"Different Bodies, One Body:
Inclusive Religious Education and the Role of the Religious Educator"

Trace Haythorn, Ph.D.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Nashville, TN

Abstract

Throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures, God is described as showing preference for those at the margins of society, especially those who are functionally denied access to political, social and religious power. Of all the places one would expect to encounter persons with disabilities, congregations should be central if the scriptural guidance holds true. And yet barriers exist at a variety of levels that either impede or prohibit persons with disabilities from full participation within the worship, education and mission of congregations.

Placing the emerging body of literature on inclusion in congregations in conversation with a case study of one particular congregation, Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville, TN, I examine the sources and strategies of one church's efforts at becoming a more welcoming and affirming community of all people. I focus particularly on the roles of the Director of Christian Education, Martha Bess DeWitt, assessing how she has participated, led, and reflected on the move towards more intentional inclusion of people with disabilities. General strategies for developing more inclusive ministries and programs are offered.

Introduction

Though the verses quoted above have long been a part of the Jewish and/or Christian traditions, congregations have struggled not only with what it has meant to love the stranger but with the very definition of who the stranger was. Cultic laws, ecclesiastical principles and socio-cultural biases have often guided communities of faith as they have struggled to define who was *not* of the fold, as they have worked to establish the boundaries of who was acceptable and who was not, often further grading acceptability in matters of leadership, teaching, and practices of the community. People with disabilities have often been prohibited from full participation in the lives of faith communities, often through misguided scientific or theological understanding.

In recent years, scholars and others have attended to the historical and current marginalization of those who are identified as "handicapped" or "disabled," providing analysis and strategies for how congregations can be more intentionally inclusive as well as offering thoughtful theological constructions that position people with disabilities within the milieu of differences present throughout communities of faith[1]. Several case studies of congregational attempts to include individuals with disabilities have also been conducted, many of which also offer important theological and practical considerations and challenges[2]. While many of these projects offer important frames for thinking about and understanding disability within the context of congregational life as well as practical steps toward becoming more inclusive, little mention is made of the role of the religious educator in this process.

In the following pages, I will present a case study of one religious educator, Martha Bess DeWitt[3], and her understanding of her vocation and role specifically as she strives to foster an

inclusive educational ministry in her church. Beginning with a history of the congregational context and a framework of terminology and concepts, I will present Martha Bess's theological convictions, practical strategies, and means of assessing the success of her efforts and those of the committees and teachers charged with the educational ministry of the congregation she serves. While the themes that I identify are rooted in the self-understanding and practice of Martha Bess, I contend they are not simply the convictions of an individual but rather indicative of an inclusive congregation and thus available to all those who seek fully include people with disabilities in their congregations.

Method

I began this project convinced that the best way to come to understand and know the vocation and role of a religious educator is not only to hear them describe their perspective but also to work alongside him or her, to actively reflect upon the ways the educator serves within the parish context. To that end, this project is a qualitative case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997) of one religious educator, Martha Bess DeWitt, my colleague at Westminster Presbyterian Church. Because Martha Bess has served for over 17 years in the same position and because she is recognized by her colleagues as an outstanding educator, I chose to explore her understanding of what she does and why she does it, particularly in her work with people with disabilities. I conducted 4 hours[4] of unstructured interviews with her (which I recorded and later transcribed) where I asked two initial questions: (1) Tell me how you understand your role and vocation as a religious educator and (2) tell me how you understand your role as it relates to people with disabilities in the congregation and community. I also conducted 25 hours of participant observations including classroom settings, vacation church school, committee meetings, and informal conversations with congregants and peers. I identified the central themes from this collection of data which are presented below along with analysis and transferable practical strategies to which the themes point.

As Eisland (1994) notes, "[E]xactly who 'people with disabilities' are is not…self-evident…People with disabilities have a wide variety of physical, psychological, and intellectual impairments" (23). Because Martha Bess works primarily with children, much of the analysis focuses on issues with children and their families. These issues can easily be translated for youth and adults who may or may not have a care partner or support network that serves in many of the ways a family serves a child with a disability. The conclusions and strategies presented are intended for people of all ages.

Martha Bess DeWitt, Director of Christian Education

Martha Bess moved to Nashville in the autumn of 1984 when her husband, Mike, was assigned to the Port of Nashville by the U.S. Coast Guard. Raised in east Tennessee, she was pleased to return to the southeast after spending a couple of years in Alaska where Mike was previously stationed. Her love for the church led her almost immediately back into volunteer work and within six months she was hired by Westminster to serve as their interim youth director. Within a year, the church changed her terms of call and hired her as their new full-time Director of Christian Education, a position which has oversight of the children's Sunday and weekday education programs at the church (see description of programs below). A mother of two and grandmother of three, Martha Bess has served Westminster for over 17 years now as a full-time member of the program staff. In addition to her service to the local church, she has

served as a member of the Association of Presbyterian Christian Educators cabinet on more than one occasion, taught workshops around the country, taught university education courses, and participated in and led a variety of mission and outreach initiatives. Her colleagues from around the country often comment to members of the Westminster staff and congregation how fortunate the church is to have her as she is recognized for her excellence among her peers. She is deeply loved by the congregation and by her colleagues at Westminster, and was recently cited by members several times in a congregational audit as one of the central reasons people chose to join the church or become involved in education and outreach.

People with Disabilities and Westminster Presbyterian Church

Founded as Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church in 1872, Westminster Presbyterian Church changed its name and moved to its new location (only a few miles down the road) upon the completed construction of its sanctuary in 1939 (Harwell, 1979). The sanctuary has been surrounded by three major educational and administrative additions which have been added since then. Red brick and a tall white steeple give the church a traditional look that, while originating in New England, could place it almost anywhere in the U.S. It sits on one of the busy arteries leading out of central Nashville and resides in the most affluent zip code in the region. It is a church where U.S. Senators, state governors, federal judges, and state attorney generals worship. Corporate executives and venture capitalists share pews with attorneys, physicians, and professors. Rarely a Sunday passes when members don't adorn the society pages of the local newspaper, and the boards of several non-profit agencies throughout the community are served by Westminster members. The congregation is 99% European American, overwhelmingly college educated, and theologically representative of the breadth of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (though the staff is thought to be uniformly liberal according to several members). Westminster has been instrumental in the founding of several other suburban churches, several city and regional missions, and three educational programs within its walls. Its membership has been roughly 1900 members (+/-100) for the last 35 years. All of the members of the professional staff have served as committee members, conference leaders, or educators at the national, regional and local level of their denomination. In many ways, Westminster embodies all the symbols of status and power that a church can offer.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the church has worked to embrace people with disabilities, people typically identified as the antithesis of power and status in our society. While Martha Bess DeWitt has served as an important facilitator, advocate and pastor to people with disabilities and their families, the church's commitment to disability issues emerged long before her tenure began. Like many well established churches with beautiful and expensive buildings, many of Westminster's efforts toward inclusivity came in classrooms and committee meetings before structural changes were made to buildings. The church completed its most recent renovations in 1998 at which time the first intentional effort was made at making the church building fully accessible. Entryways, elevators, bathrooms, and almost all public areas can now be accessed by anyone using a wheelchair or walker. The only place which has stairs inhibiting full access is the chancel of the sanctuary, thus creating a visual message of who does and does not lead worship. In fairness to Westminster in its ever-emerging commitment, a committee is currently working on a plan to redesign this area and make it fully accessible as well. Accessible water fountains, improved amplification, accessible playground equipment, and another elevator may also be included in future renovations.

Since the 1820 founding in Nashville of some of the earliest Sunday schools in the country by leaders of Presbyterian and Methodist congregations (Harwell, 1979, 339), education has played a central role in the life of not only Westminster but of many congregations throughout the region. For Westminster, Sunday and weekday education programs have continued to grow as a central part of the church's identity. In 1946, Westminster began a kindergarten program, the first Protestant program in the area (Harwell, 1979, 400). In 1971, the church expanded its outreach to young families and created a "mother's day out" program which today is called Toddlers and Twos. During the 1990s, both of the programs began to welcome children with disabilities as a part of a new commitment to inclusion. Martha Bess in her role as staff to these programs fostered and supported the teachers, children, and families as they continue to welcome more children who have disabilities each year.

Westminster's concern for people with disabilities began with a commitment to special education and did not emerge in a way that reflected an institutional investment until the 1960s. In 1968, the Nurture Committee of Westminster's governing body, i.e. the Session, proposed starting a school for children whose special education needs were not being met by the public or private schools in the area (Minutes of the Session, Westminster Presbyterian Church, May 16, 1968). In January of that year, Carol and Bobby Henderson, members of Westminster, felt they had exhausted all options for their child, Britt, who as struggling in a typical classroom (Richardson, 1998). They eventually turned to the pastor, who convened a committee of church members and professionals from the special education field to explore how the church might assist them in educating their child. In June, the Nurture Committee of the Session approved the start of a single classroom for children with special educational needs. The school would function like other private schools in the area, charging $75 per month per child, anticipating an enrollment of 7-10 children in the first year. Designed as a remediation classroom where students would become equipped for transitioning back into typical classrooms, the church expected the school to last only a few years. In September, Britt Henderson and 6 other children from throughout Nashville began school together, all of them transitioning into typical classrooms within the projected two years.

But toward the end of the second year, John Wingard, grandson of another Westminster family, was struggling in school. The family once again met with the pastor, and the classroom began its evolution into what would become the Westminster Individualized Teaching Center (1970), then the Westminster School of Nashville (1978) and the Currey Ingram Academy (2002). The changes in name reflect the growth from a single classroom to a school, functioning first as an elementary school and growing into what is now a K-12 private school for children with "learning differences," those who cannot succeed in typical classrooms and fall outside of typical diagnostic categories. While the needs of two children of Westminster, Britt Henderson in 1968 and John Wingard in 1970, served as catalysts for the formation of the school, with time the overwhelming number of students came from throughout Middle Tennessee. Even as the school's tuition placed it alongside several elite private schools in term of its accessibility to the general public, the church came to be identified throughout the community for its benevolent outreach in helping create and nurture such a mission to children with disabilities.

Since the announcement of the departure of the school to its new location, a committee of Westminster members and community members worked to develop a new plan for a new era in Westminster's life. (Martha Bess served as one of two Westminster staff members to this committee.) The result is the Westminster Ability Center which houses the office of the Arc of

Davidson County and the Down Syndrome Association of Middle Tennessee. More than simply serving as a landlord to these agencies, the leadership of the church understands this new collaboration as a model form of outreach to people with disabilities throughout the region. While the school could only serve a few children whose families could afford private tuition, the Ability Center will coordinate resources to assist children, youth and adults in educational and community settings as well as with issues such as housing, long-term care planning, and advocacy throughout middle Tennessee.

Inclusive Religious Education and Vocation

While the Westminster School offered resources for children with special needs and learning differences, it, like many efforts in education, was never intended to be inclusive. In one sense, it was simply a different form of institutionalization for children those whose learning differences fell outside the norm, much like the isolated schools and classrooms utilized by public school systems for years. The church, on the other hand, has always worked to include children with disabilities and special needs into the existing classrooms and programs. The religious educator, especially as that role has been fulfilled by Martha Bess, has been the primary agent in facilitating commitments to and practices of inclusion in the educational programs of the church.

Before addressing the role of the religious educator as it relates to the inclusion of people with disabilities, it is important to clarify the terminology I will use in the following analysis. What is the role of the religious educator? I understand our role as educators to be the practices that embody our vocation, i.e. the things we do because of who we are. Buechner (1973/1993, 118-19) offers a profound and simple definition of vocation: "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs you to do…The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Such a definition grasps the transcendent nature of vocation, but it tells us very little about the boundaries and direction of such work, the practical realities of living into one's "call". In the context of this project, what does the world need educators to do, and what is the deep gladness of a religious educator does? Groome (1980, 266), acknowledging the educational responsibility of all Christians, states that the specific role of "the Christian religious educator is to represent Jesus Christ in service to the community by an 'incarnational' ministry of the Word." He clarifies this argument stating that by understanding the ministry of Christian education as incarnational ours is not to *be* Christ (i.e. substitute for) but rather to re-present the Christ the Church continues to come to know in scripture and tradition, in revelation and proclamation, and in praxis. He goes on to describe "the substance of the teaching act: to make present the Story, to propose its Vision, and to choose life in the present" (274). Boys (1989, 193) echoes and further clarifies Groome's definition of the substance of teaching in her definition of religious education (from which we can discern the role of the religious educator): "Religious education is the making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connection between tradition and transformation."

> These efforts toward definition come to life in Martha Bess's story of her sense of call:
> I was stunned in high school to learn that some churches paid people to do what I had been doing since 8th grade: teaching Bible School, helping in children's classes, organizing youth activities. I went to Maryville College under care of Holston Presbytery planning on "full time Christian service." I got side tracked in

> college and grad school and began teaching English. Then after a long lapse, I got credentialed as a Christian educator in Tennessee at Scarritt Bennet College. Christian education was a career I could move with as the Coast Guard moved Mike. My father offered to pay for the degree, and there was a childcare center that had the part-time space I needed for my 4-year-old daughter Sara. I had volunteered hours in every church we'd been in anyway...basically God did it and wouldn't let me forget that this was the real plan all along.

What Martha Bess's words don't capture is the smile she wears as she recounts this and other stories of her ministry. While she is by no means romantic or unrealistic about the challenges of her role, her deep gladness seems to shine through her face as she tells of her ongoing ministry.

That deep gladness has not been without pain, though. As the child of an alcoholic, Martha Bess describes even today struggling with issues of codependence, often taking failures or challenges within the program very personally. She also struggles with when she is not functioning as a religious educator, when she is "off the clock. She described attending a party one weekend where every conversation "felt like work" rather than simple social conversation. While there are many with whom she is friendly in the congregation, there are few she would identify as friends. She keeps a sense of humor about it, though, noting that she did recruit another helper for a Sunday school class while she was at the party. In a conference presentation, Jackson Carroll (Carroll, 2002) noted that he has learned in his research that pastors feel an increasing sense of loneliness and isolation in their ministry. If Martha Bess is indicative of the larger field, it seems clear that this finding should also include religious educators[5].

It is in the addition of "making accessible" that Boys' definition bridges the gap between religious education and *inclusive* religious education. The process of making religious education accessible for Martha Bess begins with making herself accessible. When she completed graduate school, she understood from her studies that her primary role would be to "know the materials…the idea of resourcing people and being the one who knew the materials was really emphasized as an important part of the role if not *the* most important part of the role of the religious educator. Because you would be the only one on staff – probably – who would really knew [for example] what was happening in the 3-year old curriculum." Over time, however, her understanding of her role has changed significantly from that of educational expert to one who embodies compassion and offers hospitality:

> As I have grown in this position here, I have learned that what people are most hungry for is relationship which I do naturally and comfortably. While I don't think that content part is any less important, it's not as much of my time as I thought it was going to be. Part of that is because people feel comfortable coming to me. Even when some one has come to me as a Sunday school teacher or whatever, it is the relationship I have sensed that they have coveted, that kind of support.

She describes moments where a planning meeting or a discussion about content for a class often lead to a question from a parishioner about deeper issues in her or his life, pastoral concerns for which Martha Bess is engaged as minister in Groome's incarnational sense. She does not hold an ordained office in her denomination, and yet members are as likely to call on her for support and prayers as they would on a member of the clergy. Recently when a young mother was diagnosed with cancer, she turned to Martha Bess first as her primary support person at the church. Thus making herself accessible for relationship has become the foundation of her role as

a religious educator, and forms her efforts at making the ministry and mission of the larger community accessible to all.

In her ministry with families with disabilities, one family's story captures the experience of many members and colleagues in their understanding of Martha Bess's vocation and role. Glenn Funk shared the story of the birth of his son, Rob, as a part of Westminster's 125th anniversary celebration. Shortly after Rob's birth, Glenn and his wife, Lori, learned that Rob has Down syndrome. Glenn recalls:

> After two days all our friends had called, and we'd seen a lot of family, but when people come to support you right after you have a child with special needs, one of the things they like to say is, "Well, these are special children and you're special parents and God doesn't pick people unless they're special to have these special children." And I know that what they meant was nothing but support but as parents of a child with special needs what we were feeling was that we were different and he was different…Martha Bess came to the hospital and she said the very best thing that somebody can say to somebody in our situation which was, she just picked up Rob and held him and said, "We will love this child." There were no conditions attached. There…was no specialness about him, other than he is special because he is a child (Westminster, 1998).

Glenn's story echoes the conviction stated by Moltmann (1998, 105): "[T]here are fundamentally no 'persons with disabilities,' but rather only 'people': people with this or that difficulty on the basis of which the society of the strong and capable declares them to be 'disabled' and consequently more or less excludes them from public life. And yet they are people with the same human worth and the same human rights as each and every person." In picking up Rob, embracing him as she would any newborn and blessing him with the promise of love from the community, Martha Bess effectively dissembled the wall of difference for Glenn and Lori that so many well-intentioned others worked to build. Martha Bess embodied the kind of incarnational love that Groome describes, an incarnational love that is made manifest in the practice of hospitality with those who have traditionally been at the margins of the faith communities (Pohl, 1999, 104ff). She made herself accessible, opening herself to a young family in the midst of a variety of medical, emotional, and spiritual crises. In so doing, she began teaching the congregation how it might also respond to Rob, Lori and Glenn (see Palmer, 1998). In Glenn's sharing of this story as a part of the church's celebration of its anniversary, the teaching continues in ways that, according to other families who have borne children with special needs, helps the congregation learn how to welcome children as children, each with her or his own unique characteristics, gifts and challenges.

Another layer of Martha Bess's vocation is also revealed in her embracing of Rob Funk, that of relational teacher (Moore, 1991, 131ff). While she does not tell such stories of her ministry, others are inspired to share these moments in ways that they begin to shape and form the larger community. Her love for stories comes alive in the tasks of her role as well. She leads stories each week with children in *Godly Play* sessions (Berryman, 1995). She reads stories with new and expecting parents in baptism seminars. As an adjunct professor at Vanderbilt University, Martha Bess teaches courses in children's literature. Her commitment to narrative and her conviction of its centrality to the life of faith comes alive in many of the places she practices her vocation.

Of course, a commitment to narrative in the context of ministry with people with disabilities begs the question: what role does narrative play when you have non-verbal members of the congregation, or members for whom linguistic forms are not accessible? Once again, accessibility becomes central for Martha Bess. Her conviction is rooted in an experience from her childhood that remains unclear though leaves her with a residual feeling of grief. She credits the small, rural parish where she spent her childhood as forming her sense of how church should be:

> [I have had the privilege of] knowing the church since I was a child as a welcoming place, almost—not entirely but almost—never having known the church to say, "We can't be that for you." There's one experience that haunts me to this day. When I was a child there was another child in our congregation that—I don't know this for sure and there's nobody living that I can ask but—I think that her family was asked not to bring their child back. And this was a child who was very, very disabled. And I think people were afraid. The family came for a while, and then they didn't come anymore. And I wasn't old enough to ask the questions that would have given me the information that I would like to have now. Doing what it takes to be hospitable—that's what I believe we're called to do as a congregation. I think hospitality – I know hospitality is one of the gifts of the Spirit. I just can't reject that.

Regardless of a child's ability or disability, Martha Bess will work with whatever resources she can find to ensure a meaningful and hospitable experience for every child. Having experienced what felt like a rejection of a child who could not help her condition, Martha Bess draws on that memory to shape even now her response to the children and families who come to Westminster. She spoke of this experience in the same context as her commitment that we are called to teach in the church in ways that ensures no child will fail:

> We have talked in recruiting committees and among educators particularly about the hazards of recruiting schoolteachers to be Sunday school teachers because they are so brain washed into teaching to the test, knowing the information, learning the stuff. And that's not what makes the best Sunday school teacher. While the stories are certainly important and the content is essential it still may be not the most important when you're teaching children. And we must continue to learn to measure "success" by a very different standard in the church. <u>Nobody fails</u>. Everybody has a successful experience, which of course would be your ideal in the secular world, but… But then every single teacher you talk to would say, "Well, that would be our ideal, but, you know, three are going to fail this class. They are going to fail." And nobody can fail. Nobody can fail.

Martha Bess's response begs the question as to what measure she uses to assess the effectiveness of her teaching and administration as well as of the overall program. If the goal of Christian education is not rooted in a quantitative assessment of success or failure, what measure does she use to determine the effectiveness of the classes and teacher, the meaning the children make of their experience? For her, it ties in again to the notion of community and the individuals who find welcome with the community:

> We know that Christian education is succeeding by the joy with which children come to Sunday school; by their wanting to be there; by those times a parent says, "You know, we talked about just kicking back this morning and skipping church

> and our third grader said, 'NOOO! Today I have to be in Sunday school because we're going to finish learning about Abraham and Sarah!'" That's for me one of the most obvious ways that we are doing what we're supposed to do because children feel welcome and want to be here…We've got to find ways, continue to find ways, for children to work collaboratively with every child within their group so that every child feels like they are a part of the group and everyone feels like they've accomplished what we expected of them.

While education scholars looking specifically at secular contexts would likely be critical of such a perspective because it lacks a substantive academic agenda (for example, Allan, 1999), Martha Bess is making is a theological argument. Inclusion is not a philosophical commitment for her; rather it is a manifestation of incarnational ministry. It is part of how Westminster responds to the love of Christ as the body of Christ. While Westminster is comprised of different bodies, it strives to serve as one body in Christ. Further, Christian education is not simply the accumulation of factual knowledge (Freire, 1970, 1993); it is the process by which individuals come to love the Story (in Groome's sense) and weave that story with their own, thus becoming a part of the fabric of the community, engrafting themselves as members of the body of Christ.

But such a ministry cannot succeed by simply placing different people in a room together and declaring the setting inclusive. Martha Bess has led the church through an intentional process that has worked to assess the needs of individuals even as it has worked to form particular guidelines for addressing issues of accessibility in worship, education and mission:

> We developed a task force which we called the Ministry with Families having Children with Disabilities Task Force. We had on the task force a parent of a child with disabilities, a lawyer, a special education teacher, a social worker whose career path had taken her to working with families in which there was a person with some kind of mental disability, me, and a pediatrician. Everyone was a member of the church…We hired interns from two local universities who were working in special education to come help us do what we would now call an Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.)—we didn't have that language then—for each child with learning and/or behavior disabilities in this place. And for a few children we hired those interns to be here every Sunday to be that child's "special person," one each, in the classroom where that was needed. Where we were able to set up what that child needed from us with the regular Sunday school teacher, we left that alone. If they could function in that Sunday school class in ways that were appropriate for them and they wanted to be there and it worked, we left them where they were. But there were at that time two children who needed extra help, so we created private tutoring spaces for them.

Note the interesting reversal in Martha Bess's language: where one would expect a person with a disability to be labeled as the "special" person, at Westminster the tutor is the special person. Further, by developing a plan for each individual the Task Force resisted a temptation often encountered in congregational settings to gloss over differences and particular strengths and challenges each child might bring to the class, what some researchers describe as a process of "normalization" (Swinton, 2001, 44). Martha Bess is under no illusion that some children do have difficult behaviors and that teaching some children is remarkably difficult. But rather than placing the burden of responsibility on the child, Martha Bess has turned it back to the church. Ideally every child (as well as youth and adults, for that matter) might have a plan which lays out

goals for his or her spiritual development, though like secular education settings the I.E.P. for children with disabilities is an important step in the journey towards full inclusion.

The strategies and structure that emerged in these plans were not necessarily comprehensive; they were not designed to offer the teachers a response for every situation. But Martha Bess understands her responsibility is to be available to help creatively and imaginatively adapt the plan to meet the changing needs of the child, the family, the class and the church. For example, she shares the following story of a family who never left their child with someone who their child did not know well, a decision that had as much to do with the parents' anxiety as it did with the child's response to such situations. Martha Bess explains:

> The parents wanted to stay in their child's class, but we were aware that they also had hoped for some respite time, even an hour to go to their own Sunday school class. We said, "Why don't we plan to do this for a few Sundays, and then why don't you go to an adult Sunday school class?" The separation was very hard for both the child and the mom, but the mom was self-aware enough that she needed to do this for her and for him, and so we said, "What can we do?" (the "we" being the special education teacher, the intern, all these people together). None of the suggestions were mine; I just facilitated the group out of which the suggestions came. So, we took a Polaroid picture of mom and put it on his picture board. He was not verbal, but he could point to the picture of the toilet when he needed to go to the bathroom, he could point to the picture of the water fountain when he wanted a drink, and he pointed to the picture of mom when he was really missing her, and then he could do one of several things. He could take the picture off the board and he would just hold it against his heart, and sometimes that was enough, and sometimes it wasn't and he would keep pointing to her and so what mom suggested was we could take him to the nearest phone where we could dial her office where he would listen to her voice on voicemail and that was enough most of the time. And there were a few Sundays where that wasn't enough and he just was really agitated, enough to where we had to go get mom. Most of the time I think most all of the time, we were able to distract him, to promise that she was coming back, to the point to where we didn't have to disturb her. We were able to do what it took to get him through the hour until she came back.

While the Task Force functioned with the best of intentions and generally to the satisfaction of the whole family, some families did not always choose to engage the plan. Martha Bess cannot recall a family who left because their child's needs were not being addressed, but she did report two situations in which even when a plan had been offered, parents opted not to have their child participate, both for reasons that had nothing to do with the plan but with the particular needs or preferences of those families:

> We had two families – one who was a member family and one who was visiting because they knew we would welcome their little girl who had Down syndrome. But the dad in the second case came from a Church of Christ background. They came most of a semester, but we were not a good theological fit for dad. He finally came to us – he was an attorney who was in partnership with a church member – he came and said, "I know we couldn't find a place with a Sunday school class where my child could go, but…" in the end *he* couldn't be here. He wasn't theologically where we are. And I don't know where they went. The

> other church member family we called. We made contact through the Task Force. I had several conversations with them about their child and tried to make clear to them, "We want to be what you need us to be." And, the bottom line was, the child was medically fragile. The mother said, "If I'm going to come to church, it's easier for me – it's better for me to hire someone to come and be here with him than it is for me to do what it takes to bring him there. And we accepted and respected that decision with respect to her child (who a few years later died). But at the same time, we were able to say to her, "We would like for him to be here. We will do what it takes. We want to do what you want to do." We even offered to pay to have him transported or to send an intern to her home. And she said, "I have to do what it takes to get him out of the house five days a week and I can't do it a sixth day."

Again, this exemplifies Martha Bess's theological conviction of how the congregation is called to practice hospitality with everyone: member, visitor, stranger, or friend. She doesn't expect the community to know how to respond on their own. As an educator within the congregation, she believes a part of her role is to give prophetic voice as the congregation works to make room for people with disabilities: "It's a matter of putting the challenge out there and looking people straight in the eye and saying, 'This is what God expects of us. This is who God calls us to be and we can't be anything else. And we need your help.'" The challenge is not a demand but rather an invitation to be the body God calls the congregation to be.

From Themes to Strategies: Religious Educators as Agents of Inclusivity

The analysis above describes the central themes embodied in the ministry of Martha Bess DeWitt, i.e., hospitality and relationship, that lead Westminster Presbyterian Church towards a deeper sense of what it means to live and serve as an inclusive community, as a church where all are welcome and appreciated as those formed and gifted by God. While many of Martha Bess's commitments and theological convictions are rooted in her personal experiences and in the context in which she serves, these foundational principles illustrate many of the recommendations made by scholars, parents, educators, and concerned others who are working towards welcoming people of diverse abilities and challenges[6]. As a means of concluding this project, these themes will be highlighted in ways that they might be adapted as strategies in a variety of congregational contexts.

<u>Hospitality and Relationship</u>:

In her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl summarizes the characteristics of a hospitable community:

> A community which embodies hospitality to strangers is "a sign of contradiction, a place where joy and pain, crises and peace are closely interwoven." Friendships forged in hospitality contradict contemporary messages about who is valuable and "good to be with," who can "give life to others." Such communities are also signs of hope "that love is possible, that the world is not condemned to a struggle between oppressors and oppressed, that class and racial warfare is not inevitable." The gift of hope embedded in these communities of hospitality nourishes, challenges, and transforms guests, hosts, and sometimes, the larger community (10-11).

While this description may sound grand, it has many practical implications. Simply welcoming people with disabilities into a congregation is not enough, often because the structure of the congregation is inaccessible. I will never forget a church that had a sign in front of its sanctuary that declared that the building was "handicap accessible." Sure enough, a ramp led up the side of the step to the sanctuary, and the one step remained to enter the church. For many people with disabilities, that one step serves as an apt metaphor for how the church has welcomed them.

But accessibility extends beyond the entryways to worship spaces and classrooms, to bathrooms and communion rails, to social halls and parking lots, even to playground equipment and parking lots. Door handles and door widths are often overlooks, as are the angles of ramps or the surfaces over which someone must move with a wheelchair or walker. Braille and large print editions of hymnals and Bibles as well as sign interpreters and amplification devices are important modifications congregations can make right away, often for little cost. Some members may complain that no one in the congregation currently has need of those supports, but the complaint begs the question as to whether someone might come and participate in the community if such assistance was made available.

In many ways, the structural and physical accommodations that a church makes in order to be hospitable are the "easy" tasks. Greater challenges face congregations when they work to shape their worship, education, and mission practices in ways that are not only accessible to all but also engage the gifts of all. Traditional and contemporary worship structures overwhelming utilize linguistic intelligence (Gardner, 1999). Simply adding other elements that engage other intelligences will not necessarily make worship more accessible. It is here that relationship and hospitality go hand in hand, for if we know the members of our congregations and welcome them as they are, we can also plan and prepare for their full participation. Educators and clergy should not be afraid to ask people with disabilities what might be helpful for them and/or what they find most meaningful. As we come to know those with whom we serve, we can adapt and imagine ways of sharing the Story in ways that transcend words, that invite new insights, and that make room for all worshippers. Drama, dance and movement, and video can be used to communicate as well as to inspire. Shared silence, tactile artistic expression, and mime can all be effectively used to share the Story, none of which has to disrupt the sacredness of liturgy or the time-honored practices that develop in communities. They are all a part of the practice of hospitality and the cultivation of relationship in community.

It is noteworthy that while Westminster has worked very conscientiously to make room for children with disabilities and their families, almost no effort has been made (other than structural accessibility) to welcome youth and adults with disabilities. The development of the Ability Center may lead to new relationships and opportunities even as it will likely pose new challenges to the church's hospitality. The Down Syndrome Association has a program called "Circle of Friends" in which young people with Down syndrome gather with siblings and other friends for a day of recreation once a month, and the youth at Westminster have begun to explore how they might participate in the program. The church has begun to host a variety of meetings related to special education, long-term care and assisted living, and volunteer training and support meetings for the agencies, though church members have not yet begun to engage these programs.

Perhaps one of the central pieces one might learn from Martha Bess is that relationships take time. Over the past 17 years, she has been intentional and consistent in making herself accessible even as she's worked to make the ministries and structure of the church accessible.

There has been an ebb and flow and individual needs have increased and decreased over time, just as they would in any relationship. As new faces enter the congregation and others leave, Martha Bess continues to share stories of how children have been and may even now be included in the life of the church. The leadership of the church will do well to begin to craft and share such stories of youth and adults if the church is to become truly inclusive.

One final note: while few congregations would debate the inclusion of people with disabilities as a worthwhile and even necessary effort, welcoming other individuals whose differences are contrary to theological or moral positions is less open for discussion. In this project I have used the term "inclusive" in the pedagogical sense, mindful of how intentionally exclusive congregations can be. My firm hope is that because disabilities cut across virtually every terrain of difference in our world, we might find communion with one another across barriers that we have maintained for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps if we work to make room for those who have been marginalized because of what society deems their "disabilities," their experience and wisdom might lead us all to be the body God imagines we might be.

Endnotes

[1] See for example, Nancy Eisland, *The disabled God: Toward a liberatory theology of disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994); Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Dancing with disabilities: Opening the church to all God's children* (Cleveland, OH: United Church press, 1996); John Swinton, "Restoring the image: Spirituality, faith and cognitive disability" in *Journal of religion and health, 36* (1), Spring 1997, pp. 21-27; W.C. Gaventa, Jr. & D.L. Coulter, eds., *Spirituality and intellectual disability: International perspectives on the effect of culture and religion on healing body, mind and soul* (Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001); D.K. Hughes, "The accessibility of faith communities and their places of worship in *Journal of religion in disability & rehabilitation,* 2 (3), 1995, pp. 51-59; Kathleen Deyer Bolduc, *A place called acceptance: Ministry with families of children with* disabilities (Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 2001); Sharon Kutz-Mellem, ed., *Different members, one body: Welcoming the diversity of abilities in God's* family (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1998).

[2] See for example, John Swinton, "Building a church for strangers" in *Journal of religion, disability & health, 4* (4), 2001, pp. 25-63; Brett-Webb Mitchell, "A quilt of compassion: The disability-affected family" in *Church & society* (Nov.-Dec., 1993), pp. 94-108; T.S. O'Connor, K. O'Neill, V. Rao, & S. McKinnon, "Horse of a different color: Ethnography of faith and disability" in *Journal of pastoral care, 53* (3), pp. 269-284; Sharon Kutz-Mellem, *"May I have this dance?"* in *Church & society* (May-June, 1995), pp. 41-48; Rebecca S. S. Shah, ed., "A Christian response to disability" in *Transformation, 15* (4), Oct. 1998, pp. 1-33; T.J. Woods, "A tendency to unaffected cheerfulness: theological reflections on Down's syndrome" in *Contact, 127,* 1998, pp. 17-23.

[3] Throughout this project I will use Martha Bess's first name because of how she understands its importance to her identity. Not only do all adults and children with whom she serves use her first name, she also notes that because it is a "double-name" she is able to screen calls from sales people and others who, if they knew her, would know she is always Martha Bess and never just Martha or Bess.

[4] The initial interview lasted 1½ hours, was recorded and transcribed. Follow-up interviews (2½ hours) were less structured and were not recorded (though some clarification questions were addressed through email messages).

[5] APRRE would do well to follow this exploration of vocation with the question of where and how educators find support, nurture and sustenance in their ministries.

[6] See for example, Bolduc (2001), Swinton (2001), Kutz-Mellem (1998), Webb-Mitchell (1996).

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