

## Knowledge, Faith Development, and Religious Education that Includes All

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*This article explores the notion of inclusive religious education as it impacts people with and without disabilities. The changes that need to occur to make religious education inclusive go far beyond the idea of inclusion to the basic premise of what faith development entails. A case is made that religious education in most of its current forms is too knowledge-based, leading to an errant premise about how faith is developed and to misguided structures for the Christian church. The presence of persons with intellectual disabilities reminds us to re-examine this knowledge orientation, resulting in recommendations for faith development programs that will benefit all.*

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Religious education is inclusive when those who would desire to participate in it are able to do so. This includes both one's own desire to participate and the desire to see others enjoy the same participation. For something to be inclusive implies openness in a variety of its characteristics. There should be openness of access, openness in terms of acceptance of individual differences or disabilities, and commonness in the desired outcome for all who would participate. There probably should be contexts in which not all people are openly accepted—settings or perhaps roles from which some people, for logical reasons, should be excluded. For example, we would not want an individual who is prone to violence volunteering in the nursery, both to protect the infants and the individual who lacks impulse control. However, we should design environments where those individuals who are emotionally labile can be integrated to the greatest extent possible. The problem is

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that if environments are insufficient within the church where people might participate and contribute, the result is exclusion. Everyone does not have to be included everywhere, but everyone does need to be included somewhere. Faith is too often defined convergently (Rappaport, 1986) within the Christian church, in arguably the wrong way, with exclusion being the result. It is arguable that a reason for denominations is the overly convergent manner in which faith is defined such that one can only be baptized one way, can only come to repentance one way, or can only express faith one way. This convergent thinking has also found its way into the qualifying criteria for a Christian, too often to the detriment of those who experience a disability and would desire to be a Christian.

It is the goal of this article is to consider the notion of inclusive religious education. Is inclusive education in the religious setting simply enrolling people with intellectual disabilities in existing Sunday school classes? Are we inclusive if the adults with intellectual disabilities sit in the front row of the service and participate in music and prayer, but then file out before the sermon begins? Perhaps inclusiveness requires a wholesale change in the way the church does most or all of what it does. Perhaps those who benefit from inclusiveness are not people with disabilities who are permitted to be there so we can normalize their experience, but rather the whole congregation who reap the benefits of a system that is truly inclusive rather than exclusive. If we really had been designing religious education with everyone in mind, we would definitely not observe the absence of people with disabilities that characterizes many of our churches. Using an "if this/then that" kind of analysis (Wolfensberger, 1995), the obvious conclusion is that religious education was not designed with everyone's participation in mind. "If this/then that" analysis grows out of Social Role Valorization theory, where assertions about what can be expected to happen can be made, if a certain course of action is, or is not, taken. "If this/then that" reasoning would also cause us to conclude that even the training of those providing leadership or doing religious education did not have everyone being present in mind or it would be reflected in their practices. The evidence is generations of exclusion. One can only conclude that in the world of Christian education, exclusion is evidence of flawed educational ideas and practices, from Sunday school through seminary. The presence of significant numbers of people with intellectual disabilities in the church would not allow us to hold onto many of our traditions ways of doing things. Their presence would cause us to creatively develop new practices and traditions.

This article will explore notions of faith and knowledge, the meaning of faith development as a practice and a goal, and what changed programs might look like. It advocates for significant change in the structures of the Christian church.

## FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE

Christians seem to become confused when faith is not directly linked with knowledge and intellect. Obviously, mature faith is connected with knowledge, whether Biblical, theological, or otherwise. If you have faith and do not know certain things, your faith may be questioned. Yes, faith and knowledge are correlated. But one does not prove the other. Faith is not proven by knowledge, nor is knowledge proven by faith. Knowledge is the evidence of knowledge, faith is the evidence of faith. Clearly there is the need for an increase in basic Biblical knowledge across American society among those who are Christians. Knowledge likely will increase my faith, particularly if it is knowledge about the thing in which I already have faith. However, it is important to make a distinction. There are people who have much of what might be called "religious knowledge"—even up to the point of a seminary degree—but who lack faith in God. Their knowledge is little more than trivia, like the names of players on a ball team or the plot of a movie. The information itself has little or no impact on their lives in any way. There are also people with a deep faith in God, but comparatively limited knowledge. They trust God, trust the people around them, and trust the information about God given to them. They are those who James refers to as "the poor in the eyes of the world, but who are rich in faith" (James 2:5). But theirs it is not necessarily a lazy faith. One of my friends who has an intellectual disability and cannot read is constantly looking for and buying videos telling Biblical stories or relating to Biblical themes. He is working hard at trying to grow his knowledge, limited only by what is produced on video and the accuracy of such presentations.

It is arguable that most of our efforts in religious education have focused on the understanding of principles. This emphasis may reveal lazy efforts at faith development via increasing knowledge and assessing knowledge; two relatively easy processes. There are obviously other ways in which one might demonstrate faith development. But if our focus is largely on knowledge, then we should recognize that there will be those who make limited progress due to intellectual or other limitations. There are those with disabilities, but there is also the fact that people are limited simply because they are of average intelligence, and they are, by the way, the majority of the population. I have at times wondered about to whom pastors are speaking when they infinitesimally parse out nuances of scripture. This is not to imply that there is nothing to be gained from this level of in-depth study. Rather it is a comment on the audience to whom they are speaking and their ability to understand the depth of what is being shared. They are not, nor will they become, theologians. If faith is "determined" by the presence of knowledge, it is also linked with school, which once again is a potentially limiting factor. School is not "a happy place" for many people, so faith development linked

to activities typically associated with school performance or participation is also potentially limiting.

How something is taught should be related to what it is that is being taught. Some things can be gained through study or traditional classroom-based learning. Other things (e.g., athletics, music) can only be mastered through practice, a largely individual activity. Social skills or relationships are best learned through practice with others. Languages are like that as well. After learning the basics, people do best by being immersed in settings where the language to be learned is largely all that is spoken. Even if learning is knowledge-oriented, there is still the need for some form of immersion, some application of what is learned. Without some form of facilitated application, one might even wonder whether the knowledge was actually gained. There is much more that could be said about the way people are taught and learn; however, suffice it to say that knowledge/book-based/conceptual learning is only a small part of all learning. Additionally, some things are better learned outside of the "classroom." One need only consider the example of Jesus, who as an integral part of the training of his disciples, included moments where he responded to their desire for him to do something with comments like, "You feed them" (Mark 6:37), and ultimately sent them out in groups of two to actually put into practice what they had learned. These practices result in a different level of learning.

### THE TRADITIONAL WORSHIP SERVICE

In traditional worship services, faith development, and—to a significant degree—worship, are linked to the sharing of knowledge in the form of a sermon. Knowledge may increase my faith; however, this is not "a sure thing". When knowledge becomes the foundation of faith and worship, the end results are worship services, Sunday school, and other church structures appearing as they do today. Worship becomes the sharing of knowledge from the Bible in a room where people sit silently. Worship becomes silent sitting and listening undisturbed by noise or movement. Noise or movement actually interferes with this form of worship.

I freely admit that I am confused by corporate worship. It is understood that praises are sung to God during the music section of the service and that is a good thing. As Psalms 33:1 states, praise is what the righteous should be doing, and we are righteous through Christ. But many people claim they cannot worship if the music is not of the right variety (e.g., hymns, contemporary). Worship is also sitting and listening to a sermon. "In a nutshell", however, we are worshipping by either singing or being silent during a worship service. There is little middle ground. In addition, because this is the focal point of worship for a church, it is called "the worship service" and as a result, one can think that worship is singing or listening to



a sermon. If people were in Heaven, worship would most probably involve largely singing or listening. That is the case because we will not have a person living in poverty or living with a disability or living with an addiction sitting next to us when we are in Heaven. But singing praises or listening to a sermon should not be the primary act or aspect of worship in an earthbound existence. Our structures, however, communicate that these acts define worship. It is also a very exclusive form of worship, as service cannot even include a noisy baby, let alone a man with a severe disability, or a person prone to seizures, or, at times, someone in a wheelchair. I know of a church where you are not permitted to even leave to use the restroom; if you do, you cannot return to the service. In Mark 7:8, Jesus confronts the teachers of the law saying "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding onto the traditions of men." But verse 9 is an exhortation that applies to today's church. Jesus said, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions."

What traditional structures are being propagated, elevated, and honored as being of more importance than having all of God's people who would choose to attend present? You see, once again, it is the content of the sermon that is the most important aspect of the "worship" and it trumps the inclusion of people in the worship service. I Corinthians 13:1 again notes, "If I have all knowledge and have not love . . . I am nothing." Why would Paul even make such juxtaposition? Who would confuse knowledge as being more important than love? We, the Church would. It is because people were then and are now putting knowledge above love that we need to be exhorted to do otherwise. Such is the case for the seminary, the sermon, and the Sunday school.

If faith through knowledge is the focus of religious education, one might expect specific, programmatic characteristics to accompany that perspective. It implies quiet classrooms with minimal disruptions. A commitment to Christ is followed by memorization of facts and stories, leading to years of quiet listening in classrooms and sanctuaries. Is that what was implied as the educational strategy when Jesus said "follow me"? Is the word *follow* entirely a metaphor in terms of following through reading and listening to teachers and sermons? Or, is there a real following implied? Current educational programs and activities are largely knowledge based. Evaluation of programs is as well. We even see the attempt to apply knowledge-based approaches where they may not be the best fit.

Consider the religious education of persons with severe intellectual disabilities. There are programs where such individuals are taught religious content knowledge, independent of whether the knowledge is relevant to their lives. We set up classrooms where non-verbal individuals with severe intellectual disabilities sit while a Bible lesson is given. What do we think we are accomplishing when we are doing this? We have Sunday School lessons where adults with severe intellectual disabilities are taught about Noah's ark

and given toy stuffed animals that they can play with. From a strictly special education, pedagogical perspective, this is ridiculous. Many persons with severe disabilities do not make connections between small stuffed animals and real animals that lick and make noise. The steps in making those connections are too many. They are literally interacting with soft objects in their hands (their perception), while someone tells them Noah (not understanding that *Noah* is a name) gathered animals by twos, male and female (the value of two and the notion of *male* and *female* may not be understood) and that God (once again not understood) flooded the Earth (not understanding the concept of *the flood* or what the *Earth* is) with water (*water*, something that I drink). But let us even assume that connections between the simulated and the real were made. What impact could such knowledge possibly have on the spiritual life of people with severe disabilities? It is an important story, but to them it is largely irrelevant.

In one situation where I questioned such a program, the teacher replied that, "the Holy Spirit of God will fill in the gap." One should never underestimate the power of God's Spirit. But God also gave people minds to be used in the best way possible. There is such a thing as best practices in education of children or adults. A physician could give you a piece of candy when you need medicine and expect that the "Holy Spirit will fill in the gap," but you would rather she give you the correct medication, if available, rather than hoping for a miracle. If it is a characteristic of persons with severe disabilities, for example, that they have limited concept attainment, have limited language, and do not generalize information, then one is literally teaching and hoping for a miracle. The "catch phrase" of some programs for people with disabilities should be, "It will be a miracle if you learn anything" because of the way we approach religious education. We are not taking advantage of existing knowledge about how persons with severe intellectual disabilities learn, what knowledge might actually be beneficial for them to learn, and whether there might be better uses of "instructional" time with such people. Once again, this is an example of the overgeneralization of a knowledge-based approach to religious education.

The criticism of knowledge as the exclusive focus of religious education is not necessarily a criticism of pastors themselves, the motives of the leadership, that knowledge is unimportant, that the content being delivered is not important, or that *nothing* is gained from the current church structures. It is definitely *not* a criticism of people with limited knowledge or experience about disability who are attempting to provide some form of a program at church for people with disabilities. However, it is a criticism of exclusive church structures, the uncaring nature of this exclusion, the emphasis on tradition over loving and reaching people, the limited expectations for all people regardless of whether they experience a disability in terms of worship, the importance of social skills as an entry requirement for current forms of worship, of knowledge as the highest good for church worship, and the

emphasis of right beliefs over right love. There are Biblical commands that tell us to "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12: 29-31). There are also Biblical warnings such as 1 Corinthians 13:1 where we learn that knowledge without love is useless. Love trumps knowledge. In current forms of religious education, it appears that knowledge trumps love. We seem to believe that if we had the knowledge of a theologian, than we would be better off than if we had the love of a person with Down syndrome. However, Biblical love is the church's greatest good, the highest goal, the most like God. The church could learn a great deal about love at the feet of persons with Down syndrome.

However, if the greatest good for religious education is knowledge, then anything or anyone that interferes in the dispensing of knowledge will be getting in the way of that greatest good. If a person is limited in his ability to grow in religious knowledge he might also be considered a person who will not grow in faith. It is no wonder that people with intellectual disabilities, or mental illness, or any other difference who either interfere with the dispensing of knowledge or who have less ability to gain knowledge are excluded from church settings. Not only do they interfere with the delivery of the "greatest good," they also do not benefit from the "greatest good" of religious education. But it is not they who are at fault, it is that the form of religious education and the resulting structures, form, and strategies employed to achieve that form that are not right.

### A CHANGE IN THE GOAL

What if religious education had a different goal, resulting in different structures, forms, and strategies that were not exclusively knowledge based? We should begin by determining what the goal of religious education really is. If knowledge is not the greatest good of religious education, what is? And how would we determine whether religious education has been successful? It is apparent to me that the current forms of religious education from Sunday School to seminary are lacking if only based on evidence related to people with disabilities. For example, generations of people have been trained under existing religious education systems, yet the church has almost ignored universally people with disabilities. How could this have happened when the gospels are replete with Jesus interacting with people experiencing various disabilities? This ignorance implies more than the need for a new content area called *disability*, perhaps just something not taught in the past. That religious educators and church leaders have not seen individuals with disabilities in the community, have not seen the emphasis on this population in the scriptures, and too often willfully continue to refuse to see these individuals when faced with the facts of their existence, is heartbreaking. It is less about the need for greater knowledge about disability, for example,

and more about the need for caring and learning about love that points to the foundational problem with religious education today. That people can complete Christian education programs and apparently not care about or love people having the label of disability speaks volumes about the current status of religious education. This has been the experience of generations. But, how might religious education look that refused to accept the status quo?

### ALTERNATIVES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Hopefully, based on what is previously stated, the reader will agree that significant changes are necessary. Of course, knowledge is a part of religious education. However, in an alternative form, knowledge would be a good, but not necessarily the only or even the greatest good. The proof would be in the outcomes of educational programs.

The whole goal of religious education might change with a simple revision of the label we use to describe our programs. *Religious education* could become *faith education* or *Christian living education*. The word *education* might be entirely taken out of the names of programs within churches. If programs were called *faith development* programs, would that in itself cause us to step back and consider the goals of religious education differently? With something as simple as a label change, practices that have become traditional church structures might be questioned and, as appropriate, perhaps begin to be replaced or fall away. Why, for example, does Sunday school have to look like public school? Perhaps this model should be re-examined. Sunday school (my church calls the various programs by names such as *Jesus and Me [JAM]*, *Body of Believers [BOB]*), which takes away some of the educational "straight-jacker" feel) would not necessarily be classrooms with teachers telling children to be quiet, complete their worksheets, and color in religious pictures. It would become a space for children with and without disabilities where everybody plays together and learns to get along with each other. Perhaps the presence of a kindergarten student in a wheelchair causes a portion of the game time to be controlled. How might a junior high youth group change because of the presence of a member with a visual impairment? Religious education would be a setting where everyone would learn that the only option is to love others with significant differences. We never reject a person because of a disability. It could be a place where children get early positive experiences about persons with differences within a Christian context that would have an impact on them throughout their lives. Future Christian adults will have grown up having had experiences with people with disabilities. Can you see how that experience might change experiences such as the parenting of children with disabilities or even the decision to abort a baby given a prenatal diagnosis of disability?



What would a girl who is deaf learn about God if the entire youth group spent 15 minutes each week learning some basic sign language so that everyone could communicate? The students learning the sign language would also be taught a great deal about the work of loving and including someone who has a difference and about the church's responsibility toward individuals. What if a requirement for being in the senior high group was that you had to be a buddy to a child with a developmental disability at a different time during the morning? A lot would be learned from helping a boy with cerebral palsy ride the sliding board as long as he wanted to because the buddy was there assisting him. What if senior citizens were encouraged to partner with seniors with intellectual disabilities? I chafe at the word *retirement* when I see Christian seniors spending their days golfing, while their same-age peers with intellectual disabilities live in unabated loneliness in retirement centers or socially isolated in the community. The same criticism applies to professionals in human services like special education, rehabilitation, or social work. Imagine the difference in the lives of people with disabilities if they saw their training as requiring something more of them than just an 8-5 job? Human service workers will advocate for inclusive practices in the public schools but make no demands on themselves in their own personal life.

### SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Sunday schools and other church programs are just beginning to adopt the types of inclusive programs that the public schools have been using for years. One must remember, however, that "inclusion" is just one method of doing social integration. For example, if my goal is that I want to teach someone to read, I can use phonics or some other approach. The goal is being able to read and one strategy to accomplish this goal is through teaching phonics. One goal for religious education is social integration. Inclusion is just one way of promoting social integration. In relation to the church and social integration, is the goal or should the goal be to model the public schools? Is religious education different from public school education only in its content? Are the two programs so similar that the strategies used in one can simply be transferred to the other? One might think so. Does it matter whether inclusion programs have been successful in the public schools? A recent study noted, "nationally, in 2002–2003, less than 11% of students with intellectual disabilities were fully included in regular education classrooms" (Smith, 2007, p. 297). One problem with social integration in the public schools via inclusion as it is currently advocated, is that the goals for a knowledge-based program often are different for those with and without disabilities. This difference gets in the way of social integration occurring. Christian educators should evaluate whether inclusive programs are working and what it means to say that they are or are not working.

It would also be worthwhile to consider the extent to which teachers, be they special education or regular education teachers, are engaging in inclusive practices in their own lives. I once gave an in-service presentation to a group of special education teachers. The presenter before me spoke about inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom to great applause. As I walked up onto the stage to give my presentation on data-based instruction, the applause died down. I asked, "If you interact socially with people your age who have disabilities, in your personal life, please raise your hand." Of a room of perhaps 300 people, maybe 20 raised their hands. "Then please don't tell me you expect general education students to be socially integrated with persons with disabilities when you, the experts, are unwilling to be socially integrated in your own personal life with your peers." The room was silent. Inclusion is just something they facilitated at work for others. Social integration implies a lifestyle of being together that applies to everyone.

Must church education programs adopt public school inclusion strategies when we have the freedom to be far more creative than the public schools. In public schools, students with intellectual disabilities for example, are placed in general education classes with the full understanding that they will not be able to do the same curricular content as their non-disabled peers. The idea, however, is that social integration will happen via physical integration (placing students together). But the point of public school education is the delivery of knowledge; reading, writing, and arithmetic. The point of religious education should be something very different. Sunday school programs may have greater potential to be successful with inclusion, as the goals for all students, independent of personal characteristics, should be basically the same thing—faith development. One might also wonder whether social integration of all believers is not at the very heart of Christian religious education, rather than an "add-on" largely perceived to only benefit the persons with disabilities. Who really benefits from social integration of persons with disabilities in religious settings as compared to secular settings and is there a difference? What is implied when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:22 that the parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable (McNair, 2008).

### BENEFITS OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The benefits of valued and devalued people being together is arguably one of the most important foci of religious education because of the changes that occur in the lives of both groups. Changes such as the refusal to "other" people, softening toward people with characteristics different from oneself, the love developed, the valuing of people, and the understanding of spiritual principles are all benefits that should be the heart of religious education. That public schools are making attempts at social integration through inclusion is

great! That churches and religious educators are applying the same strategies to church programs is tragic. It is tragic because we can do anything to make social integration happen and we choose to model a system that research indicates is failing. There are little or no limits on what the church might do to integrate. For example, when a student leaves the school, the student pretty much leaves the school forever. However, when someone goes to church, that person may stay at that particular church for a lifetime. The church, therefore, is not only the preparing environment (in terms of teaching people about social integration), it is also the receiving environment in that children with disabilities become adults with disabilities who will potentially stay at the same church they grew up in. There are few other contexts like this.

By further example, do we see spiritual principles embedded in human interactions? Jesus said, "When you do something to the least of these my brethren, you do it to me" (Matt 25:40). Was that just poetic metaphor or is there a spiritual reality to interactions between people that reaches to the depths of what it means to be both a human and a spiritual being? If we cannot actually "put a finger" on the specific spiritual realities underlying human interactions, can we at least admit there is much more going on than "meets the eye"? We may not understand how, in helping someone, we are doing it to Jesus, but we are doing it to Jesus nonetheless. There is something that can be learned through these interactions with Jesus that the Church has not as yet learned because Jesus in this form has hardly been seen in our midst. Jesus in the form of women with intellectual disabilities, for example, has not been in our midst. Jesus in the form of children with profound disabilities has not been in our midst. As a result we have not had the opportunity to have an interaction that Jesus calls a "real-life", "face-to-face" interaction with him. In reality, we do not want to meet Jesus in this way. We prefer to talk about God. People with disabilities in our midst challenge us and change us to see God and to even be like God through the grace and love and faith we receive, we learn, and we dispense.

In interactions with people in need we can either change, we can soften to accommodate them, or we can reject them. In this way, we also learn to love, not just learn about love. The changes brought about in us are the result of our loving another human being when loving takes a decision to change and requires effort on our part. When we are tempted to reject another person, we choose to love instead.

For example, I do not particularly enjoy helping men with their toileting needs. I would rather not have to help a friend wipe his bottom, to be specific. However, if that friend is to come to church, I or someone else may have to do that for him. Because I want my friend to be a part of the fellowship, church attendance will now mean that I may be personally intruded upon to the point of having to wipe another man's bottom. Once again, I have two choices. I can reject the man and not pick him up for church because I am unwilling to change. Or, I can change, learning what it

really means to be a loving servant like Christ. I can learn humility and do what is necessary for another person equally loved by God, to be a part of His body. (My friend has told me that he also learns humility by being in the position of needing me to take care of personal needs not typically taken care of by a friend.) If I meet my friend's needs, he is able to participate in church. If I do not meet my friend's needs, he cannot participate in church. My friend is unable to change due to his disability. I am able to change if I will embrace what it means to love and to be a servant. If I change my personal structures about what can be expected of me as a Christian and a member of a church, then devalued people can come to church. In the process, when people do come to church, the community and I are bettered by the whole experience. My friend helps me to grow just by his being a member of the Christian community as God intended it to be. Henri Nouwen (1997) realized this through his interaction with Adam, a nonverbal man with severe intellectual disabilities of whom he said, "Here is my counselor, my teacher, my guide, who could never say a word to me but taught me more than any professor or spiritual director" (p. 101). Because of the softening and acceptance this brings in me, others are also welcomed and an example or standard is set. There is a ripple effect throughout the community.

Over the years, I have learned to carry a water-resistant pad in my car. Why? Because I sometimes transport people to church who are incontinent. Can you see how this relates to religious education? Philippians 2:4-8 says,

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross.

You see, I know Philippians 2:4-8. I have memorized it. Through friends with disabilities, I am increasingly learning to do it. It is no great sacrifice if one really is interested in having the mind of Christ Jesus and humbling oneself and treating others as better than oneself. In coherent moments, we recognize it is a learning opportunity and we become grateful for the change that has been made in us because we have altered our thinking about what the goal of religious education is for ourselves as students and have broadened our perspective on who can benefit from a form of religious education that is about life change. Vanier (1998) discusses such religious education he has received "at the hands" of persons with intellectual disabilities.

It seems paradoxical to say that people with disabilities have taught me what it means to be human and that they are leading me into a new vision

of society, a more human society. With and through them I have discovered the joys of celebration, love, working, and communicating together in a mutual respect and in laughter. I realize more deeply how spirituality is being fully human and so shapes our lives and our humanity. . . . I have myself experienced how religion can open us up to the universe, to the love of all humanity, and especially to the source of all life and love, to a meeting with God. This meeting with God, I find, is not first and foremost for those who are most clever and honourable but for those who are weak and humble and open to love or those who take the way of the heart. (p. 97).

Are these kinds of lessons worthy of a Sunday school class or a Bible study? Could these types of lessons even occur within the current structures of a church that has become entangled with conventionalism and traditionalism?

#### HOW MIGHT SUCH A PROGRAM LOOK?

How might such a program look that embraced the principles described? To describe the program would take another article—perhaps a book—but several ideas come to mind. In a typical Sunday school class, perhaps instead of having to get through a curriculum, maybe we begin the session by being told a Bible story or reminded of a Bible verse or Biblical principle that has been repeatedly told as a backdrop for faith development. For example, we might begin with John 9: 3–4, which says we must work His works, so that the glory of God might be seen. The next 45 minutes are then spent playing with a child with autism who is a part of the group, trying to get him to interact. Perhaps high school students have a meeting where they talk about the same passage, but the underlying reason they are together is to make a peer with mental illness feel like she has somewhere to go where she is unconditionally loved and accepted. They learn and grow through experiences of seeing the woman grow and feeling themselves grow; God's glory is seen. Now the children with disabilities would also learn about faith, love, and other Biblical principles primarily through their experience with their peers, and also through knowledge they may also be taught in the process. Faith development teachers or guides would help them to interpret their experiences in the light of Biblical revelation. If you are a child with Down syndrome, for example, imagine learning your Bible verse from and at the same time as your peer. Imagine practicing the lesson together through age-typical activities. So we play with toys together to learn a scriptural principle.

In an adult setting, we reach out to a judgmental, self-righteous woman who was the victim of a severe beating leaving her with memory problems that accompany her traumatic brain injury. Each week she criticizes everyone



for their lack of caring even though she has received several visits and was taken on several outings the week before, that she does not remember. She will not get better. We can either love her unconditionally or we can exclude her because she is ungrateful, whether or not it is her fault. What happens in such a situation is that people either change or reject. Such situations are difficult, but they make us like Jesus in ways that surpass exclusively knowledge-oriented Bible study lessons about love or forgiveness, and God's glory is seen. The special experiences should be the regular experiences (e.g., visiting group homes, feeding hungry people).

Or perhaps the "twenty-something" program includes people with profound intellectual disabilities—the antithesis to their college/university experience. Together, they learn what life and humanity means; why we say that all life has value. The lifestyle they would learn, the servants they would become, the depth they would develop as people, would assail the university's ivory towers, and would challenge an arrogant secular professor who disdains their Christian faith. The professor would potentially be confronted with statements like, "I spent part of my day serving my friend with severe disabilities. How does your epistemology affect your interactions with your fellow man? Or do you simply criticize those who do the heavy lifting of loving their neighbor?" We may talk about the value of life or the image of God, but through inclusive practices we find out what the image of God is in its many permutations. Our experiences become at least as typical as sessions revolving around knowledge development. The differences between the life experiences of young adults and people with disabilities, particularly if they are perceived negatively, will cause a positive dissonance that must be resolved. People then must engage in reasoned reflection and faith/life integration. People who are known are difficult to "other" and the glory of God is seen.

I remember my short-lived experience as a medical student studying anatomy. One professor described the practice in anatomy classes of learning the various body structures like "memorizing a map of Iowa in the event you might be in Iowa someday." You know, some of the knowledge provided in religious education is that sort of knowledge. However, with a direct application available in the people you are sitting next to, the "map of Iowa" becomes real. It becomes real for all the participants in the group independent of their sameness to or differentness from the greater norms for life and behavior. Children with autism are prevented from growing up in isolation. Children without autism are prevented from growing up without the presence of people with significant disabilities. Both groups are the better for the interactions. That is a lesson that the church might suspect intuitively, but has not put into practice. All parts of the body are needed for us to be the body (1 Cor 12). But the goal is not just some syrupy notion of humanistic socialization. The difference is that we are confronted with the mandate that we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We are not just told to

do it, we have to do it whether we are the teacher or a person in the group. Just in case we do not know it, we will learn that we are *commanded* to love our neighbor because loving our neighbor is *hard*. If loving our neighbor is quite easy, our sphere of neighbors probably needs to be expanded. We learn how to love our neighbor whether we are a child with autism who would rather be alone or a child without autism who wants to love people who are easy to love, or a teacher who wants life in her Sunday school class to be uneventful. The more we are stretched by such challenges, the more normal they will become for all of us. The more normal they become for all of us, the more we are softened and truly do learn to love others we perceive as different from ourselves. Christians who have moved through this form of religious education will be more accepting of others, less rigid, less socially brittle, and so on. The church would be more open and accepting. Everything would change.

Two years as a teacher of students with serious emotional disturbance changed me. I went to school each day knowing that there was a good chance that I would be verbally assaulted, a good chance I would be breaking up a fight. The "f-word" does not bother me as much as it did prior to that experience, especially when it comes from the mouth of a person with some form of mental or emotional disability. It is their disability speaking and I have been softened through my interactions with such people. It is like a rock thrown at a concrete wall versus a rock thrown down onto a lawn. The lawn absorbs the impact and the rock is unharmed.

## CONCLUSION

As is hopefully apparent, religious education of persons with disabilities is less about innovative approaches to the religious education of persons with disabilities and much more about paradigm changes in the education of people without disabilities, of everyone. It is more about questioning and confronting excluders and exclusive practices and structures than it is about building inclusive subsettings or religious education ghettos for those with disabilities. It is more about learning Christian love and social integration that reflects a Biblically truthful interpretation than simply growing isolated Biblical knowledge. The question therefore changes from innovative strategies for applying special education to religious education, to basic structural changes that need to occur for the church to move to a way of doing all religious education that reflects a Biblical anthropology that includes individual differences

We also need to get our minds around what *faith development* means. Faith develops at varying cognitive levels or abilities. One should wonder at the changes that faith development brings in lives traditionally viewed as disabled or non-disabled and pause to reflect on whether there are really

any differences between the two. *Disabled lives* is the perception, *regular lives* is the reality. Education too often reinforces differences between people with and without intellectual disabilities because it is so knowledge focused. Does faith development imply the same differences? I strongly suspected that it does not. Christian education need not be that way. Faith is not evidenced by the number of Bible verses committed to memory. No one would have considered cornering someone like Mother Theresa and asking her to recite 100 Bible verses as a test of her faith. Her faith was evidenced by her actions, her life.

There is also another component to the paradigm shift that needs to occur in religious education. Typical religious education classes can have an irrelevance to people in the classes, their families, and the larger community. It might be argued that by learning spiritual principles we will have a positive impact on our community. However, if one *learns about compassion* toward disenfranchised people that does not mean that one *has compassion* towards disenfranchised people. What if, instead of just studying a Biblical perspective on disenfranchised people, we had to in some way live out a Biblical perspective on disenfranchised people? Can you imagine the spiritually charged, potentially faith developing results of such an approach? The results would truly have an impact on the community, and we would be involved in our own community because involvement in my community is not simply this week's point of discussion. It is what we are doing to understand the Bible. Swinton (2000) calls it "practical theology" (p. 10). Such an approach removes the intermediary step. We are not required to generalize our learning to a natural setting because we were educated in a simulated setting. It is not that we are discussing loving people with social skill deficits when none are present in our group. We are already doing it in a natural setting as a part of the learning process. So, perhaps the learning group gathers at a particular setting, but the real work happens where the people who need acceptance are actually there. Increasingly, as people who are disenfranchised including those with disabilities are present, the setting would become the church. While many of the adults are off doing their community worship, children are in their meeting places also learning about loving their neighbor by spending a morning with a child with autism or severe intellectual disabilities. But the same could be demanded of the adults if we changed the structures relative to the corporate worship setting.

### SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

In the book, *The Road to Daybreak*, Henri Nouwen (1988) relates the following story, attributed to Tolstoy.

Three Russian monks lived on a faraway island. Nobody ever went there, but one day their bishop decided to make a pastoral visit. When he

arrived he discovered that the monks didn't even know the *Lord's Prayer*. So he spent all of his time and energy teaching them the "Our Father" and then left, satisfied with his pastoral work. But when the ship had left the island and was back in the open sea, he suddenly noticed the three hermits walking on the water—in fact they were running after the ship! When they reached it they cried, "Dear Father, we have forgotten the prayer you taught us." The bishop, overwhelmed by what he was seeing and hearing, said, "But, dear brothers, how then do you pray?" They answered, "Well, we just say, 'Dear God, there are three of us and there are three of you, have mercy on us!'" The bishop awestruck by their sanctity and simplicity, said, "Go back to your island and be at peace" (p. 50).

This can confuse us. Faith is so linked with knowledge and intellect by Christian society, that we cannot imagine a person of great faith not knowing the *Lord's Prayer* by heart. How can someone be a growing, believing, faith-filled Christian if they lack basic knowledge? But that is the lesson of the story, is it not? Nouwen (1998) saw the connection. We do not. The men in the story were in a place where nobody ever went. Sound familiar? When the bishop finally did go there, he saw their limitations in regards to how he understood faith should be evaluated. With his limited yet prideful understanding of faith, he attempted to change the three monks. They, in their humility took what he had to offer hoping it would help them to grow toward their Lord. But in reality, it was they who could have been the teachers if the bishop had developed a relationship with them. When they ran to the ship, it was to gain the knowledge they had never quite gotten, not to teach the bishop how to walk on water.

I am beginning to understand the truth of this story. The simple faith of my friends with intellectual disabilities outpaces my own faith in many ways. Rather than putting them into the "straight jacket" I call *Christian faith*, a straight jacket they will never be able to wear due their limitations, I should learn from them, remove my straight jacket and allow them to soften and change me.

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