

Receiving the Leadership Gifts of People with Disabilities

By Chantal Huinink

God has arranged *all* the parts of the body just as he wanted them (1 Corinthians 12:18). For the Body of Christ to work together as an integrated whole, for every part of the Body to share its gifts, we need to access the gifts of every part. Before leadership giftings can be employed, they need to be developed. Before they can be developed, they need to be noticed and nurtured. There are all kinds of barriers—conscious and unconscious—to nurturing, developing, and receiving the leadership gifts of people with disabilities.

My leadership gifts were nurtured when I heard Joni’s story and listened to her music as a child. I found myself comparing our strengths and limitations: I have a bit more physical function in my hands and arms than Joni does, but I knew I could not paint or sing as well as she. I am also legally blind. Still, we both use power wheelchairs, and if God could use Joni to such an extent, I knew he could use me too. I have a very special photo of me looking up to Joni literally and figuratively while meeting her for the first time at an event not far from where I lived with my family in Canada.

I imagined before and after meeting her what it might be like to be like Joni and do the work she does, but I put those dreams aside for the better part of a decade in pursuit of being more like “normal” Christians. Strangely, the dream of being normal, doing what able-bodied people do, seemed more faithful and more attainable somehow. I was not hoping for a cure, but at that time, I was not willing to recognize the impact of disability on my daily life and on others’ perceptions of me.

I have been blessed by many Christian leaders and mentors since then. In this article, I describe a variety of ways these individuals have impacted my life over time: nurturing, developing, and receiving my leadership gifting through various circumstances. I provide guidance so that you may likewise nurture, develop, and receive the leadership giftings of disabled leaders.

Nurturing the leadership giftings of people with disabilities may be disregarded if Christian communities or mentors assume people who experience disability are too stressed, overwhelmed, or in pain to serve by leading others. Serving or giving back to a community should not be a condition of belonging in it. There may be seasons of life when serving in one way or another is too much of a burden. However, if that season extends too long the burden of being strictly a recipient of care may become greater than the burden of expending energy to serve or lead. If someone is invited to serve with their God-given gifts and abilities, then serving becomes a source of connection, validation, and respect, rather than a burden.

For years I felt “less than” because I needed a Counsellor in Training (CIT) to help me facilitate a kids club at church. That is, until someone shared that the CITs serving with me felt valued, knowing the responsibilities I assigned them were not merely busy work. Because of this, they noticeably grew spiritually.

Nurturing the leadership gifts of people with disabilities may flounder if Christian communities or mentors do not recognize unusual gifts or different ways of leading. Christian leaders and mentors

developed my leadership gifts while I worked as a Christian camp counsellor and served as the prayer coordinator for my local chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. In these roles, I learned that although I need support with personal care, my needs do not preclude me from leading team-building exercises, theological training sessions, games, and other types of activities if adequately supported. These communities affirmed that my disability was not an impediment to Christian faith or theological understanding.

I had all but forgotten about Joni's example until travelling to the Urbana missions conference where, out of more than forty missions exhibits, the Holy Spirit led me to the Joni and Friends booth. I shared with the Joni and Friends representative how Joni influenced me as a child. This representative then further nurtured my leadership gifts when he strongly encouraged me to reconnect with the ministry. I felt the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit telling me, "This dream is real," but I did not follow up immediately because it scared me.

For five additional years, it felt more practical to minimize my disability and reach for a "typical" life: no speaking, writing, or travelling, but rather a full-time job—preferably unrelated to disability—a spouse, and kids. Throughout this period of running away from the direction God had given me, I maintained a connection with campus ministry. My value to the community of Christian students was honoured in that, regardless of accessibility, I was fully included in the community, going everywhere they went and doing everything they did.

The leadership giftings of people with disabilities may be neglected if people with disabilities view themselves strictly as recipients of care rather than contributors. They may not notice opportunities for reciprocity or develop their leadership giftings. The campus chaplain helped develop my leadership giftings along with my gifts of hospitality and teaching. He afforded me the role of coordinating the speaker series and community suppers. Throughout my life I have heard many speakers on disability, and I have spoken about disability in various contexts, but this role introduced me to a variety of Christian speakers and topics.

During a meeting with the chaplain in my final year of university, he asked me about a letter I had drafted but never sent to Joni and Friends following the Urbana conference. I was fearful of how God might change my life through it. I reluctantly and anxiously followed his advice to send it. I emailed Joni and Friends, expecting my letter would go unnoticed.

Less than forty-eight hours later, a representative from Joni and Friends emailed back notifying me of a two-week internship opportunity. Relatively quickly, I would need to find a personal care attendant (PCA) to accompany me to California and raise enough funds for us to travel. It was a long shot, but if I did so, I would get to take the Joni and Friends Beyond Suffering course, serve as a volunteer at a Family Retreat, and meet Joni again.

Developing the leadership giftings of people with disabilities may fall short if Christian communities or mentors do not account for additional costs related to disability, such as paying for food, lodging and registration fees of PCAs in addition to those of one's own. I was so grateful to receive a once-in-a-lifetime grant from Joni and Friends. Wanting to do everything they could to help develop my God-given gifts, my church was delighted to cover the difference. I was on a plane to California with a PCA two weeks to the day after I became aware of this incredible opportunity.

Having my disability since birth, I did not associate disability with suffering until I learned of the history of disability through the Beyond Suffering course. I gained an understanding of how people in some cultures treat those with disabilities, believing them to be cursed. It was there I began to see purpose in sharing my experience and educating those who support families that experience disability. My eyes were opened to the story I could tell because many with disabilities—even in North American churches—did not have as positive experiences as I did.

Following Beyond Suffering, the other interns and I were shuttled to a Family Retreat. Some might assume I could not volunteer as a buddy because I require support with personal care and tasks of daily

living. However, the Family Retreat coordinator developed my leadership giftings by pairing me with a young adult with cerebral palsy. In this context, my limitations served as a source of relatability.

As a volunteer, I experienced what it meant to serve out of my weakness and trust God to accomplish what needed to be done. After all, I could not provide much in the way of practical support at mealtimes or engagement with physical activities.

The development of leadership giftings of people with disabilities may fail if leadership training opportunities include compulsory prerequisite skills that inadvertently exclude people with certain disabilities. Prerequisites that exclude—such as reading, writing, maintaining attention, personal care, or physical stamina—may prohibit the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Upon the conclusion of the Family Retreat, I briefly stopped in the gift shop at the Joni and Friends International Disability Center (IDC). While collecting souvenirs to bring home, I was trying to process all the Holy Spirit had taught me through the Beyond Suffering course and Family Retreat. The Holy Spirit moved again. My intern cohort had not yet visited with Joni due to Joni's recent cancer diagnosis and treatment regimen. This was disappointing to me, and I was not anticipating seeing her that day, let alone saying anything to her. Unexpectedly, Joni strolled through the gift shop, and I rolled over to her in my wheelchair, blurting out, "Joni, I'm going to graduate from university soon, and I'm going to come work for you for three months."

I had not spoken to anyone about this plan before. I had not even thought of it. In that moment, the Holy Spirit was interceding for me in ways I did not understand. In classic, kind, gentle, open-to-the-Spirit Joni fashion, she responded, "What did you say your name was? ... Well, Chantal, Lord willing, that would be wonderful!"

Developing the leadership giftings of people with disabilities may be undervalued due to a benevolent desire of some Christian communities or mentors to protect or persistently prepare people with disabilities rather than let them explore, try, and maybe even fail. No sooner did I arrive home than I began corresponding with various staff and volunteers in many departments, hoping to make a three-month internship work for me. This continued for several months. Joni and Friends staff were very helpful in coordinating work projects for me, not to mention locating accessible lodging for me and my PCA and an accessible vehicle for our daily commute.

Some people with disabilities might feel they cannot pursue one leadership opportunity or another due to the disability support services they rely on. Technically, I should not have endeavored to partake in a three-month internship because the disability support funding and services I rely on stipulate that the support and funding will be withdrawn if the recipient leaves the country for more than three weeks annually. However, after I took the time to write letters and engage in follow-up conversations explaining the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for education and development, they granted my request for leeway. Remember: There are exceptions to every rule. Policies are meant as safeguards, not insurmountable barriers.

I was blown away by the provision of my church and another church I worked for at the time. They committed to praying for me throughout the time I would be away. They also banded together to cover the costs of three months of food, lodging, gas, and personal expenses for my PCA and me.

Some might think I was not adequately prepared to spend three months as an intern at the Joni and Friends IDC. For better or for worse, I have never compared a task list to my limitations before saying yes to an opportunity. I say yes and eventually find ways of doing what needs to be done. As passionate as I was about working with Joni, learning all I could about how to reach people with disabilities around the world with the gospel message, not everything went smoothly.

My leadership giftings developed further through the hiccups of my extended internship. Learning about budgeting, commuting, completing housework, and managing a personality conflict with my PCA was a very steep learning curve! There was also the additional learning curve of developing professional speaking and writing skills, learning how to facilitate Family Retreats, and cultivating ways to share the gospel message around the world. Yet it was through these experiences that I developed important

professional and life skills, equipping me for my current leadership roles.

Receiving the leadership giftings of people with disabilities may falter if Christian communities or mentors are, consciously or unconsciously, more comfortable with one-way relationships where we are the helper in charge and do not want to accept help from others. Joni and Friends academic leader Dr. McReynolds received my leadership giftings by inviting me to share my testimony with her class at Biola University. Witnessing the positively engaged reactions of her students marked the turning point when I began to see myself as a public speaker.

I assumed God's will was for me to decline acceptance to a concurrent Master of Divinity and Social Work program in favour of continuing to work at the Joni and Friends IDC for the foreseeable future. I was simultaneously disappointed and honoured when Joni and other Joni and Friends staff explained they could not extend my internship or offer me a permanent position because they felt I was meant to minister in Canada. In the same breath, they asked if I would serve as a liaison to a Canadian-based ministry serving people with disabilities then known as Christian Horizons (now Karis Disability Services).

I have a hard time doing what I'm told—that is, unless the person telling me to do it is Jesus or Joni. Therefore, somewhat reluctantly, I returned home. At the time, neither I nor anyone at Joni and Friends had any idea that the main office for Christian Horizons, now called Karis Disability Services, was located in the same city as the academic program I had been accepted to.

Having something specific and unique to contribute boosted my confidence. Initially, however, I was surprised by the extent to which Christian Horizons valued and respected my contributions as someone with “insider knowledge” or specialized training from Joni and Friends. They further developed my leadership gifts by affording me a role of considerable authority. More than a decade later, I discovered that a top Joni and Friends leader had alerted Christian Horizons that my skill set was broader than I realized.

Receiving the leadership giftings of people with disabilities may be overlooked if Christian communities or mentors fear being asked to provide support that another leader might not need. It is helpful when Christian mentors recognize and nurture leadership gifts. During the first Christian Horizons Family Camp, the director of what was then the Pastoral Ministries Department learned I would soon be studying for my Master of Divinity and Social Work near the Christian Horizons office. We had not known each other very long, but he encouraged me to contact him when seeking a student placement.

Student placements are necessary for many professional accreditations in Canada. They provide a sphere for students to demonstrate their skills in the workplace and learn more on the job under the supervision of a fully certified professional in the same field. Student placements involving both ministry and social work are hard to find. There are a limited number of supervisors available, and each placement demands extra responsibilities of a supervisor. People with disabilities may struggle more than others to get student placements or work, especially if competing with applicants who do not need disability accommodations. Having a placement lined up for me from the beginning was very valuable.

The development of leadership giftings of people with disabilities may be inhibited if they are limited only to tasks they are able to complete on their own, rather than also allowing for those they could complete if provided with adequate support. Meetings between my school's faculty, accessibility services, and Christian Horizons staff allowed us to plan for my successful transition from study to work. The assistive technology and on-site support provided by my school while I was a practicum student bridged the gap between what I could do on my own and what students who do not have disabilities typically accomplish. It also gave me opportunity to prove myself to this Christian, not-for-profit, developmental services agency. I developed a working list of tasks, some of which I would need support and others I could adapt and accomplish on my own.

Christian Horizons valued my unique perspective and skills over the things I cannot do. By the time my placement was completed, the organization developed a job description that fit my skill set. Through my student placement and work as a spiritual care coordinator for Christian Horizons, my leadership at the

intersection of faith and disability, as well as counselling and grief support for people with developmental disabilities, has been developed and received. The list of tasks I can accomplish on my own continues to grow. However, as my role expands, and as I continue to meet barriers, we work together finding innovative ways to complete all necessary tasks. One such innovation involves collaborating with an administrative support person on my team. She frequently helps me edit articles like the one you are reading now, prepare workshops, and facilitate classes, including *Beyond Suffering*. I also remain connected to Joni and Friends, appearing at Global Access events and speaking at International Family Retreats when I am able.

The leadership giftings of people with disabilities may be overlooked because people with disabilities may not see themselves as capable leaders, especially if they require support that people they may lead do not. There is no shame in asking for help, but it is better to ask others to collaborate with you, recognizing that what benefits you likely also benefits them in one way or another. Throughout my political campaign for a seat on my city's Regional Council, many candidates and team members running for other positions in municipal government delightedly offered to collaborate with me and distribute my campaign literature at the same time they delivered theirs.

Since becoming elected to Regional Council, the region I serve has been exceptionally responsive to making our facilities more accessible for me and councillors with or without disabilities elected after me. They configured adaptive technology quickly so I could hit the ground running (not literally). They also enable me to partner with an administrative assistant who fills in accessibility gaps by verbally interpreting visual material, charts, tables, graphs, etc. that I would not be able to access on my own and by setting up meetings with constituents and those that take place in Council Chambers. Through this arrangement, I have realized that the limit of supports available to me in the past, due to budgetary constraints or any other factors, also limited my ability to lead effectively.

By electing me to Regional Council, my community has recognized that I am not only a woman, not only a person who uses a wheelchair, not only someone who can speak to disability concerns. They view me as a capable leader, able to speak to all manner of concerns, including water and wastewater management, road infrastructure and public transit, supportive housing, addiction treatment strategies, emergency services, and more. The fact the community views me holistically helps me view myself holistically too.

Serving as a Regional Councillor is the first professional role I've undertaken that is not directly connected to Christian ministry. Now, my ministry takes a different form: learning how to engage colleagues, staff, and constituents in the endorsement and implementation of policies and community programs that reflect biblical values such as accessibility and inclusion, whether they know Jesus personally yet or not.

I am motivated to do the very best I can as a Regional Councillor because of the prophet Isaiah's reference to Jesus as a Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6). I know I will never measure up, but I aspire to be like him. This responsibility can be overwhelming. I am comforted and encouraged when I think of the fact that Jesus has the entire government resting on his shoulders. Thankfully, I am one of sixteen Councillors who share the weight of the regional government.

I am sometimes frustrated because my visual impairment makes me reliant on a screen-reader, and not all electronic materials are accessible to me. Further, my fine motor challenges make me reliant on voice recognition software, which, though excellent technology, is not 100 percent accurate. Finally, my inability to walk or perform self-care tasks on my own make me reliant on community to function from day to day. However, over time, I have realized the same challenges foster strengths and abilities that many do not have. For example, the fact that I cannot write things down has led to my memory being well developed. Relying on a screen-reader means I read documents that are accessible to me from cover to cover. In turn, I sometimes pick up on details fellow students, coworkers, or Council members may have overlooked while skimming the document. Because I must partner with others for everything from personal care to writing documents, I am an experienced collaborator, and the final product of my work is typically enhanced by the variety of skills and abilities of those who have assisted me in the process.

Then I remember:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12:21–26)

I must continue growing more like Christ each and every day and continue working so my community resembles the kingdom of God more and more every day. I am always learning and seeking God’s wisdom on how to proceed. I am starting to recognize the unique person God intends me to be: a leader, cognizant of Christ’s teachings and aware of structural, intellectual, and theological barriers within the church and the wider community.

It would have been much harder to develop confidence in my abilities and embrace God’s plan for my life if Joni had not touched my life and if I had not seen how God was using her in the lives of others as well.

For the Body of Christ to function as God intended, Christian communities and mentors need to access the wide variety of gifts he has given to the people in their midst. God bless you as you endeavour to nurture, develop, and receive the God-given gifts of every person you encounter. As a starting point to notice unusual gifts, consider an individual or family, and ask yourself two questions: “How has this person/family blessed me?” and “How could they bless others?” If you are not aware of a way they have blessed you, if they are willing, try to get to know them better.

About the Author

Chantal Huinink, Mdiv, MSW, RSW, is a motivational speaker, author and social justice advocate who serves as a Chaplain and a Regional Counsellor in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. She holds a Master of Divinity and Master of Social Work. Her education and experience as a woman with physical disabilities makes her passionate about fostering leadership by people with disabilities in the church and wider community, to honour all God’s image bearers and reap blessings from the widest array of God-given skills and talents.