to isolate him, to keep him

in his place. Most likely they believed that it was his sin or the sin of his parents that had caused his blindness! But Jesus heard him and paid attention. Jesus listened. He didn't tell Bartimaeus what he needed. He asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" He encouraged Bartimaeus to be his own advocate. Jesus got it right!

As leaders who live with disabilities, we can publicly and with authority defy the myths about disability. During a General Assembly debate on whether disabilities are God's will for our lives, Dr. Howard Rice, a former General Assembly moderator, rolled his wheelchair to the microphone and announced, "This is not God's will for my life." That ended the debate. ***

Third, the church is not complete until we include the gifts of all members of the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul knew from personal experience what this means. He lived with a disability, his "thorn in the flesh." (II Cor. 12:7) Scholars disagree about the nature of his disability. It may have been a chronic illness or a condition that affected his personal appearance. (Gal. 4:13-14) He may have had seizures or impaired sight. (Gal. 6:11) What is important is not the nature of his disability, but that he used his gifts for mission – preaching, nurturing churches, and writing.

Is it too much to suggest that Paul's own "disability" enriched his understanding of the body of Christ? Did his respect for the "weaker" members of the body reflect his own experience? (I Cor. 12:22-26) Paul knew that interdependence is not a problem to be solved, but God's gift, the strength of the Body.

Qualified candidates for church employment are calling for justice. Gifted persons with disabilities are seeking to serve God through the church. How long will it be before we hear their calls? How long will it be before we honor their gifts? When will we be faithful? When will we model hope and justice?

* Reynolds, Thomas E. *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008.

** Black, Kathy. *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*. Nashville: Abington Press, 1996. See Chapter Two, pp.43-56.

*** *Better Together: Transformed by God's Variety of Gifts*. PCUSA at:

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/better-together-transformed-gods-variety-gifts/>

Part Two: What Can Inclusion Mean?

See also: *Better Together*, Tool Box, Tools for Employment to see how people who are blind do a variety of jobs with the use of assistive technology.

Empowering to Serve

Rev. Lisa Larges

In Scripture, especially as we most often interpret it, people with disabilities are the ones receiving help, not the helpers. My guess is that one of the reasons that so few disabled people are employed in churches is that church people carry within us from Sunday School those old images of disabled people as the beneficiaries of help. We don't see them as helpers and we don't see them as leaders.

So maybe the first corrective in improving our poor record of hiring and calling church staff is to discover new ways of understanding the healing stories in the Gospels. In many of those stories, people with disabilities are actors – often bold, creative, and courageous actors. They risk censure and more, they defy what's expected, they advocate for themselves, and they recognize Jesus' power in ways that the crowds, the religious authorities, and even the disciples, fail in comprehending.

In the fall of 2016 I was called to a position as Associate Pastor for Congregational Care at Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church. At the time I accepted the call, I had been a part of Lake Nokomis PC for five years or so. In that time, I assisted in worship, taught Sunday school, visited folks in the hospital, preached when our pastor was away, and participated in church life. Members came to see my gifts for ministry and had the experience of knowing me in leadership roles. I like to think that this scrappy church, which has proven not to be afraid of trying new things, would be the kind of church that would call a pastor who had disabilities. At the same time, I know that because they already knew me, it was easier for them to extend to me the offer of an ordained position.

I know that others with disabilities have come to employment through similar routes. They volunteered or interned or proposed a trial period that allowed their future employers the opportunity to let go of the miss-conceptions they might have been harboring about what disabled people can or can't do.

While this has been a positive course for some of us, the truth is that most people with disabilities don't have the luxury, or the opportunity for a de facto unpaid trial period. That's why the onus is on us, as church members, to step up and do the work we need to do so that we will fully and fairly consider people with disabilities for positions as administrators, pastors, custodians, childcare workers, musicians, and more. Here are a few ideas to help us on that

path. As a bonus, I think these same ideas will help us to be more resilient, open, creative and adaptable --- characteristics that will help keep our churches alive and vital and relevant.

Understand implicit bias

Race, class, gender, disability – because we live in a culture where prejudice still exists, we all carry biases and assumptions that subtly effect our decision-making. What’s tricky is that many of these false views of reality influence us in ways that we aren’t fully aware of. It’s especially important for personnel committees, pastor search committees, and those with hiring authority to understand how best to counter implicit bias, so that we have the church staff that we need, and not just the staff that we want.

Read scriptures from the margin

What was it like to be a person with a disability in first century Palestine? How does the passage we’re reading challenge our assumptions of how the world works? Who has power and who doesn’t, and how does power shift? Understanding the central themes of Scripture--liberation, redemption, salvation--is tied up with tracing the narrative through the perspective of those who are most powerless.

Examine the need to help

Often we’re more comfortable with helping than empowering. The difference between the two is vast. When we help, we’re in charge; when we empower, we give others agency and freedom. Helping is great; sometimes all of us need someone to lend a hand, but helping usually solves a problem of the moment. Empowering someone opens up the future. It also shifts our conception of who can be a leader.

Think Differently

The best gift any of us can bring to our churches is the capacity to hold lightly all our ideas about what church is supposed to be. It’s the best way for our imaginations to be sparked, the best way to reshape church for a new era, the best way to be open to the people God is calling to lead us.

Learning to Listen to the Call When God Embraces the Gifts of People Living with Disabilities

Rev. Susan Montgomery

If a candidate for ministry in the PC(USA) was given a GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) regarding his or her call, the question would be raised—what paths will that GPS recommend? In the natural wilds of Western PA multiple drivers trust the directions of the GPS. Since a GPS cannot make decisions regarding road conditions, many drivers find themselves on clearly marked roads that say “No winter maintenance from October to April.” There’s a reason for no winter maintenance, there are hair pin turns and dangerously steep inclines. No semi-truck or motorhome can traverse the road in the summer, what makes them think they can in the winter? Answering God’s call to ministry can be a lot like following the directions of a GPS. The presbytery Committee on Preparation for ministry plays a significant role in guiding and supporting the candidate. In looking at church employment, particularly when the called pastor either has a disability or develops one, there are many issues to be addressed.

One issue is knowing our Presbyterian roots and understanding regarding a person being called to ministry. First, God and God alone calls a person to ministry. Secondly, the affirmation and encouragement of others who see gifts for ministry in the person exploring God’s call is also important. Forty five years ago I was a candidate for ministry. Something happened on the floor of presbytery that will never be forgotten. The issue then wasn’t disability but gender. Women entering the ministry was new. The people within the church struggled with how to understand God’s call being inclusive of women. Prior to the presbytery’s vote on whether or not to endorse me as a candidate, a wise elderly gentleman stood and spoke these words: “Before we vote we all need to realize, if we endorse this candidate, we also need to be prepared to hire this candidate.” That same truth applies to candidates with disabilities. Since within the PC(USA) call and ordination are woven together around employment by the church, the church needs to hear the advice of the elderly gentleman forty-five years ago—“If we endorse this candidate then we need to be prepared to hire this candidate.”

The issues surrounding the ordination of women are similar to the ones people living with disabilities face. Preconceived understandings that bar people from serving God include but are not limited to literal interpretations of scripture; the belief people living with disabilities cannot function, do the tasks, serve effectively, are weak, etc. When we return to

our roots and understand call is from God as well as through the eyes, ears, and affirmations of people around us observing and valuing gifts for ministry, it is clear people living with disabilities can be called to ministry and serve the church well.

At the same time, just as it is for everyone else, it has to be understood, not everyone living with a disability is called to ordained ministry. To embrace the belief that all people are called to ordained ministry is the same as saying it is appropriate for a GPS to send the driver of a fifty foot motorhome in the middle of winter onto an unmaintained dirt road with hair pin curves and a steep incline. I have witnessed what happened when a person living with a disability was not required to meet the standards of their peers in ministry. It led to the downfall not only of the ordained pastor but also the lives of the congregations who were affected. It is crucial for the PC(USA) at all levels, local, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly to return to the roots of our theology of call. It is our faith GPS. It is God's Positioning Spirit calling the church and people of faith who have the gifts for ministry — including people who live with disabilities.

For people who live with disabilities there are differences between life as a person born with a disability and a person whose disability developed later in life by accident or disease. Each person sees life through their own specific lenses. When a church calls a pastor and the pastor develops a disability, two things usually happen. The pastor is encouraged to leave ministry and live with the identity of a being a pastor at large on disability. Or, the church and the pastor can be creative and seek to find ways to support the ministry through reasonable accommodations and teamwork. As a pastor with a disability that was diagnosed later in life I have seen teamwork develop through the awareness and communication of my ministry needs. These needs required architectural adaptations to the building, chancel area, and to my job description. Although nursing home and hospital visitations were always accessible, the ability to make home visitations became extremely limited. To address the ministry needs of the congregations, create ways involving elders and deacons became the path to home visitations. One of the highlights of building an inclusive ministry was actually mundane, yet was telling. A smaller membership church did not have indoor plumbing nor a large budget. In fact, the restroom facilities were an outhouse in the woods. When the floorboards rotted and the outhouse was no longer safe, plans were put in motion to replace it. Two things happened—the outhouse was replaced and an ADA accessible restroom became a reality. However, it was most unique—it was a waterless, electrical compost toilet that fit into the back of the sanctuary without major or costly renovations. It was researched, chosen and installed by the church "Privy Council." The committee found a way to do what they had been told was impossible! Accessibility became a part of the creative vision, the committee was surprised by grace!

The keys to creativity and inclusion are many. The most important though are communication with one another, embracing the ministry needs of each other, and being open to the Spirit, the call of God as God continues to make things new. So when voices in the

church say to people living with disabilities, “No, you can’t,” we all need to learn how to ask, “What can we do together?” It begins with sharing the stories of how God has called people to ministry, people with disabilities have answered, and God has been served well. Together we can lift up ideas and create new GPS data that affirms what can be done—even when there is no winter maintenance, hair pin turns, and steep inclines. With God there is always a way, in Christ there is always a more excellent way, and in the church the way is being better together in God’s all inclusive, loving family.

Sue is one of four Disability Concerns Consultants who serve the PC(USA) in the areas of vision, mobility, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. Visit the PHEWA web site,

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/disability-concerns-consultants/>

My Call to Ministry—to Love, Comfort and Encourage

By Deb Trevino (Candidate for Ordination)

I attended residential schools for “the blind” and lived away from home since I was five-years-old. The fact that I am congenitally and totally blind due to retinopathy of prematurity enabled my parents to delay the inevitable transfer of my dad to another Army base. It also caused me to internalize that I was different than those around me when I was not at school. There was a dichotomy between the acceptance and shared experience as children at Kentucky School for the Blind and the loneliness I experienced as I stood inside the gate of my grandparents’ property while neighborhood children rode bikes and ran outside the fence. I couldn’t reconcile the isolation caused by my blindness with my mother’s words that I could do/accomplish anything I wanted to do. I felt like a small adult as I played near the women as they talked over coffee and because I was responsible for packing my things for school or for the next move.

These experiences of loneliness, isolation, feeling excluded had no precise label for me until much later. I experienced a great deal of loss and grief as teen and young adult, emotions which taught me compassion and empathy. I spent a dozen years doing medical transcription and, though I first laughed when an associate pastor suggested I attend Bible College, I discovered a love for Theology, Biblical studies and counseling. I felt a call to ministry but life circumstances delayed that several years.

I made my final decision to apply to Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary when the plenary speaker at the 2006 Presbyterian Women’s gathering posed the question to 3,000 women: “What is keeping you from doing what God is calling you to do?” This came about a month after my elderly husband died and there were no more barriers save one—the approval of my session. These dear ones needed guidance understanding their part in my call. They first thought they would be responsible for whether or not I could complete seminary requirements and obtain my degree. Once they grasped they were only responsible for discerning that I had a call, that blindness would not determine my success, they willingly gave their support.

I attended the fall exploratory weekend and was reassured that I wanted to obtain an M.Div. In the face of recent losses, I felt safe and supported in the close-knit LPTS community. I learned I was accepted in February and immediately moved from Maryland back to Louisville where I first attended the Kentucky School for the Blind at five years of age.

In just nine months, I had buried a spouse, applied to and been accepted to LPTS, sold a car, packed up my household, moved across several states and put down a retired Seeing Eye dog.—So much for conventional wisdom that one shouldn't make hasty decisions for the first year following a major loss such as death of a spouse. Here were more lessons in empathy, bereavement and what I could endure and accomplish with God's help and the support and care of others.

Time at LPTS revealed another important characteristic of my call. I now had words to label the experiences of loneliness, separateness and feeling excluded—marginalization. I learned that I am fighting for justice and inclusion and that I have a responsibility to do so on behalf of others living with disabilities. I advocated for accessible tests, scanned copies of reading materials and bulletins in a format I could translate into Braille. Professors came to be uncomfortable when they forgot to send a handout electronically prior to class. I would not hesitate to recommend LPTS to others who are blind or otherwise disabled!

This is a long and sometimes discouraging struggle and I am grateful to have my husband, David, also totally blind, to vent to on the difficult days. When most discouraged, I feel my greatest handicap is people refusing to imagine that a woman who is blind can fully participate in ministry.

I have been certified ready to receive a call for 14 months and serve in advocacy organizations of the blind and work to digitize cassette books for a ministry serving those who cannot read print. I hope to incorporate these interests into a vocational ministry, either as chaplain or possibly associate pastor for congregational care with focus toward elderly and disabled.

Introducing Myself: My Journey to Ordination

By Sarah VanderZee McKenney

Over the years introducing myself to others has changed. When I was very young it was simple, “I am Sarah VanderZee”. Then after struggling in school and learning that I was “different” than many of the other children, my introduction became an advocacy tool and a way to communicate my needs and rights, “I am Sarah VanderZee I have Dyslexia, ADHD, and a Learning Disability (LD)”. This became a very powerful statement and communicated to teachers, educators, deans, and more that I not only want and request extra supports or modes for learning, but that by law I am privileged to this.

Yet with this introduction, I faced judgement, ridicule and exclusion from others, then pain, hurt, self-hate, and anger within myself. This was my introduction/identity until I graduated from seminary and got married, “I am Sarah VanderZee McKenney M.Div.”. After passing my ordination exams and having my Committee on Preparation for Ministry advance me to the next stage in the ordination process I became “Sarah VanderZee McKenney M.Div., Candidate for Ministry and seeking a call”. Now, at work I am “Sarah VanderZee McKenney M.Div., Skills Development Clinician”.

My story up to this point was a journey that included a lot of introductions, a lot of self-advocacy, and a lot of vulnerability. All through grade school I struggled very much, not to keep up, but to just keep my head above water. Often teachers would pass me onto the next grade even when they probably shouldn't have. Finally I started to learn about my brain, how I learn, what is helpful, what isn't. I got “legally” and “officially diagnosed” and this helped from a legal stand point that teachers and professors had to at least allow for the minimum accommodations such as extra time on tests, taking a test in another room (to decrease distraction), etc. There were many a teacher and professor that didn't do this willingly and I needed to talk to deans and show diagnosis paperwork to prove I was “legally special”.

Seminary was in many ways refreshing because there was an openness and a willingness in many ways to work with my needs, but I always had to ask, I always had to use my special introduction. Each time I couldn't just give my name and slip quietly into my chair. Instead, the first day of classes I would give my name and then show my guts; share my flaws, share my struggles, give away my secrets. My diagnosis was like a part of my name, the same diagnosis that caused so much hurt, pain, loneliness, self-hate, and anger as a child; and I gave that away in order to validate my needs in that classroom. It was exhausting and it was hard to not consistently revisit these negative emotions and thoughts of myself, it was difficult at times to

stay positive and be proud of who I am. In many ways my own view of myself has changed over the years. I have grown to be more confident, secure, empowered, and proud of who I am and all that I am. However, there are still surprising raw moments that decide to pop up.

When I was in seminary and taking my ordination exams it was made clear to me that these operated differently than other exams in school. Typically I would get extra time, be in a separate room, and sometimes multiple choice exams would be altered into essay form exams instead, because this exam format works best with the way my brain works. However, with ordination exams it was a challenge to get certain accommodations. Even to get extra time and to be in a different space than the test takers, I have to send in diagnosis information to people I have never met, and they get to decide if it's okay or not. Some exams I passed (but I had to take those twice in order to pass), each time taking more money that I didn't have. The last three were essay, but you can't ask someone to edit and you can't rely on spell check. This is not a good thing for someone with Dyslexia (in fact this is a bad nightmare), and once again these exams are being read by strangers, they don't know I struggle with spelling. They just look at my paper and see someone uneducated, and might be wondering how they got this far in their education. Each time I took these it was more money, even if I failed. This form of examination was not working for me. I kept thinking, if only I could do this exam orally, people would know without a doubt that I have the knowledge. This is my ideal form of thinking and communicating my thoughts.

After making phone calls to the GA offices, I finally received the adequate process for requesting this type of changes. The testing offices can grant certain supports, but not this. Instead the request has to go before my own Presbytery (many of which were strangers) and it has to earn a 3/4ths vote, not simple majority like most other requests. I got lucky, and yes I am using the word lucky very purposefully here. So many others who have requested the same have been denied. Some individuals have had to leave their Presbytery, in order to find a Presbytery who will recognize that their request is valid and important. All of this to take an exam, that requires the same information and knowledge, just in an alternative format. At one point I raised a question to some of my seminary peers, "would you rather do a written exam or have an oral examination in front of five professionals who you may or may not know?" Far majority of people say they predicted that they would flunk the exam if it was given orally. I passed each of the three exams that I was given orally. All three exams, the first time.

As you may have noticed, I am still not ordained. YET. I believe God has a unique ministerial path for me. Currently I am in the process of creating a Spiritual Care Program for Stone Belt, a company that works with individuals with intellectual disabilities through a variety of services such as residential, career/job support, lifelong learning programs, mental health support, etc. My hope and vision is to support individuals with intellectual disabilities in their spiritual life; this may be in exploring with them what they believe, assisting them in finding their faith family, advocating and teaching inclusion in the congregations, etc. with the

hope to continue to grow relationships, community, inclusion, participation, and purpose for individuals with disabilities, their families, and their faith communities.

Now I am faced once again with needing to do things “a little differently”. This time it’s not because of my disability. Because this is a ministry that is unique, and not of a particular “church”, I will once again face Committee on Preparation for Ministry, Presbytery, and Committee on Ministry to determine if this chosen ministry is an ordainable one. My position will be one very similar to a chaplain, but it is “unique” and “different”.

In the past my introductions seemed to change and it was pretty clear what I would say. However, this past year I attended and assisted in leading a conference at Columbia Theological Seminary regarding Christian Education and the inclusion of children with disabilities. This was a very confusing space for me to be, because at work and in my community I am “Sarah VanderZee McKenney, M.Div., Skills Development Clinician”. My own disabilities are not recognized to be “impertinent” known information for my clients. However, when I came to this conference, I was there both as a professional in my field, a candidate for ministry, but I was also recognized as a “self-advocate”. This was yet another new and interesting space for me to be and discover myself in that space. It is a space where all of the characteristics of who God made me to be are working together, no longer separate or exclusive. I am very excited to continue to be, live, and grow in this space.

RESOURCES

Compiled by Carol Brown

Putting Faith to Work: A Guide for Congregations and Communities, Faith and Disability Collaborative, Published by the Kessler Foundation. To Order:

<http://faithanddisability.org/projects/putting-faith-to-work/order-putting-faith-to-work-manual/>

Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities, Erik Carter, Brookes Publishing.

Pathfinders: People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Allies Building Communities That Work Better for Everybody, John O'Brien and Beth Mounts, Inclusion Press.

A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability, Kathy Black, Abingdon Press.

The Church and Disability, Jeff McNair, self-published.

God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities, Jill Harshaw, Published by Jessica Kingsley.

A Humanizing Ministry, Timothy Estes, Herald Press (out of print).

Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities, Brett Webb-Mitchell, Church Publishing.

Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability and Inclusion, Mark Pinsky, Alban Publishing.

The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability, Nancy Eisland, Abingdon Press.

Copious Hosting, Jennie Weiss Block, Continuum Publishing.

Autism and Your Church, Barbara Newman, Christian Learning Center Network.

The Spiritual Art of Raising Children with Disabilities, Kathleen Deyer Bolduc, Judson Press.

Disability, Faith, and the Church: Inclusion and Accommodation in Contemporary Congregations, Wilder, Courtney. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016.

E-Mail Newsletters

Bethesda Institute's The Source.

The Source is a free email bulletin featuring links to the latest news, information and resources in disability across all faith traditions. It is perfect for busy faith leaders, family, teachers and advocates.

Subscribe at bethesda.institute@mailblc.org

The Religion and Spirituality Division of the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities' Gleanings.

Gleanings includes annotated links to blogs, videos, books, articles, and conferences on disability issues touching on politics, theology, faith, culture, science, and more.

<http://www.aaidreligion.org/newsletter>

Also see: <http://www.aaidreligion.org/>

PC(USA) Resources

<http://www.phewacomunity.org/>

<http://www.pcusa.org/phewa>

The **Presbyterian Health, Education & Welfare Association (PHEWA)** was established in 1956 by action of the General Assembly, to organize Presbyterians into volunteer networks addressing the intersection of justice and health. With the core value of "nothing about us without us," PHEWA networks are committed to grassroots partnerships that bring everyone to the table: professionals, consumers, and family members.

Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) is one of the ten networks of PHEWA. Stay connected and support this vital ministry through a membership at:

http://www.phewacomunity.org/images/PHEWA_membership_fillable_form.pdf

Resources from previous years are available at both websites.