

IS THE GOSPEL (REALLY) FOR EVERYONE? TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE BODY

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Two questions are foundational in this article: 1. What is the Gospel? 2. Is the Gospel intended for everyone? What follows is an exploration of these formative questions and a discussion of the experiences of families who have found inclusive Christian communities. Included are examples of how church leaders personally, vocational ministers, and the larger Body of Christ might be more inclusive of those at risk of remaining on the margins.

What is the Gospel?

The Gospel refers to the good news of Jesus Christ. However, what is that “good news”? Previous articles have explored Jesus’ statement that He came that we might have life (good news to be sure) and that we might have it in abundance or “to the full” (John 10:10). The Gospel both refers to the saving grace of Christ’s death and resurrection, and to the here and now. What constitutes this “abundant life” and what role do the church and ministry leaders play in enhancing or hindering it?

Social scientists have studied what they refer to as Quality of Life (QoL) and in recent decades have concluded that such a study must include “spirituality,” thereby acknowledging the importance of belief in something “transcendent.” Most readers of this journal would identify that belief to be in the Triune God and in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In sociology, and more recently in health care, QoL assessment aims to identify the hierarchy of areas of current or potential interest in every person’s life, to enhance satisfaction within these areas and, consequently, in life itself. From this point of view, QoL consists of the identification of a path, a way of living, rather than in the achievement of a contingent objective (Bertelli, et. al, 2020, p. 1999). Again, when using the term “abundant life” or exploring the issue of quality of life, there are facets of cause-and-effect relationships. Ministry leaders can positively affect the outcomes.

One aspect of the “abundant life” that Jesus mentioned that has a parallel in QoL, is to be found in the innate desire to be in relationship. People are created for community. In the beginning, God said that it would be better if Adam were not alone, so He created Eve. And the human race, with all its shortcomings, has grown. What remains, is an innate desire for relationship; interpersonal relationships and, ultimately a relationship with God himself. Note the presence and importance of various iterations of the term “communion” in the scriptures. God created his people to be in relationship with Him and also to be in communion or fellowship with others. However, mere physical proximity is not necessarily an indicator of inclusion or of fellowship; people want to belong. Belonging is a fundamental human

need that all people are driven to satisfy (Allen et. al., 2021) and thus a sense of belonging could be seen to be a part of abundant life.

Ten dimensions of belonging, illustrated in the figure below, have been posited and are succinctly described by Turner (2019). Each of these facets is worthy of further discussion. For example, Schat (2020, 2022) discusses the notion of *invitational* education and its implications for a sense of inclusion and of belonging. However, a fulsome exploration of the subtopics is beyond the scope of this article.



Figure 1. *Ten Dimensions of Belonging* (from Turner, 2019).

Is the Gospel for Everyone?

Is this human desire for community limited? Humanity is all created *Imago Dei*. Apart from those who may have significant emotional or other differences, all humanity desires to be a part of meaningful relationships, to live in community. How is that belief manifested? An earlier article (Pudlas, 2019) described the story of Catherine, who experienced a non-inclusive event in her (our) home church; all other children and youth were called to their new Sunday School classes while she remained behind - alone. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident. However, as the following illustration suggests, it is important to understand how and why events occur and to be equipped to work together toward more positive outcomes.

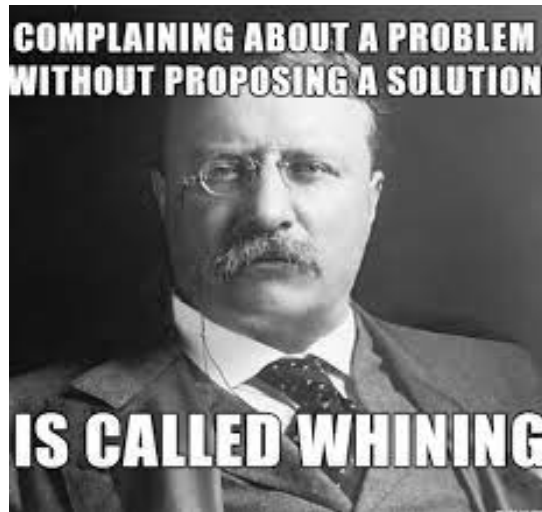


Figure 2. Quotation attributed to Theodore Roosevelt

Personal Narratives – Exemplars of Inclusion

Each of the authors has both personal and professional experience with persons who may be considered “exceptional” in that they differ from some established normative standard in their physical, sensory, or emotional behavioural characteristics. We both have known siblings as well as others who have challenges and we have seen the reality of how those challenges present barriers to participation and fellowship in community and may lead to marginalization. We are sharing some experiences and narratives to derive principles that can be applied toward inclusive praxis on the part of those in vocational ministry. Praxis means the habitual or not-with-conscious-thought inclination to seek to include in community those who may otherwise be marginalized, that is, to have a “heart” for such inclusive ministry and to be inviting.

I, Kathy, work with Capernaum, a ministry branch of Young Life. Briefly, YL Capernaum is a transformative ministry within the greater YL community to support teens with disabilities, modelling how every young person can belong, be loved, and discover their gifts to serve in the Kingdom of God. Young Life says that they are for every teenager, that all are welcome, but in practice many teens were not always finding that to be true. From a disability lens, Young Life would invite all to their clubs, but then host them in the basement of a house (non-accessible), play loud music (sensory overload) and have one leader for five teens (causing stress on both the leader and the Capernaum teen). As Young Life leaned into proper practices, its leaders have learned much about true inclusion and belonging. It is from these ministry experiences that several instructive illustrations are presented here. Note that in the narratives that follow, all names other than the author’s have been changed to protect anonymity.

Narrative one

Early in the formation of Young Life Capernaum, we had a volunteer leader who was determined to be inclusive in his ministry. He wanted to make sure everyone was welcomed. One day at the school he was visiting, he noticed a young man in a wheelchair. He started to get to know him and would look forward to his weekly connections. He started inviting him out to the Young Life club (similar to a youth group meeting), but the young man said no. Every week the leader would invite him and every week the young man would say no. By the end of the year, the leader was discouraged with why this young man kept saying no. He knew/assumed the young man would love the events if he could just get him out to one. Finally, the leader asked the young man, ‘Why don’t you ever want to come to our Young Life club?’ The young man in the wheelchair answered, ‘Because I know where you meet, and my wheelchair can’t fit through the doorway.’ What lesson might ministry leaders derive from this?

Narrative two

Young Life runs a summer camp and for the first time, in 2016, we brought a cabin full of Capernaum teens (teens with disabilities that attend our Capernaum clubs). Late one night, as per tradition, there is a dance followed by a big pool party. I knew our Capernaum girls would want to go in with all the other teens, but I also knew they couldn’t swim, and this was going to be a problem. All I could think to do was ensure they wore lifejackets and ask at a staff/leader meeting if anyone else might be willing to wear one as well (so as not to separate our girls too much). The night of the pool party came and at the end of the dance I pulled our teen girls aside to ask them to put on the life jackets. Unsurprisingly, they did not want to do this. They knew no one else was being asked to and they didn’t like how it looked to the other teens, which was a fair argument. The horn went and the teens all started running to the pool. I panicked a bit, begging the girls now to put the jackets on. Suddenly, we heard a chant, Lifejackets! Lifejackets! Lifejackets!” A cabin of boys came up to our pile of orange life jackets, threw them on, and started cannonballing into the water. Our girls, now realizing this was good, quickly put theirs on and followed suit. Other leaders and teens came up and put them on as well and, by the end, about one-third of the swimmers were floating in bright orange! The action of the other teens brought tears to my eyes. One of the leaders from their cabin came up to me and said, “My cabin of boys have been attending camp for years, and I have been struggling to know how to lead them anymore. This was the first time I could call them to think outside of themselves, to do something for someone else, and to serve one another as the brothers in Christ. Thank you for the gift of this opportunity”. Many other leaders came up to me and told me that for some reason, camp is just better with Capernaum teens there. They couldn’t quite put their finger on why, but many agreed it was just better. Again, what lessons might be derived?

Narrative three

I (Kathy) attend a church with a ministry set aside for people with special needs and while it serves a great need for space for these young adults to learn in a way that resonates with them, it also can rob the greater body of the gifts that God has given each one of the young adults with disabilities. Once when I was at church, we all were asked to share a prayer request and then, the special needs pastor explained, Sarah would pray for us as she had been given the gift of prayer. After we shared needs, Sarah launched into a beautiful, heartfelt, ushering to the throne room of the Holy God prayer over us that had many of us in tears. Sarah is non-verbal. She made noises, groans, and sounds, but somehow, we knew what she was saying. It was phenomenal and made me ache for the body of Christ just outside those doors who weren't getting to experience such a gift. Her groans gave permission to groan to God as I fully believed in that moment that God understood her. I also sometimes don't know what to pray and Sarah taught me that making noises instead of words are beautiful prayer offerings. This was a profound experience of the truth of Romans 8:26.

Narrative four

Through Capernaum, we run a program called The Leadership Experience which is a deep discipleship and leadership training program for our friends with disabilities. At each meeting we invite a guest to join us to share about something they've learned in leadership, we ask questions about this, and then we pray for the person. On one occasion, we had invited Pastor Mark, a friend from a local church nearby, to join us. He shared and answered questions and then we stood around him to pray. One of the Specialists, Lindsay, prayed for health for his family and that God would rid the sickness from his house. Later on, Mark shared that at first he dismissed this as an easy prayer that Lindsay prayed probably because she didn't know what else to pray for. As he pondered the prayer, he felt convicted; 'What if God gave Lindsay a prophetic word for my family? Could God have prompted her with what I needed to hear?' As Mark and I chatted, the answer of course was, "Yes!" How quickly we dismissed her prayer and by doing so, almost missed God's blessing through her gifting. Scripture says that God gives spiritual gifts and does not place a caveat that those gifts are limited to so-called "normal" or able-bodied persons.

Practical Applications - Enduring Understandings

The previous stories and common elements generate the following practical suggestions and ideas. Because each situation and ministry need may be unique, the authors want to guard against presenting prescriptive solutions to complex challenges. It is important to have knowledge about various learning and behavioural challenges; important to have a heart to draw people in from the margins; and it is

important to meld the knowledge (head) and motivation (heart) and develop the skills and strategies (hands) to provide inviting, inclusive spaces where all have a place to belong.

Inclusive Ministry

Structural barriers

From the first narrative that the best of intentions can be futile if there are structural barriers that are disinviting and make full participation difficult if not impossible. It is important to “walk a mile in the shoes” and to anticipate what others may be experiencing. This is discussed more fully in a previous article entitled “Toward Structurally Inviting and Inclusive Churches” (see www.nimer.ca).

Walking in another’s shoes also points to how to do ministry together. Youth leaders who have never invited a person with a disability to a youth event most likely won’t think about the wheelchair and location until after having it explained to them. Persons in a church with specialties in disability could help, noticing things like doorways so that everybody knows they are welcome. Taking the pressure off one person who has skills in youth ministry but maybe not knowledge about disability and encouraging them to reach out to occupational therapists or education assistants for help can provide care for both friends with disabilities and youth leaders.

Experiencing God’s character

Another implication that surfaces is that leaders need all kinds of people to experience more of who God is and what He is like. When they have more of the body together, all get to see more of God’s character (as described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). The boys in narrative two, the lifejacket story, were able to serve their sisters in Christ in a unique way, understanding what it means to choose someone else’s needs over our own. This is also a reminder that teens desire to fit in and not stand out; they seek to be normal. By “normalizing” the wearing of the lifejackets, these young men were performing a simple yet profound ministry.

God understands all prayers

The illustration of Sarah’s prayer, in narrative three, teaches that God understands all prayers and fancy words aren’t needed. In fact, sometimes all God’s people have are the groans of their hearts. In Romans 8 we read,

²⁶In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

Within the Body, both the local church and beyond, might leaders be remaining in a weaker-than-necessary state because they do not recognize that the Spirit works in all of God's Image Bearers? Is the work of the Spirit unintentionally limited to those who fit a definition of *normal*?

Gifting

Lindsay, in narrative four, pushes Christians to trust God's provision when it arrives in ways they weren't expecting. It also reminds that, as servant-leaders in ministry, leaders are not the only ones called to minister and they are not alone in having been given spiritual gifts. In Old Testament scriptures a dozen words are used of "gifts of various kinds." For example, in Exodus 28:38, sacrifices were gifts to God, in Numbers 18:6, Levites were a gift from the Lord, dedicated to service in the Tabernacle, and Ecclesiastes 3:13; 5:10 speaks of God's gifts to men and the futility of temporal gifts.

The New Testament marks a change in emphasis. Some of nine Greek words refer to gifts to God (e.g., Luke 21:5; Mt. 5:23 *anathema* and *doron*). Characteristic is the use of several words (see James 1:17) to denote primarily gifts God gives to humankind. An important word regarding gifts is *charisma*, which may be used of God's gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23) but more characteristically is used for spiritual gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes: "Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about the special abilities the Spirit gives us. I don't want you to misunderstand this" (verse 1) and then goes on to explain in verse 4: "There are different kinds of **spiritual gifts**, but the same Spirit is the source of them all."

Regarding the Body - the church - several questions arise. First, who is so gifted? According to 1 Peter 4:10 the answer is everyone. God has given each Christian a gift from his great variety of **spiritual gifts**. The congregation uses them well to serve one another. Are all gifts the same? Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:6 suggest that not all gifts are the same. However, all gifts are important. Ephesians 4 (NIV) reads:

¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

The Body has many parts, and each part is gifted in some way for the good of the church as a whole. A part of belonging, that aspect of living life to the full, includes a sense of being needed. As ministry servant-leaders do we perhaps - inadvertently -

deny some the opportunity to share their gifts and thereby have a sense of contributing to and being needed by the rest of the body?

The 10 dimensions of belonging (Turner, 2019), offered below in point form, serves as a possible checklist for personal or vocational ministry.

1. **Present.** Are individuals with disabilities present in all the activities you offer? If not, why not?
2. **Invited.** Are individuals with disabilities being personally invited to participate in all that your congregation, school, or program offers? We may at times be unintentionally disinviting when our words do not parallel our actions or attitudes. Recall the narrative of the structural barriers.
3. **Welcomed.** Are individuals with disabilities warmly welcomed when they arrive? Rather than feeling welcomed, many leave feeling wounded because their child may be perceived as a “disruption” in the service. See Stace-Smith and Pudlas, 2020, *Moving beyond inclusion to belonging* as an example of a changed-heart church.
4. **Known.** Are individuals with disabilities truly known for their interests, stories, passions, and gifts not merely categorized by a label. Known not by deficits, but by strengths and gifts; when people are known, they go from “being present” to “having a presence.”
5. **Accepted.** Are individuals with disabilities accepted without condition or caveat? Real acceptance comes through personal interactions over time. As someone becomes known deeply, true acceptance grows. And people come to feel like part of family and embraced for who they are.
6. **Supported.** Are individuals with disabilities provided the support they need to participate fully and meaningfully? Sometimes, young people with intellectual disabilities will benefit from additional support to participate fully in certain activities. Such supports may need to be more individualized or a bit more intensive. Let creativity and intentionality describe your posture; look to the broader community for co-workers in organizations such as Young Life Capernaum.
7. **Cared for.** Are individuals with disabilities receiving care in ways that help them flourish? Everyone needs care. And authentic communities should be marked by generous care. There are many ways to meet this need, and most require no disability expertise, such as sharing a meal, asking about life, offering a ride, praying together, providing a job connection, or extending a helping hand.

8. **Befriended.** Are individuals with disabilities named as friends? We flourish most in relationship with others. Yet friendships can be so elusive for individuals with developmental disabilities.
9. **Needed.** Are individuals with disabilities missed when they are not present? **Reminder:** persons with disabilities also possess gifts and strengths that make them indispensable to a community.
10. **Loved.** Are individuals with disabilities experiencing a deep love? We can be certain we belong when we are loved. This aspect of belonging needs little elaboration. Our deepest desire is to love and to be loved.

Summary and Conclusions

The authors acknowledge that everyone has a unique place within God's greater narrative and so caution against simple answers to complex questions. However, if the Gospel truly is intended for all then Christians must do what we can to make it available in both word and deed to everyone.

Perhaps the simplest first step is to be aware of barriers, physical, structural, or attitudinal that may keep people from becoming fully participating and valued members of our Christian communities, and thereby experiencing life to the full. The knowledge may begin with a simple greeting and an invitation to "tell me your story."

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Ken Pudlas earned his doctorate at the University of British Columbia, and recently retired as a Professor in the School of Education at Trinity Western University. He was instrumental in establishing and teaching special education courses at both UBC and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee prior to his tenure at TWU. Prior to his university career, Ken taught students with special needs in the K-12 public school system in several districts in British Columbia. Dr. Pudlas developed and was the Director of the MA in Educational Studies in Special Education program, approved by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and launched in the summer of 2014. This program seeks to bring together head (knowledge) and hands (skills) motivated by the heart in order to empower educators toward inclusive praxis. Dr. Pudlas also developed the Minor in Special Education program which has grown in popularity as pre-professional teachers realize the ever-increasing diversity among learners in today's classrooms. He

has done extensive research on the Full Inclusion model of service delivery and has presented locally, nationally, and internationally on topics related to learners with diverse needs.

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