

2-2020

Embodying God's Full Welcome: A Theology and Praxis of Hospitality Toward Families Affected by Autism

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

EMBODYING GOD'S FULL WELCOME:
A THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS OF HOSPITALITY TOWARD FAMILIES
AFFECTED BY AUTISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2020

Portland Seminary
George Fox University
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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the Dissertation Committee on February 24, 2020
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation

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To those who feel unwelcome.
You are seen. You are heard. You are wanted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The deepest gratitude is for my wife, Jenalee. Your faithful encouragement and sacrificial love sustained me throughout this process. I could not have done this without you.

I am grateful to MaryKate Morse, Loren Kerns, Cliff Berger, and Heather Rainey. Your consistent support helped me to never doubt myself and to trust the journey.

Thanks to the members of cohort LSF3 for the sacred space and intimacy you all provided. I am a better person because you all exist.

I must also acknowledge my journey partner, Isaac Hebden. Without your friendship I would not have laughed as deeply or been known as intimately. Thanks, my friend.

Thank you, Northridge Friends Church, for your consistent prayers and grace as I was on this doctoral journey. It was not always easy to shepherd a church and pursue a doctorate, but you all made it a joyful endeavor.

Finally, to my editor, Lauren Hoppock; my advisor, Carole Spencer; my expert advisor, Ronald Clark; and my prayer and accountability team, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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ABSTRACT

Autism is the fastest growing cognitive disorder in the world, yet many of the families affected do not feel supported or welcomed by their faith communities. A congregation that cultivates a robust theology and praxis of hospitality—one that invites people to consider God’s full welcome, and their place as guests in his kingdom—will provide a path of formation that results in a supportive, safe, and collaborative space that includes families affected by autism.

This dissertation will address the ministry opportunity by first articulating a clear understanding of the existing need. A biblical background of God’s hospitable nature will provide a concrete rationale for church leaders to consider as they reflect on this need. Section two will highlight how this need is being addressed in other arenas and how churches can learn from these successes and shortcomings. Consideration will also be given to potential questions and hesitations that arise regarding this topic. In section three, a detailed outline of the formational journey of hospitality will be presented. This journey is the proposed solution to this ministry opportunity. As people participate in the spiritual discipline of God’s welcome, they are more aware of their place as guests and their role as hosts. The collaborative nature of God’s kingdom is more clearly understood, which allows for authentic relationships rather than transactional exchanges.

Sections four and five will outline and expound on the artifact that accompanies this statement, a proposal for a leadership-specific book titled, *Transformative Hospitality: How Welcoming Those Affected by Autism Can Change a Community*. This book will provide biblical support for church leaders to craft an inclusive theology of hospitality that extends beyond the neurotypical members of their congregations. The

goal of this statement, the artifact, and the work that follows is the collective embodiment of God's welcome that includes individuals and families affected by conditions like ASD and that invites them fully into fellowship, worship, and ministry.

SECTION 1: THE HOSPITALITY GAP

A Story

Following a Sunday morning worship service, Joey's mother was crying in the corner of the foyer. Joey was recently diagnosed on the autism spectrum, which answered some questions the family had been asking about Joey, but also created a new set of concerns for them. The pastor approached Melody to ask what was wrong, and through her tears she confessed, "I just don't know if we can come to church here anymore. Joey's behavior is getting worse, and we feel he's a distraction to others. Those who don't know Joey's condition or don't understand his different needs either look at us inquisitively or angrily because he is usually making noises or has his face buried in an iPad. It would be so much easier to just stay home." The pastor was unsure how to respond. On the one hand, he didn't want to see this family enter this season all alone, but on the other hand, there had been no previous intentional attempts to support them in ways that would be truly impactful to their unique needs, and to begin that process now seemed daunting.

Autism is described as "a spectrum of neurodevelopmental conditions manifested by combinations and degrees of 'impairments' in social relationships and communication, with narrow interests and repetitive behaviors."¹ The term *spectrum* indicates the wide range of behaviors and symptoms associated with autism.² The term *autism* is derived from the Greek word *autos* which means "self" and was first used in

¹ Robert H. Albers, William H. Meller, and Steven D. Thurber, eds., *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 159.

² Albers, Meller, and Thurber, 159.

1911 by Dr. Eugene Bleuler.³ Since Bleuler's coining of this disorder, the understanding of autism has grown exponentially. In the early days, the disorder was broken up into several distinct diagnoses such as autism, Asperger's, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), and PDD Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). More recently the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* has eliminated many of these distinct diagnoses leaving the label of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as the sole diagnosis.⁴

This change in terminology not only simplifies the diagnosing process but also reveals the breadth of manifestations and characteristics associated with ASD. No two people living with ASD are alike. Manifestations of ASD can include any number of combination of behaviors ranging from minor sensory sensitivity to severe incapacitation. Chantal Sicile-Kira, founder of AutismCollege.com sums it up well, writing, "What it all boils down to is that there is no standard type or typical person with ASD, just as there is no standard or type of non-autistic or neurotypical person."⁵

The story above is not unique to many churches across America. Over the course of the past thirty years, the number of ASD diagnoses has increased exponentially. The latest study conducted by the National Survey of Children's Health reports that one in forty children in the United States will be diagnosed with ASD.⁶ With the number of families impacted by autism on the rise, faith communities are directly affected, but many

³ Chantal Sicile-Kira, *Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism* (New York: Perigee, 2014), 8.

⁴ Sicile-Kira, 15.

⁵ Sicile-Kira, 16.

⁶ Michael D. Kogan, et al., "The Prevalence of Parent-Reported Autism Spectrum Disorder Among US Children," *Pediatrics* 142, no. 6 (December 2018), 1, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/11/21/peds.2017-4161>.

are unprepared to respond to this growing need. The wide range of behaviors associated with ASD make any attempts at a universal approach to care and hospitality nearly futile. A June 2018 study from Clemson University reports that fewer than half of families affected by ASD attend religious services yearly, and they are less likely to attend weekly services than others affected by conditions such as ADD or ADHD.⁷ These studies substantiate the claim that churches have not adequately adapted to the unique needs of these families, and the argument can be made that many churches are not effectively prepared to provide the kind of hospitality that will create space for authentic community to occur around these families.

In this study I will contend that many American churches have an ineffective approach to hospitality and that families affected by ASD are exceptionally affected by this shortcoming. I will support this claim by exploring the biblical basis for a praxis of hospitality, specifically regarding people affected by disability, and discussing how many churches have left that call unanswered. I will then express how the view of disability held by many churches has been impacted by the medical community and popular culture, and how these influences have hindered churches from being able to develop innovative ways to invite ASD-affected families into deeper community, bear burdens with them, and support their spiritual growth. Finally, after a thorough examination of other organizations and movements that are growing in their ability to partner with and serve ASD-affected families, I will propose an answer to the question: What steps can

⁷ Andrew L. Whitehead, "Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2018): 380-81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12521>.

churches take to become better equipped to welcome, engage, and support families affected by ASD?

A Disabling Understanding

The deficiency among many American churches in their ministry to ASD-affected families is due, in large part, to an oversight of the unique needs, challenges, and desires of these families, and a misunderstanding of biblical hospitality toward the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40). Since the 1960s, the push for accessibility for people with disabilities has been strong and steady.⁸ One would be hard pressed to find a church that does not have handicap-accessible restrooms, handicap parking spaces, or wheelchair ramps. The small, rural church of ninety that I pastored in Iowa even made the financially arduous decision to install a lift so physically impaired members would be able to enter the sanctuary located at the top of a steep flight of stairs.

Efforts like these have been helpful in easing the difficulties that physically disabled people face when attending weekly worship services and other congregational events. However, when one considers how the understanding of disability, and specifically ASD, has evolved since the mid-twentieth century, it is apparent that the innovations and attempts to create accessible environments in churches have fallen short. The number of churches pursuing accessibility for cognitive disabilities like ASD is

⁸ American National Standards Institute, National Society for Crippled Children and Adults, and President's Committee on Employment of the Physically Handicapped, *American National Standard Specifications for Making Buildings and Facilities Accessible to and Usable by the Physically Handicapped* (New York: Institute, 1971), 3.

staggeringly low when compared to the number of ASD diagnoses the United States sees each year.⁹

The blame for this deficiency does not rest with any one person or group. Dr. Thomas Reynolds of Emmanuel College explains that an acceptance of the cultural understanding of disability has a profound impact on one's theological understanding, and thus affects the faith community's response to disability and its approach to hospitality toward disabled individuals and their families.¹⁰ He concludes, "Christians commonly adopt the prevailing medical model of disability. This model is based on what non-disabled people think is best for persons with disabilities . . . and from a societal perspective this means disability is a liability, a dysfunction legitimating professional and welfare services."¹¹ Many churches, like the cultures they belong to, also draw conclusions on what is best for these disabled persons and their families. Some make no attempt to understand the unique needs associated with disabilities like autism spectrum disorder which do not necessarily affect one's body, but instead impact one's behaviors, cognitive abilities, and social interactions.¹² Reynolds suggests:

Persons with autism are subject to barriers rooted in societal attitudes and assumptions about what it means to be whole or healthy, which become springboards for representing autistic experience and investing it with attributes and meanings that extend far beyond its physiological conditions . . . [ASD] takes

⁹ David Briggs, "US Churches Exclude Children with Autism, ADD/ADHD," *Christianity Today*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/study-us-churches-exclude-children-with-autism-addadhd.html>.

¹⁰ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Community: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 25.

¹¹ Reynolds, 25.

¹² Sicile-Kira, 25-27.

on a social role as normalcy's 'other,' a feature of deviance that automatically pushes it to the margins.¹³

While most types of physical disability are now well understood and widely accepted under societal norms, disabilities like ASD continue to be underacknowledged and cast aside from the normal considerations of society. Churches exacerbate this negligence by not intentionally equipping and educating the members of their congregations to approach these kinds of disabilities with the same level of concern and empathy they would have for the more obvious physical disabilities they encounter.

This lack of adaptability and intentionality has resulted in many churches ignoring their biblical call to welcome and love all people, particularly those on the margins of society.¹⁴ The devastating result of the disregard many churches often have for these affected families is more than a mere oversight of the unique needs associated with conditions like ASD; it is nothing short of a distortion of biblical hospitality. This distortion has contributed to over half of children with cognitive and behavioral disabilities like autism spectrum disorder being excluded from their faith communities.¹⁵ Autism and related disorders are not going away any time soon. In fact, ASD is now the fastest growing developmental disability in the world.¹⁶ With that in mind, what will churches do to respond?

¹³ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Community*, 27.

¹⁴ Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 10.

¹⁵ Elizabeth E. O'Hanlon, "Religion and Disability: The Experiences of Families of Children with Special Needs." *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 17, no. 1 (2013): 52, <http://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.731874>.

¹⁶ Autism Spectrum Disorder Foundation, "About Autism," accessed April 25, 2019, <https://myasdf.org/about-autism/>.

Fortunately, the path forward is not a trail churches will have to blaze on its own. The failure to understand the unique needs of ASD-affected individuals and their families is not a new problem, and church leaders can look to others who have been addressing this growing gap. The public education system in America may be the farthest along in this journey. Decision makers for the education system have been working to better understand and meet the distinct needs of children with disabilities for decades. Passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 affirmed that persons with disabilities have the same right to education that non-disabled children have.¹⁷ Although this act was groundbreaking for children with physical disabilities, conditions like ASD were not added until 1990 when the act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).¹⁸

The most recent version of this act, released in 2004, was renamed once again to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA).¹⁹ This iteration included innovative approaches such as less restrictive environments for disabled students, meaning that children with conditions like ASD have the right to be in the same classroom environments as non-disabled children. Another word for this approach is *inclusion*.²⁰ Inclusion of people with special needs has been a journey for the public education system since 1975, and nearly forty-five years later, public schools are one of

¹⁷ Autism Speaks, “Your Child’s Rights,” accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/your-childs-rights>.

¹⁸ The University of Kansas School of Education, “Timeline of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),” accessed April 26, 2019, <https://educationonline.ku.edu/community/idea-timeline>.

¹⁹ Fred R. Volkmar and Lisa A. Wiesner, *A Practical Guide to Autism: What Every Parent, Family Member, and Teacher Needs to Know* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 89.

²⁰ Autism Speaks, “Your Child’s Rights.”

the bright spots for disability inclusion in the United States. While their efforts are not without fault, these decision makers persistently challenge the way schools approach education for children with disabilities, and in doing so, offer a hopeful example to American churches. However, a poor understanding of disability is only one factor that hinders churches in their ministry to families affected by ASD.

A second factor hindering churches in their ministry to ASD-affected families is a deficient theology of hospitality. While the education system likely would not use the word *hospitality*, that is exactly what it models through the continual effort to accommodate the unique needs of children with disabilities. Henri Nouwen explains that “hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”²¹

In many churches today, the description of hospitality offered by Nouwen is more of an idealized fantasy than a reality. The dividing lines are quite clear to many in the church, especially to those families affected by conditions like ASD. This is due, in part, to the fact that biblical hospitality, in the manner of Christ, is not something that naturally emerges in congregations. It takes intentionality and hard work. When one reflects on the life of Christ, it does not take long to see that “Jesus was never ashamed to surround

²¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 71.

himself with the people who had apparent or not so visible disabilities. He knows what it means to be with a disabled person.”²²

There are multiple examples in the Gospels that show Jesus, the Christian model of embodied spiritual maturity, not only interacting with people affected by disabilities but loving them and ascribing value to them. Love and value are essential ingredients to successful hospitality.²³ Genuine hospitality is much more than a smile or a kind word; it is sacrificial and sincere. IDEA and its impact on the public education system exemplify continued hard work, a willingness to confess mistakes, and an effort to pursue nothing short of all people feeling valued and accepted, no matter their condition. Erik Carter, the assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin explains:

Although an accessible building is essential, it is through interactions and relationships with others that welcome is truly communicated. Hospitality can be demonstrated in simple ways . . . but an inclusive congregation is known for more than just easy hospitality. Its members invite people to lunch, spend time really getting to know them, celebrate their successes, and stand alongside them in difficult times. Gestures must have authenticity and substance; they must offer much more than just the veneer of welcome. A congregation can *say* all of the right things, but still fail to nurture close relationships and fall short of addressing people’s needs.²⁴

This means that churches cannot simply say they are welcoming or inclusive or put these words on a website or banner and hope they stick. True change necessitates effort. As the age-old adage demonstrates, “Actions speak louder than words.”

²² Marion Landua-Figueroa, *The Ignored, Overlooked and Often Forgotten Souls: Church + Special Needs Families = Joshua’s Quest* (Columbia, SC: self-pub. Createspace, 2013), 8.

²³ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 164-165.

²⁴ Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2007), 29.

The kind of hospitality that churches are called to represent as the Body of Christ is one that involves “vulnerability, a mixing between guest and host that undoes the distinction between outsider and insider. . . . Once the stranger is invited in, the host yields stability and control, adjusting the household to accommodate and attend to the guest’s unique needs as they became apparent. Offering hospitality in this way invites disruption in household order and routine.”²⁵ Examples of this kind of hospitality are often rare in many churches, where tradition and order are held in higher esteem than accommodating the needs of guests who are unfamiliar with the way things are done.²⁶ The growing number of ASD diagnoses held against the number of families affected by disabilities that leave the church are a red flag for churches to reconsider their approach to hospitality.

In a 2010 survey, about 80 percent of parents reported that a welcoming attitude toward their disabled children was present at their church. That statistic may seem high, but it loses much of its impact when one considers that currently about 90 percent of families with disabled children are not regularly participating in a faith community.²⁷ Author Michael Beates explains that “families with disabled members will seldom risk further rejection and loneliness by venturing to visit a new church. It will take work to

²⁵ Reynolds, 243.

²⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *Who Moved My Pulpit?: Leading Change in the Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 90.

²⁷ Melinda Jones Ault, Belva C. Collins, and Erik W. Carter, “Factors Associated with Participation in Faith Communities for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 17, no. 2 (May 2013): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2013.781777>; Amy Switzer, “Special Needs: How to Ensure You Never Leave a Child Behind,” *Children’s Ministry*, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://childrensministry.com/special-needs-no-child-left-behind/>.

attract people not normally on our church list.”²⁸ Current numbers demonstrate that either churches have decided the work it will take to attract and keep families affected by conditions like ASD is too daunting to undertake or that many do not know where to begin. Some manage to maintain cordial ties with families affected by these conditions but stepping into the radical hospitality that God desires for his church and that Jesus modeled with his life is still not a process many are pursuing.

The Biblical Basis for Hospitality

Hospitality is central to the identity of every disciple of Jesus Christ and so it is central to the church as Jesus envisioned it. A flimsy understanding of biblical hospitality will lead to frustration and failure to extend God’s welcome beyond the walls of church buildings, and it will bind church members to the rhythmic ebb and flow of a typical Sunday-morning experience. If churches desire to become better equipped to welcome, support, and encourage families affected by conditions like ASD, a full-bodied theology of hospitality will be fundamental.

A dictionary definition provides a reasonable framework for the outward activity of *hospitality*: “given to generous and cordial reception of guests, suggesting a generous and friendly welcome, offering a pleasant or sustaining environment.”²⁹ The outworking of hospitality among those who make up the church, however, involves a robust theological support system that provides both rationale and motivation for the work itself.

²⁸ Michael S. Beates, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 142.

²⁹ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “hospitable,” accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hospitable>.

A fruitful theology and praxis of Christian hospitality will go beyond simple attempts to accommodate guests as hotels or restaurants do.³⁰ The church is called to nothing less than “the practice of God’s welcome embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”³¹

When one explores the theological basis for hospitality by examining the character of God the Father/Creator and the life of Jesus, his Son, it is easy to see that many churches have too narrow a view of hospitality, which leads to a deficient outworking of this essential practice and encourages more self-centered approaches. The local church, if it is to be an expression of the church universal, must make hospitality a priority. Christine Pohl rightly points out, “Hospitality is not optional for Christians. It is, instead, a necessary practice in the community of faith.”³²

Old Testament Examples of the Hospitable Nature of God

Hospitality is fundamental to the Christian life and to the gospel message that the universal church announces and claims. Luke Bretherton notes, “The paradigm of hospitality set out in biblical texts . . . has informed the thinking and practice of the church throughout its history. From its earliest writings, right through to contemporary

³⁰ Popular church growth magazines and websites continually use Starbucks, Chick-fil-a, and other mainstream organizations as ideal models of hospitality for churches, but the call to hospitality for the Church of Jesus Christ is much deeper than good customer service. The demand for such articles remains high, however, supporting the claim that many churches approach hospitality too narrowly or not at all.

³¹ Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2.

³² Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 31.

practice, there is evidence for the centrality of hospitality.”³³ God’s hospitable character is evident from the earliest recorded moment in Scripture, the Creation account. In their book on biblical hospitality, Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements write:

In the very first chapters of Genesis we see God’s hospitality on display in full, creative force. He creates the heavens and the earth, and by doing so fashions the perfect home for Adam and Eve. He provides everything they need to thrive in created joy. . . . The word *every* or *everything* appears repeatedly in these verses. Genesis 1 reads like the most gracious host in the world is welcoming you into His castle.³⁴

This generous display of hospitality increases exponentially following Adam and Eve’s willing betrayal of God by rebelling against the commands he had set for them in the Garden. God could have reasonably reacted with wrath, but instead God responds to Adam and Eve’s rebellion with grace, first by searching for them and then by caring for their needs. When he finds them, he fashions clothing for them to cover their newfound shame and then proceeds to disclose his plan to provide for them, even in the aftermath of the fall, through the working of the land and ultimately through a Redeemer who will crush the head of the enemy.³⁵

This story climaxes in the archetypal act for all biblical hospitality, the sending of God’s own Son, according to the proper lineage, in order to replace the sins of humanity with his own holiness. Willis and Clements add, “The Bible begins with God making a home for humanity to dwell with Him in a garden and the Bible ends with God making a

³³ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 138.

³⁴ Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements, *The Simplest Way to Change the World: Biblical Hospitality as a Way of Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017), 38.

³⁵ Genesis 3:15 (unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version).

home for believers to dwell with Him in a city.”³⁶ Between these two stories, between the beginning and the end, is the rich account of God’s hospitality and the manner in which he calls his followers to model hospitality.

One such example is located among the laws given by God to Moses in Leviticus 19:33-34: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” Commenting on this passage, Bretherton writes that “true hospitality requires we understand both the experience of being a vulnerable stranger and what it means to receive all things from God. To be sensitized to the needs and fears of a stranger we must remember the experience of being ‘aliens in the land.’”³⁷

Sojourners, themselves, the Israelites would have been closely connected to this reality. As such, God was compelling them to recall that status and their dependence upon him as their impetus for obedience to his command for hospitality to the alien, outcast, and marginalized.³⁸ Therefore, biblical hospitality is, in part, the simple act of remembering one’s own experiences of being an alien, outcast, or marginalized person, and in doing so, realizing that life itself is only made possible through God’s gift of hospitality to humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son.

While the law offers many other notable examples of God’s desire for his people to embody his hospitable nature, one of the most profound illustrations of hospitality

³⁶ Willis and Clements, 40.

³⁷ Bretherton, 138.

³⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, et. al., eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring Unity and Diversity in Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 562.

found in the Old Testament is the account of Abraham and his three visitors in Genesis 18:1-15. In an article on Christian hospitality in the Old Testament, Lee Roy Martin offers commentary on this interaction between Abraham and his guests, observing, “The object of hospitality is a traveler, not a neighbor and not someone expected. It is evident from Abraham’s greeting that he recognized his visitors as travelers.”³⁹ This is significant because one cannot program hospitality. Instead, it is essential that one approach the unexpected visitor as Abraham does, with a readiness to serve and a desire to express the love of God through a sacrificial giving of one’s self and one’s resources.

In addition to Abraham’s readiness to serve and his desire to express God’s love, his interaction with these travelers reveals other key characteristics of biblical hospitality. First, by going out to meet them and bowing to them, he shows humility and a willingness to accommodate the needs of his guests. Secondly, by immediately offering water for the travelers to wash their feet, Abraham sees and meets an immediate need. This action accomplishes two things; first, it provides the travelers with the opportunity to accept their host’s generosity, and second, it allows the host to increase the level of generosity offered.⁴⁰ A final characteristic revealed in Abraham’s interaction with these travelers is that genuine hospitality is offered without the expectation of reciprocity but still often results in a blessing. Abraham did not charge the travelers for the food or services he offered them, so any favor he received for his generosity was not

³⁹ Lee Roy Martin, “Old Testament Foundations for Christian Hospitality,” *Verbum et Ecclesia; Pretoria* 35, no. 1 (2014): 3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.752>.

⁴⁰ L. Martin, 3.

transactional, but simply a blessing of grace. In this case, Abraham's blessing of grace was abundant as he received the news that he and Sarah would be given a son.⁴¹

As noted above, hospitality in the ancient world of Abraham was focused on the alien or the sojourner in need. The life of alien travelers was a desperate one as they did not belong to a people group and had no support other than the generosity of strangers. It is unmistakable that these people—the outcast, alien, sojourner, and marginalized—were near to the heart of God. To fully grasp that truth, one need simply consider the many forms of hospitality found in the Old Testament: the humble and gracious reception of travelers into one's home for food, lodging, and protection (Gen. 18:2-8; 19:1-8; Job 31:16-23, 31-32), permitting the alienated person to harvest the corners of one's fields (Lev. 19:9-10; Duet. 24:19-22; Ruth 2:2-17), clothing the naked (Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7, 16), tithing food for the needy (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:1-11), and including the alien in religious celebrations (Exod. 12:48-49; Deut. 16:10-14).⁴² Additionally, these tangible expressions of God's hospitable heart by his people also anticipated the arrival of the Redeemer who would perfectly embody God's nature and reveal the fullness of hospitality to his people.

New Testament Examples of the Hospitable Nature of God

Like the Genesis account, the birth of Christ is another significant example of God's hospitality on full display. In the Creation account, God gave everything to

⁴¹ Genesis 18:10.

⁴² Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996), 359-360.

humanity for their nourishment, to subdue and enjoy.⁴³ After the fall of humanity, God searched them out, fashioned clothes for them, and laid out a plan that would end with the complete restoration of the created order.⁴⁴ Then, as told in John's Gospel account, the Word who was with God at the Creation, who was present for the fall of humanity, and who continued to work among his people in the ancient times "became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁴⁵ Throughout his time on earth, Jesus not only took on the posture of host, but he was often a guest as well.⁴⁶ It will come as no surprise then that the Greek word translated as "hospitality" in the New Testament can mean both "host" and "guest."⁴⁷

In John 1:10-14 Jesus is presented to readers as one that the world did not recognize and that his own did not receive. This observation by John coincides with the parable of the great banquet in Luke's Gospel account. In this passage, Jesus tells the story of a man who prepared a great banquet and invited many guests from the community. When the time came for the banquet to begin, the guests all found reasons not to come. When the servant returned with this news, the master decided to extend the invitation to "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."⁴⁸ Bretherton comments on this passage, saying, "The invitation to this formal dinner is sent out to the host's peers.

⁴³ Genesis 1:28-31.

⁴⁴ Genesis 3:9-21.

⁴⁵ John 1:14.

⁴⁶ Elwell, 360.

⁴⁷ JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 201.

⁴⁸ Luke 14:16-21.

The invitation is met by insulting excuses that in effect are rejections. These rejections are a self-conscious and systematic exclusion of the host by his peer group.”⁴⁹ Thus, even in his hosting, Jesus continually assumed the position of the guest or stranger who truly had “no place to lay his head.”⁵⁰ In John’s Gospel, he is one who is not accepted by his own, and in Luke’s account, even in his attempts to be the host, he is treated as the alien or outcast. Jesus was bound by his position as “guest” among his own, by choosing to fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who shared his plight.⁵¹ In assuming this role, Jesus became accessible to those who are otherwise outcast, which at that time included anyone not of Jewish descent. Even in his role as guest, Jesus was a generous and inviting host to those on the margins of society.

There are, of course, numerous accounts of Jesus as host in the Gospels. His first miracle at the wedding in Cana, recorded in John 2, was the changing of water into wine. This act positioned him as a provider and a host. There are many other accounts of him healing, feeding, teaching, and caring for others. In Mark 6, Jesus provides food for a gathering of 5,000 people and in doing so, assumes the role of “host to the multitude.”⁵² Then, in John 13, as Jesus prepares to serve his most dedicated followers what would come to be known as the Last Supper, he assumes the role of host by removing his outer garment, and, in the manner of Abraham in Genesis 18, he bows before his disciples. In this instance, however, Jesus combines the roles of host and servant into one by washing

⁴⁹ Bretherton, 132.

⁵⁰ Luke 9:58.

⁵¹ Elwell, 360.

⁵² Elwell, 360.

the feet of his disciples. It is also worth noting that during the Last Supper, Jesus's presentation of his body and blood as the elements of the Passover meal is a definitive moment that removes any excuse or reason one might give for not exercising hospitality toward a neighbor. As Jesus was prepared to offer himself fully in a gesture of love and hospitality, his followers are called to the same level of love for God and one another.

While cemented in the upper room by both Jesus's actions and his introduction of a "new command," this call to love is perhaps most clearly explained in one of Jesus's most impactful parables, the parable of the good Samaritan.⁵³ In this exchange, Jesus is approached by an expert in the law and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks the expert, "What is written in the Law?" The expert in the law answers Jesus by reciting what is known today as the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself." The expert in the law isn't satisfied with this, however, and asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"⁵⁴ Jesus concludes this exchange by sharing a story about a man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead on a dangerous stretch of road.

The point of Jesus's teaching begins to emerge as three different individuals come across the man: a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. In a plot twist, the Samaritan—not the priest or Levite—becomes the epitome of one who loves his neighbor as himself.⁵⁵ This conversation between Jesus and the expert in the law has profound implications for both

⁵³ John 13:34; Luke 10:25-37.

⁵⁴ Luke 10:29.

⁵⁵ Luke 10:30-37.

first-century and contemporary disciples of Christ. First, as Matthew Carroll points out, “Jesus taught that it does not matter whom we define as neighbor; we must simply to [*sic*] be a neighbor to all.”⁵⁶

This would have been a groundbreaking realization to those listening in on this exchange because until that moment, the term *neighbor* was best defined by Leviticus 19:18, and it was clearly understood to mean “fellow-Israelite.”⁵⁷ Jesus also redraws the cultural boundaries of holiness when he makes the Samaritan, who would have been seen as less than human by the expert in the law and the rest of the Jewish people, the hero of this story. Thus C.E.B. Cranfield claims that Jesus implies:

... include the outsider, the heretic, the enemy. A man is not to be excluded from this category because his religious confession or political creed or social background or the color of his skin is different from our own. By contrasting the Samaritan with a priest and a Levite, Jesus draws attention to a fact which the lawyer would doubtless prefer to forget—the fact that sometimes the outsider and the heretic and the heathen actually show mercy and lovingkindness, while those who claim to be the exponents of the true religion prove to be hard-hearted and loveless.⁵⁸

Finally, in this exchange, Jesus eliminates the endless list of excuses one might come up with when faced with an opportunity to extend godly hospitality in love. Cranfield adds, “[The priest and Levite] are a frightening reminder that it is possible to be so preoccupied with our theological, religious, and ecclesiastical activity, that we have no time or energy left for the neighbor who needs our help—and so none for Christ himself.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Matthew Carroll, “A Biblical Approach to Hospitality,” *Review and Expositor* 108, no. 4 (2011): 522, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463731110800406>.

⁵⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, “The Good Samaritan,” *Theology Today* 11, no. 3 (1954): 369, <http://doi.org/10.1177/00405736540110308>.

⁵⁸ Cranfield, 369.

⁵⁹ Cranfield, 372.

This indictment by Cranfield is powerful, but not out of line when considered within the setting of what Christine Pohl calls “the most important passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality,” Matthew 25:31-46.⁶⁰ In this passage Jesus tells his disciples a parable of a time when he will give an inheritance to those who offered him hospitality. Those who receive the inheritance will say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?” To this, the reply from the King will be, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”⁶¹ Pohl adds, “[This passage] resounds throughout ancient texts, and contemporary practitioners of hospitably refer to this text more than any other passage. Acts of welcoming the stranger, or leaving someone outside cold and hungry, take on intensely heightened significance when it is Jesus himself who experiences the consequences of our ministry or the lack of it.”⁶²

Conclusion

It is clear that the entirety of the biblical narrative, from Genesis to Revelation, is riddled with evidence that the heart of God the Father/Creator is one of hospitality. In the Law, God commands the Israelites to care for both neighbor and alien, and under the New Covenant, Jesus eliminates the boundary between the two, declaring anyone nearby

⁶⁰ Pohl, *Making Room*, 22.

⁶¹ Matthew 25:37-40; Pohl, *Making Room*, 22.

⁶² Pohl, *Making Room*, 22.

as neighbor.⁶³ Later, as the church emerges following the Resurrection, further affirmation of the hospitable nature of God and of his desire to have the universal church embody that same nature becomes evident in the writings of Paul. The implication of this can be nothing less than the stirring of the heart of the Body of Christ, in the form of local churches, to represent the hospitable nature of God by following the teaching and example of Jesus who, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.”⁶⁴

I believe all expressions of the church begin with the deep desire to be welcoming and inviting and to practice hospitality in ways that honor God and reflect the love of Christ. I would even contend that many churches who have lost their way in this area continue to consider themselves to be welcoming and inviting communities. The path gets muddied, however, when the people of God begin to put more energy toward protecting themselves and their ideas of what it means to be a church and less energy toward embodying the nature of God revealed in the life of Christ. Pratt and Homan note, “We erroneously think we need safety the most,” and church health consultant Thom S. Rainer adds that it is this fact that often results in a shift from pursuing the Great Commission to pursuing what he calls “the great comfort.”⁶⁵ This is not a programming issue, but a discipleship issue. If pastors and leaders are to see their churches return to an intimacy with Christ and one another that enables them to once again become most

⁶³ Leviticus 19:18; Leviticus 19:34.

⁶⁴ Philippians 2:6-7 (ESV).

⁶⁵ Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2011), 26; Rainer, 90.

concerned with pursuing the Great Commission and Great Commandment, it will demand a deliberate effort.

SECTION 2: ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS AND CONCERNS

While the argument for a more robust theology of hospitality is strongly supported by Scripture, there are some questions that arise concerning where one must draw the line when welcoming newcomers into the life of the local church. In this case, it is wise to explore the question: Is the church that Jesus envisioned truly charged with welcoming *all people*, regardless of lifestyle, level of repentance, or varying theologies? Consideration will be given to the safety and liability issues that arise from adopting an inclusive theology and praxis of hospitality. Additionally, when considering a solution to the opportunity of hospitality, specifically regarding the way local churches welcome and support families affected by ASD, it is necessary to invite solutions already being used in other arenas. This section will explore several solutions to the opportunity of extending hospitality toward ASD-affected families.

The Successful Inclusion of ASD-Affected People in Other Arenas

The Public Education System

As noted in the previous section, there is perhaps no other organization that is more experienced in including people and families affected by ASD than public schools in America. Since the 1970s, the American education system has been intentional in its attempts to include children with disabilities in the classroom and to protect their rights to education. In the 1990s, autism spectrum disorder was added to IDEA's growing list of conditions, which offered the affected students services to aid in their education.⁶⁶ Since

⁶⁶ The University of Kansas School of Education, "Timeline of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)," accessed April 26, 2019, <https://educationonline.ku.edu/community/idea-timeline>.

then, the schools in America have continued to grow in both their understanding of ASD and the methods they use to support children and families affected by it.

In a field-research study I conducted earlier this year, Misty, a teacher in the Wichita, Kansas, public education system, told stories of her time working with children with varying disabilities. One story in particular draws out the kind of innovation and expertise that many educators have developed by working with children and families affected by conditions like ASD. Misty was assigned to work with one young boy whose behavior was more extreme than the other students assigned to her department. Often during transitions to different classrooms, to the lunchroom, or to other activities, the boy would break down in the hallways. He would act out loudly, refuse to move, and cause distractions for the other students and teachers. One day Misty got down on her hands and knees and asked if the boy would like to crawl to the next destination rather than walk. The boy's face lit up, and he joined Misty on the floor. The crawling lasted a few days, and then it turned to skipping, galloping, and eventually walking from room to room. Misty explained:

He isn't a bad kid; he just needed someone to meet him where he was. By crawling with him I showed him that I was here for him and that he could trust me. We get so caught up in doing things the right way that we forget that getting the thing done is more important than how we do it. Together, that boy and I taught the other teachers and administrators that it's okay to do something different, especially if it earns trust and gets results.⁶⁷

Doing something different is an approach that many educators have been using for a long time. When the 1990 version of IDEA was released, not only was ASD added to the list of conditions covered, but the Individualized Education Program (IEP) was

⁶⁷ Manuel Magana-Garcia, "Field Research: Hospitality, The Church, and Autism Discussion Panel," (Wichita, KS: April 2019).

introduced as a means to provide children with disabilities free appropriate public education (FAPE).⁶⁸ An IEP is “the written plan that specifies the special education and other services (such as occupational or speech therapy) the school has agreed to provide a child with disabilities.”⁶⁹ The main goal of the IEP is for each student to have a clearly mapped out process for his or her educational journey rather than segregate the affected students into separate spaces or generic programs.⁷⁰ The IEP is an innovative and fitting response to the varying ways that ASD affects individual students.

An IEP is mandated by federal law for students from ages 3 to 22 affected with varying disabilities. While many students will graduate before age 22, an IEP still applies to those who do not, and continuous services are provided for those who continue to work toward a diploma.⁷¹ As resident experts on their own children’s needs, parents are strongly encouraged to take part in the construction of their child’s IEP. IDEA affords parents a great deal of power when advocating for their child’s education plan, and the law allows for the request of unique services that may not be available to children not affected by ASD.⁷² The services available to students affected by ASD are as far reaching as the spectrum itself and can include things such as speech therapy, physical therapy,

⁶⁸ Special Education Guide, “The IEP Process Explained,” accessed June 24, 2019, <https://www.specialeducationguide.com/pre-k-12/individualized-education-programs-iep/the-iep-process-explained/>; Areva S. Martin, *The Everyday Advocate: Standing Up for Your Child with Autism* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 197.

⁶⁹ Volkmar and Wiesner, 592.

⁷⁰ Volkmar and Wienser, 94.

⁷¹ Julie M. Lane, and Quentin P. Kinnison, *Welcoming Children with Special Needs: Empowering Christian Special Education through Purpose, Policies, and Procedures* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2014), 54.

⁷² Sally Ozonoff, Geraldine Dawson, and James C. McPartland, *A Parent’s Guide to High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder: How to Meet the Challenges and Help Your Child Thrive* (New York: Guilford, 2015), 176-178.

recreation, counseling, transportation, cultural programs, art, music, dance, and much more.⁷³ IDEA states that if the student requires the service to progress in his or her educational journey and to receive FAPE while doing so, then the service is granted either by providing it directly to the student or by training his or her teacher in the necessary skill to meet the specific need.⁷⁴

While many of these laws and regulations are beneficial to the growing ASD population, limitations are still present. One glaring concern associated with the use of an IEP is that developing teams are typically large and include varying opinions about the needs and services warranted to achieve FAPE. This can lead to frustration for some parents as they attempt to advocate for the best possible services for their children.⁷⁵ Another common issue is that the members of the IEP team often change from year to year, meaning that the student and parents are frequently advocating for the student's needs and goals to various iterations of their team. This fact exacerbates the already contentious environment that surrounds diverse opinions regarding the best plan forward.⁷⁶ The quality of services also varies from school to school. Autism specialist Dr. Kate Fiske notes, "Unfortunately, many families are not aware of the deficiencies in their school system because they do not know what to look for in a quality program for their child . . . they may defer to people of authority within the school system who assure them

⁷³ A. Martin, 232-233.

⁷⁴ A. Martin, 233.

⁷⁵ Sicile-Kira, 25-27.

⁷⁶ A. Martin, 247-248.

that their child is receiving the best care possible.”⁷⁷ Even with federal laws like IDEA and tools like the IEP, public schools are not without flaws in their support of ASD-affected families. However, in spite of these deficiencies, people like Misty and other advocates, teachers, and parents continue to make many schools in the public-education system helpful sources of discovery for innovative approaches that increase the inclusion of ASD-affected students and families.

Employment

A jewel in the crown of IDEA is the Individual Transition Plan (ITP). Federal law mandates that, as part of a student’s IEP, a transition plan for post-school life be developed and implemented.⁷⁸ The ITP is developed and adjusted beginning between ages 14 and 16. Author and ASD advocate Chantal Sicile-Kira explains, “The purpose of the plan is to gather information from the parents, as well as a variety of individuals at the school and different agencies, in order to plan for the teenager’s transition to adult life.”⁷⁹ As part of the transition plan, the student’s interests and capabilities are considered, and a plan for post-school life is developed. ITPs often include plans for college, vocational training, employment, and various other scenarios.⁸⁰ The training and support offered to

⁷⁷ Kate E. Fiske, *Autism and the Family: Understanding and Supporting Parents and Siblings* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), 166.

⁷⁸ Volkmar and Wiesner, 297.

⁷⁹ Sicile-Kira, 243.

⁸⁰ Sicile-Kira, 240.

students through their ITP is invaluable since this is often the last opportunity for any formal training.⁸¹

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) continues to provide protection for individuals affected by disabilities after their coverage under IDEA ends, but often the level of care and services are greatly reduced.⁸² The ADA does require employers to make reasonable accommodations for their employees with disabilities, but there are no mandates concerning the adult employment experience, unlike that of FAPE for students.⁸³ The ADA also does not necessitate that employers hire people with disabilities, only that they not discriminate against them in the hiring process.⁸⁴

The limitations of the ADA regarding employment make tools like the ITP vital to the success of people affected with conditions like ASD, especially when one considers the statistics gathered in the 2012 study published in *Pediatrics*. It was discovered that fewer than half of students on the autism spectrum were employed, attending college, or getting vocational training within the first two years after leaving school.⁸⁵ It was also noted that only 55 percent of students affected by ASD had paid employment during their first six years following high school.⁸⁶ The study also revealed that among students with varying disabilities, those affected by ASD had the lowest rates

⁸¹ Sicile-Kira, 241.

⁸² Volkmar and Wiesner, 298.

⁸³ Volkmar and Wiesner, 297.

⁸⁴ Volkmar and Wiesner, 298.

⁸⁵ Paul T. Shattuck, et al., "Postsecondary Education and Employment among Youth with an Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Pediatrics* 129, no. 6 (June 2012): 1042, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2864>.

⁸⁶ Shattuck., 1042.

of employment.⁸⁷ A well-crafted ITP can assist those affected by ASD from adding to these statistics.

ITPs allow the IEP team to be innovative in their approach to life after school, especially concerning the individual's vocational future. Students with disabilities like ASD have options when considering employment. Competitive employment is typically the first choice of most students. This refers to a typical job that anyone can apply for and that is offered based on competency, ability, education, and experience.⁸⁸ These jobs are suitable for the most independent individuals. Another option for individuals affected by disabilities is supported employment. The authors of *A Parent's Guide to High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder* explain, "Supported employment refers to a system of supports that allow individuals with disabilities to obtain paid employment in the community. Supported employment includes individual placement, clustered or enclave models, mobile crews, and the entrepreneurial model."⁸⁹

Secure employment is also available to people affected by disabilities. These kinds of jobs are often facility based and involve basic tasks. A benefit of this model is that the individual is often given training and skills to prepare for further independence in the future.⁹⁰ A fourth option for those affected with conditions like ASD is what is known as sheltered workshops. Like secure employment, sheltered workshops provide structured tasks for individuals to perform, often in a facility-type environment. The difference is that often these workshops do not provide training for those who desire to move toward a

⁸⁷ Shattuck, 1042.

⁸⁸ Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, 261.

⁸⁹ Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, 262.

⁹⁰ Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, 262.

more independent type of employment.⁹¹ A concern surrounding secured employment and sheltered workshops is that many of them take advantage of a loophole in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA). Section 14(c) of the FLSA states that employers may obtain special wage certificates granting them permission to pay employees with disabilities less than the federal minimum wage.⁹² The Autistic Self Advocacy Network claims:

There are hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities who are paid less than the minimum wage for their work. . . . Many workers with disabilities do not make enough money to survive. They have to rely on government social programs. These programs can be difficult to sign up for, and often have their own limits on how much money you can get. This makes life more difficult for many people with disabilities.⁹³

Based on the statistics and available options, employment opportunities for those affected with conditions like ASD seem less than ideal. There is a silver lining, however. The rise of autism awareness through organizations like Autism Speaks, Autism One, and The Autism Research Institute is leading more employers and organizations toward better accommodations and opportunities for those affected by ASD. This is a welcome shift considering that the estimated unemployment for ASD-affected adults is between 66 percent and 85 percent.⁹⁴ Autism advocate and author Lisa Jo Rudy notes several reasons for increased employment opportunities in the ASD community:

- An increased awareness due to increased diagnoses.
- A broader diagnostic criterion for autism.

⁹¹ Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, 263.

⁹² Autistic Self Advocacy Network, *Roadmap to Transition: A Handbook for Autistic Youth Transitioning to Adulthood* (Washington DC: ASAN, n.d.), 209.

⁹³ Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 209.

⁹⁴ Lisa Jo Rudy, "Top 10 Autism Friendly Employers," VeryWell Health, last modified March 30, 2019, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/top-autism-friendly-employers-4159784>.

- An increased need for workers with skills, thought patterns, and work ethic that are common among people with autism.
- People with autism often prefer repetitive work, which can be an asset in many jobs and can be hard to find within the general community.⁹⁵

Companies like Ford, Microsoft, Freddie Mac, and Walgreen's are among several nationally recognized brands that welcome individuals on the spectrum to join their teams.

In addition to the growing acceptance some employers are showing for individuals with ASD, there continues to be progress in the form of services for job seekers, as well. Employment First is a government program that assists individuals with disabilities in finding integrated employment opportunities.⁹⁶ The United States federal government also has a devoted hiring process for individuals with disabilities called Schedule A. Schedule A is a non-competitive search process that enables departments of the government to pull specific applications into their applicant pool. Schedule A is not available to all people affected by disability, but anyone can apply for Schedule A status.⁹⁷

Like the public education system, the American job market is evolving as the population of people affected with conditions like ASD continues to increase. Laws prohibiting discrimination were great first steps, but innovation, inclusion, and adaptability are shaping a new culture for those living with disabilities. It is not time to celebrate just yet, however. Chantal Sicile-Kira notes that “although improvements have been made, equal access and opportunity is still ‘in progress.’ Not enough opportunity—

⁹⁵ Rudy.

⁹⁶ Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 210.

⁹⁷ Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 210-211.

or supports to benefit from an opportunity—is available. However, there is hope as parents, professionals, and organizations work together to improve the situation and generate alternative solutions.”⁹⁸

Para-church Ministries

While the indictment against the American churches in the first section of this written statement is a strong one, it should be noted that there are some Christian organizations and local churches that are extremely dedicated to inclusion, equality, and care for families affected by ASD and other disabilities. Some of the most distinguished in the field are Key Ministry, Joni & Friends, Christian Learning Center (CLC), Friendship Ministries, and Pure Ministries.⁹⁹ Many of the organizations listed, and others like them, are dedicated to congregational inclusion, Christian discipleship, and advocacy for people with disabilities. Additional services often include training for churches, leaders, and volunteers.¹⁰⁰

The oldest and largest of these organizations, Joni & Friends shall serve as an adequate case study for how these organizations further the progress of inclusion for Christian families affected by ASD. Founded in 1979, Joni & Friends states that its vision

⁹⁸ Sicile-Kira, 289.

⁹⁹ Nathaniel’s Hope, “National Disability Organizations,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.nathanielshope.org/resources/ministry-resources/>.

¹⁰⁰ Key Ministry, “Our History,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.keyministry.org/mission-churches>; Joni & Friends, “What We Do,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/about/what-we-do/>; CLC Network, “Our History,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://clcnetwork.org/about-us/our-history/>; Friendship Ministries, “Who We Are,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://friendship.org/who/>; Pure Ministries, “About Us,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.pureministries.com/who-we-are/about-us/>.

is “to accelerate Christian ministry to the disability community.”¹⁰¹ Joni & Friends is a conservative, evangelical para-church ministry that hosts retreats for families affected by disabilities, provides mobility support through its *Wheels for the World* ministry, trains individuals with disabilities for leadership in ministry, and provides church engagement and training to help churches become more educated in the area of disability ministry.¹⁰²

While these church engagement initiatives sound appealing, the main source of training is the series of free eBooks that the ministry makes available on its website. Other available options for church support are training events and consulting which require additional time and financial commitments.¹⁰³ Moreover, Pastor Dan’l C. Markham’s 2008 article about Joni & Friends in the *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* scarcely mentions the ministry’s local church engagement. The article focuses instead on the overtly successful results that Joni & Friends has seen in other areas of its ministry, such as *Wheels for the World* and engagement with foreign affiliate partners.¹⁰⁴

The comparatively unimpressive results that Joni & Friends has seen in local churches are not due to the fact that the churches are not as passionate or invested, however. The slower progress of church engagement by Joni & Friends and related ministries is best understood when one considers Michael Beates’s assertion that the main barriers keeping local churches from engaging in dedicated disability ministry are fear

¹⁰¹ Joni & Friends, “About,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/about/>.

¹⁰² Joni & Friends, “What We Do,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/about/what-we-do/>.

¹⁰³ Joni & Friends, “Joni & Friends Calendar,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/events/list/>.

¹⁰⁴ Dan’l C. Markham, “Joni and Friends: From a Founder’s Heart to a Fledgling Worldwide Disability Missions Ministry” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 10, no. 1-2 (2006): 176-177, https://doi.org/10.1300/J095v10n01_12.

and time. People are afraid of doing or saying something wrong, or simply of the unknown. Moreover, church leaders and volunteers understand that “making a commitment to ministry among the disabled will be time- and labor-intensive. It will never be convenient and will seldom have a return on investment that shows up in tangible ways.”¹⁰⁵ With nearly 20 percent of the US population being affected by some kind of disability, the estimated 85 percent of churches still without a committed disability ministry is an informative indicator of the gap still present between churches and the needs of those affected by disabilities like ASD.¹⁰⁶ Even with ministries like Joni & Friends doing their part for over forty years, there is much work left to do.

Local Churches

Joni & Friends, Key Ministry, Friendship Ministries, and others continue to chip away at the mountain of need that is present in the ever-growing population of ASD-affected families and others affected by disability which naturally leads to some local churches responding well to their efforts and to the biblical mandate to welcome, support, and love people affected by disability. One shining example of this is Grace Church in Overland Park, Kansas, and its ministry called SOAR, which stands for Special Opportunities, Abilities, and Relationships.¹⁰⁷ The founder of Grace’s SOAR ministry,

¹⁰⁵ Beates, 135.

¹⁰⁶ Kristin Bialik, “7 Facts about Americans with Disabilities,” Pew Research Center, July 27, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/27/7-facts-about-americans-with-disabilities/>; Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Let No Special Need Hinder the Spread of the Gospel,” The Gospel Coalition, September 2, 2014, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/let-no-special-need-hinder-the-spread-of-the-gospel/>.

¹⁰⁷ Grace Church, “SOAR Special Needs Ministry,” accessed June 27, 2019, <http://visitgracechurch.com/soar/>.

Stephen “Doc” Hunsley is a former pediatrician who, after leaving his job to become a stay-at-home father, was inspired to enter the field of children’s ministry and special needs ministry through the life and experiences of his second son, who was diagnosed with ASD at age two.

Hunsley became the children’s pastor of their local church and shared his vision to begin a special needs ministry with the senior leadership of the church. To his disappointment, the lead pastor declined any further discussion about the ministry for fear that it would draw more special needs people to the church. Hunsley and his family left the church shortly after this incident and joined Grace Church in May 2011. After having only been there for two months, the children’s pastor and executive pastor met with Hunsley to gauge his interest in beginning a special needs ministry at Grace. In September 2011 SOAR was launched. At the time Grace Church had a congregation of about 1,200 people of which only three were being served in the special needs ministry—two children and one adult. At its inception, SOAR’s entire ministry was made up of six people.¹⁰⁸

Today SOAR serves close to 200 special needs people and their families every weekend with a team made up of two full-time staff, an eight-member leadership team, and over 125 volunteers. SOAR provides buddies for about half of their children and adults with special needs so that they can attend worship, classes, and activities. SOAR’s goal is integration and inclusion as much as possible with 90 percent of children with special needs participating in their age appropriate classrooms for Sunday school. An

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Hunsley, 2019, interview by Manuel Magana-Garcia, Wichita, KS, June 27, 2019.

additional 7 percent are in developmentally appropriate classrooms, and 1-2 percent are in special care due to the severity of their condition.¹⁰⁹

SOAR's most celebrated ministry is a bi-monthly respite night. These nights offer care for special needs children and their siblings so parents can enjoy an evening out.¹¹⁰ According to Hunsley, this ministry is designed to help combat the higher than average divorce rate among parents of special needs children.¹¹¹

SOAR has become an effective and successful ministry at Grace Church, but Hunsley noted that to date, only about 11 percent of evangelical churches are capable of offering special needs ministry.¹¹² Hunsley believes that much of this is due to the stigmas associated with special needs and especially around conditions like ASD.¹¹³ His vision is to see SOAR assist 2,000 churches launch their own special needs ministries. To date, they have already helped over 250 begin this process. Hunsley and his team consult with congregations, provide resources, and train leaders to become effective in special needs ministry, all on behalf of Grace Church. SOAR also hosts an annual special needs ministry conference called Wonderfully Made that invites experts and leaders from across the country to share their insights. These endeavors have continued to keep Grace

¹⁰⁹ Hunsley, interview.

¹¹⁰ Grace Church, "SOAR."

¹¹¹ Margaret S. Price, "Divorce Issues and the Special Needs Child." *American Journal of Family Law* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 28, ProQuest.

¹¹² Zylstra, "No Special Need,"; Hunsley cited a study conducted by Joni & Friends for this statistic. I was unable to confirm this number. Another study, cited above, does note that 85 percent of churches in America are still without any kind of ministry for individuals with special needs.

¹¹³ Hunsley, interview.

Church on the cutting edge of inclusion, support, and care of local families affected by disabilities like ASD.¹¹⁴

In November of 2019 SOAR will obtain 501(c)(3) status and join organizations like Joni & Friends who endeavor to assist more local churches in launching effective ministries to families affected by disability. Hunsley is confident that Grace will continue to serve the local special needs community and that launching SOAR independently will allow him the time to see other churches meet the growing need for special needs ministry.¹¹⁵

Grace Church is not the only congregation reaching into the gap between families affected by conditions like ASD and the church, but there are still far too few to meet the growing need. In my city of Wichita, Kansas, with a population of just over 390,000 people, there is only one church, NewSpring, that currently has a dedicated special needs ministry.¹¹⁶ With the current national average showing that 20 percent of people are affected by some form of disability, that leaves NewSpring Church a group of roughly 78,000 people to minister to. These numbers reveal just how great the need is.

It is critical to note that Grace Church currently has a congregation made up of close to 5,000 people and meets on three campuses in the greater Overland Park area.¹¹⁷ NewSpring Church is one of the largest congregations in Wichita and hosts four services every weekend. That said, the quality and quantity of services that these larger churches

¹¹⁴ Hunsley, interview.

¹¹⁵ Hunsley, interview.

¹¹⁶ World Population Review, "Wichita, Kansas Population 2019," accessed June 27, 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/wichita-population/>; NewSpring Church, "Kidz Unlimited," accessed June 27, 2019, <https://www.newspring.org/kidzunlimited/>.

¹¹⁷ Hunsley, interview.

can provide to people with special needs are likely out of reach for smaller congregations whose resources are a fraction of a Grace or NewSpring. This fact cannot become the obstacle that keeps churches from trying, however. With the growing need and a clear biblical mandate for hospitality, church leaders will need to rely on innovation and adaptation in their efforts.

Questions Regarding Inclusion

The various examples of inclusion present in today's culture, from schools to workplaces to churches, raise certain questions and concerns for some people, especially when considering inclusion in a local faith community. Concerns regarding safety are often among the first and strongest raised when consideration is given to widening the scope of hospitality in a local church to reach marginalized groups like ASD-affected families.¹¹⁸ Financial constraint is another concern that could be raised. How much will it cost to welcome and meet the needs of these families? Third, how does widening the scope of hospitality affect a church's stance on other marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ community, ethnic people groups, refugees, the homeless population, and others? There are a number of opportunities for local churches to pause as they consider the scope of their hospitably, but are any of these reasons valid enough to allow churches to circumvent God's welcome to "the least of these?"¹¹⁹

Safety is a valid concern, especially when one considers the wide range of diagnoses that are included in the autism spectrum. Some individuals with ASD can

¹¹⁸ Hunsley, interview.

¹¹⁹ Matthew 25:40.

exhibit aggressive behavior from time to time, which often leads people to assume that violence is a common trait of ASD. It is a myth, however, that individuals with ASD are more violent than neurotypical individuals. Sicile-Kira explains, “Some individuals with autism have ‘meltdowns’—expressions of frustration at themselves or others. It’s important to understand that all behavior is a form of communication and trying to understand why a person is having a meltdown or participating in self-aggression is important. . . . However, there is no connection between planned violence and autism.”¹²⁰ This means that the measures many churches already take to keep their members safe—background checks, first-aid training, and clearly defined behavioral expectations—are a strong foundation on which to build a safe environment for welcoming ASD-affected families.

The more that individuals with ASD are able to interact with others, the more their social skills develop.¹²¹ This means that a person prone to aggression can learn to be less aggressive simply by being with others who exhibit acceptable behavior. Monitoring behavior, developing plans for more extreme cases, and reviewing procedures regularly will be necessary to ensure a safe environment for all people. It certainly takes more work, but hard work does not seem like an adequate reason to disregard families affected by conditions like ASD.

Financial limitation is another possible concern when considering a concerted effort to welcome and support ASD-affected families. Recent studies indicate that charitable giving is down across the board, and that churches are being adversely

¹²⁰ Sicile-Kira, 8.

¹²¹ Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, 204.

impacted by this shift in giving trends.¹²² While this could be a cause for concern, it may be a blessing in disguise. With the downward trend in giving, innovation has become a growing movement in many areas of ministry. A prime example of this innovation, Family Promise is a national organization that serves homeless families through its affiliates all over the United States. The model uses the existing spaces in churches to house homeless families for a week at a time while members in each church work as the support staff for the families. Church members cook with the families, play games, do homework, and visit. This model provides a way for local churches, even those with little-to-no budget for such a ministry, to have a large impact on the homeless epidemic in their cities and towns.¹²³

Stephen Hunsley also challenges the excuse of financial constraint; he shared that the vibrant and successful ministry at Grace Church began with a single event, a respite night, which had a total budget of one hundred dollars. Hunsley contends, “A successful special needs ministry doesn’t need a lot of money; it just needs willing people.”¹²⁴ Many churches depend on volunteers to maintain successful ministries of all kinds, from youth groups to worship teams. Often, the shortfall of dollars can be overcome by the passion to see something done. This is almost always easier said than done as the pool of willing volunteers is often shallow. It is possible that a volunteer team for any ministry may begin with just one or two passionate people, but as that passion develops and captures

¹²² Beryl Jantzi, “Giving Trends of Millennials (and Others) to Congregations,” Everence, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.everence.com/everence-articles/congregational-articles/pastor-resources/giving-trends-of-millennials-and-others-to-congregations>.

¹²³ Family Promise, “The Family Promise Model,” What We Do, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://familypromise.org/programs/>.

¹²⁴ Hunsley, interview.

the hearts of others, teams will grow, and resources will increase. The most important thing to remember is to move at a sustainable pace. Growing and developing a ministry is not a sprint; it is a marathon. Start slow and go with those who are passionate about going. Simplicity is key. Budgets, training, staff people, and other items can develop later, but the starting point is meeting people where they are and helping them become known and loved.

A third valid concern when considering the scope of hospitality and inclusion is simply where to draw the line. Does God's welcome mean to truly welcome all people? While it is not within the scope of this paper to distinguish which stance on any given issue is the biblical one, it is understandable that some may find the possibility of condoning certain behaviors enough of a reason not to adopt a robust theology of hospitality. With that in mind, it is important to understand the difference between tolerance and hospitality. Bretherton explains that "tolerance acts as a break to any constructive action . . . never challenging opinions others hold, [and] reduces us to silence and inactivity, because to add to and seek to change what others think is by definition intolerant."¹²⁵

The examples found in the life of Christ point to the reality that the universal church is not called to be tolerant, but it is called to be hospitable. Whether Jesus was speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, sharing a meal with sinners and tax collectors, or challenging a group of religious leaders who wanted to punish a woman caught in adultery, he never failed to model God's welcome and make it known that the

¹²⁵ Bretherton, 147.

kingdom of God was available to all people.¹²⁶ In many of the same instances, however, he readily challenged the theological framework that led to certain behaviors and lifestyles. For example, once Jesus dispersed the accusers of the woman caught in adultery, he spoke to her, saying, “Go now and leave your life of sin.”¹²⁷ The apostle Paul also teaches that those in the church should not be like infants, carried off by various kinds of teaching, but should grow to become mature like Christ.¹²⁸ Bretherton affirms, writing, “We need to move beyond tolerance, to active engagement and concern in the life of others, to dialogue, to collaborative truth-seeking and the enrichment of life through the insights of others.”¹²⁹

One example of this kind of distinction comes from the church I currently pastor. About one year before I came on staff, the leadership team was trying to discern whether a young woman should be accepted into membership. She is a believer, and her husband is not. She does her best to live faithfully, but her life is messy, as many are, and much of it is public and visible. Several scriptures were discussed, and the leadership team prayed and deliberated the messages they would send and the precedents they would set with either decision they made. It was finally determined that to prohibit this woman’s fellowship with a faith community would hinder her growth and the growth of others in the fellowship. Instead of holding the incongruencies between her lifestyle and the church’s faith and practice against her, the leadership team chose to enter into deeper

¹²⁶ John 4:1-26; Mark 2:13-17; John 8:1-11.

¹²⁷ John 8:11.

¹²⁸ Ephesians 4:14-15.

¹²⁹ Bretherton, 147.

relationship with her, and within that relationship, to both teach and learn. Often when people live simply by the letter of the law, opportunities to live out the spirit of the law are missed.¹³⁰ By distinguishing between tolerance and hospitality, it is clear that faith communities can embody God's welcome freely, while maintaining the convictions that they hold.

While this does not exhaust the list of possible questions that may be associated with a robust theology of hospitality, it does address many of the concerns that welcoming and supporting ASD-affected families may raise. After all, the Body of Christ is the most viable candidate to journey lovingly with these families. Bretherton notes, "While no single institutional form or set of relations can claim finality of truthful expression of God's order, we can say that the church is that place which bears witness to relationship with God through the actions of Christ and the Spirit."¹³¹ With that in mind, any motive for not embodying God's full welcome seems insignificant and unfounded.

Conclusion

As ASD diagnoses continue to increase and the needs of those affected continue to go unmet, ingenuity and adaptation will be vital to the successful support of this growing population of marginalized people. Much can be learned from those who have already been blazing the trail of inclusion for decades. The education system has continued to innovate in its attempts to go beyond simply tolerating students with disabilities. Tools like the IEP and ITP have opened doors for parents, teachers, and

¹³⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:4-6.

¹³¹ Bretherton, 107.

others to creatively prepare affected students for life beyond the classroom. Many businesses are also taking note of the wealth of skills and talents portrayed by those affected with conditions like ASD. In 1990 the ADA opened the door to equal opportunity employment for individuals with disabilities, but the strides that have been made in recent years are revealing the value of hiring affected individuals.

In Christian communities, ministries like Joni & Friends are strongly advocating for more rights for those affected with disability. The training, curriculums, and services they provide are pivotal in closing the gap that exists between people with disabilities and churches. Even with most churches not taking advantage of their resources, a few shining examples of local churches that understand the need are emerging. Churches like Grace Church and NewSpring are beacons of hope for what is possible when local churches take the time to understand the biblical mandate to care for and welcome all people, including and especially those affected by disabilities like ASD.

While there are success stories connected to each of these examples of successful inclusion, the average local church, with limited budgets, volunteers, facilities, and time cannot simply “plug and play” these options into what they are already doing and successfully achieve inclusion. Even after IDEA became law, it took years of litigation, debate, and just plain getting it wrong to arrive at the place the school system is at today.¹³² The same can be said of the current job opportunities available to affected individuals. Ministries like Joni & Friends have been advocating for the Christian community to open their eyes to the unique needs of the disability community since 1979 with little to show for it in terms of the number of local churches who are responding to

¹³² Bill Crane, “Ten Supreme Court Special Education Cases You Need to Know,” Massachusetts Advocates for Children, accessed June 27, 2019, <https://massadvocates.org/billsview/>.

the need. It is wise to learn from others who are experienced in extending God's welcome to those affected by conditions like ASD, but, as Doc Hunsley makes clear, to truly step into this gap, "you don't need a lot of money, you just need the willingness to love people the way God loves us."¹³³

Understanding that God's welcome is extensive, and that a proper theology of hospitality requires a robust foundation, is not enough if people's hearts are not breaking for the needs of those affected. Putting words on paper or a website is not the same thing as embracing the calling God has for his church. A journey of formation is required for faith communities to be able to stand in this gap well. When the theology is cultivated, lived out, and given space to change people, this is when the fruit of God's welcome begins to emerge.

¹³³ Hunsley, interview.

SECTION 3: WELCOMING ASD-AFFECTED FAMILIES - A FORMATIONAL PRAXIS

Introduction

The hard work of extending God’s welcome to families affected by conditions like ASD cannot be done in a vacuum. This work is best accomplished within a community of like-minded individuals who truly desire to grow in the area of hospitality in the manner of Christ. Arriving in this place, however, will take a concerted effort and newly established rhythms to move toward the goal of offering God’s full welcome to those affected by ASD. As the epistle writer James teaches, “Faith without deeds is dead.”¹³⁴ In the same way, good intentions—and even good theology, without the effort to practice it—are also dead. Yet this transition is not one where an individual can merely apply the “fake it until you make it” paradigm and hope that things will eventually fall into place. Setting goals and establishing practices open the way for the internal kind of formation necessary to fully embody God’s welcome. Hearts begin to break for the needs of these families, relationships form, and the opportunities to stand shoulder to shoulder with them become apparent.

This process of moving from theology to practice is a journey of formation for individuals and faith communities alike. While inclusive hospitality is not the sole aim of spiritual formation, it can be both a helpful discipline and a revealing indicator of spiritual growth. Recognizing spiritual formation as a process stresses the necessity of regular practices that develop new habits and goals that move people toward the desired

¹³⁴ James 2:26.

outcome. In order to extend God’s full welcome to families affected by ASD, practices and goals that direct one toward this path are needed. Formation of this nature is certainly an act of grace; nonetheless it requires work on the part of the one being formed. Dallas Willard writes, “Nothing inspires and enhances effort like the experience of grace.”¹³⁵ Effort, however, cannot become the goal.¹³⁶ These exertions are only the vehicle that ushers one into the presence of God and offers opportunities to grow deeper in intimacy with Him.¹³⁷

Further supporting this point, scholar James K.A. Smith asserts, “Your ultimate loves are formed and aimed by your immersion in practices and cultural rituals, then such practices fundamentally shape who you are.”¹³⁸ Theologian Robert Mulholland adds, “We fail to realize that the process of spiritual shaping is a primal reality of human existence. *Everyone* is in a process of spiritual formation!”¹³⁹ Smith, Mulholland, and Willard make their assertion clear: everyone experiences formation. Further, they agree that if one is not intentional to the process, the result is a distortion of the *imago dei* inherent in humankind.¹⁴⁰ However, if one is both intentional and available, the outcome is the gradual transformation toward the image of Christ. In short, the things that one

¹³⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 80.

¹³⁶ Willard, *Great Omission*, 34.

¹³⁷ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 4.

¹³⁸ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 22.

¹³⁹ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁴⁰ Mulholland, 23.

does or does not do have a direct correlation to whom that person becomes. The practices, activities, and rituals of life, regardless of how insignificant they may seem, become one's liturgy.¹⁴¹

While everyone experiences formation, spiritual formation into Christlikeness is a work of grace that results from a purposeful and ever-growing intimacy with Christ. Jesus instructed his disciples with this truth during the Farewell Discourse of John's Gospel: "Abide in me, and I will abide in you. Just as the branch cannot produce fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."¹⁴² Therefore, abiding in Christ is *the* central feature of spiritual formation and proves essential to the journey of embodying a kind of hospitality that extends beyond the familiar and comfortable into the lives of those experiencing levels of brokenness and need that many people are unfamiliar with. Consequently, practices and rhythms that put people in positions to engage with families affected by conditions like ASD will transform a faith community for the better and equip its members to better assimilate, support, and encourage affected families in the future.

Hospitality to ASD-Affected Families as a Formational Process

Hospitality as a spiritual discipline is a return to the richness of God's welcome, which transcends potluck meals and exchanged pleasantries. Henri Nouwen offers a useful explanation of the manner of hospitality suitable for this kind of spiritual formation:

¹⁴¹ Smith, 22.

¹⁴² John 15:4 (ISV).

In our culture the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered down [*sic*] piety than a serious search for an authentic Christian spirituality. But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings. Old and New Testament stories not only show us how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger in our home, but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host. . . .

The term hospitality, therefore, should not be limited to its literal sense . . . but as a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human being, which can be expressed in a variety of ways.¹⁴³

As Nouwen makes clear, and as noted in section one of this paper, inclusive hospitality is part of the nature of God. From Creation to the accounts of the early church and throughout the epistles, Scripture tells the story of God’s welcome. What may not be as obvious is that the embodiment of God’s welcome is deeply impactful to the people who live it.

The act of extending welcome beyond one’s own comfort and outside of one’s own culture and scope of experience is a spiritual practice with deep implications as evidenced in God’s word. To substantiate this claim it is prudent to revisit Matthew 25, which says, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (vv. 35-36). Benedictine oblate David Robinson explains the implications of this passage: “As we welcome people, our eyes keep opening to the glory of Christ in our midst, and we discover that our hearts are ‘burning within us’ (see Lk. 24:32), knowing

¹⁴³ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 66-67.

that we've once again spent time with Christ along the way."¹⁴⁴ This echoes the thoughts of St. Benedict, who was adamant that when one welcomes others, one welcomes Christ.¹⁴⁵ In other words, a tangible way to abide in Christ is by abiding in the Christ that dwells within each person one meets. Hospitality is a spiritual discipline, because in hosting others, one hosts Christ.

Extending God's welcome to anyone is formational, but when hospitality is extended to persons affected by conditions like ASD, the formational process tends to take on a specific progression. This progression was recognized and documented by Dan Vander Plaats of Elim Christian Services and developed into what Vander Plaats has coined, *The 5 Stages*, which are; Ignorance, Pity, Care, Friendship, and Co-Laborers.¹⁴⁶ The helpful and unique nature of hospitality as a spiritual discipline and of the formational progression recognized by Vander Plaats is that it emphasizes the spiritual growth and blessings for the host rather than the guest. This is a welcome modification to the normative church aid model that overly stresses the benefits to those being helped at the expense of the gifts they have to offer.¹⁴⁷ This paradigm shift is essential for faith communities that desire to embody God's welcome to families affected by conditions like ASD in order to transcend tolerance and cultivate authentic relationships.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ David Robinson, *Ancient Pathways: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2010), 113.

¹⁴⁵ Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982), 73.

¹⁴⁶ Dan Vander Plaats, *There is No Asterisk: Changing Attitudes about Differences Using the 5 Stages* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt University Press, 2016), 18. In an email from Dan Vander Plaats dated September 25, 2019, he requested that all mentions of *The 5 Stages* be formatted as seen here.

¹⁴⁷ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Community*, 38.

A Starting Place: Ignorance

The word *ignorance* conveys certain connotations. Some may even find it offensive, or at least unkind. When one considers the actual meaning of the word, however, it becomes clear that the idea of ignorance is not an insult at all. Instead, it is the starting point where nearly all people find themselves when considering a new thought, belief, or paradigm. Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines *ignorance* as "the lack of knowledge, education, or awareness."¹⁴⁹ In other words, as the modern proverb claims, "We don't know what we don't know." This is true in nearly all circumstances, and it is painfully obvious when it comes to the beliefs about treatment of people affected by disabilities throughout history.

During World War II perhaps the darkest response to disability took place. In this case ignorance led to evil as the Nazi regime developed the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Serious Hereditary and Congenital Suffering. Under the oversight of this committee, "between 5000 and 8000 children were put to death, mostly by injections with the barbiturate luminal."¹⁵⁰ While this barbaric slaughter stands out as extreme, ignorance has led to terrible responses to disability, both within and outside of churches, throughout history.

One need not venture too far into Scripture before having to deal with some troubling Old Testament passages on the subject of disability. One passage in Leviticus

¹⁴⁹ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "ignorance," accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ignorance>.

¹⁵⁰ John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church—Disabled Society: The Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2010), 159.

speaks to the prevention of anyone with a blemish from approaching the altar.¹⁵¹ While this law was one that the Israelites held to, it had more to do with the requirement for priests, specifically from the line of Aaron, than with disability in general.¹⁵² In other areas of the Old Testament, including just a few passages prior to this Levitical mandate, God commands the watchful care of those affected by disability.¹⁵³ In the writings of the prophets, the acceptance and redemption of disabled people is foretold.¹⁵⁴ When taken at face value, passages about disability seem to contradict one another, but the fact is, no single portion of Scripture can reveal the full scope of God's nature. To grow beyond this form of ignorance, viewing the full body of God's work is necessary. Pastor and author Brian Zahnd notes:

The Bible doesn't stand above the story it tells, but is fully enmeshed in it. The Bible itself is on the quest to discover the Word of God. What we find in the Old Testament is a progression of revelation. . . . If we want to just pluck a verse here and there to proof-text something, the Old Testament gives us many (and often contradictory) options. . . . It's Jesus who settles the dispute.¹⁵⁵

Passages like the one mentioned above from Leviticus have been plucked out of the meta-narrative that is God's story and used to discount, discredit, and disregard marginalized people groups, including individuals with disabilities, for centuries. This myopic approach to certain scriptures that focus on disability often leads to the method of

¹⁵¹ Leviticus 21:23.

¹⁵² Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 24-29.

¹⁵³ Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18.

¹⁵⁴ Isaiah 56:4-5; Jeremiah 31:8-9; Micah 4:6-8.

¹⁵⁵ Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2017), 14.

collective thinking exhibited by the Babylonians called theodicy. During the Babylonian reign (1700—560 BCE), having a disability was viewed as either a punishment by God or as being possessed by a demon.¹⁵⁶ Further, the Babylonians viewed all illnesses, including ailments of the body and mind, as the direct result of sin.¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately this is not a benign belief, as ignorance begets ignorance often results in drastic and cruel responses, including the killing of those affected.

During the Patristic Era of the eighth century, Greek and Roman Christians accepted and encouraged the slaughter of those affected by various disabilities. The people most affected by this practice were newborn infants and the elderly.¹⁵⁸ Eight hundred years later, not much had changed. In 1652, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther suggested the suffocation of a twelve-year-old disabled boy because he viewed the boy's condition as demonic.¹⁵⁹ “This theological response to a person with mental retardation was by no means unique or bizarre for that time,” writes seminary professor Brett Webb-Mitchell.¹⁶⁰ In 1487, *Malleus Maleficarum*, published by Johann Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer argued that “a person with mental retardation could be considered a witch.”¹⁶¹ As appalling as this might seem, Webb-Mitchell, quoting Stefan Heuser, notes that many of these ancient beliefs about disability are not only consistent with

¹⁵⁶ Webb-Mitchell, 52.

¹⁵⁷ Webb-Mitchell, 52.

¹⁵⁸ Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds., *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 27.

¹⁵⁹ Brock and Swinton, 186.

¹⁶⁰ Webb-Mitchell, 65-66.

¹⁶¹ Webb-Mitchell, 66.

“medieval superstition but of beliefs that are very much alive in the contemporary responses to disability.”¹⁶² This is not to say that the contemporary view of disability is equated with witchcraft, but that prejudiced ideologies and preconceived notions motivate assumptions of sin or the need for physical healing.

Some of these contemporary responses, like their historical equivalents, are due to a rigidly literal reading of Scripture or a distortion of an allegorical reading.¹⁶³ Webb-Mitchell highlights this concern regarding the Creation account in the first chapter of Genesis, where God states, “Let us make mankind in our image.”¹⁶⁴ Webb-Mitchell writes, “Many have read this passage literally, not metaphorically; they believe that since we have arms, legs, noses, mouths, and ears, so must our image of God. This is reinforced in passages in the Bible where God is moving, walking, singing, and listening to Adam and Eve.”¹⁶⁵ When taken literally instead of metaphorically, this language can lead one to view those who are disabled as being an inferior or blemished version of God’s creation.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Webb-Mitchell, 65-66.

¹⁶³ The allegorical reading of Scripture, while not completely faulty, has led many to adopt the position of theodicy when regarding disability. Scholar Joseph Milne argues that while an allegorical approach to Scripture can be helpful in connecting everything in the created world with sacred significance, it can also become a way to attribute meaning to things rather than discovering meaning from them. This movement from discovery to labeling had an obvious impact on the way people viewed conditions like disability and the ways in which they responded to the people affected by them. See Joseph Milne, “Medieval Mystical Allegory,” *Medieval Mystical Theology* 27, no. 2 (November 2018): 119-120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2018.1545673>.

¹⁶⁴ Genesis 1:26.

¹⁶⁵ Webb-Mitchell, 53.

¹⁶⁶ Webb-Mitchell, 16.

The remedy for this type of ignorance is to move beyond what Zahnd calls a “flat reading” of Scripture.¹⁶⁷ As God reveals himself to humanity through the story of Scripture, it is clear that Jesus is given the final word when it comes to informing humanity of God’s nature and his posture toward marginalized people groups, including those affected by disability. As noted in section one, Jesus’s interactions with the blemished and disabled of his time have answered the question, “Who sinned?” once and for all.

A flawed approach to understanding Scripture is not the only contributor to the ignorance toward disability found in many faith communities. In some cases, strongly rooted beliefs, no matter how unfounded, adversely influence the responses to and treatment of those affected by disability. In her book *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland highlights two typical yet troubling responses to disability found within Christian circles:

The Christian interpretation of disability has run the gamut from symbolizing sin to representing an occasion for supererogation. The present thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero . . . neither adequately represents the ordinary lives and lived realities of most people with disabilities.¹⁶⁸

Eiesland points out two distinct paths taken in Christian communities toward disability, yet the message most often communicated by the actions taken is that those affected by conditions like ASD are not welcome.¹⁶⁹ Webb-Mitchell offers an astute example in

¹⁶⁷ Zahnd, 55.

¹⁶⁸ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 70-71; Eiesland was a pioneer in the field of liberation theology concerning persons living with disabilities. Her work created a space for conversations concerning oppressive beliefs and paradigms about disabilities and on revising ideologies and symbols to assist in the process of derailing common notions of disability. Using her narrative, biblical, and historical expertise, Eiesland crafted one of the more powerful works on disability and theology of our time.

¹⁶⁹ O'Hanlon, 52.

describing a church's response to a woman who desired nothing more than to worship with a community. He shares, "What bothered this pastor was Jill's behavior. She sang too loud for many in the church; she answered the questions in the children's service before the children did . . . [he] continued, telling me that Jill's body odor was offensive to many . . . the last statement was his doubt about Jill's awareness of what was happening in worship."¹⁷⁰

Unfortunately, stories like Jill's are the rule more often than they are the exception. Webb-Mitchell's book, along with many others, is full of the true responses of ignorance that church after church have taken toward those affected by disabilities.¹⁷¹ Yet ignorance in this manner is not always deliberate. Michael Beates notes:

If asked whether this is something the church should be engaged in, an overwhelming majority would consent that the church indeed should strive to . . . bring in the blind, lame, and broken to be part of the great banquet. But there is an apparent disconnect—a holiness gap—between what most evangelicals confess would be right and what most evangelicals, in fact, ever think about.¹⁷²

Beates highlights an emblematic occurrence, namely that one's ideas about how to respond to a certain need are frequently different from the actual response. Often people just do not know what to do, so they do nothing.

Inaction is not the only indicator of ignorance, however. In some cases reaction happens too quickly, and out of ignorance, causes hurt and frustration and adds to the

¹⁷⁰ Webb-Mitchell, 3.

¹⁷¹ Other works that include true stories of ignorance include *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* by Amos Yong; *The Disabled God* by Nancy Eiesland; *The Ignored, Forgotten and Overlooked* by Dr. Marion Landua-Figueroa; and *There is No Asterisk* by Dan Vander Plaats.

¹⁷² Beates, 128.

widening gap between faith communities and those affected by conditions like ASD. Dr. Erik Carter explains some common reactions:

- Events or activities are planned without taking into account the needs of those with disabilities.
- Language is not thoughtful and can sometimes carry negative connotations or be hurtful to those affected by disabilities.
- Pastors and teachers present the subject of disability in a way that perpetuates ignorance.
- Church leaders assume that advanced training or a certain degree is required to work with disabled persons.
- Church leaders assume that faith is not important to or beyond the understanding of people affected by disabilities.¹⁷³

Ignorance is the starting point, but as Vander Plaats asserts, “It is so simple to move past ignorance that it can appear intentional to stay there.”¹⁷⁴ Deliberate or not, many faith communities today are still in a place of ignorance in regard to their position on hospitality toward those affected by ASD. While many of them are not intentionally ignorant, there is no way to justify remaining in this place. Like most formational movements, however, the journey out of ignorance begins with one’s self. Thomas Reynolds, who experienced this journey firsthand, writes, “It is important to acknowledge that I am a part of the systemic problem. I too participate in the cult of normalcy and require ongoing transformation by God’s love in the context of human frailty. . . . This is why I believe that the very notion of disability strikes to the core, forcing our theological reorientation as Christians.”¹⁷⁵

To continue to willingly live in ignorance is to refuse the formational journey offered through experiencing the entirety of the Body of Christ. The able cannot say to

¹⁷³ Carter, 10-11.

¹⁷⁴ Vander Plaats, 25.

¹⁷⁵ Reynolds, 33.

the disabled, “I don’t need you.” The clear thinker cannot say to the perplexed or troubled, “I don’t need you.” The apostle Paul’s words from his first letter to Corinth are now the paradigm: “On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”¹⁷⁶ Eiesland adds weight to this truth, writing, “As long as disability is unaddressed . . . the church will squander the considerable theological and practical energies of persons with disabilities who, like other minority groups, call the church to repentance and transformation.”¹⁷⁷

From Ignorance to Pity

Vander Plaats describes the movement from ignorance to pity as a “necessary and important step in the disability attitudes journey.”¹⁷⁸ When one decides that ignorance is no longer the ideal place to dwell concerning how one engages those affected by disability, that person is finally ready to awaken to insights, realities, and experiences that inform a new awareness concerning those impacted by conditions like ASD. This awareness almost always causes a sense of despair, sorrow, and helplessness. This is called pity. Webb-Mitchell offers this insight: “Often the perception that non-disabled people have is a mixture of much sympathy and little empathy, with an overwhelming sense of strangeness.”¹⁷⁹ Another way to describe this next stage in the formational journey of hospitality is *feeling sorry*. Vander Plaats is careful to note that this is the place where many people get stuck: “While pity is necessary, it is too often negative. It is

¹⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:22.

¹⁷⁷ Eiesland, 75.

¹⁷⁸ Vander Plaats, 32.

¹⁷⁹ Webb-Mitchell, 12.

a way of keeping our distance from people with disabilities. In fact, it often seems like negative pity is the only thing that keeps us from progressing in the journey of disability attitudes.”¹⁸⁰

Negative pity can produce inaction, but when engaged appropriately, pity can be helpful in moving one toward further formation. Parker Palmer helps emphasize this truth:

The heart can be broken into a thousand shards, sharp-edged fragments that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain. . . . But there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart “broken open” into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy. This, too, happens every day. We know that heartbreak can become a source of compassion and grace because we have seen it happen with our own eyes as people enlarge their capacity for empathy and their ability to attend to the suffering of others.¹⁸¹

In the formational process from ignorance to pity, it is this “broken open” posture that one aspires to. This posture modeled by Christ is what God’s full welcome requires. In Matthew’s Gospel, as Jesus moves from village to village healing, the Gospel writer notes, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹⁸² In other accounts Jesus is seen taking pity on a widow, a hungry crowd, a leper, a Samaritan woman, a woman caught in adultery, and countless others.¹⁸³ This form of pity does not assume nothing can be done,

¹⁸⁰ Vander Plaats, 33.

¹⁸¹ Parker Palmer, “The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap,” *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* 24, no. 2 (March/April 2009): 6, <https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/PJP-WeavingsArticle-Broken-OpenHeart.pdf>.

¹⁸² Matthew 9:35-36.

¹⁸³ Luke 7:13; Matthew 15:32; Matthew 8:3; John 4:26; John 8:11.

but instead moves one to compassion and the question, “What can I do?”¹⁸⁴ When this question is asked, the possibility of God’s kingdom begins to emerge through the lives of those impacted by conditions like ASD, and with this possibility, the journey from pity to care begins.

From Pity to Care

The movement from pity to care is significant because it is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Theory becomes practice, and theology moves toward application as one begins to act. Vander Plaats contends, “This is where the real work begins. It also happens to be where we finally start to reflect God’s kingdom in our thoughts and attitudes.”¹⁸⁵ When a faith community moves from pity to care, it is marked by a perceptible readiness to learn. Erik Carter points out, “This work is ongoing as congregations strive to do better, to be more responsive, and to live out their call more fully.”¹⁸⁶ Care can be an interesting phase of the formational journey of hospitality, because remnants of ignorance and pity can influence the nature of the care being given.

One example of this is offered by Brett Webb-Mitchell, who recalls the story of a congregation he was consulting with as they sought to grow in the area of hospitality for those affected by disability. The congregation was willing to spend a significant amount of money to make facility upgrades, including elevators and ramps, and to provide

¹⁸⁴ Vander Plaats, 34.

¹⁸⁵ Vander Plaats, 40.

¹⁸⁶ Carter, 32.

services for the hearing and vision impaired. While none of these considerations were bad, Webb-Mitchell observed the following:

What was interesting about the discussion was that nowhere in our talk did the committee consider the opinion of the congregation or ask a person with a disability, or a group of people with disabilities, about what they should or could be doing to make the church sanctuary and the programs of the church accessible for all who wished to enter . . . they were acting out of the need expressed by one family.¹⁸⁷

This story is not a unique example of care. Often care is motivated by a desire to feel better or do the right thing, resulting in a good outcome at the expense of the best possible outcome. Reactive care has the potential to overlook key elements of the inclusive hospitality that God desires his church to embody.

Care can be affected by ignorance, but it can also reorient the focus one has for people affected by ASD and other disabilities from passive to pastoral. Through the care one offers, the question “What can I do?” begins to get answered as efforts are made to meet needs, however naïve those attempts may be at first. One reason that early attempts at care often fall short is that they are done in isolation and often out of Christian obligation.¹⁸⁸ Obligation can be a suitable motivator for care, but when one’s growth halts here, the formational journey of hospitality is not complete, and the possibility of experiencing the fullness of the Body of Christ is hindered. Instead, care teaches congregations what they lack. Carter suggests, “The first step for many congregations is recognizing that an important part of their community is not actually part of their

¹⁸⁷ Webb-Mitchell, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Eiesland, 73.

community. Absent this initial awareness, it is unlikely that congregations will be energized to respond differently.”¹⁸⁹

Care takes on many forms, including some already noted in the previous sections. Facility updates such as the addition of accessible ramps, doors, restrooms, etc. are all forms of practical care. Providing devices for the hearing impaired during Sunday morning worship is another form of care. Care for a disability that is not as visually detectable, such as ASD, can be a bit less precise. Some creative forms of care for conditions like ASD include sensory rooms, headphones, and the simple willingness to let some minor distractions run their course without drawing more attention to them.¹⁹⁰

A major pitfall of care is that it is natural to assume one knows what is best for those on the receiving end. Like the story shared by Webb-Mitchell above, it is easy to make decisions without consulting those who are being cared for. Even with best intentions in mind, this can create a gap between the caregivers and those being cared for. Eiesland contends, “One unintended outcome of the practices of some charitable societies has been the environmental and societal segregation of people with disabilities from the Christian community rather than the restoration to social and religious participation.”¹⁹¹ In other words, some forms of care can cause the cared for to feel like a project rather than a member of the community, creating barriers rather than bridging gaps. Carter observes, “Many congregations begin by establishing special religious education classes, worship services, small groups, or other programs and activities designed exclusively for

¹⁸⁹ Carter, 34.

¹⁹⁰ Stephen J. Bedard, *How to Make Your Church Autism-Friendly* (St. Catherines, Ontario: Hope’s Reason, 2017), 17.

¹⁹¹ Eiesland, 73-74.

people with developmental disabilities . . . in such cases, ministry efforts are extended *to* people with disabilities; they primarily function one-way.”¹⁹²

For all of the reasons listed above, Vander Plaats is adamant that care cannot be the final destination in the formational journey of hospitality toward those affected by disability. Caring is not a sufficient stopping place, argues Vander Plaats, because, “there is not relationship.”¹⁹³ Just as Carter observed, care frequently comes in the form of a ministry *toward* rather than *with*, removing the possibility of the mutual blessing that comes from a shared relationship. He writes, “While these volunteers would likely be quick to convey the many ways they have benefited from these experiences, the majority of the congregation still remains disconnected from the lives of people with disabilities.”¹⁹⁴

Therefore, care moves individuals and faith communities toward the next phase in the formational journey of hospitality, friendship. With this movement comes a deeper awareness of not only what can be offered to those affected by conditions like ASD, but also what they have to offer the community in return. The apostle Paul taught, “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”¹⁹⁵ This teaching is not only to be applied to the able-bodied but to all members of a faith community, because, as Webb-Mitchell rightly asserts, there is a wealth of “untapped yet vital ministry with and by those who have certain limitations and

¹⁹² Carter, 34.

¹⁹³ Vander Plaats, 42.

¹⁹⁴ Carter, 34.

¹⁹⁵ Romans 12:4-5.

abilities quite unlike anyone else in the world.”¹⁹⁶ This ministry is unleashed within the Body of Christ when God’s welcome is extended and care is given space to grow, making friendship with those who were once the objects of ministry a realistic possibility.

From Care to Friendship

Aristotle once wrote, “No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods.”¹⁹⁷ Followers of Jesus Christ understand this more than most people, because the goal of the Christian life is union with God, which can also be described as friendship with God.¹⁹⁸ Theologian Paul Wadell explains, “We reach the fullness of our nature . . . when we are united with God as friend through the love which makes that union possible.”¹⁹⁹ The journey of friendship with God is not a solo mission, but a shared pilgrimage, as Father Ronald Rolheiser explains:

Spirituality is ultimately communitarian, even within those faiths such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Taoism that are not ecclesial within their essential makeup, as are Christianity and Judaism. Why? Because the search for God is not a private search for what is highest for oneself or even for what is ultimate for oneself. Spirituality is about a communal search for the face of God—and one searches communally within a historical community.²⁰⁰

Because God created humanity in his own likeness, community and friendship are essential components to experiencing a full and rewarding life in his kingdom. From the beginning, at Creation, it has been acknowledged that “it is not good for the man to be

¹⁹⁶ Webb-Mitchell, 135.

¹⁹⁷ Roger Crisp ed., *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143.

¹⁹⁸ Mulholland, 97.

¹⁹⁹ Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 129.

²⁰⁰ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Image, 2014), 69.

alone.”²⁰¹ Author Ken Shigematsu adds, “We can have relationship with God, fulfilling work to do, and an enviable home and lifestyle—but if we don’t have close friendships with others, we soon realize that something essential is missing.”²⁰² Still, with the introduction of text messaging, social media, and other opportunities to stay connected, profound friendships seem to be fleeting. Rich friendships are replaced by superficial connections that result in what Jason Reimer Grieg calls “relational poverty.”²⁰³ While this trend is becoming more true for all people, Grieg contends that the fleeting nature of friendship “is particularly the case for people with intellectual disabilities, whose situations of relational poverty strike at the heart of Aristotle’s maxim.”²⁰⁴

There are a number of reasons this is true, and Vander Plaats identifies several. First, he notes that the difference in needs creates a separation.²⁰⁵ A person unaffected by a condition like ASD does not have to encounter the numerous obstacles, preplanning, and exhaustion that it takes an affected person or family to do something as simple as attend a weekly worship service. Second, Vander Plaats points to a difference in priority and perspective.²⁰⁶ Simply living with a disability or being in a family affected by a condition like ASD forces a new perspective that unaffected persons cannot understand. The final reason offered by Vander Plaats is a different rhythm of life. He explains, “Life

²⁰¹ Genesis 2:18.

²⁰² Ken Shigematsu, *God in my Everything: How an Ancient Rhythm Helps Busy People Enjoy God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 83.

²⁰³ Jason Reimer Grieg, *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L’Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 114.

²⁰⁴ Grieg, 114.

²⁰⁵ Vander Plaats, 55.

²⁰⁶ Vander Plaats, 55.

with a disability is simply different. It is complicated and messy and medically-involved. It is never, ever going to be fixed. This is frustrating for our friends without disabilities. They want us to be normal . . . and while our disabilities are not okay, or normal, they are also not the core problem.”²⁰⁷ In other words, friendships are based on common ground, shared interests, and compatibility, and on the surface there does not seem to be much to bridge the gap between families affected by disabilities like ASD and everyone else.

Fortunately, friendship in the biblical sense does not occur only on the surface level. In John’s Gospel account, Jesus chooses to call his disciples his friends and in doing so “radically affirms the holistic humanity of the other through a profound act of recognition.”²⁰⁸ Grieg maintains that the basis for friendship in this sense is not a list of surface-level commonalities, but a deeper truth about humanity—namely, that every person was created with the potential and purpose to be a friend of God. This ingrained truth, when embodied and acted upon, frees one to accept others, particularly those affected by disabilities, “*as they are*, not as the medical model classifies them to be.”²⁰⁹ In this sense, friendship is not experienced within a transactional paradigm but is lived out as a covenant, not unlike one’s friendship with God.²¹⁰ This covenantal kind of friendship chooses the other, not based on similar traits or for what the other can offer, but simply because they are divine image bearers.

When one can move beyond the obligatory caring for those affected by disability to the possibility of friendship with them, and from seeing those affected by conditions

²⁰⁷ Vander Plaats, 56.

²⁰⁸ John 15:15; Grieg, 116.

²⁰⁹ Grieg, 116.

²¹⁰ Grieg, 121.

like ASD as objects of one's ministry to seeing them as friends of God, the true gifts of these friendships can begin to develop. Henri Nouwen names some of these gifts while recounting his experience living among disabled persons in L'Arche community:

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done. . . . I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent on how I was perceived at the moment. . . . These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.²¹¹

Nouwen describes some of the rich gifts of friendship that come from crossing the boundary of commonality and entering the unfamiliar space of covenantal relationship with those affected by disabilities. As this happens, these friendships offer a deeper and more tangible understanding of God's friendship with humankind. Vander Plaats adds that friendship in this manner “reminds me that I am not just what I do, or what I own, or what other people say about me, I am a beloved child of God and He just wants me.”²¹²

The journey from pity to friendship is a long one, likely paved with mistakes and wrong turns. The experiences on this journey refine one's thinking regarding disability. As one willingly extends God's welcome to people and families affected by conditions like ASD, formation takes place. A person can be moved from a place of apprehension to curiosity, from curiosity to grief, from grief to service, and from service to friendship.

²¹¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 27-28.

²¹² Vander Plaats, 57.

This kind of friendship comes with the gift of recalling one's own brokenness and need for companionship, acceptance, and love. Webb-Mitchell contends that these friendships remind us all "that we are present at this table not because our good works got us a place there, but because God has called all of us there."²¹³ Quoting London *Times* reporter Clifford Longley, Dr. John Gillibrand notes, "We are learning to treat the handicapped not with pity but with deep respect and an awareness that often through their handicaps they can obtain a degree of self-giving and compassion which are denied to those not similarly afflicted."²¹⁴ Gillibrand then adds, "The fundamental error is to treat difference as affliction, and to treat those who are different as 'them' rather than 'us.' In them, it is us that we all see."²¹⁵ Those living with conditions like ASD need these friendships, but it is not a stretch to say that those who are not directly affected may need them even more. These kinds of challenging and life-giving friendships undergird and enrich one's spiritual growth and enable one to extend God's full welcome.

Even with the blessings and benefits of friendship listed, there may still be some trepidation concerning how to enter into a friendship with someone living with a condition like ASD. Vander Plaats offers some helpful advice in this area: See the person not the disability, be willing to be vulnerable and unguarded, intentionally engage in conversations, and ask questions to better understand what life is like for that person.²¹⁶ Friendship with people affected by conditions like ASD is not so different from other

²¹³ Webb-Mitchell, 48.

²¹⁴ Gillibrand, 190.

²¹⁵ Gillibrand, 190.

²¹⁶ Vander Plaats, 59.

friendships, because they are all based on mutual trust, love, and acceptance. These friendships may take more work at the beginning, but they also have much to offer. By avoiding friendships with people living with disabilities one misses out on a rich and vibrant portion of God's kingdom and prevents affected persons from using their gifts and talents to bless others.²¹⁷ But as rich as these friendships can be, this is still only the penultimate stage in the formational process of extending God's welcome to families affected by conditions like ASD. The pinnacle of this journey happens when friendships blossom into collaboration, and ministry begins to emerge *from* the partnership rather than *within* it.

From Friendship to Collaboration

With the current rate of diagnoses, it is probable that everyone knows someone affected by autism.²¹⁸ If churches are to reflect their communities and embrace the diverse nature of the world they are part of, then people affected by ASD are essential to that vision. In other words, experiencing the fullness of the kingdom of God and participating in the whole church means embracing people with various backgrounds, ethnicities, skillsets, passions, gifts, and ability levels, including people affected by conditions like ASD.²¹⁹ The fact that this condition is so extensive means that without

²¹⁷ Vander Plaats, 61.

²¹⁸ Autism Spectrum Disorder Foundation, "About Autism," accessed April 25, 2019, <https://myasdf.org/about-autism/>.

²¹⁹ Yong, 7-8.

including people affected by autism, welcoming them, befriending them, and co-laboring with them, one's experience of community is deficient, and the church is lacking.²²⁰

There may be no greater example of the collaboration between non-disabled people and those living with disabilities than the L'Arche communities. When Jean Vanier visited several institutions for men with intellectual disabilities, he was so disturbed by the conditions, lack of care, and complete rejection of these men that he felt called to enter into community with them. Moved from pity to compassion, he invited some of the men to live with him. This experiment was not without its challenges, but the joys far outweighed the setbacks. Motivated by these experiences and the fruit of the relationships with these men, Vanier opened the first L'Arche community in Richmond Hill, Ontario, in 1967. Today, L'Arche has 149 communities in 37 countries and continues to expand.²²¹

The thing that sets L'Arche apart from other organizations that serve the disabled community is that the focus centers not on care or service, but on building relationships and helping those affected by disability discover their gifts.²²² This focus has not only impacted the "clients" of L'Arche, but has been even more impactful to the non-disabled people that have lived, worked, and volunteered there. While the best-known story of this experience might be Father Henri Nouwen's, he is just one of the many people who have

²²⁰ Webb-Mitchell, 48.

²²¹ "A Brief History of L'Arche," About L'Arche, L'Arche Canada, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.larche.ca/about-larche/our-history>.

²²² "Mission and Vision," About L'Arche, L'Arche Canada, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.larche.ca/mission-and-vision>.

been ministered to by the residents of L'Arche.²²³ Vanier tells the story of a young unnamed assistant: "Her parents had divorced. She was fed up with school, which forced her to learn things she did not want to learn. She had heard about L'Arche from her aunt. She came, and she was healed by people with disabilities who loved her and trusted her."²²⁴ This example of reciprocal love and care is the epitome of collaboration; as Vanier and his team nurtured their friendships with the residents of the L'Arche communities, trust was built, love was given and received, and then together, shoulder to shoulder, kingdom fruit was born out of their relationships. Ministry flows from within the community.

As one can see, the threshold that separates friendship and collaboration is razor thin. Authentic spiritual friendships carry with them the foundations of a collaborative partnership, and for that reason the formational process of extending God's full welcome to those affected by conditions like ASD will enter this phase when the relationships are given the space and time to cultivate these essential elements. In his book *Sacred Companions*, Dr. David Benner notes the components of such a spiritual friendship: "love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality and accompaniment."²²⁵ While these traits are not exclusive to relationships with those living with disabilities, Grieg contends that "entering into friendships with these persons contributes to their being recognized, which

²²³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 13.

²²⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 26-27.

²²⁵ David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 65.

entails not so much *doing something for* them as *being someone with* them. . . . They become the ‘veracious image of the other’ with whom one delights and ‘abides.’”²²⁶

This shift from *for* to *with* began back in the caring phase, but it truly blossoms here as those affected with disabilities are entrusted to share their gifts and passions in God-honoring and life-giving ways. Author Maureen Pratt affirms this claim, writing, “Christian welcome calls us to appreciate the great diversity in gifts, skills, and talents (or lack thereof) that each person brings, not qualifying them as one better than the other, but as parts of a whole that gives glory to God.”²²⁷

Helping people affected by conditions like ASD receive and live into their vocation within the Body of Christ is the climax of extending God’s full welcome. This is the pinnacle of the conversion from stranger to companion for the guest, and the culmination of the formational journey of hospitality for the host. Once separated by a seemingly insurmountable gap, they are now companions and partners in kingdom work, teaching and learning from each another, giving and receiving, holding and being held in a beautiful dance of collaboration.

Conclusion

Willingly and consistently entering into the formational process that results from extending God’s welcome to people affected by conditions like ASD is my proposed solution to the deficiency that exists in the theology of hospitality that many faith communities embody. Even with an articulated theology that gives the appearance of

²²⁶ Grieg, 142.

²²⁷ Maureen Pratt, *Salt and Light: Church, Disability, and the Blessing of Welcome for All* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2018), 35.

inclusion, faith communities that fail to put their comprehensive theology of hospitality into practice are only fooling themselves. Practices that continue to refine, nurture, and advance this theology are required for the successful assimilation, support, encouragement, and partnership with families affected by conditions like ASD. This may seem like an overly simplistic approach, but the process is anything but simple. To move out of one's own ignorance concerning conditions like ASD is a big leap for any person to take; it will require a humble and teachable spirit and a deep and abiding connection to Christ. Theology depends on practice, and practice solidifies theology. Dallas Willard explains, "A theology is only a way of thinking about and understanding—or misunderstanding—God. Practical theology studies the manner in which our actions interact with God to accomplish his ends in human life."²²⁸

The sheer desire to welcome people affected by disabilities like ASD is not sufficient to make God's full welcome a part of the DNA of a faith community. The transition from believing the right thing to doing it is not as simple as gritting one's teeth or redoubling one's efforts. None of these actions are a sufficient substitute for a changed heart. John Ortberg rightly asserts that "habits eat willpower for breakfast."²²⁹ The practice of God's welcome in tangible and recurring ways can change the way one embodies hospitality by changing one's habits. Developing a liturgy of welcome that supports one's theology of welcome is the only way that these practices can become permanent.

²²⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 14.

²²⁹ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 146.

This journey from ignorance to collaboration is not the end, but the beginning. The hard work of developing ministries and outreach, answering questions of accessibility, articulating boundaries, and navigating the messiness of relationships will certainly come. But without moving through the formational journey of welcoming those affected by disabilities, addressing these topics is futile. Jesus set the standard of God's welcome, always beginning with relationships. Success for the church will require its members to bring their full selves to the table and to freely receive others, "whether we have or don't have disabilities, are greatly gifted or only able to contribute a widow's mite. Through our baptism we are all equal members of the body of Christ. *We belong.* And when we act in concert, we are personally, publicly forwarding God's kingdom on earth."²³⁰ Forming collaborative friendships with people who are different can be challenging, but if the Body of Christ is to embrace God's hospitable nature for all people, then persons affected by ASD are needed, not simply as objects *of* ministry, but as contributing members *in* life and ministry.

²³⁰ Pratt, 54.

SECTION 4: THE ARTIFACT

Bearing the Burden of Hospitality:

Welcoming Families Affected by Autism into the Local Church

The artifact is a leadership-specific book titled *Bearing the Burden of Hospitality: Welcoming Families Affected by Autism into the Local Church*. The target audience is pastors, youth and children's ministers, elders, and other church leaders. The book will provide biblical support for church leaders to craft an inclusive theology of hospitality that extends beyond the neurotypical members of their congregations. The desired outcome is a corporate embodiment of God's welcome that includes individuals and families affected by conditions like ASD and that invites them into fellowship, worship, and ministry alongside fellow members in their faith communities. This resource will offer practical steps that pastors and church leaders can take to help their congregations move beyond a general acceptance of ASD-affected families toward the development of authentic community, friendship, and ministry partnership with them.

To address total word count for this project, chapters one, three, and four will be used in the book proposal. The book proposal will be sent to various publishers upon completion. The final version of the book will consist of six chapters divided into three sections; each chapter will include questions and evaluation tools suitable for pastoral teams, congregational boards, and other groups to use as they consider the strength of their current theology of hospitality toward ASD-affected families and grow in their care, understanding, and empathy.

SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

November 11, 2019

Dear [Publisher]:

Thank you for taking the time to consider my book proposal. This is the culmination of several years of research, conversations, and prayer. I believe that this work will fill a gap in the church growth and leadership market as it addresses a topic not often found in this genre.

As the lead pastor of Northridge Friends Church in Wichita, Kansas, I became passionate about the topic of hospitality toward people affected by autism after an interaction with a church member opened my eyes to the great need for a renewed vision of God's welcome to all people. Since then, my passion has grown as I have partnered with others who share this vision.

The current rate of autism spectrum disorder diagnoses in America serves as a warning sign for faith communities to pay attention to the unique needs of affected families. Hospitality is an area that many of these organizations claim to be proficient in, yet many ASD-affected families find themselves feeling unwelcome and unknown in these places. The need for a new approach to hospitality is evident. A number of preconceived notions and an overall lack of understanding create barriers for churches and their leaders, preventing them from offering God's full welcome to these families. A renewed theology, practical application, and the formational journey that accompanies these two will be helpful in supporting churches in overcoming these barriers and moving beyond tolerance and into acceptance and relationship with affected families. To address the hospitality gap that exists between faith communities and those affected by conditions like ASD, my proposed book, *Transformative Hospitality: How Welcoming Those Affected by Autism Can Change a Community*, will provide church pastors, staff, lay leaders, and members with helpful resources to begin rethinking how they view and respond to those affected by autism.

This book will follow the mold of many of Henri Nouwen's books in terms of word count and format. At 40,000 words, it will be a concise yet profound read that compels readers to deeper reflections, conversations, and ultimately action.

I am grateful for your consideration,

Manuel "Manny" Magana-Garcia
1503 North Judith Street
Wichita, Kansas 67212
316.680.3778
mgarcia@northridgefriends.org

Non-Fiction Book Proposal

Title: *Transformative Hospitality: How Welcoming Those Affected by Autism Can Change a Community*

Author: Manuel “Manny” Magana-Garcia
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Hook: With 1 in 40 children being diagnosed on the autism spectrum and 90 percent of families with disabled children not connected to a church, the gap between these families and faith communities is ever widening. As pastors, leaders, and church members learn to combat this trend by extending God’s full welcome, they will find themselves and their churches changed, and the Body of Christ among them more fully realized.

Overview: Hospitality is something most churches desire to model, but many modern expressions of it fall short of the full welcome that God would have his church embody. Families affected by ASD are among those that suffer the most from this deficiency. This book will provide a theological framework of God’s welcome, articulate the benefits of embracing families affected by ASD in churches, and offer practices that church leaders can use to begin to weave God’s full welcome into the DNA of their communities.

While there are many books focusing on hospitality and the subject of autism, the merging of the two seems to be a unique undertaking that will meet a growing need in church leadership literature. The perspective of this book will be different from others like it as this work will focus on the transformation of the host rather than the guest.

The goal of this book is to help pastors and other church leaders see what their communities lack when they disregard those affected by autism in their rhythms of hospitality. Once this is established, the book will help pastors and leaders initiate lasting changes to the way their congregations view God’s welcome through developing a practical theology of hospitality that is solidified through a liturgy of welcome toward families affected by conditions like ASD. In the end, this book will guide church members on a transformative journey that will open their eyes to the vastness of God’s kingdom and the diversity of the Body of Christ.

Purpose:

- Bring attention to the gap that exists between faith communities and those affected by autism.
- Provide a biblical framework for the inclusive nature of God's welcome.
- Articulate the significance of all people, and specifically those affected by conditions like ASD, to the Body of Christ.
- Tell my personal transformation story of extending God's welcome to ASD-affected families in my church.
- Give examples of faith communities who are embodying God's welcome to these families.
- Offer practices for church leaders and their congregations to engage in to help them grow in the area of hospitality toward people affected by ASD.

Promotion and Marketing: The number of ASD diagnoses in the United States (1/40) held up against the backdrop of the number of those families who are not connected to a faith community (90 percent) is enough to suggest a need for a book like this. There are several conferences for church leaders on the wider topic of disability, and connections made during the research for this project have yielded invitations for the author to lead workshops and speak at some of them. This will enable the author to self-promote this book and possibly even feature it at conference sales tables.

The author is also experienced in social media promotion and will be able to use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to inform the intended audience of the book's availability. Additionally, serving as a pastor in an established denomination enables the author to promote this work among colleagues within the denomination as well as fellow pastors in his region.

Finally, having served as a pastor in two Midwest states, having studied at both Barclay College and Portland Seminary, and having served in an adjunct professor role at both Barclay College and Friends University, the author has acquired a number of contacts that will be helpful in the promotion of this book, including at least two well-known Christian authors who are giving consideration to endorsing this work.

Competition:

- *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*, by Erik W. Carter, Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 2007.
- *Salt and Light: Church, Disability, and the Blessing of Welcome for All*, by Maureen Pratt, Twenty-Third Publications, 2018.
- *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church*, by Brett Webb-Mitchell, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994.
- *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace*, by Michael S. Beates, Crossway, 2012.

Uniqueness: While there are many books discussing the larger topic of disability and the church, few address autism directly. With the current rate of diagnosis and unique needs associated with autism, a book like this will stand out in its genre. This book will also focus on the journey of change that occurs when people and faith communities engage those affected by ASD. This perspective is also unique as most books focus on the benefits of welcome for the guest, not the transformation of the hosts.

Endorsements: Dr. Michael S. Beates, author of *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace*, has agreed to give his endorsement for this book. Stephen “Doc” Hunsley, founder of SOAR Special Needs Ministry, has also offered his endorsement. Dan Vander Plaats, author of *There is No Asterisk: Changing Attitudes about Differences Using the 5 Stages*, has agreed to read the proposal and consider an endorsement

Book Format: The book will consist of six chapters divided into three sections. This book will follow the mold of many of Henri Nouwen’s works in that it will be a robust yet concise read. The goal is to move the reader to deeper reflection, conversations, and ultimately action. Each chapter will include questions for reflection and discussion. The last section will include evaluation tools suitable for pastoral teams, congregational boards, and other groups to use in order to assess their current engagement level with those affected by ASD.

Book Outline:**Section 1: Why Hospitality Matters**

Rather than starting with a prescriptive mandate to welcome those affected by ASD because “God said so,” a solid rationale for inclusive hospitality will be developed. First, a strong moral case for the broad nature of God’s welcome toward families affected by ASD will be established through storytelling and a pastoral appeal. Second, a theology of God’s welcome will be outlined to inform readers of the biblical basis for God’s full

welcome. Additionally, some historical insights gleaned from different forms of hospitality throughout church history will be offered.

Chapter 1: Why Welcoming Matters

This chapter will open with a personal account of how I became so passionate about hospitality toward families affected by conditions like ASD, as well as accounts from others who have been on this journey. A case will then be made for extending God's full welcome to people who are affected by autism using research on the benefits of community and friendship, and discussing how many people affected by conditions like ASD are often deprived in these areas.

Chapter 2: A Theology and Brief History of God's Welcome

The way many churches view hospitality falls short of the comprehensive welcome that God exhibits in Scripture. Chapter two will show the inclusive nature of hospitality as modeled by God from Creation, through the Gospels, and beyond. Following this, a survey of hospitality throughout church history will be presented, highlighting moments that stand out as impactful for churches today.

Section 2: How Hospitality Changes a Community

Section two will begin with a chapter that presents several examples of groups and organizations that are doing well in the area of hospitality to ASD-affected families. Next, the transformational journey of hospitality will be outlined and expounded on.

Chapter 3: Hospitality in Action: A Review of Accomplished Organizations

This chapter will discuss how other organizations have responded to the needs of those affected by disability. The public-school system, employers, and para-church ministries have started to bridge the gap between themselves and families affected by autism. Churches do not have to blaze a new trail but can learn from those that have gone before them.

Chapter 4: The Transformational Journey of Hospitality

Chapter four will unpack the transformational journey of hospitality. When embodying God's full welcome toward families affected by autism, change is inevitable. The blessings received by coming fully to the table in communion with ASD-affected families far outweigh the costs.

Section 3: Where Hospitality Begins

The network of people who are working hard to help churches and faith communities become more inclusive for families affected by disability is a rather small one, but the people in it want nothing more than to share what they have learned so that others can join the work. In this section, stories from pastors and church leaders who have experience in leading their congregations toward a more robust theology and practice of hospitality toward families affected by conditions like autism will be shared. Tools and resources for pastors and leaders to begin evaluating their churches in the area of hospitality will also be included.

Chapter 5: How's Your Church Doing?

Chapter five will share the stories of pastors and leaders who have gone through the process of extending God's welcome to families affected by disabilities like autism. Through their stories of success and failure, they will assume the role of trail guide, as they help readers to navigate the journey of inclusion in their churches and faith communities. This chapter will conclude with some helpful assessments that can be used to discern how a church's current level of hospitality does or does not embody God's full welcome.

Chapter 6: What's Your Church Doing?

With insights gleaned and assessments made, the door is opened for church leaders to help their congregations consider a broader view of hospitality that extends beyond what has always been done. This chapter will help leaders articulate a new vision for partnership with families affected by conditions like autism in their churches. A tool to support the crafting of a Congregational Rule of Life will help churches apply all of their new insights and goals into a plan of action.

Intended Readers: The primary audience includes pastors, pastoral staff, elders, youth workers, and other church leaders. The secondary audience includes various church members of all commitment levels, as this book will be designed for use by individual readers and small groups.

Manuscript: Section one is complete, and section two is half finished. The estimated word count for the completed work will be between 35,000 and 40,000 words. A period of up to six months would be needed to complete it.

Author Bio: Manuel "Manny" Magana-Garcia has served as the lead pastor of Northridge Friends Church in Wichita, Kansas, for the past 5 years. He earned his B.A. in Pastoral Ministry and his M.A. in Transformational Leadership from Barclay College (Haviland, KS). In 2017 he began doctoral studies at Portland Seminary, studying Leadership and Spiritual Formation. Manny has also served as an adjunct professor at Barclay College and Friends University (Wichita, KS).

Manny became passionate about the topic of hospitality toward people affected by autism after an interaction with a church member opened his eyes to the great need for a renewed vision of God's welcome to all people. Since then, he has grown in this passion and partnered with others who share this vision.

Publishing Credits:

- "Spiritual Direction from a Friends Perspective" published March/April 2013 in *Quaker Life* magazine.
- "Seasons – Scripture for Living" published September/October 2013 in *Quaker Life* magazine.

- “The Journey of a Disciple” published January/February 2014 in *Quaker Life* magazine.
- In August 2015, Evangelical Friends Church-Mid America Yearly Meeting featured Manny’s article “Embracing the Peculiar” on its monthly blog.

Future Projects:

Hospitality Reimagined: How Churches Can Embrace Their Actual Neighbors

Continuing in the theme of hospitality, this work will look at how churches can cultivate the art of hospitality in their own communities. Gleaning insights from the Benedictines, Garcia will unpack the art of welcome and explain what it means to “love your neighbor as yourself” in today’s culture. Churches have become marketing machines, drawing people from all over their cities to the biggest and best shows in town, but there is still value in investing in the parish.

Welcoming the Broken: Understanding the Needs of the Silent Sufferer

There are many silent sufferers in need of community, but the barriers they face can be daunting. In this work, Garcia will use his own experience of abuse, neglect, and abandonment to provide a framework for church leaders to understand the needs of those whose traumas have become a barrier to authentic community. Culture has taught many people to keep their wounds hidden, but when the church can become a safe space for healing, radical transformation is possible.

Received and Renewed: How Church Saved My Life

In this autobiography, Garcia will tell his story of growing up in an apathetically Catholic family riddled with abuse. In his journey of self-preservation, he was introduced to true authentic community, and it changed his life. In spite of divorces, teen pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts, God used the best things about his Church to rescue this young man and inspire him to a life of kingdom work.

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

When I began my doctoral journey at Portland Seminary, my focus was far from the subject of autism or how churches might better welcome and support affected families. Throughout this program, however, I was challenged by the coursework, my professors, and my peers to be attentive to certain behaviors and issues within my spheres of influence. As I began to look at things with a new perspective, I realized that the gap between ASD-affected families and local churches and faith communities was an area of great need. Right in my own church was a group of people whose adversities, needs, and journeys were not being heard or acknowledged.

The discussions, research, and growth that I have experienced in preparing this written statement and accompanying artifact, *Transformative Hospitality: How Welcoming Those Affected by Autism Can Change a Community*, have been invaluable to me and will be a strong foundation for future endeavors in this area of need. This book proposal will allow me to gain support for the completed work to be promoted and utilized in churches across the country. Additionally, the partnerships with others whose hearts break for this cause have enabled me to enter into a community that will continue to undergird and encourage my efforts. One tangible fruit of this process will be a conference for church leaders to learn about this ministry opportunity toward ASD-affected families. The research from this written statement and my book, as well as partnerships I have gained in this process, will provide a deep resource pool for this event.

Because this area of need is still very underserved, there is still much to learn about how churches can best welcome, support, and partner with ASD-affected families.

It is exciting to consider a series of conferences and collaborations with organizations like SOAR and Joni & Friends in the future. I believe that what is being learned at the local church level, where people are investing in the hard work of developing friendship and working in ministry together, will prove to be a wealth of information for organizations like these. A grassroots/bottom-up approach to this ministry opportunity is emerging and, if those in the local church will embark on this journey, the kingdom of God will be experienced among them.

APPENDIX

TRANSFORMATIVE HOSPITALITY: HOW WELCOMING THOSE AFFECTED BY
AUTISM CAN CHANGE A COMMUNITY

By Manuel Magana-Garcia

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SECTION 1: WHY HOSPITALITY MATTERS

Three years ago, I was unaware of the world of confusion, pain, rejection, and loneliness that families affected by conditions like autism live in, and then I met Kim. I was ignorant to the strife, the needs, and the lack of inclusion that they experience, especially within their faith communities, and then I met Kim. When the call from Kim's sister came, I wasn't expecting it. Kim is a member of the church I pastor and from what I knew at the time, in generally good health. Her sister was calling to tell me she was in the hospital and asking that I come to see her. While this was surprising, I didn't think twice about it because, as a pastor, I visit people in the hospital often.

When I made it to Kim's room, she was already on the verge of tears. Over the next two hours she told me the story of loneliness, depression, confusion, and resentment that she had been living in for the past few years. When her son, Hunter, was two years old, he was hospitalized for some serious health issues. Prayer warriors surrounded them and together with the doctors, they went to battle. Hunter's symptoms began with severe stomach pain and vomiting to the point of becoming pale and then blue. Once at the hospital, doctors discerned that his lower intestine had died. His chances of survival were slim. The decision to transfer Hunter to a larger hospital was a difficult one, because moving him was very dangerous, but it was also his best chance of survival. Once they arrived at Children's Mercy in Kansas City, Hunter's kidneys and liver began to shut down. According to Kris, Hunter's father, he was the "sickest kid in the intensive care unit." Doctors said he was also the toughest. He kept fighting and, with the help of some amazing doctors and lots of prayer, he made a full recovery.

Today Hunter is a typical, energetic seven-year-old. Even so, this experience was emotionally, physically, and spiritually taxing on Kim and Kris. Now, in the hospital herself, Kim was not only reflecting on how thankful she was for Hunter's recovery, but also wondering if she had the strength to endure a new set of challenges with him. As I sat with Kim, through tears and gasps, she finally got out the words, "I think Hunter has autism." She had quietly reasoned this to be the case for quite some time but had only recently shared it with Kris. The stress of it all had finally overcome her. I didn't have any answers. I didn't any have words. I just listened while Kim let out all of the questions, doubts, fears, and struggles that she had been bottling up since Hunter's release from the hospital years earlier. This tension had been a strain on her marriage, at her job, and pretty much everything else she was involved in. The weight Kim had been carrying for all these years had finally overpowered her, and her knees buckled.

If you heard Kim tell this story, you might be shocked at the difference in perspective. I did nothing more than listen, but she claims that I saved her life. I didn't know it at the time, but Kim had been considering suicide. The depression she was experiencing had her backed into a corner, and she couldn't see a way out. I did my best to assure Kim that she wasn't alone. I told her that her church family wanted to support her, to bear the burdens that their family faced. I didn't really know what that entailed at the time, but I meant every word.

Kim confessed that one of her greatest fears was that if Hunter did indeed have autism, that they would have to leave the church. Hearing her say this was like getting punched in the gut. I had always thought of our church as very inclusive and hospitable, but after hearing her concern, I began to wonder if this was actually true. Her statement

and the questions that followed became the catalyst for the journey I would embark on over the next two years: learning about autism, how it affects families, and what churches can do to journey with these families in this extremely lonely and trying circumstance.

In section one of this book, rather than starting with a prescriptive mandate to welcome those affected by autism because “God said so,” I will offer a practical foundation for inclusive hospitality that extends beyond our normative church culture and a “what we’ve always done” approach. I will present definitive cause for extending God’s full welcome to families affected by conditions like autism through the sharing of some stories and insights I have experienced over the past two years. Next, I will outline a robust theology of God’s welcome for all people. This will provide a solid framework for developing a praxis of hospitality and encourage the formational journey of welcoming families affected by autism into our churches.

Chapter 1: Why Welcoming Matters

This is what the Lord Almighty said: “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”

Zechariah 7:9-10

People with disabling conditions, including those who live life with physical, developmental, behavioral, medical, emotional, hearing, or visual disability, are considered strange and different in a society that is primarily comfortable with those who look, sound, and act “normal”—whatever that is. Unfortunately, in this world, and even in many churches, “different” is still equated with “deviant.”

Brett Webb-Mitchell

Hospitality Inspires Community

It has been said that experience is the best teacher, and in my journey toward recognizing the gap that exists between individuals and families affected by autism and faith communities, that certainly has been the case. In my interactions with Kim’s family and others affected by conditions like autism, it has been in getting to know them deeply, understanding their needs, and seeing their gifts that I have discovered what our churches miss out on by not partnering with them in life, worship, and ministry. The more I learned about these families and about how churches and faith communities respond to them, the more I realized that this isn’t a localized issue. This isn’t an oversight or a missing program; it’s a growing concern for churches everywhere. The most recent study, released in November of 2018, states that one in forty children will be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).¹ In this study, it is also noted that most of the cases are

¹ Michael D. Kogan, et al., “The Prevalence of Parent-Reported Autism Spectrum Disorder Among US Children,” *Pediatrics* 142, no. 6 (December 2018), 1, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/11/21/peds.2017-4161>.

self-reported by the families, meaning that the actual number of individuals living with this disorder is likely much higher.

A 2018 study conducted by the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* reports that less than half of families affected by autism attend religious services yearly.² The need becomes glaringly obvious when we hold this statistic against the fact that the number of families affected by autism is on the rise. Local churches are directly affected by this oversight, as families in our own congregations feel tolerated but not fully welcome. Knowing this isn't enough, however, because many church leaders assume that their congregations aren't prepared to respond to the growing needs associated with autism. A misunderstanding of the wide range of behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorder can paralyze some church leaders which results in not doing anything different at all. The typical alternative is an inadequate attempt at a generic "one size fits all" approach to hospitality. Both of these options fail time and again. One sends the message that these families aren't worth the effort, and the other causes affected families to feel like objects of ministry rather than members of a community. A third option must be discovered.

When churches aren't prepared to welcome these affected families, the gap widens between our churches and these people who truly need a community. When these families don't feel welcome, wanted, or seen, they have one less place that feels safe, one less place to let down their guard and be fully present. Like Kim, affected family members can feel cornered, lost, and alone. When churches aren't viewed as safe places

² Andrew L. Whitehead, "Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2018), 380-81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12521>.

by someone in need, the response from pastors and leaders must be an evaluative one. We have to ask, “What are we not seeing?”

Most churches don't have a way to evaluate themselves when it comes to welcoming people outside of the majority demographic. Instead, we can assume that if we feel welcome, everyone does. This is a faulty and dangerous narrative. A church is supposed to be the kind of community whose primary focus should be on those who are not yet a part of it. And the studies show that people affected by autism are a large part of that group. So, if these people are saying they don't feel welcome or wanted, the answer can't be, “Well, we do, so I'm not sure what more we could do.” Instead, it must be something close to, “I'm very sorry to hear that. Tell me more about what we're missing and how we can grow in this area.”

This is a difficult path to walk, because we all like to think that our churches are friendly and welcoming. We smile, say hello, and even hug if the moment is right. But we can't mistake these gestures for hospitality. When we do, we overlook many of the critical elements required for authentic community to take place. Most of us may be okay with this, even if only subconsciously, because we have other circles that provide for these common needs. Many of the families affected by autism aren't afforded that same luxury. Often, they just want a space where their entire family can be vulnerable and accepted, and it makes sense that a church should be one of the places eager to provide for that. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many areas.

I had the chance to sit down with a group of parents who have children living with ASD and I learned a great deal about their needs, what they look for in a church, and what they thought was missing in their churches and faith communities regarding

hospitality to ASD-affected families. All of the families shared that they felt disconnected from their churches due to the unique nature of their needs and burdens and the lack of intentional effort on the part of their churches to truly know them. Many of the families said that engaging with their faith communities was moderately easy, yet most of them noted that the level of inclusion shown to them from people in their churches is very low. Of all of the families I spoke with, only one family said that they felt fully accepted by their faith community. It's important to add that the members of this family have been part of their church for many years, which helped them feel safe enough to share their journey with others. This is a beautiful and rare exception to the norm.

All of the families I spoke with claimed that their churches were not well-prepared to meet the needs of their children with autism, mostly due to not understanding the unique nature of their condition. Many parents told stories of their children being treated as if they are misbehaving when they would have emotional outbursts or strong reactions to certain situations. One mother added, "Even when we are in the sanctuary for worship, if I have to give my son headphones or an iPad to keep him focused, I get stares and looks of judgement, because they don't really understand what my son's condition entails."

The families all agreed that education is the biggest need when considering how churches can be more understanding, accommodating, and welcoming to families affected by autism and related conditions. As one parent noted, "Most people just don't understand. Our kids look like every other normal kid. They aren't physically disabled, but they are dealing with things that other kids aren't. If people knew, I think they'd have more empathy." This mom's statement echoes that of many other parents and is

supported by research presented in the *Journal of Applied Research on Intellectual Disabilities*. The study identified five key characteristics of inclusive faith communities. Of the five, educational resources for church members ranked second behind key leaders being committed to inclusion.³

It's easy to get excited at the possibility of helping more of these families feel welcome and included in our churches through more education and deliberate leadership buy in, but we have to be realistic with our expectations. This is a complicated problem that can't be fixed with a simple, programmatic solution. Currently 90 percent of families with disabled children are not connected to a church.⁴ This suggests that the complexity of this need will require a great deal of intentionality, introspection, humility, and sacrifice on the part of congregations. The first question that must be asked is, "Do we really want this?" The truth is, some churches won't. It's sad, but historically we have seen many churches choose to remain comfortable rather than to embody the characteristics of the Body of Christ as modeled by Christ. My encouragement to those who might find the task too daunting to undertake would be to consider the value of deep community in your own lives. Many families affected by autism do not share in that experience. There is a great and growing need for someone to step up and enter into community with these families, not as objects of our ministry but as brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot allow fear, comfort, or excuses to deter us from leading our

³ Megan M. Griffin, et al., "Characteristics of Inclusive Faith Communities: A Preliminary Survey of Inclusive Practices in the United States," *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 25, no. 4 (2012), 391, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3148.2011.00675.x>.

⁴ Amy Switzer, "Special Needs: How to Ensure You Never Leave a Child Behind," Children's Ministry, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://childrensministry.com/special-needs-no-child-left-behind/>.

congregations in extending God's full welcome. When we settle for anything less than this, we fall short of the image of the Body of Christ that we are called to emulate.

It's abundantly clear that, while community is a deep need and desire for families affected by conditions like autism, many churches are ill equipped to journey with them in authentically supportive ways. Education will play an important role in seeing progress for this worthwhile ministry opportunity, because most people are simply unaware of the unique needs, challenges, and burdens that these families face on a day-to-day basis. Beyond that, a deliberate movement toward becoming the best expression of the Body of Christ we can be will prove essential. God's full welcome is not optional for the church that seeks to become the best version of itself. If our churches are to become a refuge for all people—and particularly for families affected by ASD—and a place for them to find community and respite, there is much work to be done.

We Haven't Arrived

The deficiencies that many churches have in their ministry to and inclusion of families affected by autism are due, in large part, to simply being unaware of the unique needs, challenges, and desires of these families, and misunderstanding biblical hospitality toward the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40). In the 1960s, a sweeping push for accessibility emerged, and with it a long overdue increase in our awareness of the unique needs associated with physical disability. Fast forward sixty years and you can hardly find a church building that does not have handicap accessible restrooms, handicap parking spaces, or wheelchair ramps. Even the small rural church that I pastored in Iowa made the financially difficult decision to install a lift so that the physically impaired

members would be able to enter the sanctuary located at the top of a steep flight of stairs. This was in a church of ninety! The truth is, we have seen a great deal of progress concerning the inclusion of those affected by disability, but we haven't arrived just yet.

The progress observed in the area of disability awareness has been helpful in easing the difficulties that physically disabled people face when attending weekly worship services and other congregational events. Since these efforts began, the knowledge, awareness, and responsiveness to disability have grown exponentially. We are now more aware than ever of various kinds of conditions that affect people physically, emotionally, cognitively, and so on. Unfortunately, this growth in awareness has outrun the innovations and attempts to create accessible environments that were so evident early in this movement. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our churches. The number of churches pursuing accessibility and inclusion for disabilities like autism is staggeringly low when compared to the number of people this disorder affects each year.

As abhorrent as this is, there isn't really anyone to point the finger of blame at because overlooking cognitive disabilities like autism is truly a cultural phenomenon. Dr. Thomas Reynolds, author of *Vulnerable Community: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, explains that as a culture we have accepted a generalized understanding of cognitive disability, and that this reality has a profound impact on our theological understanding and approach to hospitality toward disabled individuals and their families.⁵ He contends that, "Christians commonly adopt the prevailing medical model of disability. This model is based on what non-disabled people think is best for persons with

⁵ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Community: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 25.

disabilities . . . and from a societal perspective this means disability is a liability, a dysfunction legitimating professional and welfare services.”⁶ He adds:

Persons with autism are subject to barriers rooted in societal attitudes and assumptions about what it means to be whole or healthy, which become springboards for representing autistic experience and investing it with attributes and meanings that extend far beyond its physiological conditions . . . [it] takes on a social role as normalcy’s ‘other,’ a feature of deviance that automatically pushes it to the margins.⁷

In other words, our churches, like the cultures they belong to, tend to draw conclusions about what is best for those living with disabilities in our congregations. It’s almost muscle memory at this point. We have become so accustomed to making decisions in our boards and committees that it is increasingly difficult to remember to pause and ask those affected by conditions we don’t fully understand what they need. When we fail to ask these kinds of questions, we contribute to the deficiencies and continue in the kind of ignorance that preserves the feelings of being unwanted and unheard that many of these families have.

Most types of physical disability are now well understood and widely accepted under societal norms, but disabilities like autism spectrum disorder continue to be underacknowledged and cast aside from the normal considerations of culture. Churches intensify this reality by not intentionally equipping and educating the members of their congregations to approach these kinds of disabilities with the same level of concern and empathy that they would have for the more obvious physical disabilities they encounter. Further, the narrative that informs us to treat those affected by disabilities differently—as

⁶ Reynolds, 25.

⁷ Reynolds, 27.

objects of ministry rather than brothers and sisters—is harmful to the forward progress of authentic community for all people in a congregation.

This lack of adaptability and intentionality has resulted in many churches simply ignoring their calling to welcome and love all people, particularly those on the margins of society. The devastating result is more than a mere oversight of the unique needs associated with conditions like autism; it is nothing short of a distortion of the biblical mandate to extend hospitality to all of God’s people. This distorted view of God’s welcome has resulted in many of these families becoming spiritual orphans, tolerated but not fully welcome. The reality is, disorders like autism are not going away any time soon. In fact, ASD is now the fastest growing developmental disability in the world.⁸ With that in mind, how will our churches respond?

Following the Example of Others

Fortunately, the way forward is not a trail our churches will have to blaze on their own. The failure to understand the unique needs of the individuals and families affected by autism is not a new problem, and our churches can learn from others who have gone before us. The growing awareness surrounding the needs of conditions like autism has led many organizations to engage in efforts that bridge the gap between themselves and those affected by cognitive disabilities. The public-school system might just be the farthest along in this process. Decision makers for the school system have been working to better understand and meet the distinct needs of children with disabilities for decades. In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed, affirming that

⁸ Autism Spectrum Disorder Foundation, “About Autism,” accessed April 25, 2019, <https://myasdf.org/about-autism/>.

persons with disabilities were entitled to the same right to education as non-disabled children.⁹ Although this act was groundbreaking for children with physical disabilities, conditions like autism were not added until 1990 when the act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).¹⁰ The most recent update released in 2004 includes innovative approaches to inclusion for all students such as less restrictive environments (LRE) for children with disabilities.¹¹ This means that children with conditions like autism are afforded the right to be in the same classrooms and learning environments as non-disabled children. Inclusion of people with special needs has been a formal effort for the public-school system since 1975, and nearly forty-five years later, it is one of the bright spots for disability inclusion in our country. This is not to say that public schools have it all figured out. They do, however, consistently evaluate and refine their approach to education for children with disabilities, and in doing so offer a hopeful example to others who are striving to be more understanding and inclusive. Leaders in the public education system probably wouldn't call these measures hospitality, but that is exactly what they model through the continual efforts to accommodate for the unique needs of children with disabilities and by welcoming them into the larger community of students.

This is much different from what happens in many churches, however. The burden and expectation of accommodation and flexibility are most often placed on guests

⁹ Autism Speaks, "Your Child's Rights," accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/your-childs-rights>.

¹⁰ The University of Kansas School of Education, "Timeline of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)," accessed April 26, 2019, <https://educationonline.ku.edu/community/idea-timeline>.

¹¹ Fred R. Volkmar and Lisa A. Wiesner, *A Practical Guide to Autism: What Every Parent, Family Member, and Teacher Needs to Know* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 89.

and visitors rather than on the regular attenders. Henri Nouwen challenges this paradigm with this explanation: “Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”¹² In many churches today, this description of hospitality is more of a romanticized fantasy than an achievable reality. The dividing lines are quite clear to those people who find themselves “on the outs,” and they are especially clear to families affected by conditions like autism. This is due, in part, to the fact that biblical hospitality, in the manner of Christ, is not something that naturally emerges in many congregations.

Extending a full welcome to those who have different needs or challenges than we do takes an immense amount of intentionality and hard work. But when we take time to truly reflect on the example and life of Christ, it doesn’t take long to see that this is *the* way to represent God’s welcoming nature as his church. Author Marion Landua-Figueroa adds, “Jesus was never ashamed to surround himself with the people who had apparent or not so visible disabilities. He knows what it means to be with a disabled person.”¹³ There are multiple examples in the Gospels that show Jesus, our model of spiritual maturity, not only interacting with people affected by disabilities but loving them and ascribing value to them. Love and ascribed value are essential ingredients to successful hospitality and a pathway into deeper community. Genuine hospitality is much more than a smile or a kind

¹² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movement of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 71.

¹³ Marion Landua-Figueroa, *The Ignored, Overlooked and Often Forgotten Souls: Church + Special Needs Families = Joshua’s Quest* (Columbia, SC: self-pub. Createspace, 2013), 8.

word; it is sacrificial and sincere, requiring a persistent effort, a willingness to confess mistakes, and a determination to pursue nothing short of all people feeling valued and accepted, no matter their condition. Authentic community necessitates being known and knowing others. Erik Carter, the assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin explains:

Although an accessible building is essential, it is through interactions and relationships with others that welcome is truly communicated. Hospitality can be demonstrated in simple ways . . . but an inclusive congregation is known for more than just easy hospitality. Its members invite people to lunch, spend time really getting to know them, celebrate their successes, and stand alongside them in difficult times. Gestures must have authenticity and substance; they must offer much more than just the veneer of welcome. A congregation can *say* all of the right things, but still fail to nurture close relationships and fall short of addressing people's needs.¹⁴

This means that pastors and leaders can't just say that their churches are welcoming and inclusive and move on. We can't just put these words on our website or hang them on a banner and hope we live up to them. True transformation requires intentional behaviors and disciplines. It is sacrificial.

The need for movement from what Carter calls "easy hospitality" to something more intentional became abundantly clear to me when I hosted a discussion panel on the topic of hospitality and inclusion toward families affected by autism. The goal was to discuss how our church could grow in our awareness and effort to extend a full welcome to these families. Before the discussion panel, I would have said that our church was doing well in our efforts to welcome and include the families affected by disability in our congregation. I was actually confident in it considering my interaction with Kim in the

¹⁴ Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2007), 29.

hospital and our growing friendship since, as well as all that I was learning through my research. But my eyes were about to be opened even wider.

All of the parents on the panel shared stories about how they have had to adapt to the expectations of a children's ministry program, event, or church service even though their needs and struggles are very different from that of normative culture families. One mother told her story through tears, sharing that her son struggles to sit still during an entire worship service, and it can become quite distracting. Rather than being met with grace, she is often met with glares, animosity, and requests that she "please get her child under control." This has led to her having to move her son to the foyer, and on days when that's not enough, she waits in her car while the rest of her family remains in the worship service. If hospitality is about creating space, as Henri Nouwen noted, then how can having this mother remove herself and her child from the community be a helpful solution?

Another parent shared that while our church often did an acceptable job of welcoming her family, they still willingly choose to leave their autistic son at home with a caretaker because they felt he was a distraction to the other worshippers. She said, "I don't want to distract someone else from their experience with God." The fact is, this mother didn't arrive at this place on her own. This is the result of years of feeling embarrassed or singled out for her son's behaviors. I can't help but wonder what would be different if our church had done more to journey with her and her family early on. What if instead of ignoring them or glancing their direction when their son, Tanner, was loud or moving around, people asked how they could help? What if we were more willing

to offer true companionship rather than cordiality? My guess is that Tanner would still be a regular and active part of our faith community.

When this mother shared her concern for those who might be distracted by her son, one of the other panel members, a special education teacher said, “If you don’t bring him, how can I learn to love him? How can we learn to love anyone who is different than us if we aren’t given the chance? If our goal is to be the Body of Christ, we need your son to do it.” This statement carries a wealth of truth for us all. How can we learn to love someone who is different from us if we aren’t given the chance? At the same time, asking for that chance requires a great deal of responsibility on our part. True change requires effort. As the age-old adage demonstrates, “actions speak louder than words.”

The kind of change it will take to embody a full welcome to those affected by autism will require a great deal of intentionality. This begs the question: Where do we draw the line when it comes to hospitality? How far do we have to go to make others feel welcome, wanted, safe, and a part of the community? If Jesus is our model, then the line is nothing short of giving all that we have, but not everyone is ready to go there.

The kind of hospitality that our churches are called to represent as the Body of Christ is one that involves us giving up what we want, what we are used to, and sometimes even what we think we need. It will take a high level of humility that permits us to say that we don’t always know what’s best and that places us in the posture of students, able to learn from our guests who are different from us but who deserve nothing less than God’s full welcome. Thomas Reynolds’s explanation helps bring further clarity:

Hospitality itself involves vulnerability, a mixing between guest and host that undoes the distinction between outsider and insider. . . . Once the stranger is invited in, the host yields stability and control, adjusting the household to accommodate and attend to the guest’s unique needs as they became apparent.

Offering hospitality in this way invites disruption in household order and routine.¹⁵

Examples of this kind of hospitality are often rare in churches, because tradition and order are typically more appreciated than accommodating the needs of our guests who are unfamiliar with the way things are done. In churches I have pastored in, I have seen people get up in arms when someone is sitting in “their seat” on a Sunday morning. When I think about things like this and compare them to the level of sacrifice it will take to truly offer a full welcome to others, to come to the table of communion with them, and to receive them fully as they are, I get discouraged. It’s no wonder we fall so short of the mark we are called to hit regarding God’s welcome. While it breaks my heart, it also helps me understand why many families affected by autism and other disabilities just opt out altogether. Author Michael Beates explains this decision: “Families with disabled members will seldom risk further rejection and loneliness by venturing to visit a new church. It will take work to attract people not normally on our church list.”¹⁶

Right now, the numbers are telling us that either church leaders have decided the work it will take to make these changes, to grow in our awareness and understanding, and to truly welcome families affected by conditions like autism is too daunting to undertake, or that some just don’t know where to begin. The best some churches are doing is maintaining cordial ties with families affected by conditions like ASD. Stepping into the radical hospitality that God desires for his church to live into, and that Jesus modeled for us in his life, is not something we see many churches practicing. I attribute this mostly to

¹⁵ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Community*, 243.

¹⁶ Michael S. Beates, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 142.

a lack of understanding concerning our biblical mandate to welcome the outsider to our table. It's important for our churches to have a clear and robust understanding of the theology of welcome shown to us through the ways God has welcomed his people throughout the Scriptures and historically. In the next chapter I will outline a biblical basis for extending God's full welcome and highlight several historical examples of Christian hospitality.

Questions for Reflection

1. How aware are you of those in your faith community that are affected by conditions that you are unfamiliar with, such as autism? How can you grow in your awareness?
2. What are some questions you might ask a person or family affected by autism to better understand their needs and perspective?
3. Why do you think some churches find it so hard to adapt to the needs of those with conditions like autism?
4. With the current diagnoses rates, there is a high chance your church has individuals affected by autism or a similar condition in the congregation. Think of one or two of them that you might try to get to know better and make a plan to have a conversation with them.

A Prayer for Understanding

*God, I confess that it's hard to truly see those who are different from me.
I confess that it is easier to remain comfortable than it is to learn to love someone
I don't understand.
Lord, open my eyes to those around me.
Give me the grace to be a student of the guests I encounter.
Help me to fully embrace my position in the Body of Christ and to honor all of the
other parts of the Body.
Give me the wisdom to ask questions, the patience to listen, and the compassion to
pursue friendship with the guests I encounter.
In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.*

Chapter 2: A Theology and Brief History of God's Welcome

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 19:32-33

This intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians. Jesus welcomes and needs welcome; Jesus requires that followers depend on and provide hospitality. The practice of Christian hospitality is always located within the larger picture of Jesus' sacrificial welcome to all who come to him.

Christine D. Pohl

Hospitality is central to the identity of every disciple of Jesus Christ and so it is central to the church as Jesus envisioned it. A flimsy understanding of biblical hospitality will lead to frustration in our churches and to our eventual failure to extend God's welcome beyond the walls of our church buildings. It will also bind our congregations to the recurring practices and procedures of a typical Sunday morning experience with no imagination for a more vibrant expression of God's kingdom. If churches desire to become better equipped to welcome, support, and encourage families affected by conditions like autism, then a full-bodied theology of hospitality must be the cornerstone of any attempts to do so.

A simple dictionary definition of *hospitality* gives us a good starting point for what the outward activity of hospitality demands of us: "given to generous and cordial reception of guests, suggesting a generous and friendly welcome, offering a pleasant or sustaining environment."¹⁷ The outworking of the discipline of hospitality in our

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "hospitable," accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hospitable>.

congregations, however, must be built upon a robust theological support system that provides both a rationale and a motivation for the work itself. The theology and praxis of Christian hospitality must be more than our feeble attempts to accommodate guests as hotels or restaurants do. Popular church growth magazines and websites continually use Starbucks, Chick-fil-a, and other mainstream organizations as ideal models of hospitality for local churches, but the call to hospitality for the church of Jesus Christ is much more profound than managing to provide good customer service. The demand for such approaches and models remains high, however, revealing the sad fact that many churches approach hospitality too narrowly or not at all. The truth is, the church is called to nothing less than what author Letty Russell describes as “the practice of God’s welcome embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”¹⁸

When we faithfully consider the theological basis for hospitality by examining the character of God the Father/Creator and the life of Jesus, his Son, it is easy to see that many people in our churches have too narrow a view of hospitality, which leads us to a deficient outworking of this essential discipline and encourages the cementing of our typical self-interested approaches. The local church, if it is to be an expression of the church universal, must make hospitality a priority. Christine Pohl rightly points out, “Hospitality is not optional for Christians. It is, instead, a necessary practice in the community of faith.”¹⁹ In the next two sections I will present examples of God’s full

¹⁸ Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 31.

welcome extended to the other, the stranger, the broken, and the needy, from both the Old and New Testaments.

God's Welcome in the Old Testament

The discipline of hospitality is essential to the Christian life and to the gospel message that the church announces and claims. Theology professor Luke Bretherton notes, "The paradigm of hospitality set out in biblical texts . . . has informed the thinking and practice of the church throughout its history. From its earliest writings, right through to contemporary practice, there is evidence for the centrality of hospitality."²⁰ God's hospitable character is evident from the earliest recorded moment in Scripture, the Creation account. In their book, *The Simplest Way to Change the World: Biblical Hospitality as a Way of Life*, Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements write:

In the very first chapters of Genesis we see God's hospitality on display in full, creative force. He creates the heavens and the earth, and by doing so fashions the perfect home for Adam and Eve. He provides everything they need to thrive in created joy. . . . The word *every* or *everything* appears repeatedly in these verses. Genesis 1 reads like the most gracious host in the world is welcoming you into His castle.²¹

This generous display of hospitality is increased exponentially following Adam and Eve's willing betrayal of God by rebelling against the commands he had set for them in the Garden. God could have reasonably reacted with wrath, but instead God responds to Adam and Eve's rebellion with grace, first by searching for them and then by caring

²⁰ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 138.

²¹ Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements, *The Simplest Way to Change the World: Biblical Hospitality as a Way of Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017), 38.

for their needs. When He found them, He fashioned clothing for them to cover their newfound shame and then proceeded to disclose His plan to provide for them, even in the aftermath of the fall, through the working of the land, and ultimately through a Redeemer who would crush the head of the enemy.²² This account climaxes in the most emblematic act of all biblical hospitality, the sending of his own Son, according to the proper lineage, in order to replace the sins of humanity with his own holiness. Willis and Clements add, “The Bible begins with God making a home for humanity to dwell with Him in a garden and the Bible ends with God making a home for believers to dwell with Him in a city.”²³ It is between these two stories, between the beginning and the end, that the rich account of God’s hospitality and the manner in which he calls his followers to model hospitality are found.

One significant example is found in the laws given by God to Moses. Leviticus 19:33-34 says, “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” Luke Bretherton comments on this passage, noting that “true hospitality requires we understand both the experience of being a vulnerable stranger and what it means to receive all things from God. To be sensitized to the needs and fears of a stranger we must remember the experience of being ‘aliens in the land.’”²⁴ The Israelites would have understood this better than most people because they were sojourners, themselves. As such, God was

²² Genesis 3:1-24.

²³ Willis and Clements, 40.

²⁴ Bretherton, 138.

inviting them to remember that fact and their dependence upon him. This remembrance would serve as their inspiration for obedience to the command of hospitality to the alien, outcast, and marginalized. This helps us understand that biblical hospitality today is, in part, the simple act of remembering our own experiences of being aliens, outcasts, or marginalized people. We all depend on others at some point in our lives, and we certainly all depend on the goodness and love of God through our lives. When we take time to reflect on these truths, we begin to realize that our stations in life are only made possible through God's gift of hospitality to us through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, and through the welcoming and supportive nature of community.

While the law offers many other notable examples of God's desire for his people to embody his hospitable nature, one of the most profound illustrations of hospitality found in the Old Testament is in the account of Abraham and his three visitors in Genesis 18:1-15. Lee Roy Martin offers a helpful commentary on this interaction between Abraham and his guests, observing that "the object of hospitality is a traveler, not a neighbor and not someone expected. It is evident from Abraham's greeting that he recognized his visitors as travelers."²⁵ This is significant because we can't just program hospitality into the life and rhythm of our churches. Instead, we have to approach the unexpected visitor as Abraham does, with a readiness to serve and a desire to express the love of God through our willingness to sacrificially offer all that we have and all that we are to our guests. Each guest is unique, and as such our approaches to welcome must be adaptable and sacrificial.

²⁵ Lee Roy Martin, "Old Testament Foundations for Christian Hospitality," *Verbum et Ecclesia; Pretoria*, 2014, 3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.752>.

In addition to Abraham's readiness to serve and his desire to express God's love, his interaction with these travelers reveals other key characteristics of biblical hospitality that are helpful for church leaders to consider. First, by going out to meet them and bowing to them, he shows humility and a willingness to accommodate the needs of his guests. Next, Abraham recognizes and meets an immediate need by offering water to his guests to wash their feet with. This action accomplishes two things; first, it provides the travelers with the opportunity to accept the generosity of their host, and secondly, it creates the opportunity for future acts of generosity to be shared between host and guest. A final characteristic revealed in Abraham's interaction with these travelers is that genuine hospitality must be offered without the expectation of being paid back. Abraham was not presuming to be reimbursed for his generosity yet he was still blessed. This is often the case when we are generous in our welcoming of others. We don't do it for the purpose of being blessed, but often we are anyway. When I sat with Kim in the hospital that day, I had no idea how much this journey of friendship, learning, and awareness would bless me. I was simply offering her what I had, a listening ear and my presence, and in return I have been given the invaluable gifts of perspective, friendship, and a call to share the truth of God's welcome with others.

As noted above, hospitality in the ancient world of Abraham was focused on the alien or the sojourner in need. The life of alien travelers was a desperate one as they did not belong to a people group and had no support outside of the generosity of strangers. This description is fitting to our subject since many of the families affected by conditions like autism don't have a people to belong to either. It is obvious that these people, the outcasts, aliens, sojourners, and marginalized, were near to the heart of God, and so are

the families we are talking about. To fully grasp this truth, we only need to consider the many expressions of hospitality found in the Old Testament. God is near to the overlooked and marginalized person. God's heart breaks for the sojourner who depends on others. These tangible expressions of God's hospitable heart by his people not only invite us to a deeper embodiment of his full welcome, but they anticipate the arrival of the Redeemer who would perfectly represent God's nature and reveal the fullness of his hospitality toward His people.

For a better picture of God's full welcome in the Old Testament, take some time to read and reflect on the following passages:

- Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God." See also Deuteronomy 24:19-22 and Ruth 2:2-17.
- Deuteronomy 14:28-29: "At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."
- Deuteronomy 16:10-12: "Then celebrate the Festival of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees."
- Isaiah 58:6-7: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

- Job 31:16-23: “If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless—but from my youth I reared them as a father would, and from birth I guided the widow—if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or the needy without garments, and their hearts did not bless me for warming them with the fleece from my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things.”
- Proverbs 19:17: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.”

God’s Welcome in the New Testament

Not unlike the Creation account in Genesis, the birth of Christ is a significant example of God’s hospitality on full display. At Creation, God gave all things to humanity for their nourishment, to subdue and to enjoy.²⁶ After the fall, God searched for Adam and Eve, fashioned clothes for them, and laid out a plan that would end with the complete restoration and redemption of the created order.²⁷ Then, as told in John’s Gospel account, the Word was with God at the Creation, was present for the fall of humanity, and continued to work among His people in the ancient times “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”²⁸ Throughout his time on earth, Jesus not only took on the posture of host, but he was often a guest as well. It should come as no surprise then that the Greek word translated as “hospitality” in the New Testament can mean both “host” and “guest.”²⁹

²⁶ Genesis 1:28-31.

²⁷ Genesis 3:9-21.

²⁸ John 1:14.

²⁹ JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012) 201.

In John 1:10-14 Jesus is presented to readers as one that the world did not recognize and that his own did not receive. This observation corresponds with the parable of the great banquet in Luke's Gospel. In this passage, Jesus tells the story of a man who prepared a great banquet and invited several guests from his community. When the time came for the banquet to begin, the guests all found reasons not to come. When the servant returned with this news, the master decided to extend the invitation to "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."³⁰ Luke Bretherton offers his commentary on this passage: "The invitation to this formal dinner is sent out to the host's peers. The invitation is met by insulting excuses that in effect are rejections. These rejections are a self-conscious and systematic exclusion of the host by his peer group."³¹ Even in his hosting, Jesus frequently assumed the role of a guest or stranger who truly had "no place to lay his head."³² In John's Gospel, he is described as one who is not accepted by his own, and in Luke's account, even in his attempts to be a welcoming host, he is treated as alien or outcast. Jesus was bound by his position as a "guest" amongst his own people by persistently choosing to fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who shared in the role of outcast. In assuming this position, Jesus became accessible to those who are otherwise exiled by society. Even still, in his role as guest, Jesus was a generous and inviting host to those on the margins of society, and he serves as our primary example of godly welcome and inclusion today.

³⁰ Luke 14:16-21.

³¹ Bretherton, 132.

³² Luke 9:58.

There are several accounts of Jesus as our ultimate example of host in the Gospels. His first miracle at the wedding in Cana, recorded in John 2, was the changing of water into wine. This act positioned him as a provider and a host. There are also many accounts of him healing, feeding, teaching, and caring for others. In Mark 6, Jesus provides food for a gathering of 5,000 people and in doing so, assumes the role of “host to the multitude.”³³ Then, in John 13, as Jesus prepares to serve his disciples what we know today as the Last Supper, he assumes the role of host by removing his outer garment, and, much like Abraham in Genesis 18, he bows before his disciples. In this instance, however, Jesus combines the roles of host and servant into one by washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus’s presentation of his body and blood as the elements of the Passover meal at this Last Supper is also a noteworthy moment because it removes any excuse or reason we might give for not extending hospitality toward everyone we encounter. Jesus was prepared to give himself fully in a gesture of love and hospitality, even to the point of death, and as his followers we are called to the same level of love for God and for others.

The things Jesus did and said in the upper room exemplify the new command he gave, which is, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”³⁴ This call to love as Jesus loves is best expounded on in one of his most impactful stories, the parable of the good Samaritan. In this exchange, Jesus is approached by an expert in the law and asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asks the expert, “What is written in the Law?” The expert in the law answers Jesus by reciting what is known

³³ Elwell, 360.

³⁴ John 13:34.

today as the Great Commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.” This lawyer isn’t satisfied with the answer though, and asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”³⁵ Jesus concludes the exchange by telling a story about a man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead on a dangerous stretch of road. The point of this teaching begins to emerge to the lawyer as three different individuals come across the beaten man: a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. In a plot twist, the Samaritan—not the priest or Levite—becomes the hero of the story and the model of one who loves his neighbor as himself.³⁶

This conversation between Jesus and the expert in the law has deep implications for both first-century disciples and for Christians today. First, Jesus rewrites the script on who our neighbors are. No longer does it mean the person next door; it is now an all-encompassing word that describes any person we come in contact with, and especially those in need. This would have been a groundbreaking realization to those listening in on this exchange because until that moment, the term *neighbor* was best defined by Leviticus 19:18, and it was clearly understood to mean “fellow-Israelite.”³⁷ But, Jesus doesn’t stop at redefining words; he also redraws the cultural boundaries of the day regarding holiness when he makes the Samaritan, who would have been seen as less than human by the expert in the law and the rest of the Jewish people, the hero of this story. By making this kind of person the embodiment of this new understanding of neighbor,

³⁵ Luke 10:25-29.

³⁶ Luke 10:30-37.

³⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, “The Good Samaritan,” *Theology Today* 11, no. 3 (1954), 369, <http://doi.org/10.1177/00405736540110308>.

Jesus says that to truly practice godly hospitality we must include all people. Author C.E.B. Cranfield explains:

“Samaritan” had for the Jews of Jesus’ time the same sort of flavor as “Communist” has for the respectable citizen of Western Europe or the United States today. So “neighbor,” Jesus implies, must include the outsider, the heretic, the enemy. A man is not to be excluded from this category because his religious confession or political creed or social background or the color of his skin is different from our own. By contrasting the Samaritan with a priest and a Levite, Jesus draws attention to a fact which the lawyer would doubtless prefer to forget—the fact that sometimes the outsider and the heretic and the heathen actually show mercy and lovingkindness, while those who claim to be the exponents of the true religion prove to be hard-hearted and loveless.³⁸

Finally, in this exchange, Jesus eliminates the endless list of excuses that we tend to come up with when faced with an opportunity to extend godly hospitality in love, especially when it requires we love someone different from us, or that we sacrifice our preferences and desires to extend love fully. Cranfield adds, “[The priest and Levite] are a frightening reminder that it is possible to be so preoccupied with our theological, religious, and ecclesiastical activity, that we have no time or energy left for the neighbor who needs our help—and so none for Christ himself.”³⁹

This indictment is powerful and hits at the heart of many of our comfort zones but is not out of line when considered within the setting of what Christine Pohl calls “the most important passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality,” Matthew 25:31-46.⁴⁰ In this passage Jesus tells his disciples the story of a time when he will give an inheritance to those who offered him hospitality. Those who receive the inheritance will say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something

³⁸ Cranfield, 369.

³⁹ Cranfield, 372.

⁴⁰ Pohl, *Making Room*, 22.

to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?” To this, the reply from the King will be, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”⁴¹ Pohl adds, “[This passage] resounds throughout ancient texts, and contemporary practitioners of hospitably refer to this text more than any other passage. Acts of welcoming the stranger, or leaving someone outside cold and hungry, take on intensely heightened significance when it is Jesus himself who experiences the consequences of our ministry or the lack of it.”⁴²

It is clear that the entirety of the biblical narrative, from Genesis to Revelation, is riddled with evidence that the heart of God the Father/Creator is one of hospitality. In the Old Testament Law, God commands the Israelites to care for both neighbor and alien. In the New Covenant, Jesus eliminates the boundary between the two, proclaiming anyone we come in contact with as our neighbor. Later, as the church emerges following the resurrection, further affirmation of the hospitable nature of God and of his desire to have the church embody that same nature becomes evident in the writings of Paul. The results of these truths should be nothing less than the stirring of our hearts as members of the Body of Christ, and the movement of our local churches toward more fully representing the hospitable nature of God.

For a better picture of God’s full welcome in the New Testament, take some time to read and reflect on the following passages:

- Matthew 25:35-40: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and

⁴¹ Matthew 25:37-40.

⁴² Pohl, *Making Room*, 22.

you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

- Luke 14:12-14: “Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’”
- Acts 2:44-46: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”
- Romans 12:13-16: “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”
- Hebrews 13:1-3: “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”
- 1 Peter 4:8-10: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”

I believe all expressions of the church must begin with the deep desire to be welcoming and inviting of all people, and to practice hospitality in ways that honor God and reflect the love of Christ. That said, one major pitfall in our churches today is that

many churches that have lost their way in the area of extending God's welcome still consider themselves to be welcoming and inviting communities. The hoax we play on ourselves is believing that our private fellowship meals, small groups, events, and programs are hospitality, when in reality they are the maintenance of an already established paradigm that meets our internal needs and desires. This muddies the waters because when we get comfortable, we also tend to get defensive. We then start to put more energy toward protecting ourselves and our ideas of what it means to be a church and less energy toward embodying the welcoming nature of God revealed in the life of Christ. Pratt and Homan write, "We erroneously think we need safety the most," and church health consultant Thom S. Rainer adds that it is this fact that often results in a shift from pursuing the Great Commission to pursuing what he calls "the great comfort."⁴³ This is not a programming issue but a discipleship issue, and the pastors and spiritual leaders of churches that have suffered this shift toward comfort have a responsibility to lead their congregations back toward a level of intimacy with Christ and one another that enables them to once again become more concerned with pursuing the Great Commission and Great Commandment than their own self interests. This is a long and arduous process, likely paved with pushbacks and setbacks, but the alternative is to perpetuate the distortion of God's full welcome.

⁴³ Lonni Collins Pratt and Father Daniel Homan, OSB, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2011), 26; Thom S. Rainer, *Who Moved My Pulpit?: Leading Change in the Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 90.

God's Welcome in Church History

On the journey toward embodying a robust theology of hospitality in our churches, there are many helpful signposts in the form of previous iterations of the Christian church that have fully embraced the welcoming nature of God. We have seen some of the charges made in Scripture, and now we will look at some of the ways that God's people have continued to champion these charges, gleaning insights and gaining perspective from them along the way.

In the previous section, you read what I consider to be the most complete human expression of communal hospitality and inclusion in the New Testament, Acts 2:44-46. This observation of community wasn't just an idealized memory from doctor Luke; the welcoming nature of the early church was noticeable to many. Early on, Christians gained a reputation similar to that of Jesus, by welcoming all people regardless of their gender, economic position, cultural background, or other differences. This was so culturally shocking that accusations were often made against these Christians. In the second century, the Assyrian writer Tatian penned these words, "Because we do not make any distinctions in rank and outward appearance, or wealth and education, or age and sex, they devise an accusation against us that we practice cannibalism and sexual perversions."⁴⁴ These attempts to subvert the growth of the early Christian movement proved futile, and the practice of hospitality is a major reason why. Gerald Sittser, author of *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern*

⁴⁴ Eberhard Arnold, ed., *The Early Christians in Their Own Words* (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2011), 71-72.

Missionaries notes, “They did not use organized rallies, or high-profile evangelists and big-budget programs to win recruits. If anything, Christians maintained a low profile to avoid public notice. The church thus attracted outsiders through natural networks of relationships.”⁴⁵

The way that these early Christians lived out their faith was appealing to those who were considered outsiders by the culture of the day. They valued women, held marriage and fidelity in high esteem, and were against the many acceptable immoral practices of the day such as incest and infanticide. They held closely to the teaching of Jesus that all people deserve to be known and loved. This life wasn’t compartmentalized either, not like it is today for many of us. The sacred posture of welcome was embedded into the everyday ebb and flow of life. This included feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, caring for widows and orphans, accompanying the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming travelers and sojourners. Sittser points out that “this quality of life impressed and attracted outsiders who observed the benefit of belonging to a stable community, and it helped to mitigate social tensions within the city and to improve the quality of life for everyone.”⁴⁶

Moving forward a few centuries, we come to an address given by Augustine of Hippo to Christians regarding hospitality. He specifically points out that if we assume the posture of foreigner in our own lives, we are better positioned to welcome others. He says:

⁴⁵ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 57.

⁴⁶ Sittser, 63.

Acknowledge the duty of hospitality, for by this some have attained unto God. You take in some stranger, whose companion in the way you yourself also are, for we are all strangers. This person is a Christian who, even in his own house and in his own country, acknowledges himself to be a stranger. For our country is above, there we shall not be strangers. For everyone here below, even in his own house, is a stranger. If he is not stranger, let him not pass on from here. If pass on he must, he is a stranger.⁴⁷

During the same time period, the monk John Cassian appeals to monastic communities to remember that they are sojourners in this life, and as such they should not get so comfortable with their current successes that they lose sight of their purpose.⁴⁸ This warning is a timely one for us today, as many churches confuse attendance, buildings, and cash with kingdom success.

In 525, Benedict of Nursia began a monastery based on his *Rule* which was written in 512. While monastic movements had been around prior to this, St. Benedict is often regarded as the father of western monasticism.⁴⁹ In his *Rule*, hospitality plays a fundamental role. In chapter 53 he writes:

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith and to pilgrims. Once a guest has been announced the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all courtesy and love. . . . Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them.⁵⁰

Benedict wrote this chapter based on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:35, which is printed in the previous section. Benedictine oblate David Robinson explains the

⁴⁷ Amy G. Ogden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 45.

⁴⁸ Ogden, 46.

⁴⁹ Ogden, 185.

⁵⁰ Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982), 73

implications of this passage and the heart of what St. Benedict was communicating: “As we welcome people, our eyes keep opening to the glory of Christ in our midst, and we discover that our hearts are ‘burning within us’ (see Lk. 24:32), knowing that we’ve once again spent time with Christ along the way.”⁵¹

The exhortations for hospitality continued in the Christian movement for the next several hundred years. It was a well-established belief that hospitality was a key element of the authentic gospel message. The line of distinction between conventional and Christian hospitality was clearly drawn during these centuries. While some used the idea of hospitality for gain, early church leaders taught that Christian hospitality was for the purpose of welcoming “the least of these.”⁵²

Even with a strong historical start, the shift away from this conviction was beginning to become noticeable toward the end of the fifteenth century. Monasteries began hosting wealthy guests in extravagant rooms, and the entertainment of powerful visitors for political and social gain was moving much of Christianity away from the original intent of hospitality.⁵³ In the sixteenth century hospitality remained a social and political activity, though Protestant reformers started to speak out against this practice.⁵⁴ The increased focus toward piety and simplicity helped move the pendulum of hospitality closer to its biblical roots. Due to the influx of Protestant refugees in North America,

⁵¹ David Robinson, *Ancient Pathways: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2010), 113.

⁵² Christine D. Pohl, “The Healthy Church: Embodying Hospitality,” *Catalyst*, Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives for United Methodist Seminarians, February 2003, <https://www.catalystresources.org/the-healthy-church-embodying-hospitality/>.

⁵³ Pohl, *Making Room*, 48.

⁵⁴ Pohl, *Making Room*, 52.

hospitality extended to the foreigner and needy was once again a common practice, however it was not an ecclesiastical practice, but a civic one.⁵⁵ By the eighteenth century it seemed as though the virtue was lost altogether. Christine Pohl notes, “Over the past few centuries, the scope of hospitality as a term has diminished; it now chiefly refers to the entertainment of one’s acquaintances at home and to the hospitality industry’s provision of service through hotels and restaurants.”⁵⁶ In my observations, the separation of church and state may have triggered the separation of church and home as well. This compartmentalization of sacred spaces has inadvertently removed the potential for Christian hospitality, and the way back will require a remerging of these two sacred spaces. Only in the overlap of real life and true worship can the space be made to once again embody God’s full welcome.

While many churches still lack in certain areas of hospitality, there are volumes upon volumes of stories and examples of individual Christians extending God’s full welcome. Some hosted runaway slaves during the days of the Underground Railroad. Others, like Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, used their means to create space for people to truly belong and partner together in life, worship, and ministry. More contemporary examples include Mother Teresa’s care of orphans, the impoverished, and the terminally sick in India; Dorothy Day’s welcome and inclusion of the homeless, starting in New York and then spreading all over the United States and Canada; and the L’Arche communities which provide space for people living with disabilities to engage in authentic community with others, both with and without disabilities. The truth is, some

⁵⁵ Pohl, *Making Room*, 52.

⁵⁶ Pohl, *Making Room*, 36.

members of the Body of Christ have been on the cutting edge of extending God's welcome throughout history, even when it meant crossing cultural and political boundaries, including women's rights, prison reform, abolition, HIV and AIDS education and support, advocacy for immigrants, gender equality, education reform, and so much more. The examples set by these trailblazers and the biblical mandates set by God Himself compel and obligate us to continue to embody God's full welcome. Families affected by autism are among those who are slipping through the cracks in many of our efforts, and it's time that their voices are heard, their stories are told, and their needs for acceptance, community, and love are met. In the next section I will highlight how some organizations and groups are doing this and what the church can learn from them. I will then introduce the transformational process of welcome that, when practiced, will change us and our churches for the better.

Questions for Reflection

1. Go back and read the Scripture references from this chapter. What themes emerge? What questions are raised?
2. Christ assumes both the roles of host and guest. What does this mean to you? How can you better assume both roles in your life?
3. In what ways is your church or faith community settling for the maintenance of already established paradigms (events, small groups, fellowship meals, etc.) instead of pursuing true hospitality to those who are not part of the group?
4. What are some of the ways your church or faith community has extended God's full welcome to others? What are some of the areas you could grow in?

A Prayer of Lament

Lord, I grieve my lack of hospitality to the least of these.

I confess that I fail to acknowledge my own identity as an alien in need of welcome.

I confess that I often ignore my responsibility to welcome strangers as my guests and as those who reflect the present Christ.

Lord, open my eyes to see those around me who need community, acceptance, and love.

Help me to merge my real life with true worship, that I might invite others to the table with me.

Forgive me for the damage I may have caused to others because of my ignorance.

Keep me from continuing on that path.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen.

SECTION 2: HOW HOSPITALITY CHANGES A COMMUNITY

Last year I was given the opportunity to host a roundtable discussion concerning the topic of autism and the church at a national student ministry event. As I looked at the lineup of options, I set my expectations fairly low. I figured fewer than ten people would come, some of my friends and one or two people who were affected by autism.

Apparently, the event planners thought the same thing, because my room was set up for about twenty people. By the time the session began, we had nearly fifty people crammed into the small meeting room. It was literally standing room only. Why? I assure you they weren't there to see me. They were there because autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the world, and it affects so many people. I had parents with children on the spectrum in the room. I had students who had already been diagnosed or who thought they might have autism. I had people whose friends, siblings, or other family members were living with this disorder.

To be honest, I was in over my head. I had only been researching autism and the church's response for a short time. In this room were experts with years of experience and stories of how their churches had let them down or fallen short. There were a few bright spots of some smaller faith communities doing wonderful things to journey with those in their congregations affected by autism, but by and large the atmosphere was one of hurt and loneliness. What I discovered, however, was that in that hour of asking questions and listening to stories, transformation took place. The sharing of life, even for that short period of time, was transformative and healing. One mom came to me in tears after the session and simply said, "Thank you for doing this."

“Doing what?” I thought. I left more blessed and encouraged than anyone that day. But isn't that how it works? In the Body of Christ, when we focus our attention outwardly, looking to serve rather than to be served, to give rather than receive, and to hear rather than be heard, somehow our needs are met too. Not in a transactional exchange, but in a kind of beautiful and collaborative experience.

In this section I will highlight some of the groups and organizations that are well experienced in this relational collaboration with individuals and families affected by disabilities like autism. Some of them have been doing this for years, and we can learn a lot from them. Then I will walk step by step through the transformative journey of extending God's full welcome to those affected by autism. Much like my experience at the youth conference, what we receive when we come fully to the table in communion with these families will bless us immeasurably more than we can imagine.

Chapter 3: Hospitality in Action: A Review of Accomplished Organizations

As noted in the previous section, there might not be another organization more experienced in including people and families affected by autism than public schools in America. Since the 1970s, the American school system has been intentional in their attempts to include children with disabilities in the classroom and to protect its rights to education. In the 1990s, Autism Spectrum Disorder was added to IDEA's growing list of conditions and affected students were offered services that would aid in their education. Since then, the schools in America have continued to grow in both their understanding of autism and the methods they use to support children and families affected by it. In this chapter I will offer a detailed account of the progress the school system has made in its continued attempts to accommodate for the needs of students with conditions like autism.

While the indictment I am making against our churches and faith communities is a strong one, it should be noted that there are some Christian organizations and local churches that are extremely dedicated to inclusion, equality, and care for families affected by autism and other disabilities. Some of the most distinguished in the field are Key Ministries, Joni & Friends, Christian Learning Center (CLC), Friendship Ministries, and Pure Ministries. Many of the organizations listed, and others like them are dedicated to congregational inclusion, Christian discipleship, and advocacy for people with disabilities. Additional services often include training for churches, leaders, and volunteers. In this chapter I will also outline many of the ways these organizations are standing in the gap and helping churches grow in their awareness and inclusion of families affected by conditions like autism.

I will close this chapter with a case study of Grace Church in Overland Park, Kansas. This church has developed one of the most inclusive communities for families affected by disabilities in the country. Dr. Stephen Hunsley has led this effort since 2011 and has recently launched SOAR, a non-profit ministry that will help other churches follow Grace Church's example of extending God's full welcome to families affected by conditions like autism.

Chapter 4: The Transformative Journey of Hospitality

*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever.
Amen.*

1 Peter 4:8-11

When I attempt under my own power to go to those places to which a life of welcome leads, I find myself quickly exhausted, weary, depleted, hopeless, defeated. But when I give myself to be used as God's instrument of welcome . . . one of the blessings of that complete surrender is that when we place ourselves where Jesus placed himself, we find there his closest companionship.

Kelly Deatherage

The hard work of extending God's welcome to families affected by conditions like ASD cannot be the solo mission of a rogue pastor or church member. This will truly be a congregation-wide endeavor. In the same way, the results of taking on such an intentional task will not only affect one person or one family but will have fruitful implications for the entire church. Arriving in this place, however, will take time, effort, and a transformation in the hearts and minds of those within the faith community. We can't just think our way toward being more hospitable. Instead, it must be a journey marked by intentional behaviors and practices, and a willingness to learn new narratives regarding God's welcome. Adopting a robust theology of hospitality is only the beginning; the desired outcome is the tangible application of that theology and the transformation of the DNA of our churches. We will not just be acting more welcoming; we will truly be a welcoming community. The goal, then, is for our churches to stand "in

the gap” with ASD-affected families: listening to them, learning from them, and partnering them.⁵⁷ Quaker teacher Parker Palmer explains this process:

We have to stand in this place between what is and what could and should be. But we have to stand there without flipping out on one side or the other. To flip out on the side of too much reality is to be drawn into corrosive cynicism. . . . To flip out on the other side toward what could and should be, is to fall into an equally dangerous trap, which I call irrelevant idealism. Corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism sound like one hundred and eighty degrees apart, but in fact they take us to the same place, which is out of the action. They disengage us from this place in the gap where we need to stand in order to move things forward. How do we stand there? What do we do to stand there? We have to reach deep inside ourselves. . . . We do that inner work, but we do it in community. The inner work is important; it’s how we face ourselves. But to do it in community is equally important, because we are so gifted at self-delusion, at hearing only certain voices within ourselves. . . . It’s only in community that we’re going to have a chance to check and correct our own self perceptions.⁵⁸

Standing in the gap, as Palmer teaches, is to participate in hospitality, not as an event or a duty, but as a spiritual discipline that renews our minds, as Paul writes in Romans 12. It’s a return to the richness of God’s hospitality, a welcome that transcends potluck meals and exchanged pleasantries. As noted in the previous chapter, inclusive hospitality is part of the nature of God from the Creation to the Gospels to accounts of the early church and throughout the epistles. Scripture tells the story of God’s welcome. What may not be as obvious is that the embodiment of God’s welcome is deeply impactful to the people who live it out.

The act of extending hospitality beyond our own comfort zones and outside of our normal experiences is a spiritual practice with deep implications as demonstrated in Scripture. In Matthew 25, Jesus says, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to

⁵⁷ Parker Palmer, “Tragic Gap,” video teaching, March 3, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq0aeKCB41g>.

⁵⁸ Palmer, “Tragic Gap.”

eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (vv. 35-36). St. Benedict, inspired by passages like this one, made hospitality a staple in his *Rule*, because he knew that when one welcomes others, one welcomes Christ.⁵⁹ In other words, a tangible way to abide in Christ is by abiding in the Christ that dwells within each person one meets. Hospitality as a spiritual discipline places us in the presence of Christ, and as such, positions us to experience Christian Spiritual Formation. This process forms us more and more in the image of Christ for the sake of others.

Extending God’s welcome to anyone is formational, but when hospitality is extended to persons affected by conditions like ASD, the formational process tends to take on a certain path. This process was first recognized and documented by Dan Vander Plaats, founder of Elim Christian Services. Vander Plaats has named this process *The 5 Stages*, which are: Ignorance, Pity, Care, Friendship, and Co-Laborers.⁶⁰ The helpful and unique nature of hospitality as a spiritual discipline and of the formational progression recognized by Vander Plaats is that they emphasize the transformative impact on the host rather than the value offered to the guest. This is a welcome adjustment to the typical ministry model that wrongly identifies the guest as the object of ministry. This paradigm shift is crucial for churches that seek to extend God’s welcome to families affected by

⁵⁹ Fry, 73.

⁶⁰ Dan Vander Plaats, *There is No Asterisk: Changing Attitudes about Differences Using the 5 Stages* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt University Press, 2016), 18. In an email from Dan Vander Plaats dated September 25, 2019, he requested that all mentions of *The 5 Stages* be formatted as seen here.

conditions like ASD if they wish to transcend charity and cultivate authentic relationships.

We Don't Know What We Don't Know

Like the modern proverb says, “We don’t know what we don’t know.” This is true in nearly all circumstances, and it is painfully obvious when it comes to what we believe about and how we treat people affected by disabilities like autism. We don’t need to look too hard to find troubling passages about disability in Scripture. One such passage is found in Leviticus and urges the prevention of anyone with a blemish from approaching the altar.⁶¹ A flat reading of scripture might cause confusion about how God views disability and about how his people should respond to people affected by disability. It’s true that this law was one the Israelites held to, but the point of it was to communicate the requirements for priests, specifically from the line of Aaron, not to speak to disability in general.⁶²

In other areas of the Old Testament, including just a few passages prior to this Levitical mandate, God commands the watchful care of those affected by disability.⁶³ In the writings of the prophets, the acceptance and redemption of disabled people is anticipated.⁶⁴ When taken at face value, passages about disability seem to contradict one another, but the fact is, no single portion of Scripture can reveal the full scope of God’s

⁶¹ Leviticus 21:23.

⁶² Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 24-29.

⁶³ Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18.

⁶⁴ Isaiah 56:4-5; Jeremiah 31:8-9; Micah 4:6-8.

nature. In order to develop a well-rounded understanding of God’s heart for those affected by disabilities like autism, we must “zoom out” and take in the full body of God’s work. Author Brian Zahnd adds:

The Bible doesn’t stand above the story it tells, but is fully enmeshed in it. The Bible itself is on the quest to discover the Word of God. What we find in the Old Testament is a progression of revelation. . . . If we want to just pluck a verse here and there to proof-text something, the Old Testament gives us many (and often contradictory) options. . . . It’s Jesus who settles the dispute.⁶⁵

Sometimes passages, like the one in Leviticus 21, are plucked out of the meta-narrative of God’s story and used to discount, discredit, and disregard marginalized people groups, including individuals with disabilities. Sadly, this has been the case for centuries. During the Babylonian reign (1700—560 BCE), having a disability was viewed as either a punishment by God or as being possessed by a demon.⁶⁶ Unfortunately this was not a benign belief, as it often resulted in drastic and cruel responses, including the killing of those affected by disability.

Some of the contemporary responses to conditions like autism that we see in churches, like their historical equivalents, are due to a rigidly literal reading of Scripture or a distortion of text that is pulled from the meta-narrative. The solution for this mishandling of Scripture is to move beyond a flat reading and toward a reading that encompasses the God revealed to us through the person of Jesus. As God reveals himself to humanity through the story of Scripture, it is clear that Jesus is given the final word when it comes to informing humanity of God’s nature and his posture toward

⁶⁵ Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2017), 14.

⁶⁶ Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 52.

marginalized people groups, including those affected by disability. Jesus's interactions with the blemished and disabled of his time have answered the question, "Who sinned?" once and for all.

A flawed approach to understanding Scripture is not the only contributor to the oblivious nature toward disability found in many churches. In some cases, a strongly rooted belief system, no matter how unfounded, can negatively influence a community's response to and treatment of those affected by disabilities like autism. In her book *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland highlights two typical yet troubling responses to disability found within Christian circles: "The person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned."⁶⁷ While many people in the church may not confess to subscribing to the latter response, the message most often communicated, even if only non-verbally, is that people affected by conditions like ASD are not welcome. This message is not always intentional, however, as Michael Beates notes:

If asked whether [the inclusion of disabled persons] is something the church should be engaged in, an overwhelming majority would consent that the church indeed should strive to . . . bring in the blind, lame, and broken to be part of the great banquet. But there is an apparent disconnect—a holiness gap—between what most evangelicals confess would be right and what most evangelicals, in fact, ever think about.⁶⁸

Beates brings light to a common occurrence in many churches, that our ideas about how to respond to certain needs and opportunities are often very different from the actual response. In many cases we just do not know what to do, so we do nothing. In other cases, we can react too quickly, without having taken the time to ask questions and gain

⁶⁷ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 70-71.

⁶⁸ Beates, 128.

perspective from those affected by ASD. When we do this we are more prone to cause confusion, hurt feelings, and frustration that add to the widening gap between our churches and those we seek to include.

Vander Plaats argues that “it is so simple to move past ignorance that it can appear intentional to stay there.”⁶⁹ Deliberate or not, many churches today remain in ignorance when it comes to welcoming and including those affected by disabilities like autism. In this day and age, there is really no way to justify not moving past this stage. The able cannot say to the disabled, “I don’t need you.” The clear thinker cannot say to the perplexed or troubled, “I don’t need you.” We must follow the apostle Paul’s model from his first letter to Corinth: “On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”⁷⁰

Broken Open

When we finally decide that being oblivious to autism is no longer a sustainable place for our churches to dwell, we are then ready to welcome new insights, realities, and experiences that inform a renewed awareness about the needs and desires of those affected by conditions like ASD. This awareness almost always begins with a sense of despair, sorrow, and helplessness. Webb-Mitchell offers this insight: “Often the perception that non-disabled people have is a mixture of much sympathy and little empathy, with an overwhelming sense of strangeness.”⁷¹ Another way to describe this

⁶⁹ Vander Plaats, 25.

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:22.

⁷¹ Webb-Mitchell, 12.

progression is *feeling sorry*. Vander Plaats is careful to note that this is the place where many people get stuck: “While pity is necessary, it is too often negative. It is a way of keeping our distance from people with disabilities. In fact, it often seems like negative pity is the only thing that keeps us from progressing in the journey of disability attitudes.”⁷²

This negative pity can produce inaction, but when processed appropriately, it can be helpful in moving us further along in our formational journey. Parker Palmer helps emphasize this experience:

The heart can be broken into a thousand shards, sharp-edged fragments that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain. . . . But there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart “broken open” into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy. This, too, happens every day. We know that heartbreak can become a source of compassion and grace because we have seen it happen with our own eyes as people enlarge their capacity for empathy and their ability to attend to the suffering of others.⁷³

It is a “broken open” heart that we should aspire to. This posture, modeled clearly by Christ, is what God’s full welcome requires of us. In Matthew’s Gospel, as Jesus moves from village to village healing, the Gospel writer notes, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”⁷⁴ The Greek word for compassion used here is *splagchnizomai*, which alludes to a physical discomfort in one’s bowels. This is more than an emotional response; it is a brokenness for those around us. In other accounts Jesus is moved to compassion for a

⁷² Vander Plaats, 33.

⁷³ Parker Palmer, “The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap,” *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* XXIV, no. 2 (March/April 2009), 6, <https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/PJP-WeavingsArticle-Broken-OpenHeart.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Matthew 9:35-36.

widow, a hungry crowd, a leper, a Samaritan woman, a woman caught in adultery, and countless others.⁷⁵ This brokenness does not result from the assumption that nothing can be done, but instead leads to the question, “What can I do?”⁷⁶ When we start to ask this question, the possibility of God’s kingdom begins to emerge, and we can begin to imagine a diverse community that includes those affected by ASD.

Compassion at Work

The movement from brokenness to action is significant because this is where the rubber meets the road. Theory becomes practice, and theology moves toward application as the members of our faith communities begin to act on the compassion they feel for those affected by conditions like autism. Vander Plaats contends, “This is where the real work begins. It also happens to be where we finally start to reflect God’s kingdom in our thoughts and attitudes.”⁷⁷ When a church’s level of compassion moves its members to action, it is marked by a perceptible readiness to learn from those around us. Erik Carter points out, “This work is ongoing as congregations strive to do better, to be more responsive, and to live out their call more fully.”⁷⁸

These physical expressions of compassion and love that churches participate in can reorient our congregations from passive to pastoral and open the door for deeper relationships with people affected by disabilities like autism. When this happens, the question “What can I do?” begins to get answered as efforts are made to meet needs,

⁷⁵ Luke 7:13; Matthew 15:32; Matthew 8:3; John 4:26; John 8:11.

⁷⁶ Vander Plaats, 34.

⁷⁷ Vander Plaats, 40.

⁷⁸ Carter, 32.

however naïve those first attempts may be. Early attempts at serving ASD-affected families can fall flat if they are motivated by obligation rather than compassion.

Don't get me wrong, obligation can be a suitable motivator for serving others, but when this becomes the stopping point, the formational journey of hospitality is not complete and the possibility of experiencing the fullness of the Body of Christ is hindered. Instead, these initial expressions of compassion teach our congregations what we lack. Carter suggests, "The first step for many congregations is recognizing that an important part of their community is not actually part of their community. Absent this initial awareness, it is unlikely that congregations will be energized to respond differently."⁷⁹

Learning this lesson comes with a deeper awareness of not only what can be offered to those affected by conditions like ASD, but also what they have to offer the community in return. The apostle Paul taught, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."⁸⁰ Webb-Mitchell supports Paul's teaching, noting that there is a wealth of "untapped yet vital ministry with and by those who have certain limitations and abilities quite unlike anyone else in the world."⁸¹ This untapped source of ministry is unleashed within the Body of Christ when God's welcome is extended and compassion is given the space to grow into

⁷⁹ Carter, 34.

⁸⁰ Romans 12:4-5.

⁸¹ Webb-Mitchell, 135.

action. All of this leads to the possibility of cultivating deep and meaningful relationships that span a formerly impassible gap.

The Fruits of Hospitality

Aristotle once wrote, “No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods.”⁸² Because God created humanity in his own likeness, community and friendship are essential components to experiencing a full and rewarding life in his kingdom. From the beginning, at Creation, it has been acknowledged that “it is not good for the man to be alone.”⁸³ Author Ken Shigematsu adds, “We can have relationship with God, fulfilling work to do, and an enviable home and lifestyle—but if we don’t have close friendships with others, we soon realize that something essential is missing.”⁸⁴ Still, with the introduction of text messaging, social media, and other opportunities to stay connected, profound friendships seem to be fleeting. Rich friendships are replaced by superficial connections that result in what Jason Reimer Grieg calls “relational poverty.”⁸⁵ While this trend is becoming more true for all people, Grieg contends that the fleeting nature of friendship “is particularly the case for people with intellectual disabilities, whose situations of relational poverty strike at the heart of Aristotle’s maxim.”⁸⁶

⁸² Roger Crisp ed., *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143.

⁸³ Genesis 2:18.

⁸⁴ Ken Shigematsu, *God in my Everything: How an Ancient Rhythm Helps Busy People Enjoy God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 83.

⁸⁵ Jason Reimer Grieg, *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L’Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 114.

⁸⁶ Greig, 114.

This is true for a number of reasons. First, there is a stark difference in the needs of those affected by cognitive disabilities and those who are not. A person unaffected by a condition like autism does not have to encounter the numerous obstacles, preplanning, and exhaustion that it takes an affected person or family to do something as simple as attend a weekly worship service. Second, living with a disability or being in a family affected by a condition like ASD forces a new perspective that unaffected persons cannot understand. Third, there is just a different rhythm of life. Vander Plaats explains, “Life with a disability is simply different. It is complicated and messy and medically-involved. It is never, ever going to be fixed. This is frustrating for our friends without disabilities. They want us to be normal . . . and while our disabilities are not okay, or normal, they are also not the core problem.”⁸⁷ Naturally occurring friendships are based on common ground, shared interests, and compatibility, and on the surface there does not seem to be much to bridge the gap between families affected by disabilities like ASD and everyone else.

There is a kind of relational bond, however, that does not only occur on the surface level. In John’s Gospel account, Jesus chooses to call his disciples his friends and in doing so “radically affirms the holistic humanity of the other through a profound act of recognition.”⁸⁸ The source of this kind of friendship is deeper than a list of shared interests. This kind of friendship is based on the truth that every person was created with the potential and purpose to be a friend of God. When believed and acted upon, this truth releases us to accept others, particularly those affected by disabilities, “*as they are*, not as

⁸⁷ Vander Plaats, 56.

⁸⁸ John 15:15; Grieg, 116.

the medical model classifies them to be.”⁸⁹ This bond is not based on transactions, but is lived out as a covenant, not unlike our friendship with God.⁹⁰ This covenantal relationship chooses the other, not based on what is held in common, but for what the other brings to the table as a divine image bearer. When we can move beyond obligatory expressions of care for those affected by disability to the possibility of deep and abiding relationships with them, and from seeing those affected by conditions like ASD as objects of ministry to fellow members of our community, the fruits of hospitality can begin to develop.

The journey from brokenness to friendship is a long one, likely paved with mistakes. But the experiences we have on this journey refine our thinking regarding disability. We are literally being transformed by the renewing of our minds. As we extend God’s welcome to people and families affected by conditions like ASD, formation is taking place in us. We move from apprehension to curiosity, from curiosity to grief, from grief to service, and from service to relationship. This new bond comes with the gift of recalling our own brokenness and need for acceptance and love. Webb-Mitchell writes that these relationships remind us all “that we are present at this table not because our good works got us a place there, but because God has called all of us there.”⁹¹ Those affected by conditions like ASD need these kinds of relationships, but it is not a stretch to say that those of us who are not directly affected need them even more. These kinds of

⁸⁹ Grieg, 116.

⁹⁰ Grieg., 121.

⁹¹ Webb-Mitchell, 48.

challenging and life-giving friendships enrich our spiritual growth and enable us to more readily extend God's full welcome to all people.

As rich as these relationships can be, this is still not the end of the journey. The pinnacle of this journey happens when these relationships blossom into collaboration, and ministry begins to emerge *from* the partnership rather than *within*. If our churches are to reflect their communities and embrace the diverse nature of the world they are part of, then people affected by conditions like ASD are essential to that goal. Experiencing the fullness of the kingdom of God requires embracing people with various backgrounds, ethnicities, skillsets, passions, gifts, and ability levels, including people affected by conditions like ASD. The fact that this condition is so extensive means that without including, welcoming, befriending, and partnering with people affected by disabilities, our communities will be deficient, and our churches will be lacking.

There may be no greater example of this kind of partnership in the kingdom of God than the L'Arche communities. Started by Jean Vanier in Richmond Hill, Ontario, in 1967, L'Arche now has 149 communities in 37 countries and continues to expand.⁹²

The thing that sets L'Arche apart from other organizations that serve the disabled community is its focus on building relationships and helping those affected by disability discover their gifts over providing services.⁹³ This focus has not only impacted the "clients" of L'Arche, but has been even more impactful to the non-disabled people who have lived, worked, and volunteered there. Vanier highlights this truth with the story of a

⁹² "A Brief History of L'Arche," About L'Arche, L'Arche Canada, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.larche.ca/about-larche/our-history>.

⁹³ "Mission and Vision," About L'Arche, L'Arche Canada, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.larche.ca/mission-and-vision>.

young unnamed assistant: “Her parents had divorced. She was fed up with school, which forced her to learn things she did not want to learn. She had heard about L’Arche from her aunt. She came, and she was healed by people with disabilities who loved her and trusted her.”⁹⁴ This example of reciprocal love and care is the epitome of collaboration; as Vanier and his team nurtured their friendships with the residents of the L’Arche communities, trust was built, love was given and received, and then together, shoulder to shoulder, kingdom fruit was born from their partnership.

Authentic spiritual friendships carry with them the possibility of rich collaborative partnerships. The formational process of extending God’s welcome to those affected by conditions like ASD can reach this point when these relationships are given the space to cultivate the necessary components: “love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality and accompaniment.”⁹⁵ These components are not exclusive to friendships with people affected by autism, but Grieg points out that “entering into friendships with these persons contributes to their being recognized, which entails not so much *doing something for* them as *being someone with* them. . . . They become the ‘veracious image of the other’ with whom one delights and ‘abides.’”⁹⁶ This transition from *for* to *with* started with our hearts being broken and can now truly blossom as those affected by disabilities are now invited to share their gifts and passions in God-honoring and life-giving ways. Partnering with people affected by conditions like ASD to offer our combined gifts and passions in ministry is the climax of this journey of hospitality. This is the finish line of the journey

⁹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 26-27.

⁹⁵ David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 65.

⁹⁶ Grieg, 142.

from stranger to companion for the guest, and the conclusion of the formational process for the host. Once divided by an impassible chasm, they are now companions and partners in kingdom work, teaching and learning from each another, giving and receiving, holding and being held, in a beautiful dance of collaboration.

Much of this journey is traveled within the hearts and minds of those who desire to embrace the call to extend God's full welcome. It requires nothing less than a willingness to submit ourselves to the *other*, and to allow the Christ in them to minister to us. Now that the map is drawn, the first steps are yours to take. The next section will provide some helpful stories of others who have traveled this path and some useful tools to help you consider your church's current theology of hospitality toward those affected by conditions like autism and evaluate how well you are putting that theology into practice. The journey is long, but the destination is worth it!

Questions for Reflection

1. How does viewing hospitality as a spiritual practice rather than an event or program help change your approach to welcoming those affected by ASD?
2. How does a heart "broken open" differ from the paralyzing kind of brokenness that can sometimes accompany facing a difficult state? How does the idea of *splagchnizomai* help you better understand this concept?
3. What are some of the pitfalls of relying only on obligation when it comes to welcoming and including those affected by ASD?
4. What are some of the ways that you might more fully experience the kingdom of God by sharing in collaborative ministry with those affected by ASD or other kinds of disability? What are some things you might miss out on by avoiding these friendships and partnerships?

A Prayer of Transformation

*God, I desire to begin this journey of change; please help me.
I choose to begin this journey and I ask that you surround me with others who will join
me in the renewing of my mind regarding conditions like autism and how those affected
fit into your kingdom.*

Lord, sustain me on this path; I know it is a long one.

God, forgive me when I fail or fall short, and help me to learn from my mistakes.

Grant me the grace of compassion in the manner you experienced it.

*Help me to move from compassion to action so that my experiences might lead me to
friendship.*

*Lord, bear fruit from these relationships, that others may know and see your goodness
through the fruit that is produced.*

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.*

SECTION 3: WHERE HOSPITALITY BEGINS

Kim's story doesn't end with her family feeling more welcome and involved at our church, though that would be a happy ending. Her story is much more exciting than that. The healing that took place in Kim's life through being heard and valued is simply incredible. She has decided to return to school and become a special education teacher. Her dream is to help students like her son, Hunter, feel valued and loved. She has also become an incredible resource to me as I try to lead my congregation on the formational path of hospitality to families affected by autism. One of the many ways that my friendship with Kim has continued to bless me is in the connections she is making. Through Kim I have met some incredible people that are on the frontlines of helping churches become more inclusive of families affected by disability. At a conference Kim attended last fall, she met Stephen "Doc" Hunsley. When Kim told me about him, I immediately found him on Facebook and reached out. Doc was so gracious to reply to my note and has continued to make himself available to me as I sought to address this need. Doc and I have shared several interactions since then, and I have learned so much from him.

Connections like the one I have made with Doc got me thinking about how valuable his experiences are and how helpful they can be to others. The network of people who are working hard to help churches and faith communities become more inclusive for families affected by disability is a rather small one, but the people in it want nothing more than to share what they've learned so that others can join the work. In this section you will read stories from pastors and church leaders who have experience in leading their congregations toward a more robust theology and practice of hospitality

toward families affected by conditions like autism. These men and women have learned a great deal from their willingness to take a step back and listen to those in their congregations and communities. They have befriended and partnered with the people that they sought to minister to, and in doing so, have been immensely blessed. Their churches and faith communities are stronger and more vibrant because of the hard work they were willing to undertake. The stories are filled with successes and failures, and leaders who hope to lead their congregations down similar paths will glean helpful insights from both.

This section will also share some tools and resources for pastors and leaders to begin evaluating their churches in the area of hospitality. The assessments will be especially useful for gauging the inclusion efforts of churches toward those affected by cognitive disabilities like autism, but they can also be helpful for evaluating hospitality in general. The final chapter will help put all of the things you've learned together in a Congregational Rule of Life. Real and lasting change is only possible through regularly assessing and adapting our vital behaviors. The things we do form us and help us become the people God created us to be. This exercise will guide you through crafting a plan that includes regular rhythms and practices that will help you and your congregation abide more deeply in Christ, more regularly consider God's full welcome, and grow in your awareness and inclusion of the individuals and families in your churches affected by disabilities like autism.

Chapter 5: How's Your Church Doing?

Chapter five will share the stories of pastors and leaders who have gone through the process of extending God's welcome to families affected by disabilities like autism. Through their stories of success and failure, they will assume the role of trail guide as they help you navigate the journey of inclusion in your churches and faith communities. This chapter will conclude with a helpful assessment that can be used to discern how your church's current level of hospitality does or does not embody God's full welcome.

How Welcoming is Your Church?

Use the statements below to assess your church's current level of welcome and inclusion of those affected by disabilities like autism.

- 5 = Strongly Agree
- 4 = Agree
- 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

1. Those affected by conditions like autism in my church are well known by others in the church.
2. My church's understanding of disability is clearly articulated, well understood, and in line with the meta-narrative of Scripture.
3. Pastors and leaders in my church talk about the value of authentic community often.
4. Hospitality in my church means more than a good first impression or gathering for a meal.
5. Occasional disruptions are not a big deal in worship services in my church.
6. When events are planned, considerations are made for families affected by conditions like autism.
7. Church leaders meet with families affected by autism to learn how to best support their needs.
8. Sunday school classes, Bible studies, youth groups, and other gatherings are inclusive of those with conditions like autism (non-segregated).
9. Families affected by conditions like autism are welcome to serve and encouraged to share their gifts of ministry.

10. My church has a non-judgmental attitude toward things that are outside of the normal rhythm of church life.

- If the answers you gave about your church added up between 41—50, you are a very inclusive church. Families affected by conditions like autism are welcome, loved, and included as equal and contributing members of your faith community. How can you use your strengths to help other churches in your community grow in the area of hospitality? Ask God to connect you with other church leaders who might benefit from your church's experience.
- If the answers you gave about your church added up between 31—40, you are well on your way to becoming an inclusive church. The families affected by conditions like autism are likely noticing your efforts. Have you met with any of the affected families in your church yet? You may be ready to begin partnering with them to take the next step in your hospitality journey. Pray for God to bless you with the humility to become a student of some of these families. Ask for the wisdom to ask good questions and the patience to listen. All great partnerships begin with being known and seeking to know others.
- If the answers you gave about your church added up between 21—30, you have some work to do, but that's okay. Every journey has to start somewhere. If you are not a pastor or leader in your church, your first step might be meeting with one of them to discuss how your church can begin the transformational journey of hospitality. Starting a group study with this book can help spread the passion for beginning this rewarding process. Spend time praying to God about how to best proceed and ask Him to grant you the boldness to act.
- If the answers you gave about your church were 20 or below, the theology of hospitality in your church may be seriously out of line with Scripture. A meeting with your church's leadership team, elder board, or your pastor might help clarify what your church believes about welcoming and including families affected by disabilities. No church is too far gone, so don't lose heart. Every journey begins with one step, and by reading this book, you've already started. Ask God to lead you to like-minded people in your church that can help you increase the awareness of this growth opportunity.

Chapter 6: What's Your Church Doing?

This is where we put it all together. You've read the stories, you have the information, and you've assessed your starting place. Now the door is opened for you to consider a broader view of hospitality that extends beyond what you've always done. This chapter will help leaders articulate a new vision for partnership with families affected by conditions like autism in their churches. A tool to support the crafting of a Congregational Rule of Life will help you apply all of the insights and goals you've made into a plan of action.

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