What are some of the key issues for faith communities wishing to become spaces of more authentic belonging?

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<u>Bridging the Divide Between Agencies and Faith Communities</u>.

The Problem of Faith Communities' Self-Perception
While there has been historic resistance on the part of the professional community to embrace spirituality as a natural and 'legitimate' part of a plan for support, there also exists a need for greater self-awareness on the part of faith communities with regard to their relationship to people with disabilities.   In short, <u>people of faith often think they are far more progressive than they are, and think they know more about disability inclusion and welcoming than they actually do</u>.

> In 2020, Lifeway Research conducted a phone and online survey of 1000 protestant pastors and churchgoers to rate their level of agreement with statements about disability. One statement read:
> <u>"A person with disabilities would feel welcome at our church"</u>
>
> - Among Protestant Churchgoers, 97% of agreed; of that, 81% strongly agreed
> - Among Protestant Clergy, 99% agreed; of that, 81% strongly agreed[i]
>
> Yet, in a 2013 study, about 40% of families reported that they have gone so far as to change churches because their child with a disability was not included or welcomed.[ii]

It is healthy and productive for professionals to work from the assumption that people of faith want to do what is right and good but, especially in this case, may not know how. It is understandable for a number of reasons:

- Faith communities are not exempt from the messages of exceptionalism, e.g., media portrayals of people with disabilities as perpetual children or their everyday functioning as being somehow heroic.
- Long ago, faith communities began following the lead of education and service professionals and developed segregated classes, segregated worship, etc. Like many education environments, those practices have yet to completely fade.
- Congregations are full of caring people, and a caring person's default is often one of mercy. A purely merciful and benevolent relationship is rarely one of equality.
- Benevolence may feel a lot like inclusion and acceptance, but it is neither.

What can be done to reduce tension and create a context for more authentic belonging?

A Faith Community Self-Assessment

> "Disability doesn't make you exceptional but
> questioning what you think you know about it does."
> *~Stella Young*

Working in partnership alongside <u>people with disabilities</u>, their <u>families</u>, <u>clergy</u>, and <u>other faith community leadership</u>, it is possible to lead faith communities through an accessibility self-assessment. Three quick examples:

1. Can people who use wheelchairs…
   - Come in the front door? (*Can they open it by themselves?)*
   - Use the bathroom? (*Toilets, sinks, soap, towels*)
   - Get a drink of water?
   - Assist with worship?
   - Park nearby?
   - Get to church? *(Transportation is often among the highest priority needs for people with disabilities)*

2. What skills are needed to worship?
   - walking
   - sitting
   - standing
   - kneeling
   - reading
   - speaking
   - seeing
   - hearing
   - being quiet
   - sustaining attention
   - taking bread
   - drinking wine

   To what extent are people excluded by items on this list? How might congregations modify practices in order to include everyone?

3. What are the messages we send through our language and imagery?

   - The use of "if you're able" (e.g., "stand if you're able") language may be divisive
   - Are terms like "special" and "exceptional" used? Disabilities, of themselves, are neither special nor exceptional.
   - "Special needs" (Are we really talking about *human* needs?)
   - "Suffers from…" (Most people do not suffer from a disability)
   - "Wheelchair bound" (Wheelchairs are not typically viewed as restrictive by people who use them; rather, they are most often tools of liberation and access)
   - "Disability", "handicap", & "impairment". These are three separate and distinct things. Emory School of Medicine provides a handy resource[iii] for telling the difference
   - What about person-first language, or identity-first language?

Some Characteristics of "Authentic Belonging" in Faith Communities

> "The best plans include nothing particularly special,
> adaptive, or contrived; rather, they are authentic,
> organic, ordinary experiences taking place in real
> environments." *~John O'Brien*

True welcome and belonging requires a level of <u>authenticity</u>.
- Ordinary shared spaces
- Ordinary relationships
- Universal design
- Accommodation within existing spaces, worship, and other programs
- Leadership roles for people of all abilities
- Honored voices

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[i] Churches Believe They Are Welcoming to Those with Disabilities. Lifeway Research. March 2020
https://research.lifeway.com/2020/03/10/churches-believe-they-are-welcoming-to-those-with-disabilities/

[ii] *Ault, Collins, Carter , et al (*2013*) Congregational Participation and Supports for Children and Adults with Disabilities: Parent Perceptions. Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: February 2013, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 48-61.

[iii] Differences Among the Terms, Impairment, Disability, and Handicap. Emory University School of Medicine. 2018
https://med.emory.edu/departments/pediatrics/divisions/neonatology/dpc/examples.html