

Disability and Church: Building a culture of belonging

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WACO—Commit to “one next move” toward building a culture of belonging for individuals impacted by disability, program director of the Baylor Collaborative on Faith and Disability Jason Le Shana challenged attendees of a faith and disability workshop at Baylor University, Sept. 17.

Le Shana pointed out society often neglects people with disabilities and “doesn’t reflect God’s heart” for individuals impacted by disability. But “we believe that the church is called to be the body of Christ in the world,” he said.

Because “when certain parts of the body are neglected, that’s not good for the body in general,” it’s important for church members to think about what gets in the way of movement—in this area of people with disabilities being invited fully into the life of the church.

Churches need to consider what it might look like for disabled people “to be embedded at that DNA, normalized cultural level of church life,” Le Shana suggested.

He defined church culture as an often unspoken or unstated pattern of shared basic assumptions that exist within the group and imperceptibly govern the way members of the group behave. Changing church culture is difficult, Le Shana conceded, but committing to one next move is a good place to start.

Joni & Friends



Daniel Moreno, ministry relations manager for Joni & Friends Texas, discusses five stages of belonging and cultural change. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Daniel Moreno, ministry relations manager for [Joni & Friends Texas](#), explained the organization advocates for the disabled community within the walls of the church because they believe disabled ministry isn't just an option, but a command, found in Luke 14:21-23.

Joni & Friends has a vision of a world where every person with a disability finds hope, dignity, and their place in the body of Christ. In his role, Moreno works with churches in Texas, empowering them to evangelize, disciple and serve people living with disability—which Moreno suggested comprise “the largest unreached people group in the U.S.”

Moreno said social and physical boundaries exist to including disabled people in church, but these barriers are not new.

For an example of the longstanding nature of disability disenfranchisement, Moreno turned to the story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52. The followers of Jesus' rebuke of Bartimaeus, a blind man, highlights an uncomfortable truth—“the people of God often are the biggest barrier to people impacted

by disability to enter the doors of the church,” Moreno said.

But, Jesus told his followers to call Bartimaeus to him. When he was healed, Bartimaeus chose to follow Jesus—whose Messiahship he recognized—“with the very people that rebuked him.”

Moreno encouraged churches to think about where the church and its individual ministries fall within five stages of cultural change, when it comes to meeting the needs of the disabled community: unawareness, evaluation, care, friendship and contribution.

The first stage, unawareness of what disabled people and their families experience and need, is addressed by seeking information and becoming knowledgeable about disability ministry considerations.

When a church has become aware of a need to change in order to meet the needs of its disabled members, it’s at the evaluation stage and needs training in how to make the right changes for their church.

From evaluation, the church moves to the care stage, when time together—abled and disabled—is beginning to happen.

Then the church moves into the friendship stage, where individuals with disabilities are beginning to be seen as part of the fabric of the church and are missed when they aren’t there.

Finally, the church reaches the fifth stage of cultural change—contribution—where individuals impacted by disability are given the opportunity to participate in the body, serving as equal, valued members.

When people come to church, they expect to be discipled. Church is about making disciples. Moreno insisted families impacted by disability have the same right to expect church to aid in “fostering a gospel-centered heart” in

them and/or their children, regardless of abilities.

People impacted by disability aren't excluded from the Great Commission, he explained, neither in being recipients of the message, nor in participating in its fulfillment. The gospel and the Great Commission are for everyone.

How is it, then, that the church continues to exclude people with disabilities, Le Shana asked—because: “Change is hard.”

However, “it’s not all bad news,” Le Shana said, there is scholarship on how to do this. He challenged attendees to consider committing to “one next move” they could make in their churches to help build a culture of belonging.

It starts with one



Jason Le Shana, program director of the Baylor Collaborative on Faith and Disability, discusses the power of ‘one next move’ to create change. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Citing the book, *It Starts with One*, by J. Stewart Black and Hal Gregerson, Le Shana asserted the main reason change is so hard is “as humans, we tend to pursue feelings of competence and success.”

Humans don’t like to feel like failures. Change requires a willingness to live in and with incompetence until the new way of doing things is mastered, according to the book. And people are not naturally going to want to do that, Le Shana said.

Churches tend to measure success in terms of the three “Bs”—budgets, buildings and bodies. If things seem to be going well in those areas, churches can fall into a trap—thinking they’ve figured out how to do the right thing and do it well.

Then they discover there’s something wrong with the right thing.

Le Shana gave examples of a church that’s been known for its loud, spirited worship music learning the worship is painful to families in the church dealing with sensory processing challenges or a church good at quiet, contemplative liturgical-style worship struggling to welcome a visiting person prone to verbalizations and movements.

In each case, the church must decide whether to keep doing the thing well that they’ve been doing—which has become the “wrong” thing because it’s a barrier to participation—or move forward toward a new “right thing,” which at least at first, they can expect to do poorly, Le Shana continued.

To move forward “requires us to face our own collective incompetence,” so change is hard. But, organizational change literature points to a key in fostering change: the power of simple movements. Not grand strategies, but simple movements, or behaviors, is where change starts, Le Shana said.

“Don’t underestimate the power of simple actions undertaken faithfully over time” to effect change in church culture. And, he challenged, consider

what movement “God might be calling you to.”