

HELP, LORD, I HAVE SPIRITUAL E/BD

By Kenneth A. Pudlas, EdD

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Romans 7:18-19)

Introduction

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul describes what could be considered a spiritual behavioural disorder; that is, a failure to achieve his full potential as an authentic apprentice of Jesus. He, like we, may need spiritual special education to remove barriers that challenge our growth and development. It has been suggested (See Pudlas, 2022) that there may be such a condition as a *spiritual learning disability* and that God allows or even creates human disabilities to reveal similarities to spiritual conditions that prevent God's people from becoming all that they can and should be.

Also addressed in previous articles in this series is the biblical imperative to be inclusive; to ascribe value to those who may be marginalized and who may not be highly regarded by society (Dubbeldam & Pudlas, 2023). Wolfensberger's (1972) concepts of normalization (providing as close to normal life experiences) and social role valorization (personal perception of value determined by actions and attitudes of others) are the ideological impetus for an educational paradigm which seeks to offer a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. The Church and individual apprentices of Jesus who comprise the Body ought to be exemplars of inclusive praxis and to be inviting both personally and corporately. Too often, despite knowing and desiring to do what is right, like Paul God's people fail. Could it be that rather than being the least restrictive environment, the Church and the individuals who comprise it actually impose barriers to the full development of spiritual potential?

The purpose of this writing is to discuss possible lessons from an area of learning challenges - emotional and behavioural disorders (E/BD) - as potential barriers experienced in educational settings and how they may relate to spiritual growth and development. The figure below is a reminder that while knowledge and skills are important, it is the heart that is foundational.

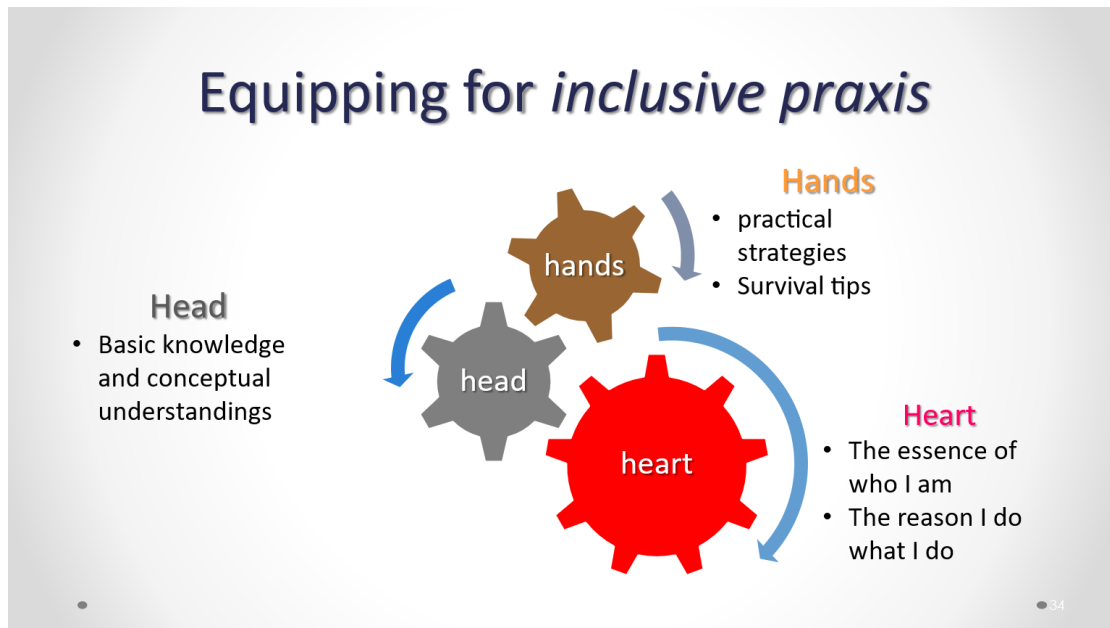


Figure One: Characteristics & Enabling Conditions for Inclusive Praxis

The heart has been described by Merton (1971, p. ii) as the deepest psychological ground of one’s personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the unknown yet present one who is “more intimate to us than we are to ourselves”. Perhaps more succinctly, Jean Vanier (1989) suggests:

In our deepest selves, below the levels of action and understanding, there is a vulnerable heart, a child who loves but is afraid to love. Silent prayer nourishes this deep place. It is the most important nourishment of all, because it is the most secret and personal (p.191).

Note Vanier’s suggestion that the heart knows to love but is afraid to do so.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the notions of parallels between emotional and behavioural challenges that may present barriers to learning in school settings with challenges to spiritual growth and development as loving and inviting apprentices of Jesus. If God’s people are to be inclusive and caring corporately, they must be personally inviting. The greatest commandment is to love others... “as we

love ourselves”. A loving posture is one that says, as Jesus did, “come unto me all...” and with a physical stance of arms outstretched.

To be inclusive means to be inviting and to be inviting in our stance toward others requires that church members be personally inviting (see Purkey & Novak, 2015; Schat, 2023). These terms and concepts are discussed below and are germane to their growth as apprentices of Jesus.

Being Inviting

Invitational theory as posited by Purkey and Novak (2015) and adroitly discussed by Schat (2018, 2023) is shaped by five primary elements: care, trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. Purkey and Novak note that, “Human behavior is the product of the unique ways individuals perceive the world. To better understand why people do the things they do it is necessary to explore perceptions within and among individuals” (p. 2).

Further, Purkey and Novak state (1996) that living the inviting process involves orchestrating four basic areas: being personally inviting with oneself; being personally inviting with others; being professionally inviting with oneself, and; being professionally inviting with others (pp. 103, 104). The applicable point here is that if God’s people are to be inclusive and inviting toward others, they must also care for themselves. Note again that they are to love others as they love themselves. This is part of the full and abundant life that Jesus spoke of as recorded in John 10:10.

Schat goes on to state,

The communication of care is profoundly shaped by perceptions. A teacher’s perception of care and of their students influences the teacher’s care capacity and care communication. More significantly, a student’s experience of their teacher’s care is completely dependent on the student’s own perceptions. If the student does not perceive their teacher as caring, care has not occurred, regardless of teacher intentions and intention-directed behaviors (p.9).

For the purpose of this paper and substituting “apprentice of Jesus” for “teacher,” a summary of the above suggests that while Christians may intend to show care and be inclusive and inviting, they may in fact be unintentionally dis-inviting. Why?

One reason believers may not behave in an inviting manner toward others is because they are not personally inviting due, perhaps, to emotional issues such as fear.

Perhaps they as his apprentices may be guilty of what Crabb (2014) describes as the “sin of self-protection.” That is, their behaviour is not marked by an open-armed inviting posture toward others perhaps because of emotional scars, past hurts, or simply a lack of empathy (See Pudlas, 2024,” 7-9, for a discussion of Theory of Mind).

Emotional and Behavioural Challenges

In special education (more recently termed “inclusive education”), definitions of persons with E/BD suggest they are: those who chronically and markedly respond to their environment in (socially) unacceptable and/or personally unsatisfying ways but who can be taught more socially acceptable and personally gratifying behaviour. While educators must always see the person before the label, further classifications include mild/moderate and severe/profound. Elements of serious emotional disturbance might include: an inability to learn; an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships; inappropriate behaviour under normal circumstances; pervasive unhappiness or depression; tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. Some of these symptoms require intensive and prolonged professional intervention beyond what a school setting can provide. On the other end of the continuum, those with mild/moderate E/BD typically can be taught with peers in the regular classroom setting.

How prevalent are E/BDs as learning challenges? An exact number varies with classification. As one example of the complexity, the prevalence of persons identified as being on the Autism Spectrum has dramatically increased and while autism may present behavioural challenges, some would classify it as simply a form of neurodiversity. The exploration of these questions is not the purpose here. Suffice to say that as many as 60 percent school-aged persons are - at some time - identified as having an E/BD. While all people may not have a chronic or permanent E/BD they, at times, struggle with behaviour and emotions.

Another factor that makes an exact census difficult is that the group can be identified as falling into a number of subcategories including: Conduct disorders; Anxiety and withdrawal; Socialized aggression; Immaturity.

Given the foregoing, Paul decries his conduct and lack of maturity and is, perhaps, anxious about his failings. Certainly, during his life as Saul, he was guilty of socialized aggression, seeking out and killing followers of Jesus.

In anticipation of discussing parallels in spiritual lives, other forms of understanding E/BD pertain to systems of classifying behaviour as either externalizing or internalizing. Externalizing behaviours may include conduct disorders, socialized aggression, motor excess, aggressive behaviours, and disruptive behaviours. Examples of internalizing behaviours include attention problems, immaturity, anxiety-withdrawal, psychotic behaviour, socially inadequate and immature behaviours, social withdrawal, or stereotypic behaviours.

Christians are to explore barriers to the full discovery and utilization of their spiritual gifts toward being inviting and inclusive apprentices of Jesus. The purpose of spiritual gifts (charismata) is primarily for the building up of the entire body. Humanly speaking, there are barriers to the identification and full utilization of these gifts. Perhaps one barrier to discovery and full development arises from emotional or behavioural disorders.

E/BD and Spiritual Parallels

In exploring possibly parallels with spiritual life, several scriptures may be instructive. Lessons may be drawn from the sub-group of socialized aggression whose characteristics may include behaviours that are destructive and socially maladjusted, disobedient, and delinquent in groups (gangs or cliques or factions). In 2 Peter 2:1,2, the scriptures declare, “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute ((all references from the NIV Version).”

How might impediments to inviting and inclusive praxis be ameliorated? Since nature abhors a vacuum, “Stop that!” may not be effective. Romans 6:19,20 states, “I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.” The implication here is that believers need to be discerning in who and what they allow to shape their behaviour or control their emotions.

Another parallel may be drawn from the characteristics of immaturity, which include being easily frustrated or having low tolerance. Scriptures that may provide insights include the Parable of the Sower in Luke 8:14, “The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s

worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.” The letter to the Hebrews, warns against falling away, “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14). Further, James 1:4 reads, “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

This paper explores how the characteristics of learners with emotional and behavioural disorders or challenges may reveal parallels to growth and maturity in the spiritual lives of believers. These challenges may then be an impediment to being personally inviting and may prevent God’s people from being inclusive and inviting toward others.

Causes and Cures

To begin to understand possible “cures,” it is necessary to understand possible causes. What may predispose a child (or other learner) toward or precipitate maladaptive behaviour, and may God’s people discern spiritual parallels? Possible causal groupings may be biophysical: inherited, acquired pre/perinatally, or be a result of accident, disease, malnutrition. These factors may influence behaviour, but they may not present an explicit causal link.

Other groupings may be psychosocial. For example, family patterns which have a profound effect on children include divorce and separation, absence of natural parent(s), parental conflict, parental hostility, neglect or abuse, inconsistent or lax discipline, and chronic illness of one or both parents.

Several scriptures may be instructive. Proverbs 1:2 emphasizes the important parental role of imparting instruction toward wisdom. Revelation 3:19 teaches that those whom God loves benefit from His rebuke and discipline. This important message is reiterated in Hebrews 12:5-12,

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons: “My son do not take lightly the discipline of the Lord, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastises every son He receives.” Endure suffering as discipline; God is treating you as

sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you do not experience discipline like everyone else, then like everyone else, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Furthermore, we have all had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Should we not much more submit to the Father of our spirits and live? Our fathers disciplined us for a short time as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good, so that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields a harvest of righteousness and peace to those who have been trained by it.

It would be disingenuous to attempt to draw complete parallels between all types of E/BD and draw spiritual lessons from each. Rather the purpose is to repeat what was discussed in earlier articles (Pudlas, 2022) regarding spiritual learning disabilities and suggest that Christians may not be as inviting and inclusive as they ought because of their own emotional or behavioural challenges.

At this point it may be worthwhile to emphasize two important truths. First, from the previous examples, God's people are reminded and assured that they never need doubt their Heavenly Father; he will never be absent or unloving. Second, they need to be aware of their behaviour and the effect it has on their children; both natural children and those who are their spiritual children.

In addition to family factors, there are extra-familial factors that are influencers of socialization: schools, peer groups and entertainment. Schools influence what children learn both by what is taught and by what is not taught (the null curriculum). Concerning the latter, religious literacy is an example. A learner may deem religion as unimportant since the school did not include it in the curriculum. What about the learning that takes place through churches? Is there a null curriculum or a hidden curriculum that hinders spiritual growth and development?

As to peer groups, the notion of socialized aggression is noteworthy. Might the rise in gang affiliation (and attendant public displays of violence) result from such a strong innate desire for belonging that moral judgement is suspended? Could churches be doing a better job of being inviting and inclusive, thereby obviating the need to seek belonging elsewhere? Is it time to consider a more welcoming orthodoxy?

Finally, there is role of entertainment and what is taken in through the visual and auditory senses. While evidence of direct causal links may be equivocal between

violence in the media and violent behaviour, there can be no doubt that such exposure is desensitizing. It is noteworthy that the psalmist wrote, “I will not look with approval on anything that is vile” (Psalm 101:3). I hate what faithless people do; I will have no part in it.” Perhaps one part of preventing spiritual E/BD might be media literacy and awareness; that is, an explicit awareness of what we take in through our senses. This may be one example of prevention being preferable to a cure.

E/BD - Prevention

As noted, causes are not easily identified and thus prevention is not simple. However, Christians can draw lessons from three causal categories: nutrition, family climate, and prevention of abuse and neglect. As scriptures are presented, the reader is encouraged to appropriate lessons that have personal ecological validity.

Nutrition

Learning is developmental and various learning theories have been discussed elsewhere (Pudlas, 2022). Might church leaders be unintentionally disinventing because they are not appropriately discipling learners young in the faith? The letter to the Corinthian church says, “²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready” (1 Cor 3:2). Educators speak of universal design for learning (UDL) in which the needs of individuals are considered in lesson planning. Hebrews 5:12 reads, “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” Again, 1 Peter 2:2 says, “²Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” What might church leaders learn about cause-and-effect relationships between appropriate spiritual nutrition and appropriate emotional growth and behaviour?

Family Climate

Various images are used to describe apprentices of Jesus, including sheep and the family of faith. To learn more about family, additional instructive lessons might be gleaned from scripture. For example, Proverbs 15:27 suggests that the greedy bring ruin to their household, while chapter 31, in contrast, speaks of a wife of noble character and verse 15 suggests she rises early to prepare for her family. Caring for family is important, be it natural or spiritual care. Finally, God’s people recognize that they were created as relational beings, desiring community. The writer of Hebrews (10:24, 25) says, “²⁴And let us consider how we may spur one another on

toward love and good deeds, ³⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Prevention of Abuse and Neglect

From 1 Timothy 5:8 we learn, “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” In addition to the encouragement of family members, providing developmentally appropriate teaching and learning toward spiritual maturity, what else might be done to ameliorate spiritual E/BD? Perhaps Christians can draw some lessons from the first letter to the Church in Thessaloniki, chapter 5,

⁴And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray continually, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²²reject every kind of evil.

Embedded in this passage are practical suggestions toward avoiding spiritual behavioral or emotional barriers that may hinder the full development of the God-given potential of his people.

Some Final Practical Points re E/BD

The underlying intent of this paper is to be instructive and descriptive rather than dogmatic and prescriptive. Some final thoughts are derived from the Gospel of Jesus according to Mark (12: 29-31) in which Jesus articulates the greatest commandment. From God’s response, Christians understand the three basic needs of human beings: intimacy with God, intimacy with others, and self worth. Seven suggestions toward meeting those needs follow.

First, Christians should have a vital personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Why? Potential causes for and the resultant effect of emotional and behavioural challenges

parallel impediments to spiritual well-being. To offer intimacy and enjoy intimacy, believers need to be personally and corporately inviting.

In human terms, the people of God fail. They all sin and fall short. Therefore, step one is to know Christ (I Cor 10:13). Step two is to have personal relationship with him; belief and trust in Christ begins with choice of the will (John 3:16-18). Then, how might they further their spiritual growth and development?

Seven Simple Suggestions

Suggestion one is to commit their lives daily to the purpose of glorifying Jesus Christ. This reminds them to pray forgiveness for failures, to love themselves more as purposefully created beings who are Imago Dei.

Suggestion two is to spend time each day meditating on God's Word and applying it to their lives. While brains may be compared to computers, they still have a will and so can reprogram them from self-destructive and critical thinking. Bad programming from the past (e.g., rejection, failures) can affect their present-day attitudes. For further meditation, see: John 3:6; Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:16; John 15:7; and Philippians 4:8. They have a new Spirit.

Suggestion three is to get rid of grudges daily (pent-up anger actually causes changes in brain function). Ephesians 4:26 is helpful here. Note that in the area of special education, a new dominant discourse of "neurodiversity" helps to illustrate that rather than seeing learners with diverse needs as problems, that is, "dis"-abled, they might be seen as simply created to be different. While a rose bush in the midst of a field of tulips may seem out of place, it is none the less beautiful and unique. If God's people can learn to see the beauty and uniqueness of "challenging" individuals, they may be less resentful and they may prove less of a hindrance to personal and professional wholeness.

Suggestion four relates to developing or investing in intimacy with a mate, children, friends, or other loved ones. Resolve conflicts. Since people can only control their own thoughts and behaviours, they may need to be mature enough to accept responsibility for conflicts. It also may be helpful to reflect on Romans 12:18.

Suggestion five is to spend time each week having fellowship and fun with at least one or two committed Christian friends of the same gender. If appropriate, this may be done as couples. However, the kind of friendship demonstrated between David and Jonathan is uniquely experienced between two people who build a relationship

of mutual trust and accountability over time. For further study, the following passages may prove instructive: Proverbs 13:20; Hebrews 10: 24, 25; Proverbs 18:24 (intimacy not quantity); Proverbs 17:9 (verbalize and resolve anger).

Suggestion six is that God's people be involved in a daily self-satisfying routine. Such activities would be those in which they are convinced they are following God's will and purpose in their life, and they are glorifying *him*. This routine may include activities that involve work, play, homework, housework, or projects. The notion of work as a self-satisfying routine relates to previous discussion regarding vocation and is antithetical to the striving Adam (See Shigamatsu's, 2018, book, *Survival Guide for the Soul: How to Flourish Spiritually in a World that Pressures Us to Achieve*). For reflection see John 10:10. What does it mean to have "life to the full"? Perhaps one step is to choose a daily routine based on your priorities. For example, a routine might include intimacy with God, personal mental and physical health, time for building intimacy, time to adequately parent your children, time for earning a living (not your fortune). It is satisfying to use time to perform a ministry and to utilize gifts.

Suggestion seven that fends off E/BD is to do some special thing for another person each week, and occasionally oneself. A special thing may involve tasks or works of service that are physical (helping with some task), emotional, or spiritual. Ephesians 2:10 says that believers are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for them to do. How might they better apply that in real terms? Note that it is not wrong to be introspective - to a point. But God's people also need to look outward, considering the needs of others, being grateful for their own daily bread.

Again, these suggestions are intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Jesus' answer to the question of the greatest commandment was that believers are to love God and show that love by loving all those *Imago Dei* - including themselves. As Christians as apprentices of Jesus become more personally inviting and as a *Body* become more corporately inviting, they will be better able to fulfil that commandment. Challenges caused by E/BD (emotional and behavioural development) disorders within others as well as themselves can be overcome.

References

- Crabb, L. (2014). *Inside out*. Colorado Springs, CO, NavPress Publishing Group.
- Dubbeldam, K. & Pudlas, K.A. (2023) *Is the Gospel (Really) for Everyone? Toward a More Inclusive Body*. *Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research Journal*. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).
- Merton, T. (1971). *Contemplative Prayer*. NY: Doubleday Religion.
- Pudlas, K.A. (2022). *Learning Disabilities and Spiritual Applications: Help, Lord! I have a Spiritual Disability*. *Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research*. www.nimer.ca
- Pudlas, Kenneth K. A. (2022) *Learning Disabilities and Spiritual Applications: Help, Lord! I have a Spiritual Disability*. Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).
- Pudlas, K. A. (2024) *All are Precious in His Sight: What Does This Mean for the Church?*, www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed). Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research Journal. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).
- Pudlas, K. A. (2019) *Faithfully Inclusive Communities: How Welcoming is the Body?* Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research Journal. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).
- Kathy Dubbeldam and Kenneth A. Pudlas (2023) “Is the Gospel (Really) for Everyone? Toward a More Inclusive Body.” Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).
- Purkey, W.W., & Novak, J.M. (2015). *An Introduction to Invitational Theory* (3rd Ed.). Huntington, NY: International Alliance for Invitational Education.
- Purkey, W.W., & Novak, J.M. (1996). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching, learning, and democratic practice* (3rd Ed.). Wadsworth.
- Schat, S. J. (2023). Exploring student experiences of teacher care communication: the offering of educational care. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 41(1), 4-25.

Schat, S. (2018). Exploring care in education. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 13(2), 2.

Shigematsu, K. (2018). *Survival Guide for the Soul: How to Flourish Spiritually in a World that Pressures Us to Achieve*. Zondervan.

Vanier, J. (1989). *Community and Growth*. NY: Paulist Press. Wolfensberger, W. (1972). *Normalization: The principle of normalization in human services*. Toronto, ON: Leonard Crainford (National Institute on Mental Retardation).