

People with Disabilities in Christian Community

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ABSTRACT

During His time on earth, Jesus walked alongside all types of people, showing no partiality in His ministry. He saw ALL people as bearers of the image of God and desired to share His Kingdom with everyone, especially those whom society deemed unworthy. This research study was developed to evaluate the Christian community of today and determine whether or not they hold true to a similar mindset; specifically in regards to people with disabilities. To determine this current status of the Christian community, an online survey was created and distributed. The survey consisted of six open-ended questions asking about three main subjects: (1) current status of disability in the Christian community, (2) barriers to inclusion in the Christian community, and (3) positive actions made to aid inclusion in the Christian community. Upon evaluation of the submitted responses, it was observed that the Christian community is making strides towards effective inclusion but still has much work to do. This study was not only intended to provide a general snapshot of the status of disability in the Christian community but to also be used to identify specific areas in which the community can improve.

Keywords: *disability, disability ministry, church, inclusion, Christian community*

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People with Disabilities in the Christian Community

Whether or not it is always acknowledged, God has mandated the entire Christian community to show no partiality in the body of Christ. That means that within churches, parachurch organizations, and any other entity claiming to be “Christian,” all people, from all backgrounds and all walks of life, should be invited and included into the essential functions of that specific entity. To go one step further, God has called His followers to *go out* from their current location and spread the Good News of Christ to those at the ends of the earth. He also told His body to not only *go out* but also *bring in* those who are “poor and crippled and blind and lame” (Luke 14:21 *ESV*). That specific mandate, from Luke 14, in addition to Paul’s description of the body of Christ from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 is what has guided this study. The body of Christ has been given specific instruction to reach out to people with disabilities and this study attempted to examine the degree to which the body of Christ has been successful or unsuccessful in fulfilling its responsibilities in this area. The goal of this study was to create a snapshot of the Christian community’s attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Devaluing Attitudes of the Church

The Christian community has a history of devaluing attitudes towards people with disabilities. In her article titled *Sacramental Bodies*, Nancy Eiesland (2009) discussed the different marginalizing attitudes that churches have in regard to people with disabilities. She suggests that the church “has too long provided the ideological funding and charitable practices” to people with disabilities which results in marginalization (p. 240). Further on in the article, Eiesland discusses the church’s flawed focus on healing as she states, “Our bodies have too often been touched by hands that have forgotten our humanity and attend only to curing us...Healing has been the churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine, in which the goal was ‘normalization’ of the bodies of people with disabilities” (Eiesland, 2009, p. 243). In his book on Social Role Valorization, Wolfensberger (1998) explains how ideas such as these can marginalize and devalue people with disabilities. He states that people with disabilities are devalued when society views them as an object of charity or as someone who is sick and needs to be healed (p.15, 16).

Wolfensberger (1998) tells us of another attitude/mindset that causes people with disabilities to become devalued in society: when people with disabilities are viewed as the “other” or “alien.” Gaventa (n.d.) outlines

this same idea in his article titled “Lessons in Community Building from Including the ‘Other,’” describing different polarities that people with disabilities are subject to in society; two of which include: *disabled/different vs. normal/typical* and *victim/hero* (p. 6-7). These polarities cause an “us vs. them” mentality which, as Wolfensberger suggests, can only further devalue people with disabilities. Finally, Swinton (2001) mirrors a similar thought as he discusses the attitude a church must have when moving towards inclusion. He states that the church cannot truly be transformed if we assume that we are doing ministry for “them.” We can only understand the need for change when we realize that we are making changes in order that the Body of Christ can be made whole (p. 57).

Many authors present this *us vs. them* mentality as a common problem for the Christian community. For example, Gaventa (n.d.) wrote about a story of when he was a chaplain of an institution for people with disabilities. A pastor came up to him and told him that he saw eight of “his people” at the mall. It turns out that the pastor was referring to attendees of his own church. This interaction led Gaventa to say that the church needs to move from seeing people with disabilities as “apart from” to a “part of” the congregation (p. 2). The author was once told a similar story in which a pastor of a church called the head of the disability ministry to tell him that “his people” were calling the church office and they didn’t know how to handle it; once again showing a lack of ownership among church leadership. Meininger (2008) comments that if we are to include persons with intellectual disabilities in our community then we need to start acting and thinking in terms of an inclusive *we* (p. 348).

Another, surprisingly common, devaluing thought the church has in regards to disabilities is its supposed connection with sin. Reinders (2008) states that the prevailing Roman Catholic view regards the life of a person with profound disabilities as a manifestation of natural evil (p. 119). Satterlee (2010) echoes Reinders stating:

Throughout its history, the church has interpreted scriptural passages, images, and stories that include persons with disabilities in ways that subtly or explicitly reinforce the assertion that physical and developmental disabilities are caused by or are a consequence of sin and may even be God’s punishment visited upon the sinner. This hermeneutical approach assumes that getting rid of their disabilities is the chief concern of people who are disabled and the ideal for all people. (p. 34)

As noted above, historically, many churches believed that disabilities were caused by sin in an individual's own life or their parent's lives. Today, many authors will strongly argue against that theory. It is interesting to note, however, that these same authors who strongly believe disabilities are not caused by sin will argue that disabilities were in fact caused by the fall of man. For instance, Satterlee (2010), who previously in his article argues against the notion that disability is caused by sin, goes on to say, "I hold that disabilities are a consequence of the fallen state of creation..." (p. 36). Hull (2003) also comments that although people with disabilities may not have necessarily sinned or brought their condition upon themselves, "their very existence is a continual reminder of the imperfect human condition in to which humanity has fallen and from which we hope to be redeemed" (p. 11). It would make for interesting research in the future to detail the distinction between *direct* and *indirect* sin.

Kabue (2006) provides us with a grim outlook on what this mindset, of connecting disability with sin, can do to the church and to people affected by disability.

The continued interpretation and belief among some churches that there is a relationship between disability/sickness and sin has led to the development of an attitude of pity and sympathy to those who are disabled or sick. To those who hold this view, the presence of people with disabilities in the church is a sign that the church is unable to combat the devil, which is the source of those infirmities. The response to this is endless prayers for those who are disabled or sick, and when these prayers do not yield the expected result the victim is blamed for having no faith. The consequence is that the person in question will opt to stay away not only from that particular church but also from the Christian faith. This explains why, more often than not, persons with disabilities feel alienated, marginalized, embarrassed and, in some cases, offended by the treatment meted out to them by the church. (p. 115)

Reasons Why the Church Has Not Included People with Disabilities

Sometimes it may be rather perplexing to imagine why churches do not have people with disabilities fully included in their congregation. Several authors offered varying reasons for the prevalence of this perplexing idea. Collins and Ault (2010) state that some congregations might actually wait until a person with disabilities arrives at their congregation before they decide how they

are going to respond (p. 114). But, it has also been shown that people with disabilities may not even come to a church if they show a lack of accessibility. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted which required buildings to make accessible accommodations. However, existing church buildings were exempt from many ADA mandates regarding accessibility; many cities and states now have laws that do not exempt churches from ADA requirements (Fear not the disabled, 2005, p. 28). Yong (2010) states that “because of the inaccessibility of our buildings or events, we have already sent a signal to people with disabilities that they are a burden who needs to be accommodated rather than a potentially integral part of the church community” (p. 79).

Another reason that people with disabilities are not included in the church is because the church places unreachable expectations on their members through religiosity and traditional rituals. For instance, Kunz (2011) describes how the way we view religion can prevent integration. “To be able to grasp spiritual matters, one must understand something about interpretation; one has to be able to talk, to interpret oneself and one’s world religiously. Religion is a language game. Or: Religiosity is to be acquired like language and therefore is dependent on the ability to socialize” (p. 22). Later in the same article, he argues, “It is not the ritual framework but rather the sanctification of human community that comprises the inner core of Christian worship” (p. 25).

A Symbiotic Relationship

After surveying the literature on church and disability, you begin to see a symbiotic relationship in that people with disabilities *need* the church and the church *needs* people with disabilities. Various authors have written about either side of this relationship. For example, Kunz (2011) writes, “The deepest spiritual need of every person is acceptance as a member of the family of God” (p. 24). Carter (2010) outlines a similar belief as he says “within the life of a congregational community, faith is formed, shared, and strengthened; relationships are forged and deepened; and gifts are discovered, developed, and dispensed ... unfortunately too many people with disabilities do not experience the same opportunities as others to grow spiritually, enjoy community and experience relationships” (p. 2). Hauerwas (2004) develops this same concept of the Christian’s need for community. He states that being a Christian is not about knowing “this or that doctrine” but rather salvation is attained by “participating in a community through which our lives are constituted by a unity more profound than our individual needs” (p. 60).

He then argues that from this perspective, a church would have no way of knowing it is a church without the presence of people with intellectual disabilities (p. 60). Spirituality then, is a corporate concept and experience. It is rather a “slightly startling counternarrative to contemporary understandings of spirituality that perceive it to be a personal thing that is located firmly within the desires and the control of the individual (Swinton, 2011, p. 14).

To further this argument, Collins and Ault (2010) explain why families affected by disability need to be involved in community within the church. They state that “most of the families of children with disabilities who were interviewed by Todis and Singer (1991) reported that the church was a major source of social support and that congregation members demonstrated unconditional love for their children” (p. 113). Hauerwas (2004) also describes how society has lacked support for parents with a child with intellectual disabilities and therefore the church must step in. He states that the “family becomes the only agent representing the mentally handicapped, since absolutely no one else is there to represent them” (p. 55). So where is the church in this? Hauerwas continues on to say that raising children for Christians is part of the church’s commitment to hospitality of the stranger (p. 58).

On the other side of this “symbiotic relationship,” Eiesland (2009) presents a strong case as to why the church *needs* people with disabilities. Eiesland was disabled herself and therefore writes in the first person. She states:

“The church is impoverished without our presence. Our narratives and bodies make clear that ordinary lives incorporate contingency and difficulty. We reveal the physical truth of embodiment as a painstaking process of claiming and inhabiting our actually existing bodies. People with disabilities in the church announce the presence of the disabled God for us and call the church to become a communion of struggle.” (p. 242)

In support of Eiesland’s idea regarding the church *needing* people with disabilities, McBride (2008) discussed a statement of Pope John Paul II delivered to a disabilities committee. “He reminded them that persons with disabilities are not to simply be accepted as passive observers within the church. Persons with disabilities, along with all the baptized, have received the call of discipleship ‘to enrich the People of God with the gifts entrusted to them by the Lord’” (p. 37, 38). Webb-Mitchell (2010) says “one of the reasons faith communities need the presence of people whom the world

calls ‘disabled’ is because they enable or facilitate the group in becoming a community” (p. 38, 39).

The Church as the Interconnected/Interdependent Body

We are shown throughout the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters, that the church is likened to that of a body. Christ is the head and his universal church represents the rest of the body. To further describe the importance of this imagery, Morris (2010) states that “in reflecting on this image of the body in relation to creating inclusive communities, the image of the body of Christ was used by Paul to encourage the churches to be different from the wider society” (p. 55). It doesn’t come down to the church *choosing* to be an inclusive body, the church *must* become an inclusive body. Hauerwas (2004) comments that we are not just accidentally communal, but we are such by necessity (p. 16). Additionally, McNair (2008) quotes a pastor from Africa who said at the Urbana Missions Conference that the purpose of maturity as a Christian is not independence, but interdependence, as we are a body (p. 321).

Part of creating this interdependent community relies on the Christian community to accept diversity. Morris (2010) says that “...making community begins with the acknowledgement and affirmation of every human being as the unique and wonderful creation of God with the potential to contribute to building up the church through the gifts of their uniqueness” (p. 51). In fact, George (2011) states that the unity of the body of Christ is *constituted* by its diversity (p. 101). In essence, the body relies on the uniqueness and diversity that people, especially people with disabilities, are created with. Recognizing the body of Christ’s reliance on all people, McNair (2008) argues that thinking there is no need for certain parts of the body is a clear sign of immaturity as a Christian (p. 322).

It is very important to recognize the various gifts that people with disabilities offer the church. Morris (2010) reminds us that we must approach people with disabilities as individuals and see what each individual can offer the church. He comments that just like any other group in society, some people are good at some things while other people are good at other things. We need to look at each person as an individual person with an endless possibility of spiritual gifts. Morris further clarifies his concept with the following:

When we ask “What can disabled people contribute to churches?” we are not talking about precisely the same group of people who

would have been spoken about under some other label in the ancient world had they asked this question. Everyone may indeed be limited, but society constructs groups of people with certain limitations and labels them together. However, the people who end up under these labels are often people with a whole variety of experiences of life and with a diversity of contributions to make to the life of the church. To speak of the experience of people with disabilities as though it was the same for every person is deeply problematic. (p. 51)

In order to create this community that accepts people with disabilities as they are and uses their gifts for edification, we must redefine the image of God.

Redefining the “Image of God”

It is interesting to note that in McNair’s 2007 study with church attendees, over 25% of participants said that they were either unsure or disagreed with the statement that people with disabilities were created in the image of God. To counteract such findings, EDAN (2003) summarizes their standpoint of the image of God wonderfully as follows:

We would therefore argue that: (1) Christian theology needs to interpret the *imago Dei* from a Christological and soteriological (the saving work of Christ for the world) standpoint, which takes us beyond the usual creationist and anthropological perspectives. (2) Christian theology needs to embrace a non-elitist, inclusive understanding of the body of Christ as the paradigm for understanding the *imago Dei*. (3) Without the full incorporation of persons who can contribute from the experience of disability, the church falls short of the glory of God, and cannot claim to be in the image of God. (p. 512)

In *Building a Church for Strangers*, Swinton (2001) said, “As human beings, we are made in the image of God. In each of us that image is damaged and tarnished, as our relationship with God is broken, leading to the consequent loss of community and harmony. However, the image of God begins to be restored in the Body of Christ when each individual is affirmed for what they have to contribute to the total image” (p. 59). Taking this all into account; the church’s need for people with disabilities, the interconnected/interdependent body, and the redefined image of God; we now look at different strategies to creating this inclusive community.

Practical Strategies for Inclusive Communities

While some writers suggest structured processes as the path to inclusion, such as Throop's (2009) three-step process, other writers suggest that a step-by-step how-to guide to inclusive faith communities is overcomplicating the situation. Satterlee (2010) instead states that "rather than turning to a handy list of do's and don'ts, congregations must dare to engage persons with disabilities" (p. 37). Pierson (2010) supports Satterlee as he writes, "Over the years of urging churches to include people with disabilities, I have come to believe that it is not the mechanics or the process that makes it happen. It is the attitude of the people that makes it happen" (p. 182). Many families from the Jacober (2007) study would offer a very similar outlook. One parent in that study stated, a disability "inhabits the child but it belongs to the family" (p.84). With this in mind, it is important to take into account what one other parent in the study said: "So for me I wished people would ask more questions and if I need support rather than just waiting for me to come and ask" (82).

Treloar (2002) showed very similar findings in her study. Some parents commented that they wished church leaders would simply approach them and ask, "What can I do to help you?" (p. 600). In response, Treloar stated, "We must plan *with*, rather than *for* the person/family. This requires open communication, unrestrained by power and position differences" (p. 601). Webb-Mitchell (2010) says the burden is on the members of the church to "be educated to understand the God-given gifts of people with disabilities, and the necessity of adapting to the presence of people with disabilities" (p. 257).

Finally, Meininger (2008) argues that we must be able to abandon our traditions and rituals for the sake of inclusion. We must liberate ourselves from our own domestication. Yong (2010) shares three principles of an inclusive congregation: (1) the church consists of the weak, not the strong which puts people with disabilities at the center instead of the margins of what it means to be the people of God; (2) each person with disabilities, no matter how severe, contributes something essential to and for the body of Christ; (3) people with disabilities become the paradigm for what it means to live in the power of God and to manifest the divine glory (p. 89).

Everyone Needs the Church

Each and every one of the authors presented in this review would agree that the church is called to make sure their doors are open to *everyone*. "Responding to and fully including people with disabilities is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church's defining characteristic" (EDAN, 2003,

p. 525). The church should be a place where parents and children with intellectual disabilities can attend “without apologizing, without being stared at, without being silently condemned” (Hauerwas, 2004, p. 59). Yong (2009) says that people with disabilities find redemption from disability not when they are healed but with the removal of societal barriers – social, structural, economic, political, and religious – “which hinder those with temporarily able bodies from welcoming and being hospitable to people with disabilities!” (p. 175).

It is most important for church congregations to recognize that in regards to the work of Christ in the world and within our lives, there is no difference between a person with a disability and a person without a disability. Pierson (2010) argues that when church leaders search for a biblical mandate to be involved in disability ministry, they need look no further than the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) which states that Christians are to go into the entire world community and spread the message of Christ’s love to everyone. “There is no footnote that reads, ‘*Everyone* is limited to people with heights over 5’7”; 20/20 vision; ability to hear; IQ 100 or higher; acceptable public behavior” (p. 184). Webb-Mitchell (1996) comments that “one’s mental, physical, or sensory condition is neither a help nor a hindrance in relationship to God” (p. 51). Finally, Bach (1989) summarizes this idea superbly:

People with and without disability: Both are respectively created by God; both live in the fallen creation; both (as damaged creation) are dependent on the salvific deed of Christ; both are reconciled to God through Christ; both are members of the body of Christ, both deficient and dependent upon others; both gifted with divine gifts, both expectant of salvation. Where, exactly, is the theological distinction? (as cited in Kunz, 2011, p. 104)

Method

Introduction to the Survey

The topic of inclusion of people with disabilities in the community has been written about for years. It can be easy for many of us to be critical of the Christian community and argue about what should and should not be happening when it comes to inclusion of people with disabilities, however, the discussion needs to go further than that. The purpose of this study isn’t simply to present this snapshot of the Christian community’s efforts

toward inclusion, it is also to offer guidance and direction to our readers to bring about change in their own communities. The survey was created using Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com) and was distributed via email. Everyone who received a link to the survey was from a large group of email addresses comprised of personal and professional contacts. They received an email with a general description and goal of the research study as well as a link that would take them to the online survey.

This online survey consisted of six questions, all of which were open-ended. The author knew he would face increased challenges in organizing data from only open-ended questions, but he wanted to allow the respondents a certain amount of freedom in developing their answers to get a true snapshot of the current status of people with disabilities within the Christian community. The first three questions asked for the respondent's idea of the "big picture" of disability within the Christian community while the following two questions asked respondents to draw from specific experiences. The first question asked for the participant to describe the current status of the Christian community's efforts towards inclusion of people with disabilities in general. The second question asked for the participant to name the greatest barriers that people with a disability face to participating within the Christian community. In response to the second question, the third question asked respondents to list any specific actions that could be taken to overcome the barriers that were mentioned.

The fourth and fifth questions asked for examples from the respondents own experiences; the fourth question asking for *specific* barriers to inclusion they have witnessed within the Christian community and the fifth question asking for *specific* positive actions the Christian community has made that had a positive impact on including a person with disabilities.

The sixth, and final, question asks the respondent to provide any other comments, thoughts or ideas about the Christian community and their inclusion, or lack thereof, of people with disabilities. Once again, our desire was to gain a true snapshot of the current status of inclusion within the Christian community, so this question was developed to give respondents an opportunity to provide any other useful information that they may have been unable to provide in the previous questions.

Results of the Survey

In all, 166 surveys were completed. As a result of the survey being conducted online and requiring the completion of one set of questions to get to the next, not all respondents who started the survey ended up completing the

entirety of the survey. Therefore, only 162 of the 166 respondents completed the demographics page of the survey, which was near the end of the survey. The following demographics information was also collected: gender, age, denominational affiliation (if applicable), and role within church/organization (if applicable). In addition, respondents were also asked to describe how disability intersected with their personal lives.

Out of the 162 respondents who completed the demographics page, 62 were male and 98 were female, with two responses missing. That means that almost 61% of the participants in the survey were female. The ages of the respondents varied greatly from ages 16-80 years old. Although there were respondents from almost every age group, there seemed to be a 16-year window between 46 and 62 which represented the highest concentration of responses. A total of 90 respondents, or 55.5%, fell somewhere in between this age window with the highest frequencies occurring at ages 49 and 50. Fittingly, the average age of a respondent was 48 years old.

A total of 18 denominations were represented in the study with 25.9% of those denoting an affiliation with a non-denominational church. The next highest frequencies were those that did not specify (15.4%), Baptist (9.9%), United Methodist (8%), and Presbyterian (7.4%). In terms of roles within an organization there was a wide variety of roles represented, however, the highest percentage came from those who did not specify a role (38.9%). Forty-two respondents claimed the role of a program director/coordinator (25.9%), Eighteen were pastors or priests (11.1%), 10 were individual members (6.2%), and 8 were volunteers (4.9%). Smaller numbers of representatives claimed other roles such as teacher, advocate, elder, administration, committee member, field worker, and missionary. Finally, the question of how the experience of disability intersected with the respondent's life provided us with information on how much interaction each respondent has with persons with disabilities. An overwhelming majority, 90.7%, claim to have at least some degree of interaction with people with disabilities. It is interesting to note that 75, or 46.2%, of the respondents were parents of those with disabilities (44) or people with disabilities themselves (31). The remaining responses represented volunteers working with people with disabilities (14.8%), family member of someone with a disability (11.7%), those who work professionally with people with disabilities (11.1%), friends of people with disabilities (6.8%), people who said that disability does not intersect with their life (5.6%), and six missing responses (3.7%).

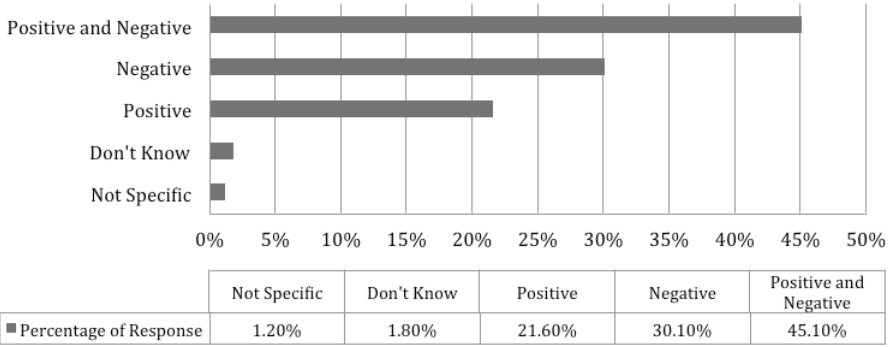
For the sake of this report, the question results will be broken up into four sections. The first section will describe the results of the first question about the general current status. The second section will go over barriers to inclusion within the Christian community which includes results from both questions 2 and 4. The third section will discuss positive actions to overcome inclusion barriers which includes questions 3 and 5. Finally, the fourth section will outline the extra thoughts and comments that were provided in question 6.

Because the questions were open-ended, a process for evaluating the answers was employed. After reading every response to each question we were able to simplify them into “types” of responses. For instance, if a respondent said that the church needs to build more wheelchair ramps, then we would group that response into “accessibility” because it is related to making the church more accessible.

Question 1, “Current Status”

The first question was worded as the following: “Drawing from your own personal experience, what is the current status of the Christian community’s efforts towards inclusion of people with disabilities?” A total of 166 people responded to this question. Our goal in evaluating this question was to see whether our respondents had a positive or negative outlook on the current status of disability within the Christian community. Therefore, after reading each answer, we deemed it to be a positive answer, a negative answer, or an answer that represents both positive *and* negative aspects (see Table 1). In all 21.6% of respondents declared the current status to be a positive one in regards to disability inclusion within the Christian community. For example, one respondent stated, “Our church does a good job of including people with disabilities” and another described the Christian community as “blossoming” in this area. On the other hand, 30.1% of respondents disagreed and cited a negative status for people with disabilities within the Christian community. One respondent said that “there is no real effort for inclusion” while another described the Christian community as being “oblivious to the need.” Many respondents simply described the efforts as being “poor.” The majority of respondents, 45.1%, included both positive and negative aspects in their responses. The majority of these responses would describe the Christian community as growing in this area but still having much progress to make. Finally, three respondents were either not specific or did not know what the current status was.

Table 1: Current Status of Disability within the Christian Community

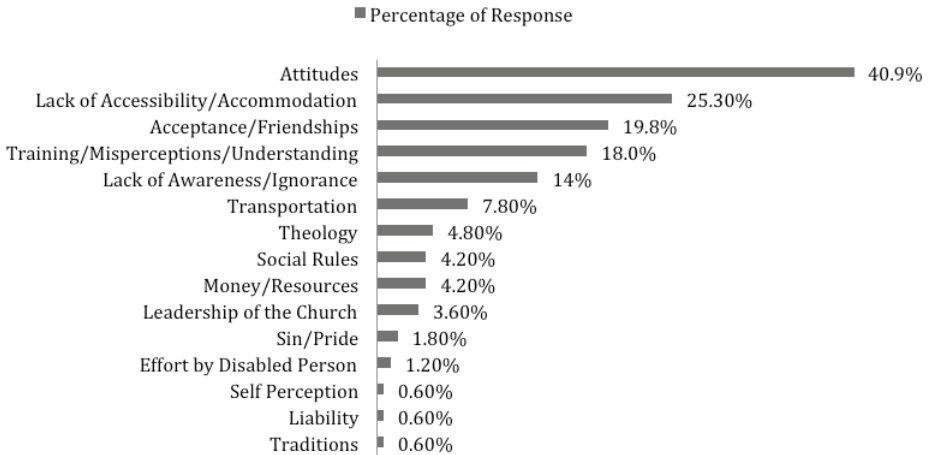


Questions 2 & 4, “Barriers to Inclusion”

In the survey, there were two separate questions relating to barriers that are present within the Christian community. Question #2 asked respondents to generally describe barriers to inclusion that people with disabilities face within the Christian community. Question #4 asked the participants to give a *specific* account of a time that they or someone they know experienced a barrier to participating in an event within the Christian community. Once again, for each question, we evaluated the responses and created a number of subject groups in order to cluster the responses together. Also, as you will see with the entirety of questions in this survey, as a result of the question being open-ended, the respondent was able to write an answer that touched on more than one subject. If this was the case, the respondent’s answer would be included in each subject area that was described in the response. Therefore, the percentages given will not add up to exactly 100% but instead each percentage that is given is the total amount of people who cited something about that specific subject area. A total of 166 participants responded to question #2 (see Table 2). Of the 166, 40.9% of respondents cited the attitudes of those in the Christian community being a barrier to inclusion, easily the most common answer. Many of those respondents simply wrote the word “attitudes” as being the primary barrier as others listed specific attitudes such as hatred, judgment, negative mindset, and rejection. One respondent specifically listed the barrier as being the “closed hearts of the people in the congregation who don’t want to interact with people who have a disability.” The second most common answer, with 25.3%, cited the lack of accessibility within the Christian community. While most of the responses generically

cited a lack of physical accessibility in the church, a few respondents specifically attributed this problem to older churches that were built in an era in which physical accessibility for people with disabilities was not required. For instance, one respondent simply stated, “The churches that were built more than 25 years ago aren’t accessible.” Rounding out the top five most common answers, respondents addressed the following barriers: lack of acceptance/friendships (19.8%), misperceptions and the lack of training/understanding (18%), and the lack of awareness/ignorance (13.8%). When discussing the lack of training/understanding, many respondents wrote about people not only misunderstanding disability but also not knowing how to interact with a person with a disability.

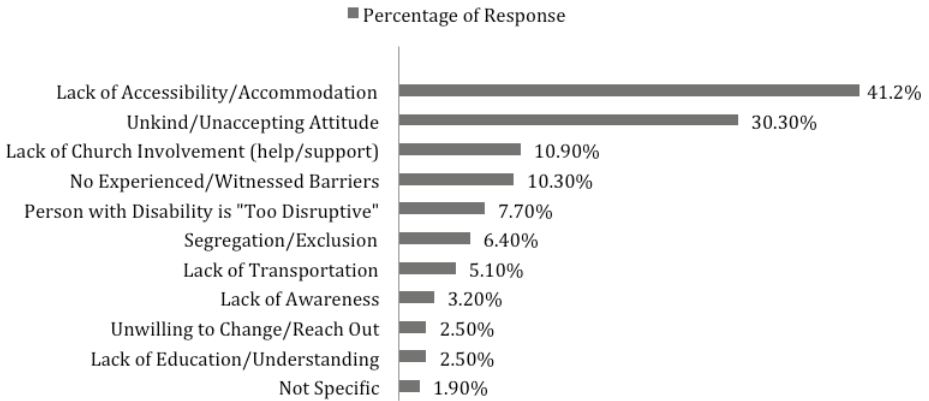
Table 2: Barriers to Inclusion



In question #4 respondents were asked to cite specific examples of barriers from their own lives (see Table 3). In all, 155 people responded to this question. The most common barrier mentioned in question #4 was that of accessibility and accommodation with 41.2% of respondents replying with a related response. In comparison, this same barrier garnered only 25.3% of responses to question #2. This subject not only included physical access such as wheelchair ramps and accessible bathrooms but it also included accommodations such as Braille, large print documents, listening devices, and interpreters. In regards to physical inaccessibility, one respondent said that they ran a day camp at their church for people with disabilities and realized that “the man in the motorized wheelchair could not access the bathrooms because they were up a flight of eight stairs.” The second most common response was related to

the attitudes of those within the community; 30.3% cited this barrier, most commonly referring to *unkind* and *unwelcoming* attitudes. To give an example, one respondent described the following story: “My daughter who couldn’t speak was enjoying the music and one of the elders got offended when she was making what he called noises. He asked that she not be brought into the service anymore.” The third, fourth, and fifth most common answers are as follows: lack of church involvement/help/support (10.9%), no experience or awareness of barriers (10.3%), and person with disabilities deemed “too disruptive” for the environment (7.7%). It is interesting to note that almost 9 out of every 10 respondents (88.3%) were able to cite some sort of barrier to inclusion of people with disabilities within the Christian community.

Table 3: Specific Barrier Examples

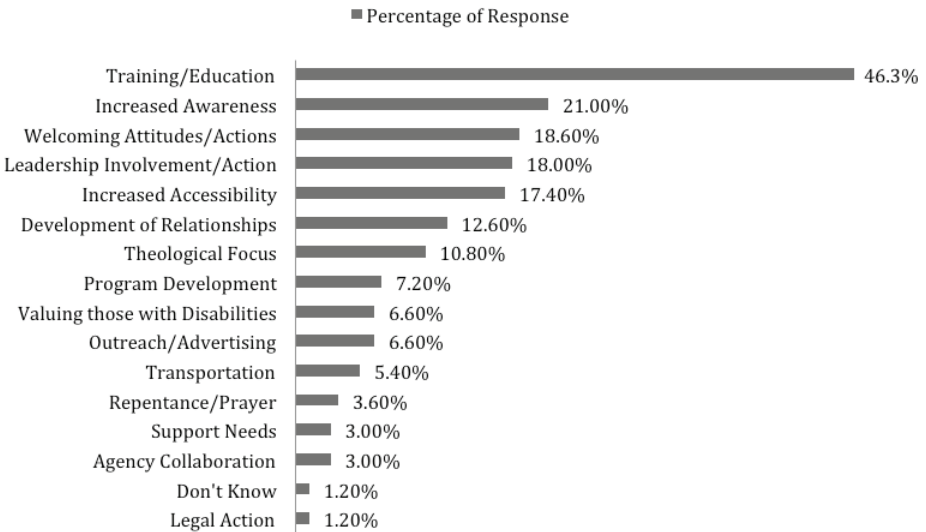


Questions 3 & 5, “Positive Actions”

Similar to the previous section, there were two questions in the survey relating to positive actions the church could/should take in order to overcome barriers to inclusion. Question #3 asks for *general* actions that can be made and question #5 asks for *specific* actions, witnessed or experienced by the respondent, which had a positive impact on including a person with disabilities. In total, 166 people responded to question #3 (see Table 4). Almost half (46.3%) of the respondents agreed on one action that the Christian community should take to overcome barriers: training/education. Responses regarding training/education mentioned different ideas such as training the leadership, training the congregation, holding workshops on accessibility, and education on disability in general. One respondent suggested “some kind of simple online lessons that can teach teachers and other church

members basic knowledge about disabilities and including them in church programs.” Another respondent stated, “I believe pastors need to be educated so they can educate their congregations.” The next four top answers were relatively equally represented: increased awareness (21%), more welcoming attitude/actions (18.6%), leadership taking action (18%), and improved accessibility (17.4%). It is also interesting to note that 10.8% of respondents argued that there needs to be a change in theology within the Christian community in order to make a difference.

Table 4: Positive Actions to Overcome Barriers



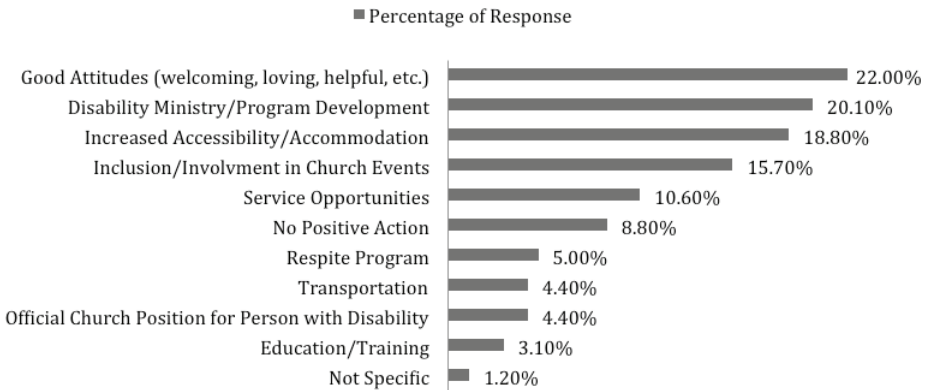
In question #5, the participants were asked to cite specific examples of an action by the Christian community that had a positive impact on including a person with disabilities (see Table 5). In total, 159 participants completed responses to this question. The most common action experienced by the respondents (22%) was that of a good attitude by someone in the Christian community. The different examples of a “good attitude” presented in these results included: welcoming, loving, helpful, supportive, involving, and willing. For instance, one respondent detailed the following personal story:

There are a group of people I know, leaders in my local church. There have been times where I have stayed home, intending to miss events because I could not physically participate. On their own, they educated themselves on the issue, got my input (sneakily), and then made

the necessary adjustments out of love not obligation. After they surprised me by bringing me along, not making a deal out of the changes but enjoying the time we spent as a group. This by far had the biggest impact on myself, and other disabled students watching on campus.

The second most common response, with 20.1%, was in regards to the development or presence of a disability ministry or program. A respondent gave an example from their church which has a “Disability Mainstreaming Department which will advocate for mainstreaming programmes for the disabled in the church.” The next three most common responses include: improved accessibility/accommodation (18.8%), inclusion/involvement in church events (15.7%), and service opportunities for people with disabilities (10.6%). In terms of service opportunities, the respondents cited examples such as worship team member, greeter, and children’s ministry worker. It is interesting that in question #3 almost half of the participants suggested the Christian community should provide more education/training to overcome barriers, however, according to question #5 only 5, or 3.1% of respondents stated that they experienced the Christian community using education/training to make a positive impact on including people with disabilities.

Table 5: Specific Positive Action Examples



Discussion

This survey consisted of four primary sections: current status, barriers, positive actions, and concluding thoughts. Beginning with the question regarding the current status of disability within the Christian community, we wanted to allow the respondent to reflect in a general sense on how well the

Christian community has interacted with/reached out to people with disabilities. Almost half of the respondents made comments that had both positive and negative aspects. However, 30% of respondents replied with an answer that was completely negative with no positive aspects. This shows that in total, 75% of the respondents had something at least in part negative to say about the current status of disability within the Christian community; which left 21% of respondents to provide an answer with solely positive aspects.

As a result of the way the survey was developed we have the opportunity to compare what people *think* with what people actually *observe*. For instance, in question #2 we asked participants to generally describe barriers that people with disabilities face in the Christian community. Then, in question #4, we asked participants to cite specific examples of barriers that they had actually observed. In regards to barriers, we saw relatively similar results between the two questions. Both questions shared the top two most common answers, Accessibility/Accommodation and Attitudes, though in reversed order. This commonality shows us that not only do people assume that accessibility concerns and negative attitudes will disconnect those with disabilities from the Christian community, but that these are also the most frequent barriers people are actually experiencing in real-life circumstances. It is interesting to note that the third most common response in the more general question #2 is the lack of Acceptance/Friendships with almost 20%. So if you take that 20% and combine it with the 40% of respondents that cited attitudinal barriers, that means 60% of respondents, over half, show that the most common barriers to inclusion relate to efforts of *individual* people within the Christian community. Some of this perceived negative attitudes and lack of acceptance is reflected in the 30% of respondents who actually *observed* negative attitudes towards people with disabilities. It could also be connected to the 10% that saw a lack of Church involvement, the almost 8% that saw people with disabilities being referred to as “too disruptive,” the 6% that observed segregation in the Christian community, and the 2.5% that saw the Christian community as being unwilling to change and reach out to people with disabilities.

When we read some of the specific responses from individuals who responded to the survey, the negative attitudes shown towards people with disabilities are emphatically heartbreaking. “Exclusion” was a common theme shown throughout these responses. One respondent described their exclusion from an important Christian sacrament: “Symbolically, a communion rail was removed without asking me (I very obviously used the rail in the past to help me stand during communion). I can now no longer go up to the rail

for communion, and I feel excluded from the central practice of my church.” The following are examples from other respondents who described shocking stories of exclusion and removal from church programs:

One person was asked to leave the church for good because his behavior was “unmanageable.”

I am aware of a child that was left out of her age-appropriate Sunday school class based on accessibility issues that actually did not warrant different treatment (i.e. the accessibility issue could have been easily overcome.)

She has been excluded from Sunday school programs because of her disability. The barriers placed in front of her equate to barriers for our entire family. When our daughter is not welcomed into community, the rest of our family receives that same message.

5 people from a group home attended a church for the first time. They enjoyed the service and were greeted by the people sitting near them. However, after the service the pastor approached the group and told them they were not appropriate for his church and they should find somewhere with special classes to go to.

These results and experiences illustrate a discouraging snapshot of the inclusionary efforts by the individuals within the Christian community.

The third and fifth questions of the survey touched on actions by the Christian community that had a positive effect on the inclusion of people with disabilities. Once again, we were able to compare what people *want* to see with what people *actually* see. There are a few unique observations to mention in this area of the survey. First of all, an overwhelming majority (46% in comparison to the second most common answer with 21%) argued in favor of the church providing more education and training to combat the barriers faced by people with disabilities, but when it came down to what participants were actually experiencing in the Christian community, only 3% shared that they had experienced some sort of education or training in their congregations. Although we saw an abundance of negative responses to the other questions, it was encouraging to see that respondents did mention many positive things they had seen. These included more welcoming/loving attitudes (22%), more disability-focused programs (20%), increased

accessibility/accommodation (18%), and inclusion/involvement in church events (15%). It is interesting to note that although 20% of respondents observed that program development had a positive impact on including people with disabilities, only 7% suggested that as a solution in question #3.

An additional observation relates to leadership involvement. In question #2, 3.6% of respondents described the leadership of the church as a barrier to inclusion. In question #4, 10.9% of respondents observed lack of church involvement as being a barrier to inclusion. Finally, in question #3, 18% of respondents cited leadership involvement/action to be a positive action that can be taken towards overcoming barriers in the Christian community. However, as can be seen in Table 5, when it came down to the positive actions *observed* by the participants no one specifically mentioned leadership involvement as a positive action that they had actually experienced. Therefore, this may show us that the Christian community could make more of an effort to get the leadership involved in including and reaching out to people with disabilities.

Finally, in question #6 the respondents had the opportunity to provide any last comments or suggestions regarding inclusion in the Christian community. As a result of it being towards the end of the survey, 135 out of the original 166 responded to this question. Though a lot of the same issues were being discussed – such as lack of caring/welcoming attitude (11%), lack of inclusion (20%), and issues with leadership (10%) – it is encouraging to see the optimism shown in the responses. Almost a quarter of the responses, 23%, described the current state of the church as encouraging as they felt like they were moving in the right direction. Another 12% offered specific recommendations for inclusive programming. Take, for example, responses from two respondents who offered encouraging ideas to aid churches in their inclusionary efforts:

Church leaders (teachers, preachers, pastors, academics) should take pains to understand the theological place of people with disabilities in the Bible. This study must be honest, open, and it **MUST** include theologians with disabilities. This information should then be passed on to congregants in teaching and preaching. It would also be beneficial for churches to reach out to service providers and people with disabilities to host information sessions for congregants in order to address disability, what it is, how one should interact with a person in a wheelchair, with autism, etc. Churches could also reach out to group homes and day programs to offer volunteer supports for people to access church. These volunteers could receive basic

training on different kinds of personal care and assistance that they could then serve their Christian brothers and sisters with. Lastly, churches **MUST** make space for all the members of the body to serve. This may require churches to redefine the meaning of excellence in worship leading to encompass a person's less than technically perfect but authentic singing, preaching etc.

Education is important, and so are simply spending time with and developing relationships with people with disabilities, but unfortunately this tends to put the onus on people with disabilities (or their families) to educate their communities, when they are already often exhausted and overstretched. Church leaders have to be much more active in promoting inclusion, speaking out against attitudinal barriers, displaying openness themselves, and actively encouraging people with disabilities to be involved in the full range of church activities. People with disabilities should be encouraged to become leaders (in whatever way is appropriate for them) in their own communities, and this is not currently happening.

So, although there are plenty of areas within the Christian community that need improvement, it is important to not be solely critical but also offer optimism and concrete suggestions to build upon.

Conclusion

When observing the list of barriers that respondents are experiencing within their own Christian communities, we see several that can easily be improved upon. For instance, 41% of respondents are observing barriers in accessibility and accommodations and are expressing needs for wheelchair ramps, handicapped parking spaces, Braille materials for people who are blind, listening devices for people who are hearing impaired, large print for people who are visually impaired, and so on and so forth. These are barriers that the Christian community could easily overcome if the leadership was willing to do so. Willingness to change is precisely the biggest change this study revealed as necessary. It comes down to the willingness of Christian leadership to regard disability inclusion as a high priority need. Thirty percent of respondents are seeing unkind and unaccepting attitudes and another 10.9% of respondents are seeing a lack of church involvement and support. This is obviously where the

Christian community is lacking. It is really up to the Christian community to be willing to change and make every effort to include people with disabilities.

Yong (2009) states that inclusion “requires our own conversion so that our eyes can truly see, our ears can really hear, and our other senses can be fully activated to receive and be transformed by what such people have to offer” (p. 185). The Christian community will not be prepared or willing to undergo this “conversion” until they acknowledge two separate ideas: that all men are created in the image of God and that all believers have a responsibility to reach out to people with disabilities. As previously stated, there is no theological distinction between a person *with* and a person *without* a disability. Both are sinners in need of salvation and both uniquely belong to the body of Christ. Luke 14 has called all believers in Jesus Christ to *go out* and *bring in* people with disabilities in our community. If the Christian community was to better comprehend that very concept our churches would be more accessible, our congregations would be more inviting, our leadership would be more supportive, and our Christian community would be barrier-free.

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