

## All Things Possible: Calling Your Church Leadership to Embrace Disability Ministry

*By Stephanie O. Hubach*

For years, I have listened to my pastor quote various lines from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy as sermon illustrations. While I confess I have yet to read all of the books, my oldest teenage son recently asked me to spend a marathon weekend watching *The Lord of the Rings* films—all twelve hours of footage—from start to finish. Amazed at the depth and richness of the tale, I found myself drawn not only to the characters, but also to the symbolism and metaphors that reflect aspects of the Christian life, spiritual warfare, and the kingdom of God. *The Lord of the Rings* series is an inspiring tale of victory in the face of seemingly impossible odds, and at incredible cost. One of my favorite lines from the third and final film in the series, *The Return of the King*, was spoken by Gimli upon facing the final great battle: “Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?”

Since you're reading this paper, you probably have a passion to see people with disabilities and their families embraced by your local church. But perhaps you think the task is impossible. Maybe you've tried to get your church leadership on board in the past, and your assessment of another attempt is: “Certainty of death. Small chance of success.” My hope is that by the time you finish reading this you'll have abandoned those thoughts and, instead, only be saying, “What are we waiting for?”

Remember: You and your church leadership are *on the same side* of the battle to advance the kingdom of God. Our role is to call each other to greater levels of commitment in that battle—not to fight against one another. Nor is it our job to manipulate others through guilt or coercion. Our responsibility as believers is to call each other to what God calls us to in his Word. We are not responsible for outcomes. God is. Jesus reminds us that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). When we are free to call without feeling responsible for outcomes, it encourages us to communicate in Christ-like ways. Only then can we call our leadership to a better place.

### **The Scriptural Basis for Calling Your Church Leadership**

If you look at Colossians 3:15–17, you'll see a beautiful framework for the principles to follow in calling your church leadership. Toward the end of a powerful passage on Christian living, the Apostle Paul writes:

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (emphasis mine)*

What does this passage show us? Our *purpose* in calling church leadership needs to be centered in “the peace of Christ” (vs. 15). Our *process* needs to be rooted in the “message of Christ” (vs. 16). And our *posture* needs to emulate the “name of the Lord Jesus” (vs. 17). The peace of Christ involves being committed to wholeness. The word of Christ is his truth that transforms our lives. The name of Christ requires that we operate in ways that honor his name in everything that we do—including the ways in which we call others.

## The Purpose of Calling Church Leadership: The Peace of Christ

In the prophecy of the coming Messiah in Isaiah 9:6, Christ is referred to as the “Prince of Peace.” The Hebrew word that we translate as “peace” is the word *shalom*. Much more three-dimensional than our English word peace, *shalom* carries the meaning of “completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, or the absence of agitation or discord.”<sup>1</sup> In the coming of his kingdom, the Prince of Peace brings restoration to all things: to individual lives, to his church, to society, and to nature. Christians are Christ’s agents in the kingdom of God—his agents of restoration—his peacemakers.

To bring peace in the context of disability ministry means several things. First, it means just what the passage says in Colossians 3:15, “Let the peace of Christ rule in *your* hearts” (emphasis mine). When Christ’s peace rules in our hearts it “umpires”<sup>2</sup> or “arbitrates” the conflict within us when our two natures war against each other. We let, or allow, Christ’s peace to be what rules us and calls us to do his will. Peacemaking starts *within us* before we attempt to be peacemakers in the church.

Next, it addresses what follows in the passage: “since as members of one body, you were called to peace.” Paul’s passages on the body of Christ (Romans 12:3–8, 1 Corinthians 12:12–31, and Ephesians 4:1–16) stress the interdependence of the body of Christ, and the value of all its parts. Unity in diversity is his theme. Yet, sadly, this is often not the way the church works in practice. People with disabilities are generally outside of the body of Christ entirely, or they are believers who live on the fringes of congregational life—marginalized, unappreciated, and underutilized. But Colossians 3:15 reminds us that as one body, we are called to peace. That means completeness, wholeness and harmony. The irony of it all! When the body of Christ attempts to operate without all of its members, it actually becomes disabled itself. It is not “at peace.” The church needs to be called to peace within itself.

Our purpose in disability ministry is to be peacemakers who: 1) experience personal peace with Christ and invite others (including people with disabilities) to find it as well, 2) call the body of Christ to oneness with all of its members, 3) bring restoration and healing to families who are struggling with the effects of disability in their lives, and 4) repair the fabric of society, the unraveling of which dramatically impacts life for people with special needs.

## Barriers to Peace in Pursuing Disability Ministry

Pursuing peace, by definition, implies that there are barriers in place that are in conflict with the purposes of peace. As peacemakers, our goal is to identify and help remove those barriers in ways that foster oneness. In the context of disability ministry, what are some barriers that church leadership will need to recognize and own in order to pursue peace for people with disabilities in the church?

*Anxiety.* Many people have spoken and unspoken fears associated with relating to people touched by disability. Simply dismissing someone’s fears is not a compassionate way to deal with them. It is also extremely ineffective. Fears that remain unaddressed simply go “underground” where they remain until they cannot be suppressed any longer. Fears about disability tend to fall into two categories: unwarranted and warranted. Unwarranted fears are those that have no basis in reality. When a child is fearful that she will “catch” Down syndrome from sitting next to her peer in Sunday school, that is a fear with no basis in reality.

When a church leader is worried that starting a disability ministry will be “frightfully complicated,” that is a fear with no basis in reality. Unwarranted fears are readily addressed through education. Clear, accurate, timely information communicated with grace and patience is usually enough to address unwarranted fears.

Warranted fears, on the other hand, require a different approach. For example, risk management is a topic that comes up in church leadership circles. An unfortunate by-product of living in an increasingly litigious society is that church leaders are often forced to evaluate questions of legal liability that would never have been addressed a generation ago. Legal liability is a reality that must be engaged in contemporary American life. There is a basis in reality for fears of litigation, but that does *not* justify allowing fear to set the agenda of the local church. This is where love comes in. According to 1 John 4:18, “perfect love drives out fear.” Love is what motivates us to navigate our way through warranted fears—for the benefit of the leadership, for the benefit of the person with a disability, and for the benefit of the entire church. Love encourages creative problem-solving that *finds a way* to create a win-win solution for the whole Christian community in the face of present realities.

The goal in dealing with anxiety is to pursue peace by helping your church leadership to move from fear to faith. This is done by validating the feelings that people have, educating on unwarranted fears, and encouraging a loving response to warranted fears.

*Attitudes.* Attitudes that permeate the church can appear in a myriad of different disguises. Three of the most prominent ones that occur in response to the subject of disability are: 1) ignorance, 2) indifference, and 3) arrogance. Ignorance is the most common problem that Christians have in relating to people who have disabling conditions. Lack of exposure to people with special needs and lack of accurate information on disabling conditions can lead to inappropriate responses. As with unwarranted fears, education goes a long way to mediate the effects of ignorance. Indifference, on the other hand, is a much more difficult matter. While ignorance doesn’t know what to do or what to say, indifference doesn’t really care—even if the facts are known. Rooted in issues of the heart, indifference requires the work of the Holy Spirit to remove it.

Arrogance is slightly different from indifference or ignorance. Arrogance stems from a presumed (ignorant) posture of superiority that a person believes is justified (indifferent). Societal arrogance and discrimination against people with disabilities are a deeply entrenched, learned posture. While today it would be virtually unheard of to deny a person access to a church on the basis of their race, we continue to actively and passively discriminate on the basis of people’s abilities. Many of us carry a “superior/inferior” relational model in our heads and hearts when it comes to relating to people with special needs. Attitudes of arrogance require both education *and* sanctification in order to improve.

*Agendas.* Agendas are goals that we’d like to accomplish. There is nothing implicitly wrong with being goal-oriented, unless (of course) the goal itself is sinful. However, when our agendas become more important than our relationships with others, we have lost our way. Love for God and love for neighbor are to be our life’s aim (Mark 12:29–31). The way we relate to each other in the church needs to reflect this Great Commandment. The goal in dealing with agendas is to pursue peace by helping your church leadership to identify where agendas might tend to take precedence over relationships. Calling the church leadership to encourage “equal concern for each other” will promote harmonious body life that exemplifies the Great Commandment.

*Autonomy.* The words “shalom” and “autonomy” don’t even feel as if they belong in the same sentence—because they don’t! Wholeness in community and radical individualism are antithetical to each other. At times, autonomy rears its ugly head in the church. Even church leaders, when feeling threatened by change, may say, “No one can tell me (us) what to do!” Such a response might cause you to go back and reflect, “Am I having a demanding attitude?” But if the answer is no, then you have likely encountered a spirit of autonomy. Don’t be subversive in the way that you introduce disability ministry ideas: be up front. Call from the Scriptures, but don’t demand. Every person is under the authority of God himself. He is the ultimate authority to whom we all answer, whether we like our independence or not. We are all under

the authority of the Scriptures, for it is God's Word and our rule of faith and practice. The goal in dealing with autonomy is to pursue peace by helping your church leadership to achieve unity under appropriate authority. This starts with the authority of God himself, then the authority of his Word, then the God-given authority structures under which your church operates.

## The Process of Calling Church Leadership: The Word of Christ

What is “the message of Christ,” and how does that relate to disability ministry? “The sum of God's utterances”<sup>3</sup> is the meaning of the phrase “message of Christ” in Colossians 3:16. It implies the whole counsel of God, as incarnated in the life of Christ and his teaching, and as embodied in the entirety of Scripture. The word of Christ is Truth. And truth is the essential ingredient to the process of godly transformation. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2, emphasis mine). Truth transforms the mind and, subsequently, the heart. The process of pursuing peace in the body of Christ is accomplished by communicating truth. As Joni Eareckson Tada once summarized it, “Becoming a disability-effective church begins with a good knowledge of God's Word . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Notice, however, that the truth needs to be delivered from a bearing that is personal, positive, and wise. “Let the message of Christ  *dwell* among you  *richly* as you teach and admonish one another with all  *wisdom* . . .” (Col. 3:16, emphasis mine). The word of Christ is expected to dwell within us to such a degree that our truth-giving proceeds from the rich overflow of a heart changed by grace. In addition, it is to be delivered “with all wisdom.” Wisdom has been defined as that which “flows from character and virtue applied, as we lean into the moment and lovingly act.”<sup>5</sup> Wisdom implies discerning—from motives of love—not just  *what* to say, but  *when* to say it, and  *how* to say it.

## Truth and the Transformational Process

As truth-tellers, we need to remember that transformation is a process, and as such, we need to expect it to take time. Lots . . . and lots . . . and lots of time! God shows tremendous patience with us in working out his sanctifying process in our lives. How much more should we demonstrate patience with our brothers and sisters in Christ—even our church leadership! Personal growth in the life of a believer, or a collection of believers (as in the church), is a progressive but not predictable process. From our own spiritual journeys, we all know that our maturation is messy at times. It can be “two steps forward, one step back.” It can feel exponential and then “dead in its tracks.” What does the progressive transformational process of getting your church leadership on board look like in the context of disability ministry? Where do you start? And where can you hope to arrive?

*Engage.* As stated earlier, all transformation begins with truth. Engage your church leadership on the truths of the Scripture as they apply to ministering to and alongside people touched by disability. Start with theological topics on which you can agree and then challenge them to think more broadly and biblically about disability in that context. For example, when we were beginning a disability ministry in my church, our church leadership had already built a strong heritage of preaching and practicing the biblical principles of mercy and justice. We were able to start with those agreed-upon truths as our point of engagement in saying, “How do we need to apply these mandates to the lives of people with disabilities in our midst?” From there, we have slowly worked our way out into more challenging topics and applications.

*Explain.* All theology has relevance, or it isn't really theology. After engaging your church leadership on biblical truths that call us to embrace people with disabilities, explain the ways in which those principles actually work themselves out. What does biblical compassion look like in a congregation that reaches out

to people with special needs and their families? How does the doctrine of the image of God impact our relationships with people on the most ordinary levels? Help your church leadership to connect the dots and see—in ways they may never have seen before—how theology relates to life in the context of disability.

*Educate.* All truth is God’s truth, and as such, we need to not only communicate biblical truth, but everyday earthly realities that our church leadership needs to understand. Individuals and families touched by disabilities face a myriad of complexities and challenges in life that others are often ignorant of. Serve your leaders by providing them with helpful and accurate information on a variety of topics, over time. This requires an ongoing process. Topics might include issues such as: the grief experienced at the onset of disability, familial adjustments, medical concerns, social challenges, legal nuances, the need for respite care, the desire for respectful relationships and meaningful work (inside and outside the church) and the effects of disability on marriage.

Your church leadership and congregation will likely rely on you to provide them with continuing education as a step in transforming your church into a welcoming place for people with disabilities and their families. Offer it to them at a pace that they can handle, and with a sense of perspective that disability ministry is not the only ministry of the church that is attempting to educate the congregation and its leaders.

*Equip.* After engaging theologically, explaining the practical applications of the theology, and educating on real-life issues, you will need to equip with practical ideas and support. Equipping puts “hands and feet” on the ideas you have conveyed to this point. It is not enough to call your church leadership to the idea of inclusive Sunday school settings, for example. You will also need to provide practical, hands-on training in order for the church leadership to call the congregation to carry this out. Conferences, workshops, seminars, special speakers, one-on-one consultations and written or video resources are all different ways to equip your church leadership and your congregation for ministry.

*Encourage.* Like the coach of a football team, the encouraging truth-teller has done their work of engaging, explaining, educating and equipping in practice sessions. When game time arrives, the coach knows to stand on the sidelines and encourage—yard by yard, play by play. There will be times for more educating and equipping in later practices. But for the moment, it is appropriate to let the players do the best they can with what they know. Your job in working with church leadership is to encourage them, and your congregation, to loving action. You can call someone to love through encouragement, but you can never push them to love with demands, as love, by definition, is voluntary.

*Exhort.* The further you progress in the transformational process, the more wisdom is required. Exhortation involves calling others to increasingly higher levels of commitment. If exhortation is practiced prematurely, it can feel like criticism or pressure to those who hear it. Great sensitivity is necessary to discern the ability of your church leadership to hear exhortation in the context of disability ministry. Suppose, for example, that your church has been very effective at reaching out to people with physical disabilities. Appropriate exhortation would involve knowing the right time to ask, “Now, how about people with intellectual disabilities?” Or perhaps your church has supported tremendous progress at removing barriers for people with disabilities. When is it time to ask, “Now, what is our responsibility to help remove barriers in our community?” Remember: the transformation process is not linear or easy. It will have many setbacks and moments of discouragement along the way. Transformation takes time, and it is ongoing. As we embrace truth and grow in it in one particular area, we will become aware of other areas in our lives that need improvement as well.

## **Our Attitude in Calling Church Leadership: The Gospel of Christ**

In closing, a final overarching theme runs through the passage in Colossians 3:15–17. It is the theme of thankfulness. “And be thankful” (vs. 15)... “with gratitude in your hearts” (vs. 16)... “giving thanks to God the Father” (vs. 17). Thanks for what? Thanks for the gospel of Christ—the good news. When genuinely

experienced, the gospel of Christ produces an attitude of gratitude in the life of the Christian. Knowing that we deserve nothing, yet have received everything, at the hands of our loving heavenly Father—through the obedience of his Son—causes our hearts to swell with thanksgiving. When we remember the gospel, an attitude of gratitude becomes the atmosphere in which we live, and the refreshing presence we bring to our dealings with others. As Oswald Chambers stated, “The main thing about Christianity is not the work we do, but the relationship we maintain and the atmosphere produced by that relationship.”<sup>6</sup> The coming of the kingdom of God in our lives is truly good news—good news that contagiously affects what we do and say.

The peace of Christ calls us to be peacemakers in the church and in the kingdom. Disability ministry calls Christians to bring shalom—completeness, wholeness and harmony—to the body of Christ and the world around us. The word of Christ is the truth that transforms. Building a disability ministry is a process that involves teaching yourself, your church leadership and your congregation life-changing truths from Scripture. The name of Christ is the posture from which we operate. When ministering in his name, we represent his character. His claim on us is universal—in all that we do and say—including how we engage others in kingdom work. The gospel of Christ creates an attitude of gratitude in the life of a believer. Bringing an atmosphere of grace with its presence, the gospel brings newness and hope to those around us.

So, what will your mindset be as you engage your church leadership on the subject of disability ministry?

“Certainty of death?”

“Small chance of success?”

Or—“*What are we waiting for?*”

## Permissions

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## Notes

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1. John Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship?: Theologies of Disability: Challenges and New Possibilities,” *IJPT* 14.2 (2010):274.
2. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 226.
3. W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 683.
4. Joni Eareckson Tada, “How to Minister to the Disabled: Q&A with Joni Eareckson Tada,” *RTS Reformed Quarterly*, Spring 1999, Vol.18, No. 1.
5. Dan Zink, Website quote, <http://covenantseminary.edu>, (February 25, 2007).
6. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1963), August 4th entry.

## About the Author

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