

## Review

Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (Author). *Life together: Disability and belonging in the church*. Available: <https://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Resources/Documents/Life-Together-Disability-and-Belonging-in-the-Church>

By K.A. Pudlas, Professor Emeritus, Trinity Western University

I have contributed to the *NIMER Journal* on the topic of diversity and special needs (see: <https://nimer.ca/section/diversity-special-needs/>) and recently was asked to offer some thoughts on a resource from the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada entitled, *Life Together: Disability and Belonging in the Church* (available: <https://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Resources/Documents/Life-Together-Disability-and-Belonging-in-the-Church>). I highly recommend this resource for reasons discussed below.

In previous contributions I have discussed the necessary confluence of heart and head and hands if we, the Body of Christ, are to be inclusive in our praxis (see: Pudlas, 2007). The content of the issue reviewed here contributes to that confluence, addressing attitudes and values, knowledge and skills, and offers practical applications. The content is presented in four interrelated sections:

1. Welcome and belonging
2. Ableism in church & culture
3. Next steps for Christian communities
4. Organizations and resources

What follows is a brief commentary on the content of each of those four sections. First, I ask that you ponder two words in the title: *Life* and *Belonging*.

### Context: Life and Imago Dei

In the 1930s in pre-NAZI Europe, the T4 Euthanasia Program advocated the termination of lives of those considered to consume more resources than they contributed to society (quantified by production/consumption of “calories of energy”). This resulted in the systematic murder of institutionalized “patients” with disabilities in Germany. Based on this supposed “scientific evidence” the promotion of these views was so successful that individuals asked to be euthanized “for the greater good of society.” History proves how this devaluation of human life led to unimaginable actions and ultimately to the extermination of millions. This ethic prompts the question of what kind of worldview (or heart-set) would allow such an atrocity.

The term euthanasia literally means “good death” and the editors begin the EFC issue with a reference to the current trend toward aiding death:

Although ableism or discrimination against people with disabilities is not new, our culture is quickly moving toward more extreme expressions of ableism. In 2021 a law was passed that made Canadians who are not dying eligible for hastened death - if they have a disability or chronic illness. (2023, p.5)

This sobering introduction should give all who seek to be authentic apprentices of Jesus, the human embodiment of the Creator of ALL life, cause for concern that we are on the brink of history being repeated. Jesus told us in John 10:10 that he came to give us life to the full. Part of living a full life means living in community.

### **Belonging and the Body of Christ**

The first section on welcome and belonging speaks to the “heart” or perhaps the mindset of those who would seek to be inviting. Mere physical proximity does not ensure inclusion, and Dr. Cynthia Tam writes, “Making the building accessible is an essential welcoming gesture, but opening the church doors does not always translate into a welcome” (9). She suggests we need to learn how to communicate and build relationships. We can learn from 1 Corinthians 12 that patronizing charity is not the foundation of relationship; for the body to be whole, all members must be present and contribute using their (diverse) abilities.

Elsewhere in this first section, Taylor Hyatt, a disability rights advocate, shares a lesson from Luke 5 where access to Jesus was enabled by friends who removed part of a roof (a barrier to access). Hyatt suggests, “Find those people who are willing to take off the roof for you - who will put effort in to help you get closer to the Lord, and be solid supports.” (11). This is at once a call for self-advocacy for those who have challenges, as well as a challenge to all apprentices of Jesus to be inclusive, welcoming “roof busters.”

The section ends with thought-provoking reflection questions, including: how might your church ministry or small group ensure that people with disabilities are welcome as part of community life?

Perhaps the barriers that need to be removed are attitudinal.

### **Ableism in Church and Culture**

The second section begins with a practical definition of the term “ableism” as a kind of discrimination built on the wrong idea that lives of people with disabilities are worth less or have less joy, purpose or fulfillment than the lives of those without disabilities (17). Perhaps the “roof busting” requires an honest assessment of our attitudes.

By way of anecdotal evidence, I have a friend who happens to have osteogenesis imperfecta (brittle bone disease). During a recent hospital stay she was “encouraged” by medical personnel to consider ending her life; the medical

professionals could not conceive that she lived a full rich life, overcoming numerous physical as well as attitudinal barriers. They failed to see value and potential of the person but saw only the so-called disability.

Sadly, as Taylor Hyatt states, “society is full of structural, procedural and attitudinal barriers” (19). Hyatt recounts words from a friend who said, “Jesus isn’t going to make you run to catch up with Him. He is going to walk and run with you at your speed” (20). And since we are to be the embodiment of Jesus here on earth, what better way to display and dispel the folly of ableism than to walk (or run) in community with persons with abilities different than our own.

Elsewhere in this section we are encouraged to assess the invitation, supports, and hospitality offered to people with disabilities. (I recommend to you the work of Dr. Sean Schatt on the topic of care theory and being inviting). Bergman opines that when someone approaches people with visible health issues in church it is too often with the agenda of serving them rather than engaging with them. I have observed that the dominant discourse regarding disabilities is too often the “charity discourse.” Bergman suggests that the key to inclusive ministry is to establish common ground, seeing everyone as equal members of the Church Body living together. Give voice to those who may be marginalized; the Bible teaches all have been given gifts to be utilized for God’s glory.

In a piece entitled, “On ableism, gifts and the life of the Church,” Chantal Huinink, of Christian Horizons, suggest that the word “disability” is only a bad word if it is used to imply that to be able-bodied is better; thus, reinforcing the importance of examining our attitudes. Our negative attitude may prevent individuals and families with disabilities from exercising their God-given gifts and serving in the midst of being served. We should not, says Huinink, deny people with disabilities the opportunity to multiply their talents (see Matthew 25:14-30). A very helpful evaluative tool entitled “Indications of Belonging” is offered at:[https://christianhorizons.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Indications\\_of\\_Belongin\\_Checklist.pdf](https://christianhorizons.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Indications_of_Belongin_Checklist.pdf).

This section concludes with a brief reflection by Janet Noel-Annable, CEO of Christian Horizons, entitled, “On churches missing out”. She aptly summarizes by stating that, “Our churches, neighbourhoods, and friendship are far richer when everybody belongs” (33).

## **Summary and Conclusions**

### **Next Steps for Christian Communities**

It has been suggested that complaining without providing a solution is simply called “whining.” Another reason I recommend this resource to all servant leaders who desire to be inclusive is that it offers “solutions” by way of next steps and practical resources.

In a full-circle moment, returning to the importance of “heart,” Stephen Bedard suggests that the crucial first step in a church being welcoming – including being disability friendly – is to encourage widespread understanding and acceptance of the value of every person. (See for example Stace-Smith, H. & Pudlas, K.A.; 2020). Bedard goes on to suggest that inclusion can be a very positive experience - for all parties – but it requires awareness on our part. Awareness of the gifts and abilities of others and of their inherent worth as *Imago Dei*. Bedard also offers some practical suggestions which, once awareness has been achieved, could be considered simple and obvious (such as making sure a person with hearing challenges can easily see visual clues to what is being said (aka speechreading). A previous NIMER article, [Toward Structurally Inviting and Inclusive Churches \(www.nimer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Towards-Inviting-PDF-Pub-Copy-2.pdf\)](http://www.nimer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Towards-Inviting-PDF-Pub-Copy-2.pdf) ) may be instructive. While churches may be hesitant, I suggest we borrow a phrase and “just do it!”; what is the worst that can happen? To provide impetus toward next steps, the authors provide “Disability etiquette tips” (42-43).

The section on next steps concludes by addressing the need to acknowledge our own woundedness and need for healing. As I have suggested in earlier writings, perhaps we are loathe to be fully inclusive of persons with disabilities because they remind us of our own imperfections and challenges. The final contributor, Taylor Hyatt, reinforces the need for Christian communities to break out of the stereotype of disabled persons being recipients of others’ kindness (p.46); yet another example of the inappropriateness of the “charity discourse.” This section concludes with another list of reflection questions, including, “What can you do to learn more and engage with the stories and perspectives of people with disabilities?”

A final piece reminds us of the story of the roof-busters and is preceded by a list of relevant organizations and resources.

Thus, having addressed attitudes (heart) and provided knowledge (head), the reader is left with some practical helps (hands) toward making the Body of Christ more inclusive and welcoming to all.

Ken Pudlas, EdD, 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, Dr. Pudlas taught students with special needs in the K-12 public school system in several districts in British Columbia. He 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. 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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## References

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