

# Churches benefit from the gifts of people with disabilities

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Erik Carter believes the church needs the gifts people with disabilities bring to the body of Christ as much as those individuals need the church.

Carter directs the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities and leads Baylor University's new interdisciplinary Disability, Faith and Flourishing Initiative within the School of Education.



Erik Carter

"It's my passion to help churches welcome and embrace persons with disabilities," he said.

For Carter, that desire comes from personal experience. Growing up, he had no contact with any people with developmental disabilities.

"They were a hidden part of our community," he said.

However, the summer after his freshman year in college, he worked at a camp for youth. To his surprise, he was assigned to work in programs for young adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

"I stumbled into relationships with people who had Down syndrome," he said, noting they unconditionally embraced him as a friend.

The young people with developmental disabilities were Christians. At the time, Carter was not.

However, he was touched by their love for Jesus, their joyful approach to living, their accepting attitudes, and their firm conviction God accepted them just as they were.

“They shared their testimonies in a way I had never heard before,” he said. “That’s how I became a Christian.”

## **‘A matter of reciprocity’**

As director of the new Baylor Disability, Faith and Flourishing Initiative, Carter hopes to influence the way churches view ministry with people who have disabilities.

“It’s not just about trying to open up churches to make them more hospitable and accessible to persons with disabilities because of their needs. It’s also about opening minds of church people who need to encounter people who have disabilities. These are individuals with gifts that we need,” he said.

“It’s a matter of reciprocity. It’s not a charity thing. It’s a faithfulness thing.”

In a society that values speed, people with disabilities can teach others the value of slowing down, he noted. In a culture that emphasizes independence, people with disabilities can help others learn the importance of interdependence, he added.

“People do come to Christ through the witness of people with disabilities. And I would love for it to be an unremarkable story,” Carter said.

# Help churches become accessible and inviting

After teaching at Vanderbilt University, where he was co-director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, Carter joined the Baylor university faculty in January. He felt drawn to the university because of Baylor's commitment to being "a preeminent Christian research university."

Carter believes Baylor is uniquely positioned to become "the first of its kind hub" for research, theological reflection, ministry training and resource development to help congregations become accessible and inviting faith communities where people with disabilities can flourish.

"Most churches want to do it well, but they don't know how," he said.

The initiative Carter leads not only will examine empirical research that already exists, but also will do further research and seek to discover ministry models that work in churches of varied sizes and settings.

Based on research so far, Carter observed larger churches tend to respond to people with disabilities by creating programs geared toward them and hiring staff to carry out those programs. Programs may include specialized classes for individuals with disabilities, along with support groups and respite care for families.

"In smaller churches, it's more a matter of coming alongside particular individuals and their families," he said. "It's dealing with one person at a time and one family at a time."

Regardless of church size, ministry to people with disabilities demands time and intentionality, he noted. The initiative will seek to help churches identify barriers that may keep people with disabilities from participating

fully in worship, discipleship, service and fellowship.

“Barriers to their participation can be architectural, and they can be attitudinal,” Carter said. “Churches may inadvertently exclude people.”

The Baylor initiative defines “disabilities” broadly enough not only to include people on the autistic spectrum or with Down syndrome, but also individuals who experience disabilities that accompany aging, such as memory loss, impaired mobility and loss of hearing and vision.

Seen in the broadest sense, 70 million Americans—1 out of 5 people in the United States—have disabilities. One student in 7 receives special education services in school. One child in 36 is on the autistic spectrum.

## **Think about disability from God’s perspective**

One area of potential collaboration may be with Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary, as the initiative seeks to help churches consider disabilities from a theological perspective.

“We want to enter into conversations with those who are thinking theologically about it,” Carter said. “How do we think about disability from God’s perspective?”

The initiative will include a training component for churches and make resources available to congregations, he noted.

In January, the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities will host a five-part training series focused on helping churches become more accessible, welcoming and supportive communities for people with disabilities and their families.

Designed for pastors, ministry leaders and other interested church members, sessions will focus on practical ways churches of all sizes can plan worship, religious education, fellowship activities, outreach and support that make possible ministry with and by people with disabilities. Both in-person and online options will be available. Dates and times will be announced online [here](#).

As churches find ways to remove barriers and include people with disabilities in their congregations, they benefit from the gifts those individuals bring, Carter insisted.

“People with disabilities have different life experiences and perspectives to offer,” he said. “Even those who are unable to communicate can help us expand our imaginations, teaching us how to pray without speaking and worship without singing.

“As churches widen the welcome, we become more creative and imaginative. ... We want to support churches in the journey.”