

# Social Ramps: The Principles of Universal Design Applied to the Social Environment

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## Abstract

This article considers a next step in the application of universal design principles, that being universal social design. Using the idea of “social ramps,” we consider seven principles of universal design from a social perspective. Social skill deficits in persons with disabilities has arguably been the reason for exclusion of persons with disabilities. But if the traditions of those without disabilities leads to the exclusion of those with disabilities, then one must wonder who has the social skill deficits? This is particularly the case from a Christian perspective. This article challenges the reader on a variety of levels to reflect on social practices with an eye toward changes leading to inclusion.

**Keywords:** *universal social design, social ramps, inclusion, universal design, fellowship*

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It is said that when Abraham Lincoln was president, he would open the White House to citizens who would come to meet him. On one occasion, a farmer and his wife came for tea. When the tea was served, the farmer poured the tea from his cup into his saucer and began to slurp it up noisily to the consternation and disdain of those at the tea. Lincoln, it is reported, then poured his tea from his own cup into the saucer and began to slurp robustly.

Another story is told of a rabbi who was very well-known in a particular community. Occasionally, he would invite people to come to dinner with him, which was a great honor. A family came to dinner one evening, with much excitement and much nervousness. They were served a beautiful dinner on a pristine white tablecloth. In the course of the evening, one of the guests accidentally spilled some of his red wine on the white tablecloth. He felt terribly embarrassed and apologized profusely. Shortly afterward, the rabbi “accidentally” tipped over his wine glass so that the entire contents were spilled all over the table.

These stories, whether real or fictional, illustrate something profound. In each case, a person with the ability to be critical of someone who made a social error choose not only to overlook the social error but actually performed the same error in order to minimize it and remove judgment from the offender. The audience looked on with shock and judgment at the error committed while the person in power in the social situation, through his participation in the mistake, caused it to be something less shocking, less worthy of judgment, something of little concern. It is not a question of whether there are social skill ability differences between people. It is a question of the relevance given to the differences.

What will it take for people who struggle with the consequences of social skill deficits to experience the kind of grace and acceptance described in the two stories? Social skill deficits are typically not moral deficits (although we will discuss the actual relevance of this distinction later) and should not be treated as such. If I stand too close to you, or repeat topics too frequently, speak too loud, make noises, answer rhetorical questions to public speakers, or engage in a myriad of other social skill deficits, I am not acting in an immoral fashion. However, one might think so from the rejection that accompanies even minor social skill deficits. One has broken “laws” of social interaction or discourse. When these rules are breached, we feel uncomfortable about the situation and about the person who has made the mistake. Recognizing the discomfort, younger people will often audibly say, “Awkward” when such situations occur,

and once again, the repercussions for the guilty party can be devastating. Researchers have long known that people with disabilities most often even lose their jobs because of minor social skill deficits (Greenspan & Shoultz, 1981). But the repercussions are even more pervasive. In observing social interactions, Reinders (2008) suggests “the key question to ask is why so many people with disabilities do not have friends” (p. 126). No doubt social skill deficits contribute to the answer to that question. Because people with disabilities are not being chosen as friends, the state has responded by paying people to be in their lives in a variety of capacities. These “paid relaters” (McNair, 2013a) take the place of friends such that devalued people’s lives are filled with “almost friends” (Baca & McNair, 2013). Human service providers seem to be unaware of this problem. But unfortunately, Reinders’s question might just as easily be asked within the Christian community as outside of it.

The first author is a professor at a Christian college. Once, one of the faculty in the Theology program called to ask whether any of the students studying special education would be willing to befriend a theology student with Asperger’s syndrome. The author responded, “Listen to what you just said to me: there are no theology students who are willing to befriend a fellow student with Asperger’s syndrome.” This obvious fact had eluded the professor of Theology. Why? Probably because the professor and students could not get past the social skill deficits that people with this characteristic often have. But the most disturbing fact was that, once again, a faculty member in Christian theology felt no need to encourage students studying Christian theology to move past someone’s social skill deficits and befriend that person. Social skill deficits were a sufficient reason for not reaching out in friendship.

Obviously, it is not always simple to do the right thing. One might criticize, but how much better to set the example like Lincoln and the rabbi and in that way make it easier for others in the social environment to do the right thing (Wolfensberger, 1998).

### **Universal Social Design**

When people discuss the principles of universal design, they are typically thinking about changes in the physical environment that make it more accessible. The classic example is the curb cut one sees on just about every corner in the United States. This physical change, originally intended for wheelchair users, benefits parents with strollers, young children, people using walkers, bicyclists, delivery workers, etc. Changes in the physical environment for one group of people ended up aiding many others who

were perhaps not envisioned as being assisted. But how might this apply to changes in the social environment?

After years of interacting with persons with deficits in social skills, the authors find that our own social skills have changed. In part, this is because many friends with disabilities do not have the ability to develop “requisite” social skills, so we therefore changed. If it is true that people are excluded from social environments for social skill reasons, could changes be instituted within the social environment that would benefit both persons with disabilities and others as well? As a physical ramp allows access to otherwise inaccessible physical environments, could a “social ramp” (McNair, 2013b) allow more people to have access to social environments?

Universal Social Design (USD) (2014) describes social ramps as being “built” in three steps. One must first prepare the social environment, one then educates the social environment, and then one coaches the social environment. The social environment is prepared by making general announcements (as from the pulpit in church) or through other forms of notification. “We typically have three worship services every Sunday. Beginning in two weeks, the third service will be one that includes individuals with autism. So please don’t worry if there is some extraneous noise during the service. Those sounds are the sounds that come with previously excluded people being included.” Although this social environment is not prepared to experience something different from what it has in the past, the leadership is not only comfortable with this change, but they are also leading the congregation in this inclusive direction. Because this change will be unfamiliar and perhaps strange, education is provided in a variety of ways to help the social environment to be more open and accepting. Perhaps we learn about the communicative intent of behavior or the behaviors that accompany some types of impairments. We are educated not only about the support needs that everyone has but also about the particular needs those with mental illness, or cerebral palsy, or intellectual disabilities might have. As we then experience the blessings and challenges of integration, we are lovingly coached by leaders with encouragement and correction.

A key factor in the creation of social ramps is that we all need them. We are all on the continuum of support needs. People with intellectual disabilities need help with people with autism. People with physical disabilities need help with people with intellectual disabilities. And, people with autism need help with people with no observable impairments. The social ramps created will benefit all ultimately in the same way that the curb cuts benefit more people than just those who use wheelchairs. Social ramps, therefore,

might be described as an attempt to make it easier for people to do the right thing, socially.

In physical environments, universal design implies changing the environment such that physical accessibility is facilitated. If one uses a wheelchair, he or she has no ability to access a setting where there are only steps: that person does not have the ability to change into someone who can use steps. So people change the physical environment by putting ramps in so that one can have access.

Similarly, social environments have developed in such a way that there are certain social skills demands that are like stairs; their design ends up restricting someone from entering the environment. If one doesn't have those skills, he or she will be relegated to low social status and excluded from the social situation. In many cases, that which is viewed as a social deficit is actually a life less cluttered with social stumbling blocks. We find greater transparency, sincerity, and even honesty. Universal social design ([Universalsocialdesign.com](http://Universalsocialdesign.com), 2014) advocates changing the social rules of a social environment to allow people to overcome barriers such as social skill deficits to participate in the environment. McNair (2013) alluded to this concept in the context of Christian church ministry to persons with disabilities. He referred to the required changes as "social ramps." Let us consider some examples.

If I am someone who has Tourette's syndrome, I cannot help that I make vocalizations. Typically, church worship services require me to sit silently (most denominations). Social ramps require the leadership to change the worship environment so that someone who makes vocalizations is permitted social access (the social ramp is rejecting the insistence on silence during a worship service). It may begin with a word from the pulpit, modeling welcome and acceptance, while recognizing someone making noise. The first author once gave a sermon where a man with autism would periodically make a moaning noise. After the first occurrence, he stated, "Did you hear that sound? That is a sound we don't hear enough in our worship services. It is the sound of someone with autism being accepted among us. I wish we heard that sound more often in our worship services." The congregation understood that the speaker was aware, was not bothered or troubled, and was recommending they accept the sound as the new normal in background noise, at least for that particular service.

Other social skill "deficits" evidenced by people with autism or intellectual disability in other social environments might be imagined. People with Asperger's syndrome have related that they have been told they are "weird"

by others because of their minor social skill deficits. These deficits could be overlooked for people who do not have the ability to understand social setting demands and change their behaviors. Because the environment has to be prepared to understand social behaviors, the environment changes by broadening what is acceptable in order that more people can be included. Church leadership needs to consider its role in providing, or covering, individuals with acceptance and dignity.

### **ADA Next Steps**

Sadly, it is arguable that the major reason for the exclusion of persons with disabilities from Christian community is social skill deficits. Yet, in the same manner that the physical environment may be modified to provide access to those with physical disabilities, social environments might be modified to include those with social skill deficits.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 has made a profound impact on the American landscape, in particular on the physical landscape. Universal design principles have been applied, as mentioned, resulting in curb cuts, kneeling buses, etc. To some degree, social environments have been opened, providing access to work settings, restaurants, and other community settings. However, one might ask about the degree to which these kinds of changes have resulted in true social integration. Joni Eareckson Tada tells the following story about the passage of the ADA.

After the signing ceremony on the South Lawn (of the White House), our council retired to a nearby hotel for a reception. As champagne got passed around, our council's executive director, Paul Hearne, said he wanted to make an announcement.

"The ADA will mean that there will be mechanical lifts on busses," he said, "and ramps into restaurants. . . open doors in places of employment." Paul then fell silent again. After a long moment, he continued, "But this law will not change the heart of the bus driver. It will not change the heart of the restaurant owner or the employer." After another long pause and with wet eyes, Paul Hearne lifted his glass in a toast: "Here's to changed hearts." (Eareckson Tada, Bundy & Verbal, 2011, p. 59)

The point of this story is that there is a next step, a next phase that cannot be produced by law. You can give someone access to the restaurant where we are sitting, but you cannot make us talk to that person. A different type of



change needs to occur in order to move to the next level of integration that Hearne recognized. Somehow, there needs to be the creation of social ramps.

Social skills are very complicated indeed. But arguably, social skills are little more than traditions that have been developed and handed down by a particular culture. Intuitively we understand that there are social differences between cultures. In parts of Africa, men who are friends will walk down a street holding hands. In the United States, men may shake hands, but holding hands is not how friendship is expressed. In parts of Europe, people will greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks. In the United States, this is not typically the case. Whether someone kisses someone on the cheek is simply a cultural preference. When one is familiar with different cultures or is in a multicultural situation, one adapts to differences resulting in a much more socially open environment. Judgment goes away in such situations as people become unsure of differences in social skill rules. The same could be true in interactions with persons with social skill deficits. The lesson is not that persons with such deficits represent a different culture. Rather, in the same way that someone who does not understand the social customs of another place is accepted with love and patience, the person with social skill deficits experiences the same acceptance. This requires a change in the receiving environment. In the case of people from different cultures, there is the potential for change, and one might learn to behave in different ways socially, depending upon the environment. However, in the case of those with social skill deficits, there is generally limited potential for change in the individual. The onus for change thus is placed largely on the environment that chooses not to enforce social mores but rather to accept people with whatever social skill set or understanding they come with. This is arguably a biblical notion. Consider the commands to Israel in how to treat strangers and visitors during worship, various festivals, and even in legal matters (Exodus 12:48–49; 23:12; Leviticus 16:29). A particularly strong reference is: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:33–34 English Standard Version). This is more than mere Semitic hospitality!

When someone from one culture visits another, the receiving culture is hopefully tolerant but doesn't change its culture to match that of the visitor. Scripture is clear about how the Church should love and care for others. Yet, in this area, the Church often falls short of its call. We therefore are proposing something different. In USD, the receiving environment does choose to

change, becoming something different in meaningful ways. One might not expect the dominant culture to change in this way, however, might one expect the Christian community to live out Scripture in such a way that it could be more accepting of devalued people? This type of change would cause the social environment of church to become completely different from current norms. Our evaluative criterion for interactions among people should be love. Our interactions should therefore reflect love. The virtue of acceptance of people with social skill deficits should influence everyone as it did Lincoln with the tea. As appropriate, traditions are recognized as simply traditions. Traditions are simply cultural practices that needn't be as they are in a particular place.

Sometimes a particular occurrence in an environment can bring out conflicts within the environment. In our discussion, social skills and the command of God to love one's neighbor (Mark 12:31) are the conflicting paradigms. One feels he or she must choose between the two, and social skills/traditions seem to be the winning paradigm. Social skills may even be in some ways canonized as if they are a demand of God for the Church. But the real command of God is to love your neighbor. When the commands collide with traditions, traditions too often win. Jesus himself addressed this issue.

In Mark 7, Jesus says "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (v. 9 New International Version). Later he says, "Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (v. 13 NIV). Our social skill rules are simply traditions that might be changed for the greater good of including persons with skill deficits into our social environments. If we reject people with social skill deficits, we have sinned, not they. Universal social design would seek to broaden the range of acceptable social skill so that people are not rejected and the community learns to love, accept, and integrate those with social impairments. Perhaps they would even be chosen as friends.

A focus on friendship opens up the possibility that the care of people with severe mental health problems is a communal, lay oriented enterprise rather than an exclusively individualized specialist task, and suggests that the church community may have a specific responsibility within this area. Such a focus on friendship enables the church to offer a distinctive contribution to the process of care. (Swinton, 2000, p. 38)

A contribution, it must be added, that is not being offered elsewhere in the community.



Dr. Marc Gold, the special education reformer whose “Try another way” strategy demonstrated the potential for learning in persons with severe intellectual disabilities, understood how our perceptions of disability needed to change. The experience of disability and therefore interventions related to disability significantly involve changes in the social environment. He tried to illustrate this when he took the definition of intellectual disability and turned it on its head, stating that intellectual disability,

refers to a level of functioning which requires from society significantly above average training procedures and superior assets in adaptive behavior on the part of society, manifested throughout the life of both society and the individual. (as cited in McLoughlin, Garner & Callahan, 1987, p. ix)

The onus is placed on society to change, developing “superior assets in adaptive behavior” such that persons with the characteristic “intellectual disability” might experience integration. By intention, Dr. Gold causes us to ask, “If exclusion occurs because of social skill deficits, who has the deficits? Is the one who should change the person who doesn’t understand social rules or the person who wields adherence to them as a weapon of exclusion?” One person cannot change; the other can. The one who perhaps cannot change, however, feels the repercussions of those who can change but refuse to do so, to do the work leading to inclusion.

Burton Blatt, another reformer who exposed the conditions within institutions for persons with intellectual and other disabilities in the 1960s, said:

To live with our retarded children, our handicapped friends, our aging parents *does place burdens on all of us* [emphasis added], but what we must learn from the nightmare of institutionalization is that these burdens cannot be avoided or delegated, for to have a decent society we must first behave as decent individuals. Ultimately our society will discover that it is easier to meet the responsibilities to our fellow man than it is to avoid them. (1981, p. 268)

This confrontation with responsibilities once again challenges our traditions. Our traditions that have developed become comfortable like an old chair. We rest in them and are content with them. Then, perhaps something happens to disrupt our comfort.

The authors are at the age when they might expect to have grandchildren in the future. Imagine that one has lived for many years enjoying relaxation in “Dad’s chair”: the old, extremely inviting, overstuffed chair where one goes to nap and retreat a bit from the world. No one bothers you when you are relaxing in your chair. But then the grandchildren arrive and the solitude of the chair is lost. The presence of grandchildren places you at a crossroads of values. Will you cling to the tradition of comfort and solitude in your chair, or will you embrace a new value of welcoming and loving children who do not understand your comfort and solitude value? They want to be with you and do not understand your tradition of quiet comfort. Their arrival causes you to have to choose between two values: comfort/traditions or welcome/change. Now this example is a bit ridiculous as grandparents love their grandchildren and embrace the changes their lives bring. But are we willing to love and embrace people with social skill deficits and embrace the changes their lack of understanding will bring? Will we love them and allow them to be with us, causing our social traditions of comfort to be disrupted, or will we tell them, “Get away from my chair, and don’t touch me while I am sitting in my chair”?

Oftentimes, persons with social skill deficits are also those with disabilities, and this combination results in distancing, devaluing, and dishonoring. However, if we have been participating in this categorization, Paul corrects us by saying “the parts [of the body] we think are less honorable we treat with special honor” (more on this passage, 1 Corinthians 12:23 NIV, later). But too often, the social environment is made up of people who respond like a cranky old man to the changes his grandchildren might bring. There is haughtiness, a pride in one’s self-importance, when someone who should be valued (like a grandchild) is rejected. Once again, it is only when certain situations occur and conflicting values face off that we discover whether the environment will be like a loving grandfather or a cranky old man.

Duggan (2015, in this issue of JCID) describes Jesus as a “social subversive.” We may tend to think about Jesus as someone confronting the religious leaders of the day about their social demands regarding Sabbath practices or use of money. But we may forget about how he challenged or did not submit to basic interpersonal social traditions in his interactions. He allows a woman with blood discharge to touch him, a teacher, making him ceremonially unclean, and he responds with intimacy, calling her “daughter” (Luke 8:48). He has a conversation with a woman of a different ethnicity at the well (John 4). He allows a “sinful” woman to wash his feet with tears and her hair, to the comment from onlookers, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him” (Luke 7:39 NIV). He touched a man with leprosy (Matthew

8) and deliberately went to the pool of Bethesda (John 5). Even his response to the blind man, when he says, “What do you want me to do for you?” implies a form of rejection of what that social environment would have thought to be the man’s obvious problem (Mark 10:46–52). There is also the ongoing criticism that he eats with sinners, something that someone who understood social skills at the time would have refrained from doing (Matthew 9:11).

These examples show Jesus’ rejection of interpersonal social skills that were deemed culturally important. There is nothing inherently wrong with a man talking to a woman or a woman touching the hem of a man’s garment. But both acts were understood as wrong socially according to the culture. Jesus rejected these interpersonal social skill rules because his value was to accept people, whom by social skill rules of the day, he should have rejected.

## Principles of Universal Social Design

The Center for Universal Design (2014) describes universal design as, “The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” One of the lessons is that changes are made in an environment, perhaps for the expressed purpose of making things easier for a person with disabilities, but end up benefitting a broader audience. It seems that universal design should be something the Church embraces. That would be the case because the Body of Christ comprises people with so many varying abilities but equal value. The Church was envisioned to reflect human fellowship as God desires us to live, so it must be designed, be composed of structures, evidence practices, and develop programs to reflect the variety of humanity. The degree to which we do not see universal design principles within the Church, in many ways, is evidence that it is not all that it should be. In the following, we first consider each of the seven principles of universal design (Center for Universal Design, 2014) briefly in reference to the Christian community. We then consider the principles as they apply to social aspects of the principle.

### **1. Principle one: Equitable use implies providing means of use that are identical if possible and equivalent when it is not. The desire is to prevent segregation or stigmatization.**

Let’s consider the birthday of the Church—Pentecost. On that day “they were *all* [emphasis added] filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4 ESV). Imagine the mess if only persons of a certain holiness or spiritual maturity were allowed to access the Holy Spirit! From its inception, equitable use was guaranteed by

God himself, through his Spirit. From that day they had all things in common. The church should facilitate equitable use. That means access to the programs of the church and all the benefits of church participation. The implication therefore is that programs and benefits might have to be altered such that most people can have access to them. Generally speaking, if there is not access, the person is not wrong; the program needs to be altered in some way.

The change in the social skill environment must be the same for everyone. Expectations are the same, tempered by ability. Programs and practices of the church should also not segregate and stigmatize people, particularly on the basis of perceived negative characteristics. We overlook inability and mistakes. Latitude and the provision of grace are the same for all independent of personal characteristics. To make the standard the same for everyone may mean to envision a standard that conforms not to the lowest common denominator but to the highest common denominator—the denominator of love resulting in discipleship.

In regards to faith development, notions of how it might be done could be in need of revision. Arguably, faith development has become too intellectually based for all people (McNair, 2010) and, like stairs, limits the access of those who would benefit. Alternative notions of faith development would cause changes in program expectations (Sunday school, Bible study, etc.), leading to greater access and more equitable use because all could benefit and all would have something to contribute. In the process, we would learn to love our neighbor with social skill deficits as an important component of faith development.

Another way to understand equitable use is to realize that all people are on a continuum of support needs. It is also important to recognize that “Exclusion exists along a continuum rather than as an absolute condition of being ‘outsider’ or ‘pariah’” (Silver & Miller, 2008, p. 9). There are many ways in which exclusion is experienced. Rather than labeling and segregating, we approach differences (including disabilities) with the question, “What supports does someone require in order to be afforded equitable use?” This question replaces “What label must someone receive (via a score or some assessment) to be eligible for or relegated to separate services?” We aspire to integration, not separate programs that provide support through segregated settings whether segregated within the church or outside of the church. These types of segregated programs, within the church, have been referred to as “silo ministries.” Of all the ministries of the church that should be integrated, ministries to persons with disabilities should be at the top of the list. On many levels, the more integrated the disability ministry is, the more mature its approach to ministry is.

**2. Principle two: Flexibility in use attempts to offer choice, facilitate participant accuracy, and be sensitive to specific participants.**

Flexibility implies changes in the delivery of information in the social standards (we are not talking about sin but about social skills). By understanding “users,” we understand that responses can be very different. As stated, we understand, for example, that faith development is a process that is not exclusively knowledge based, so programs that facilitate faith development are sensitive to where people are in their faith and the contribution of knowledge to their faith development. We may find that people will prefer the faith development activities designed for persons with intellectual disabilities, for example, because they are connected with real life and are potentially less esoteric. Worship alongside of a person who is atypical changes the nature of worship from quiet listening to a sermon, to service, or patient love, or a variety of other goods. If someone does not fit in with something that has become programmatically entrenched in a particular way the church has always done things, that person is considered at fault. But it doesn’t have to be so. USD would say that there are others who have similar issues or limitations, but the programmatic “heavy hand” squelches questions of why. Once again, God has anticipated our needs. Paul upbraids the Corinthians for their casual attitude toward the Lord’s supper and the institutional segregation. He teaches them that unity is built through variety. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Corinthians 12:4–6 ESV). The Church is flexible by design! Each believer has his part to offer. Each saint has her gift to give for the edification of the congregation. These are gifts given, and more importantly, empowered by God! We limit God’s blessings to the congregation when we too narrowly proscribe fellowship.

Regarding the social skill environment, there must be flexibility in overlooking errors. Notice that the “Love Chapter” (1 Corinthians 13) is sandwiched between two chapters on functional gifting in the body. There needs to be flexibility within the environment as it grows in maturity, that is, maturity in social acceptance. The change is facilitated in the same way as described in the article “What Would Be Better” (WWBB, Tumeinski & McNair, 2012). We would use WWBB to identify small steps to guide growth in maturity and social acceptance. We can make someone more accurate by making the target easier to hit (larger). Behaviorally, we speak of developing skills via successive approximations while providing grace in the process of growth toward an endpoint. To offer someone a choice implies you have

thought through options to provide. How does one use a social environment for the support and betterment of others, for faith development, or for the growth of the social environment itself?

**3. Principle three: To be simple and intuitive implies eliminating unnecessary complexity, accommodating a wide range of skills, organizing information by importance, and attempting to be consistent across these areas. This includes effective and timely prompting and feedback for both individuals and social environments.**

Are social expectations of the Christian community simple and intuitive and communicated as such? “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4 NIV). Humility is the most stringent filter of behavior in believers. We love to complicate life and faith. Do our paths, processes, and programs reflect humility? Often in programs for persons with intellectual disabilities, the knowledge-based orientation of the programs makes them unnecessarily complex. Somehow complexity is a high value in knowledge-based approaches. But what are the user expectations of the typical church member? How are they being addressed and do we even know whether they are?

One must also wonder about the notion of arranging information consistent with its importance. In training persons with severe disabilities, there is the concept of functional curriculum (Brown, et.al, 1979; Snell & Brown, 2006). That is, teachers ask themselves whether it will make any difference in the students’ lives if they learn a particular thing. This notion is something that churches should consider in programs and in faith development for all. Do we ever evaluate the comparative importance of the information we are sharing or do we just routinely teach according to our traditions? Are we guilty of “spiritual pragmatism”? Are we doing things that conform people into our image instead of helping them become more like Christ?

Additionally, once something is learned, how do we ensure learning is maintained? This idea would likely change things and perhaps raise the value of loving one’s neighbor. Do we simply move onto the next Bible story, unconcerned about whether the lesson of the story was learned or whether faith was developed? Is the focus only to learn the story? Stories are simply entertainment unless reflected upon with lessons learned.

If we could reduce the complexity in social skill demands, might we lean on intuition to determine (1) what is necessary and (2) what is unnecessary? Could the environment change such that it prompts social interactions and rewards social interactions? How could the environment change so that it no



longer judges and rejects on the basis of social interactions? Have people ever reflected upon their current reactions or biases and actually built an alternative intuition (as above) around acceptance and what leads to it? Why not teach people expectations and develop alternative obvious responses? Much learning comes through experience with people with social skill deficiencies for both those with and without such deficiencies.

**4. Principle four: We facilitate the perceptibility of information, through varying modes of delivery (pictorial, verbal, tactile), helping to differentiate what is relevant from what is not, and offering redundant presentation of information that is deemed necessary.**

The Church is the greatest mystery ever conceived. Yet, through the Church, God's wisdom is made known (Ephesians 3:9–10). Angels and demons are stunned at the wisdom of God's redemptive plan. Are we unnecessarily complicating what God intends to be simple? How do we make relevant information perceptible, and how do we help people to understand what is relevant? Do we highlight or point out for people that this is the focus, that this is the lesson, and how do we facilitate understanding? In our current churches, we have lots of video, lots of performance style music, etc. Is that the way to make specific content relevant because there is a difference between being culturally relevant (via technology for example) and personally relevant in terms of helping people understand what is essential? The video screens are not essential, although, they may assist in bringing what is essential to the notice of those viewing. Yet, there is confusion about whether the information or the video screens are what is essential to many people. What is it that makes a church radical and cutting edge? Some might think avant-garde music, stunning video, and people with piercings and tattoos. But actually, to be truly radical and avant-garde would be to love one's neighbor. There is a vanity in much of the practices of the church today, reflected in people's appearance and programmatic glitz. The outward appearance can confuse people about perceptible information. People with disabilities are not sufficiently represented in just about every church in the world. Some places are worse than others. Many ministries are even venues for ongoing segregation. All these practices mark our lack of love for our devalued neighbor and confuse people, the result being that the importance of loving one's neighbor is hidden by video screens and hip people being present—things much easier to accept than loving people who due to their deficits are difficult to love. Lose the vanity and love your neighbor; then you will be truly radical and your focus could be easily perceived. Go to a church with video

screens and experience one form of distraction. Go to another church with people with autism in the worship service and experience a different form of distraction. Why do we have video screens? Perhaps it is to be seeker friendly and hip. Why do we have people with autism in the worship service? Because we reject every utilitarian social value, every Christian tradition that leads to exclusion because love is more important in this place. You come here and we will make demands on you to honor your neighbor (1 Corinthians 12:23), to value your neighbor more than yourself (Philippians 2:3). You are here to worship (à la James 1:27) not to be entertained. Social change and theological knowledge become a palpable social ramp, not just something sung about with clever lighting.

It is easily arguable that somehow the message has been inaccessible, in particular as it relates to persons with disabilities. The Church in the world appears not to have known that we should love people who have been devalued because of disability. So, the most basic demand of the Christian life (after loving God), to love your neighbor, has been imperceptible. No doubt it is unattainable in its completeness, but the standard set in the church as it relates to persons with disabilities evidences very little effort toward attempting to move in that direction.

McNair (2014b) describes meeting a bishop of the Anglican Church, the Right Reverend Michael Nazir-Ali. He relates that in one of their conversations, the bishop made comments about the Church being “fed in a particular way” in terms of a basis for discipleship. This notion of being fed in a particular way really began the authors ruminating. If you are fed in a particular way, it might lead to a particular set of actions or responses, seeing some things and not others. If feeding is largely cerebral, one would probably expect a cerebral response. If feeding is largely based upon emotion, one might expect an emotional response. If feeding makes no demands for accepting action or integrating work, one will not act. If feeding is geared toward doing something, particularly doing something in the service of others, then chances are one will act in that way or in a manner that reflects that feeding.

If we find ourselves in a situation where people largely have perfect social skills for example, we are able to do our programs in our own strength. As we increasingly involve ourselves in the messiness of people’s lives, we have less confidence about what we should do and therefore are driven to rely on the Lord for assistance. This, in the end, is good both for those with difficult lives, as others around them come to serve them, and for those who are attempting to serve. Those who serve then (1) share in the suffering of others in their messy lives, (2) learn service, and (3) learn to rely on the Lord

in the midst of these challenges because they are unable to solve the complex difficulties of the lives of others on their own. We are compelled to dive into the Scriptures to understand God's mind, and we also end up in desperate prayer to seek God's wisdom, direction, and even direct intervention. This is another form of social ramp facilitated by social relations that drives us to seek God in humility.

Maturity in ministry would cause us to think about the growth stage of those we are discipling. If we were sufficiently aware, we would try to determine the connection between particular outcomes and the discipling approach in order to evaluate our feeding practices. One cannot help but wonder once again what the exclusion of persons with disabilities reveals about the particular way that the Church has been fed. If it was one church or one denomination, we would look into that particular group. However, if everyone—largely the Christian Church in the world, from the leadership on down—shows little interest in persons with disabilities, that would imply something about how those in the Church have been fed. They have been fed to believe that they have no responsibility for their neighbor with a disability, or that there is no need to change to facilitate the inclusion of another. Somehow, many have been fed in this way such that we do not perceive the need to love our neighbor and feel no hypocrisy in loving some people and not others.

We really need to look at ourselves, at our churches, and at the behaviors of churches and ask ourselves whether who we are is an artifact of how we have been fed. If so, when will we change that way of being fed so that we are fully prepared and provided with better motivation and opportunities to love our neighbors?

**5. Principle five: Tolerance for error is taught and modeled such that environments are arranged to prevent or ameliorate “hazards” as much as possible, including raising awareness of unconscious action. Environments are “prepared” to do the “right thing.”**

Tolerance for error in the church begins with the acknowledgement that we are all sheep who have been forgiven and continue to need forgiveness. The Church is fundamentally designed to take in the broken and desperate through the path of forgiveness. “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37 ESV). Forgiveness is truly the central social ramp. Both sides of the relationship must recognize the call to forgive one another. Those who walk in forgiveness walk in freedom. If we are to attempt to become

congregations that better reflect the nature of our Lord by including those with social skill errors, we need to understand and apply forgiveness (forgiveness for those of us who are excluding others!).

What hazards or errors might characterize a church that is trying to include people with disabilities? In the past, hazards and errors have focused on social skills of attendees, on the potential perceived contribution of attendees, on the demands people by virtue of their disabilities may make on attendees, and the failure of leadership in recognizing the priority that should be placed on ministry that involves service. Past errors have also been related to resistance to change.

People might also need to be prepared to see errors within themselves so that they can be aware of them (a social ramp). “We are going to have people start coming here who are autistic. Autistic people sometimes make strange noises that largely will make us feel uncomfortable, because we have not been around them enough to have their noises no longer bother us. But we will get better over time as we become acclimated to them and they to us. What we cannot do is reject them, because that is sin and we don’t want to sin.”

The locus of the problem of disabilities is neither the psyches nor the bodies of individuals with disabilities, but rather it is the system of social relations and institutions that has accomplished the marginalization of people with disabilities as a group. (Eiesland, 1994, p. 62)

How could we minimize the repercussions of social skill errors such as marginalization? How can we bring unconscious responses to consciousness for reflection by both individuals and larger social environments? Can we reduce rejection by decisively choosing increased “tolerance for error”? This might begin by considering the relevance of defining what is a social skill error.

Goffman (1963) described the marginalization of people and how our perceptions lead to the stigmatization of others based upon initial impressions.

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable. . . . He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap. . . . The term stigma,

then will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, *but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed* [emphasis added]. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable or discreditable as a thing in itself. (p. 11–12)

Why would Paul call those who seem weaker indispensable or those thought less honorable worthy of special honor? Might he be trying to change our perspective so that what we see is the “usualness of another”? Who would we become if rejected people were no longer rejected but seen as simply usual?

Grace is extended, as it should be, to those who need it. Universal social design would be sensitive to this. If a person with advanced Alzheimer’s disease or severe intellectual disabilities takes a bite of food, determines he or she doesn’t like it, and spits it on the floor, a different grace is extended than if the authors were to engage in the same behavior. “Those we think are less honorable we treat with special honor” is what 1 Corinthians 12:23 says. This extension of special honor is not unlike that extended to any human being by God Himself. If a person has the ability to learn not to spit on the floor, we help him or her to do so. If not, we extend grace. If someone chooses to spit on the floor simply because he or she rejects that form of social rule, one may still extend grace, but the offender might also be expected to clean up the floor. When this type of grace is extended to those who are unable to change, it opens up the social environment. People who struggle to change experience acceptance while grace is also being extended to people who simply make a mistake. If one learns to love people who are hard to love, everyone else becomes much easier to love. To give special honor is to extend grace. Social skill deficits become opportunities to provide special honor, not cardinal sins leading to a form of excommunication. People feel welcomed when they see this type of acceptance extended. “If they accept that person,” one might think, “perhaps they will accept me with my problems as well.”

## **6. Principle six: Minimize social effort by facilitating a nonjudgmental, neutral social position.**

How can the effort required to attend church be minimized for persons with disabilities? We need to teach average church members the truth, biblically and theologically, about what disability is so that they do not allow the goofy ideas that have grown out of ignorance to persist. There

are people with disabilities who will not go back to church because of the things said to them there or experienced by them there: things about sin and disability, or sufficient faith and healing, or being segregated, or just a lack of understanding of what life is like for a person with a disability.

Segregation is a problem in many settings, and this includes the church. Regarding segregation, Wolfensberger (1978) states,

You cannot segregate a group of people until you have first done one thing: identified or designated them in terms of at least one criterion that is purportedly relevant in differentiating them from the people who are doing the identifying, designating, differentiating, or segregating. Obviously, this identifying difference must have one very powerful characteristic: *it must be seen by the segregators as being very significant* [emphasis added]. (p. 51)

Howard Thurman was a civil rights activist who wrote about issues of racial segregation, but his words are equally relevant to other forms of segregation. The following easily applies to the segregation of persons with various disabilities.

Segregation can apply only to a relationship involving the weak and the strong. For it means that limitations are arbitrarily set up, which, in the course of time, tend to become fixed and seem normal in governing the etiquette between the two groups. A peculiar characteristic of segregation is the ability of the stronger to shuttle back and forth between the prescribed areas with complete immunity and a kind of mutually tacit sanction; while the position of the weaker, on the other hand, is quite definitely fixed and frozen. (1976, p. 42)

This ability of the stronger to shuffle back and forth illustrates power in the social situation (including disability ministries) where parts of the body that seem weaker experience the tacitly sanctioned actions of the stronger (McNair, 2014b). The result is two tacitly sanctioned groups. Why is it this way? First, because that is how the stronger desire it to be, and second, because the segregated either recognize they have no choice in the matter or do not realize that there could be other options for the social arrangement.

Integration implies change. The “mutually tacit sanction” may not be something that is understood by those being segregated (particularly if they have intellectual impairments), but if they are made aware, typical church



members can extend social membership. O'Brien & O'Brien (1992) describe the opposite of this type of membership.

Such places discourage staff from understanding that they and those they serve are *members of each other*. At the same time, these places reinforce the physical and social distance between their residents and those people others easily recognize as “one of us.” By doing so, they enforce and ratify the perception that people with severe disabilities should live outside the boundary of membership. Inside the boundary, people may dislike or disapprove of one another, people may have conflicts, people may avoid one another, and people may let one another down. *But inside the boundary of acknowledged membership, people also see one another as approximately equal* [emphasis added]. (p. 21)

The authors' point is made in the title of the article, “members of each other.” Our integrative behaviors reflect who we believe is equal to us.

Earlier in his book, Thurman (1976) states,

It has long been a matter of serious moment that for decades we have studied the various peoples of the world and those who live as our neighbors as objects of missionary endeavor and enterprise without being at all willing to treat them either as brothers or as human beings. (p. 13)

There is a difference between treating people as an object of ministry compared with treating them as a subject of relationship (McNair, 2014a). As Hauerwas (1976) has stated,

Too often the suffering we wish to spare them is the result of our unwillingness to change our lives so that those disabled might have a better life. Or, even more troubling, we refrain from life-giving care simply because we do not like to have those who are different from us to care for. (p. 173)

Care involves more than just physical caring, assisting one with physical needs. It also applies to the social or psychological needs that may or may not accompany physical needs. Relationship implies change in one's personal life. Ministry cannot be just be a visit to the silo where the strong condescends to mingle with the perceived weaker (McNair, 2014b).

How do we minimize or reduce pressure to perform in social situations? Familiarity and relationship are a part of the answer. The problem of fear of failure may actually go both ways as there are persons without disabilities who fear approaching those with impairments because they are afraid they will act in a socially inappropriate manner or say the wrong thing to the person with disabilities. This fear then becomes a barrier to entrance into social relationships. Recognition of our own weaknesses makes a place for God to grant his grace and strength (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:9). Paul recognized his entire ministry was summed up in this acknowledgement. God did it all and made use of the very weaknesses of his servant.

**7. Principle seven: In facilitating approach and use, we endeavor to provide access for any participant, via social skill accommodations and sufficient “social space” for assistive devices or personal assistance.**

Believers are called to be impartial in the exercise of faith. Yet, each week we choose our fellowship circles by those to whom we best relate. The apostle James saw this behavior in the early church. As senior elder of the Church in Jerusalem, he witnessed the creeping tendency to prefer one person over another (wealthy vs. poor). This is a danger today, and it is another fundamental aspect of how we tend to operate. When we judge and show partiality, we sin (James 1:1,9). This is a great evil that James did not want to see take root in the Church. This is also the sin that Jesus was addressing with the religious Jews in Luke 14:7–11. He then put the principle in the form of a parable and gave the kernel of the problem, “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, *because they cannot repay you* [emphasis added]” (Luke 14:13–14a). We must address our hearts and discern the cause for our lack of inclusion. The religious Jews used partiality as a way to climb the social ladder. How shall we care for those who cannot advance our personal goals and aspirations?

People should have access to what they need at a church, whether it be physical, intellectual, or emotional. Social accessibility would feel like a “softening of the environment.”

So much more could be said on these points, however, the take-home lesson is that the Christian community should strive to be the model of universal design physically and particularly socially. It should be the example that people use whenever they discuss such principles. It is God’s intention that the church be a place of openness and acceptance, a supple place where the environment is much softer than the community, where people come and can cease their struggling and relax in love, acceptance, and accommodations

as appropriate. A place that does not nullify the word of God by its traditions (Mark 7:13).

## Final Comments

### **Social structures of the Church**

A social structure consists of rules, institutions, and practices. A social structure is socially embodied in the actions, thoughts, beliefs, and durable dispositions of individual human beings. A social structure is effective in organizing behavior of large numbers of actors. A structure is coercive of individual and group behavior. A social structure assigns roles and powers to individual actors. Social structures can cause social outcomes involving both persistence and change” (Understanding society, 2007).

In thinking through the social structures of the church, the Mark 7:8–9 and Mark 7:13 passages become crucial in decision making. What are the commands of God relative to church social structures, and what are the traditions of men in regard to these same structures? If we opened the floodgates of inclusion, would the result for the church socially be something outside of the commands of God? If so, those results would be clearly wrong. However, if they were not, they would lead us to alternatives that have been somewhat unexplored because we have emphasized tradition (including social skills) over the commands of God. Must the Word of God be shared in a silent room? Does noise in a room indicate a lack of respect for what is being shared? Do the practices that lead us to being able to achieve the silent room during worship show a lack of respect for what is being shared? Does sitting still and doing nothing indicate a lack of respect for what is being shared? It could be that our social structure assumptions need to be revisited.

It is obvious, but must be stated, that we are not talking about questions of morality when we speak of social openness. To illustrate, we are referring to someone talking or talking too loud or standing too close. We are not talking about recategorizing behaviors that are “sins” by saying they are no longer sins and celebrating them. This is a critical distinction to be made in our current social climate where amorality is equated with morality because either is determined by the social consensus of the moment. For example, racism is wrong in our society—at the moment. But I do not trust our society, because it could change due to prevailing events, and people might suddenly think that what used to be wrong is no longer wrong. It is not as if this has not occurred in the past. Think of the language that has been used to describe our enemies in war. In spite of the fact that there were, and are, Americans from ethnic groups representing the countries we fought, our

language became racist. When there is no immutable moral position based upon truth, one does morality by consensus, and consensus changes.

In contrast, perhaps asociality (McNair, 2014d) is acceptable, particularly when expressed by someone who does not have the ability to know the difference and act on the difference even when shown this. Asociality can be annoying because we are conditioned to experience social interactions in a particular way. However, when you spend significant time with people who do not understand typical social behavior, you come not only to find it not particularly disturbing but also at times actually quite refreshing. It is not unusual that what got people interested in people with disabilities in the first place was actually this quality. For example, in interactions with adults with intellectual disabilities, there is openness, a lack of guile, which is totally engaging. It would be considered inappropriate or strange for someone to meet you and instantly tell you “I love you!” or “I hate you!” Each of those statements is socially inappropriate according to typical standards, and they are entirely wonderful and engaging in their honesty. Honesty is not really socially acceptable behavior, but the brutal honesty received from friends with various mental and intellectual impairments is something one grows to enjoy. Their form of inappropriate social skills is often refreshing compared with the “appropriate” social skills of others not impacted by disability. It could be that the kinds of changes that the access of persons with social skill deficits would bring to the church will cause us to develop alternative traditions that may be much more reflective of the commands of God than our current traditions are. We must facilitate the social ramps that will make those changes possible.

What is intended by the term “universal”? First, we must view the term within the local church context, a biblical worldview that should be common to each local church. All believers should hold these values and practice them within the local context. We are not speaking of a universalism, the view that all religions ultimately lead to heaven. This is not the “universal brotherhood of man” whereby we accept any cultural adaptation of true biblical faith. We also do not imagine that somehow all of society will develop some form of socialist utopian view.

Universal Social Design appeals to the design of the Church itself, that “Church” well done will fit universally into every culture and environment. The biblical pattern of the Church is universal and eternal. The Church should reflect in its temporal form its eternal purposes. So, eternity backs up universality. Universal is an enduring perspective of design. It is universal because it can indeed become universal. Again, not by human effort or purpose, but fully supported by God’s sovereign design.

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