

# A Place of Belonging

## Including Individuals With Significant Disabilities in Faith Communities

Erik W. Carter, PhD<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Faith is central to the flourishing of so many children and adults with significant disabilities and their families. For congregations striving to be a place of inclusion and belonging for their *entire* community, the theological call to welcome people with disabilities can introduce a host of questions: What does it mean to be a community marked by belonging? What strategies and supports should we adopt to include people well? How can others assist us in this essential endeavor? This article presents a framework for reflecting on the practices and commitments of local congregations that contribute to belonging within a community of faith.

**Keywords:** religion, spirituality, disabilities, belonging, inclusion, faith formation

Spirituality and religious involvement can hold an important place in the lives of people with significant disabilities. Indeed, a growing collection of studies illustrate the place and prominence of faith in the lives of children and adults with intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities (see review by Carter, in press-b). Like anyone else, they want to know and be known by God, to love and be loved by their neighbors, to serve and be served by others, and to discover and live out their calling. Like anyone else, they want to explore, share, and deepen their faith in the midst of a caring and committed community. In other words, faith is no less relevant or important because someone has a disability (Carter, 2021). As emphasized in the TASH (2003) resolution on spirituality, “all people with disabilities have the

right to spiritual expression including the reflection upon and sharing of spiritual purposes for their lives.”

For churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other local congregations, the call to welcome people with disabilities is also quite clear. The scriptures and tenets of many religious traditions emphasize belonging themes of inclusion, hospitality, vulnerability, care, and community (Melcher et al., 2017; Schumm & Stoltzfus, 2016). Moreover, the faithful are often enjoined to love their neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to overturn societal hierarchies, to see each person as indispensable, to move the margins to the middle, and to recognize the *imago Dei* in everyone. Many congregations who have responded to this call can speak firsthand of how the

presence, gifts, friendships, and contributions of individuals with significant disabilities have enriched and enlivened their communities.

Yet stories of wounding and exclusion are still often heard alongside stories of welcome and embrace. As is true of schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and other community settings, faith communities have been uneven in the extent to which they have supported the presence and participation of individuals with significant disabilities and their families (Carter, 2016; Griffin et al., 2012). Many congregation leaders and members feel uncertain of how best to widen their welcome when it comes to disability.

Others are reluctant or resistant to making the changes needed to remove

existing barriers to full participation. And some have never really thought about who might be missing from their faith community. How might congregations move forward in this area?

This article offers guidance to congregations on becoming communities of belonging for individuals with and without significant disabilities. There is growing recognition that the

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**Figure 1. Ten dimensions of belonging within a faith community.**

language of “inclusion” does not fully capture the depth of connection and mutuality people with disabilities desire (Carter, in press-a). In response, the concept of “belonging” has emerged as a fuller way of describing the intimacy, affiliation, membership, reciprocity, and relationships that people often yearn for within a community (Mahar et al., 2012; Swinton, 2012). But what does it really mean to belong within faith community? How can an abstract concept like belonging be actually experienced and promoted within a local congregation? In a series of studies, my colleagues and I asked individuals with disabilities and members of their families to reflect on the things that contributed to sense of belonging with their faith community (Carter, Biggs, et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2014). Although every person had a unique story to share, 10 dimensions of belonging emerged from across these numerous conversations. We heard that belonging was experienced when people were *present, invited, welcomed, noticed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved* (see Figure 1).

### Pathways From Barriers to Belonging

These 10 dimensions of belonging provide points of reflection—and areas of potential response—for congregations wondering how to welcome well. In the remainder of this article, I address why each of these aspects of belonging matters so much and suggest steps you can take to ensure they are experienced by people with significant disabilities and their families. This reflection and response can be led by congregational leaders or undertaken by a team that brings different experiences and perspectives to this process. Figure 2 includes a set of guiding questions to help guide this reflection process.

#### To Be Present

Children and adults with disabilities are already present within the neighborhoods and schools of every city, county, and state (see

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci>). But do they have a presence in your congregation? Too often, individuals with significant disabilities are absent from the ordinary events and rituals that comprise life together in a faith community (Carter & Boehm, 2019; Whitehead, 2018). Yet belonging is born and built upon a foundation of shared presence. In other words, so many of the other dimensions—to be known, accepted, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved—are hard to experience in absence or from a distance.

Congregations can begin by reflecting on the extent to which individuals with disabilities and their families are already involved in the breadth of experiences they offer, such as worship services, religious education classes, small groups, youth programs, service projects, and social gatherings. Is their participation widespread, constrained to a few activities, or rarely observed? Wherever absence is found to be more common than presence, congregations should reflect on the factors that might be limiting this involvement. For example, barriers can be found in the areas of awareness, architecture, attitudes, expectations, supports, theology, and commitment. What specifically stands in the way of the presence of people with disabilities and their families?

#### To Be Invited

Invitations are the right remedy for absence. But they do much more than prompt presence. For individuals who often feel overlooked or ignored, an invitation reminds someone that she is actually noticed. It communicates that there are people who actually long for her company. Yet such invitations can remain quite rare for individuals with significant disabilities and their families. Although growing numbers of congregations are willing to include people with disabilities when they arrive, far fewer are actively pursuing people with disabilities when they do not. There is a distinct difference between these two postures.

Congregations must be proactive about inviting the involvement of individuals with significant disabilities. Review your website, social media, print media, and other outreach efforts to ensure they communicate clearly your commitment to welcoming people with disabilities and their families. Do your mission and materials mention disability? Are you advertising available assistance and supports? Is your choice of language and images (e.g., pictures, videos) likely to resonate with individuals and families? Ask local disability organizations, community agencies, and parent and self-advocacy groups to help share your information and materials through their networks. Although these general announcements can be valuable, personal invitations will be even more powerful. Hearing firsthand that your presence is actually desired can help quell any uncertainty about whether proclamations of “all are welcome” really do apply to you.

#### To Be Welcomed

The reception people receive whenever they arrive also impacts their sense of belonging. Are they greeted with a warm welcome or a cold shoulder? Does their presence elicit genuine delight or a reluctant response? Rich hospitality should be a hallmark of every congregation.

<b>Are individuals with significant disabilities and their families:</b>	<b>What are we already doing well right now?</b>	<b>What could we do better or differently?</b>	<b>What should we start doing next?</b>
<b>Present</b> <i>Are they participating in all aspects of congregational life?</i>			
<b>Invited</b> <i>Are we pursuing their presence through active invitations?</i>			
<b>Welcomed</b> <i>Are we communicating a warm—indeed extravagant—welcome whenever they arrive?</i>			
<b>Known</b> <i>Do we know them personally and for the strengths and gifts they possess?</i>			
<b>Accepted</b> <i>Are we receiving them unconditionally and graciously?</i>			
<b>Cared For</b> <i>Are we invested in their flourishing the other six days of the week?</i>			
<b>Supported</b> <i>Are we providing the assistance they need to participate fully and meaningfully?</i>			
<b>Befriended</b> <i>Are we creating opportunities for friendships to form and deepen?</i>			
<b>Needed</b> <i>Are we experiencing their talents, gifts, and contributions?</i>			
<b>Loved</b> <i>Are we loving them deeply and demonstrably?</i>			

**Figure 2. Reflection tool for congregations.**  
*Note.* Adapted from Carter (2015).

But some faith communities still struggle to “welcome the stranger,” especially when a significant disability is involved. Their reluctance is seen as rejection. Similarly, some congregation members feel uncertain about what to say (or not say) and do (or not do) in the presence of people with significant disabilities. Their uncertainty is seen as avoidance. In the midst of each response, people with disabilities and their families come to feel unwanted—and they soon stop coming.

Hospitality can be surprisingly simple—introducing yourself, learning people’s names, seeking them out before services, asking about their week, inviting them to sit with you, introducing them to others, mentioning available supports, or reconnecting again later throughout the week. But it must also be intentional. Unfortunately, these ordinary gestures are not always extended to individuals with significant disabilities—sometimes deliberately, more often inadvertently. Provide

training and resources to congregation leaders and volunteers (e.g., greeters, ushers) who may feel reluctant or unsure about how best to welcome individuals who have complex communication difficulties, challenging or unusual behaviors, or extensive support needs. Sharing information about disability etiquette, appropriate language, thoughtful support strategies, and available congregation resources can foster both confidence and competence. Similarly, it is important to invite the input of people with disabilities and their families on other ways in which congregational activities and culture could be changed to further widen this welcome.

**To Be Known**

The ways in which people come to be known within a particular community also impact belonging. Most people long to be known personally and as individuals. Yet some people are

still known by the labels they have been given (e.g., “special needs children,” “differently abled adults”) rather than by their given names (e.g., Elena, Spencer, or Kamela). They are viewed only as members of a larger group rather than as unique persons—known about, but not really known personally. Similarly, most people want to be known by their strengths and positive qualities. Yet professional definitions and prevailing depictions of disability usually place the accent only on what someone cannot do or struggles to do. Each presents an incomplete or inaccurate portrait of a person, which shapes how they are viewed by others.

Faith communities should strive to know individuals with significant disabilities in a way that is strikingly different from contemporary society. The diagnostic labels used so widely within educational and professional circles should have no place within the discourse of a faith community. Instead, come alongside each person and invest time learning their story. Find out their interests, passions, strengths, virtues, and other positive qualities. Help them discern their spiritual gifts, talents, and calling—just as you might do for anyone else in the congregation. Parents, siblings, and other relatives can share their own insights into each of these areas, particularly when their family member has communication difficulties. Then, find ways of making introductions to others in ways that make these assets more obvious. Finally, offer inclusive experiences that provide contexts for others in the congregation to meet and get to know their fellow members with significant disabilities. Separate classes, programs, or ministry models inevitably limit the opportunities people with disabilities have to become personally known by the rest of their faith community.

### To Be Accepted

People want to be part of communities in which they are embraced enthusiastically by others. They want to be assured of their acceptance—without condition and in the absence of any asterisks. Yet societal attitudes toward disability remain mixed and are often disheartening. Moreover, the same prejudices, stereotypes, and stigma that exist elsewhere can also be found within faith communities (Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016; Patka & McDonald, 2015). Theologies that define disability as the product of sin, conflate intellect with faith, define the *imago Dei* in terms of ability, or see people with disabilities as needing special healing can serve to further marginalize people. To experience belonging, people need to first experience acceptance.

Congregations can take a variety of steps toward promoting a culture of acceptance. Many promote awareness by hosting a regular worship service dedicated to the topic of inclusion or disability (e.g., “inclusion Sunday”) or participating in various disability and diversity awareness months (e.g., World Down Syndrome Day, Autism Awareness Month, National Disability Employment Awareness Month). Others disseminate awareness resources (e.g., bulletin inserts, videos) or incorporate curricular units within religious education programs to teach others about the gifts and lives of people with disabilities. Some also offer occasional training for program leaders and volunteers to

ensure they have the knowledge and skills needed to welcome and support individuals with significant disabilities effectively (e.g., Baggerman et al., 2015). Two key points should be emphasized here. First, acceptance must be seen as well as taught. When you model respectful interactions, use affirming language, communicate high expectations, and demonstrate love, others are more likely to follow this lead. Second, personal contact is the most powerful way of promoting acceptance (Scior & Werner, 2015). Getting to know someone personally spurs attitude change in a way that learning about a category of people more generally simply cannot.

### To Be Supported

Most children and adults with significant disabilities will need ongoing support to participate in the spiritual and religious activities that are important to them. This might include transportation to events, modifications to activities, assistance during worship services, explanations of concepts, accessible materials, information about congregational offerings, behavioral supports, adapted equipment, a peer partner, or technology aids. The right combination of ordinary and specialized supports enables meaningful participation, but it also communicates a clear commitment to and desire for a person’s presence. Sadly, the inconsistency or unavailability of support within faith communities is a common lament among many families (Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016; O’Hanlon, 2013). Communities committed to belonging see the provision of support as essential rather than as optional. Moreover, they address needed supports as a forethought rather than as an afterthought.

The best supports are designed one person at a time. Congregations should meet with interested individuals with disabilities and their families—along with any friends or other supporters they identify—to develop a plan for supporting meaningful participation. Find out what areas of involvement they consider to be important at this particular time. Ask about their goals in areas like faith formation, social relationship, service to others, and degree of participation. Then identify the informal and formal supports that could help advance these goals and determine how they will be provided. Finally, equip others in the congregation to help provide these supports in respectful and effective ways. Recognizing that people’s priorities and preferences often change over time, support plans should be revisited periodically.

### To Be Cared For

Healthy communities are invested in the flourishing of their members. For many individuals with significant disabilities and their families, the care and commitment of their faith community contribute substantially to their own thriving and quality of life (Biggs & Carter, 2016; Boehm & Carter, 2019). For example, some families access practical (e.g., respite, financial assistance, information), emotional (e.g., personal encouragement, advice, support groups), spiritual (e.g., prayer, pastoral counseling), and social (e.g., friendships, companionship) supports through their local congregation.

Similarly, some individuals with significant disabilities have received assistance from congregation members in areas such as employment, transportation, community participation, recreation, and relationships (Carter, 2011).

Congregations can have a direct impact on the thriving of individuals with disabilities and families all 7 days of the week, not just on the days you gather for worship. Begin by getting to know them and asking what they would consider to be most helpful. Avoid assumptions that may not reflect their preferences or priorities; care can be extended in both healing and wounding ways. Although some congregations launch more formal care initiatives (e.g., respite nights, parent or sibling support groups, family retreats), do not overlook the simple ways in which fellow congregation members can demonstrate care: providing a ride, stopping by to check in, sharing a meal, assisting someone to find a job, praying with them, attending a medical appointment, helping with a bill, sending a card, calling to say hello, assisting with housework or yard work, or just being present together. None of these actions require expertise or experience related to disability; they are part and parcel of what congregation members naturally do for one another. Encourage these same actions for people with disabilities and their families.

### To Be Befriended

Belonging is rooted in relationships. Having people in our lives who know us, like us, accept us, need us, miss us, and love us is at the heart of our well-being. The same is true for individuals with significant disabilities. Their need for friendships and other supportive peer relationships is a universal need, one grounded in the core belief that humans were created for community. Yet studies find that friendships can be few or fleeting for individuals with significant disabilities (Brock et al., 2020). Instead, the social networks of many children and adults are composed primarily of family members and paid service providers. Faith communities can offer a much-needed remedy to the isolation and loneliness experienced by far too many people with disabilities.

Congregations should shine when it comes to fostering relationships. Friendships are most likely to form when people participate in shared activities based on common interests over a sustained period of time. Ensure that every individual with a disability receives the invitations and supports needed to participate in the full range of available congregational activities, such as worship services, small groups, fellowship activities, service opportunities, and more occasional events (e.g., retreats, summer camps, mission trips, celebrations). A commitment to inclusive practices exponentially expands the opportunities people with and without significant disabilities have to meet one another and discover new friendships. In addition, identify others in the congregation who share the individual's interests, hobbies, and passions and facilitate introductions. For children and youth, peer-mediated support models can provide regular opportunities for individuals with disabilities to spend time with and get to know their peers within religious education classes, social activities, or service projects. Similarly, adult leaders can actively facilitate social

interaction by designing collaborative activities, ensuring children with disabilities have a reliable way to communicate, providing needed information about each another, giving children with disabilities valued roles within congregational activities, and providing the right balance of support and independence.

### To Be Needed

Every person is endowed with immeasurable worth, but not every person feels valued. So much of contemporary society still struggles to recognize the ways in which people with significant disabilities can enrich the lives of others and make important contributions within their community. So when a faith community comes to see people with significant disabilities as indispensable and crucial to its flourishing, it provides a powerful counterpoint to these prevailing views. Being part of a community that seeks out and affirms your gifts brings additional assurance that you really do belong there. Like anyone else, people with disabilities want to know that their presence matters, that they are needed by others, and that their absence evokes a longing for their return. As Swinton (2012) asserts, "To belong you need to be missed" (p. 183).

Identify and develop the gifts and talents of individuals with significant disabilities in your congregation. Then look for places where those gifts and talents are precisely what others need. For example, John's beautiful voice should have a place in the choir, Javier's contagious smile would serve the congregation well as greeter, Evon's obsession with detail could be useful on the set-up team, Aiden's servant spirit would be helpful in the soup kitchen, and Neva's faithfulness would enrich the prayer team. Similarly, create opportunities for individuals with disabilities to serve others, rather than remaining only on the receiving end of service. This might include volunteering as an usher or greeter, assisting with aspects of a worship service (e.g., reading scripture, leading a prayer), joining the choir or worship team, visiting those who are sick or homebound, helping in the nursery or with the children's program, assisting in community outreach programs, serving on a committee, praying with and for others, or assisting in any of the numerous other ways that fellow congregation members serve. Assuming valued roles within a congregation transforms how people with disabilities are viewed by others, as well as how they feel about themselves (Wolfensberger, 1983).

### To Be Loved

Faith communities are quick to see the connection between love and belonging. We long to be part of a community that loves us deeply, unconditionally, lavishly, and patiently. And we are called to be the sort of people who love others in this same way. Love is a distinguishing feature of a faithful community. It is love—not law—that compels a congregation to invite, welcome, know, accept, support, care for, befriend, and need individuals with significant disabilities. And it is love that in turn grows out of these same efforts. Although special education and disability service systems can do many important and impactful things, they were not designed to love. Faith communities are.

In his article on inclusion and friendship, Hans Reinders (2011) suggests that

If “being loved” is the most important thing in our lives, then the most important thing is something we cannot do by ourselves or on our own. It is not a goal we can strive for, it is not something we can achieve. (p. 432)

Instead, love is a gift to be received from others. Congregations should be generous in this gift-giving. Look for ways of demonstrating love in concrete, ongoing, and transformative ways. Encourage others to do the same. Where love abounds, belonging is likely to follow.

## Reflecting and Responding

These 10 dimensions of belonging—expressed by individuals with significant disabilities and their families—point congregations to potential areas of action and investment. But there is no simple recipe for this important work—no single strategy or scripted intervention to adopt. There are more than 300,000 congregations across the United States, each with its own commitments, culture, beliefs, resources, histories, and memberships. Similarly, there are more than 4 million Americans with significant disabilities, each possessing a unique set of strengths, needs, passions, personalities, beliefs, and goals. In other words, the pathway to belonging will look somewhat different for each person and in each place. Moving forward requires prayerful reflection on the particular movements that are most needed next.

Congregations should form a core team to undertake this reflection. This provides intentionality, promotes accountability, and prompts movement. Invite a cross-section of congregation members who collectively see the congregation from a variety of vantage points. This might include individuals with disabilities, family members, clergy, congregational staff, and other interested members. Similarly, involve ministry leaders who are familiar with programming for children, youth, adults, and seniors. Finally, seek out congregational members who have professional roles related to disability (e.g., educators, counselors, related services providers, health care professionals) or invite representatives from local organizations or agencies that serve individuals with disabilities (e.g., Centers for Independent Living; residential or employment providers; local chapters of The Arc, Down Syndrome Association, or Autism Society; university programs). Remember that individuals with significant disabilities and their families are the very best experts on what contributes to their belonging. Their perspectives should be prioritized throughout this process.

Figure 2 displays a simple tool that can help guide this reflection process. For each of the 10 dimensions of belonging, teams should address the following questions: *What are we already doing well right now? What could we do better or differently? What should we start doing next?* Team members can share their own experiences and observations in these areas.

They can interview or survey others in the congregation to solicit their input. And they can convene the entire congregation for a “community conversation” (Carter et al., 2017) or hold more focused listening sessions with particular stakeholder groups. Based on what they learn, the team crafts a written plan that addresses the steps the congregation will take moving forward. This process of prayerful reflection should be revisited regularly as new needs and opportunities emerge.

## Conclusion

Belonging is not a special need, it is a universal need. Indeed, the 10 dimensions of belonging addressed in this article are relevant and important to people with and without disabilities alike. We all want to be present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved. Congregations that make strong strides in each of these areas on behalf of individuals with significant disabilities are quite likely to discover that they have become a more hospitable place for many others in their community as well.

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## Bio

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