

We Wanna Dance with Somebody: Three Aspects of an Ecclesiology of Disability for the Evangelical Covenant Church

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From August 2018 to June 2020, I lived in a low-rise apartment building in Albany Park, Chicago, Illinois, near North Park Theological Seminary, where I taught biblical and theological courses related to accessibility and inclusion to undergraduate and graduate students.¹ I taught at North Park as part of a two-year teaching contract through the Louisville Institute.² In the fall of 2018, I had spoken to my supervisor about maintaining my mental health during a busy schedule of teaching and committee work; by that time, I realized that I needed to meet people outside my neighborhood in order to really feel rooted in Chicago. Thus, when two of my upstairs neighbors decided to go dancing with their classmates, I asked if I could go along. They accepted me in their group, with the proviso that I become the faculty liaison for their school-based dance club. Because of my neighbors, I met a few people at select dance venues in Chicago's North Side prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was introduced fulsomely and quickly to the Chicago style

¹ North Park Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Covenant Church is a fascinating place that demands wider exposure. See "North Park Theological Seminary," <https://www.northpark.edu/seminary/>.

² The Louisville Institute is a religious grant-making body based in Louisville Seminary that supports pastors, researchers, and scholars whose work impacts North American religious life. See "Louisville Institute," <https://louisville-institute.org/>.

of blues dancing, with all its hospitality and laissez-faire.³

Allow me to reify my motif of dance by introducing myself. I am a Canadian theologian in his late thirties with spastic cerebral palsy, a neurological condition that affects strength, balance, and motor control. Because I bled from my brain at birth, the right side of my body is shorter, weaker, and less stable than my left, and I possess several non-verbal disabilities. Specifically, I experience constant, low-level spatial disorientation. To put it plainly, I can't always tell which way is up. That is, I cannot tell directions by the sun, as many people can, and I require landmarks to aid my navigation of 3D space. Only when I sing, pray, or perform the Eucharist do I know precisely where I am in space. The rest of the time, I sing, "*Donde estas?*" or "Where?" as the Edge does in U2's latter-day rocker "Vertigo."⁴

Because of my spatial differences, dance has helped me both personally and theologically. Personally, dancing requires that I not drop my partner onto the floor. As I have learned to dance, I have also adapted my diet and weight-training regimen. Dance has also taught me to think on my feet and to be gracious to everyone, even those who think differently from me. My neighbors taught me that "dance etiquette" eschews verbal power relations evident in other aspects of society: when two people finish a dance, one says, "Thank you," and the other replies, "Thank you," rather than "You're welcome," or "Of course." They speak to each other thus because the two parties are equals within the dance.

Using dance as a thematic "hook," this article will assert that the Evangelical Covenant Church (the Covenant) has integrated, and can more fully embody, three ecclesiological aspects of ministry with people with disabilities. Dance is our metaphor because, as I have written elsewhere, dance allows participants to engage in embodied, holistic, and affectively grounded relationship.⁵ Indeed, relationships between Christians with able bodies and Christians with disabilities resemble dancing. Each party

³ The group with which our dance club was most closely affiliated was Bluetopia, "Chicago's longest-running monthly blues dance." See Bluetopia, "Chicago Bluetopia," <https://chicagobluetopia.com/>.

⁴ See U2, "Vertigo," *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, recorded in Hanover Quay Studios and the South of France, Island Records, 2004, track 1, line 9, compact disc.

⁵ For an interpretation of the "dance of difference"—the way in which believers with disabilities embody neurodivergence and diffuse modes of engagement and perception—see Michael A. Walker, *Embodying Community: A Transformative and Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability* (diss., Toronto: University of Toronto, 2018), 15053, 17982.

performs physical, linguistic, and attitudinal moves to which the other party must respond. This article will contend that worshipers with disabilities “wanna dance with somebody who loves [us.]”⁶ Within the social arrangements of that dance, I have experienced great hospitality through the Covenant, which will guide my argument here. My argument will occur in four stages, beginning with a series of definitions.

Defining Disability and Other Concepts

I am a theologian with spastic cerebral palsy. Thus, I am a person with disabilities. Briefly, disability represents both a marker of embodied diversity and a functional limitation on physical and social activity. Because of the ways our bodies and minds are formed, and how they interact with our environments, some human beings cannot engage in activities considered “normal.”⁷ Some disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, are physical; others, like the autism spectrum, manifest as intellectual difference. Mood disorders, such as anxiety and depression, are emotional disabilities.⁸ Some scholars call us “people with disabilities,” and some “disabled people.” In most venues, I prefer the former designation because it affords us agency; that said, I often have more agency than many people with profound intellectual disabilities, who cannot always advocate for themselves in the same ways that I can.

This auto-ethnographic paper will acknowledge the *medical model of disability* but will affirm and celebrate the *social model*. According to the medical model of disability, people with disabilities require correction and remediation, because their bodies are construed as problematic. By contrast, the social model of disability, which I wholeheartedly embrace, asserts that the bodies of people with disabilities are good, rather than

⁶ I cite the late great Whitney Houston, R&B and soul singer. See “I Wanna Dance with Somebody,” *Whitney*, Arista, 1987, track 1, compact disc.

⁷ For one theological definition of disability, see Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 17; see also Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 99.

⁸ For this incisive and insightful definition, see John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 13–20, 62–67.

problematic.⁹ The social model allows scholars of disability to critique social and systemic barriers to the full lives of people with disabilities. For the dance of embodied difference to take place in churches, people of varied abilities must dismantle systemic barriers.

People with disabilities experience embodiment differently in groups that promote *ableism*. Ableism is the systemic and personal oppression of people with disabilities, in favor of people of able body; this definition is related to, but different from, *disablism*. The British nonprofit organization Scope, a charity that campaigns for equality for people with disabilities, states the difference succinctly: “Both terms describe disability discrimination, but the emphasis is different. Disablism emphasises discrimination against disabled people. Ableism emphasises discrimination in favour of non-disabled people.”¹⁰ Accordingly, I will clarify that, for Christians with disabilities, freedom from ableism involves not only the *absence* of those oppressive tensions but also the presence of generous ecclesial welcome and opportunity.

Furthermore, people with varied abilities require *access* or *accessibility*. Access is an entryway into God’s dignity and joy: this word describes the process of people of diverse abilities sharing their gifts and needs in community. This paper will note three of the many facets of accessibility. The first, which I will call *structural access*, denotes the presence of welcoming and inclusive physical aspects of varied ecclesial environments. The second, *communicative access*, denotes the ways that people with and without disabilities can understand each other in churches. Third and finally, *attitudinal access*, a subset of *affective* or *emotional access*, denotes the positive attitudes or worldviews of Christians of able body, and those with disabilities, that can create the conditions for Christlike ecclesial hospitality and solidarity. All three of these aspects of ecclesial solidarity allow the dance of difference to occur; they will form the fulcrum of this essay, along which my argument will balance and spin. All these major chords will be woven together with a resource from the Ontario College

⁹ American sociologist Rod Michalko, who is blind, and his Canadian partner Tanya Titchkosky, who has dyslexia, aptly summarize and critique both the medical and social model of disability. For the medical, see, e.g., Rod Michalko, *The Difference that Disability Makes* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 6–8, 42–47; see also Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto, 2003), 96–113. For the social, see, e.g., Michalko, *The Difference that Disability Makes*, 47–56, 113–41; see also Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society*, 64–95.

¹⁰ Scope UK, “Disablism and ableism,” <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/>.

of Art and Design's Inclusive Design Research Centre, the *Our Doors Are Open Brief Accessibility Checklist*, contained in the *Our Doors Are Open Guide for Accessible Congregations*, because this checklist describes concrete ways in which churches can enter the dance of embodied difference.

A. Sense Memory and Structural Access: Perichoresis and Physical Aspects of an Ecclesiology of Disability in the Covenant and All Churches

I attended a theological college of the Presbyterian Church in Canada for graduate school. That college's chapel, a space well-suited to choral singing, perched atop a solid stone staircase. Needless to say, the stone did not grant everyone access to this sonically resonant space: one of my colleagues at that time used a wheelchair for mobility. My friend wanted to come to chapel with the other students but could not, because the stone steps denied that student structural access to the space; through my friend's persistent self-advocacy, and the compassionate efforts of the faculty, the seminary finally obtained an elevator for the chapel space. Similarly, when I performed an accessibility audit of that space in early 2018, I also noticed that the altar had a similar (though shorter) set of stone steps, which could prevent communicants who use mobility devices from fully presiding over, or assisting in, Holy Communion. Even though I could partake in communion with my colleagues, sometimes while standing in a circle (a liberating practice!), our wheelchair-user friend was excluded. As a person with mobility issues that limit some of my activities, I reflect on these powerful experiences with some frequency.

These experiences contain what some have called *sense memory*. This term means a form of remembrance in which the impression of the initial stimulus remains, and influences the subject, after the stimulus no longer operates.¹¹ When I think of that chapel in that theological college, or when I think of North Park's own Isaacson Chapel in Chicago, I have similar memories—experiences that reside within my body, even though they are no longer fully present. These memories can be both positive and negative; throughout this text, I will name both kinds, and nuance others' encounters as well. Crucially, *structural access*—inclusive physical aspects of the ecclesial environment—offers Christians of diverse abilities the capacity to turn negative sense memories into positive ones, and to use our bodies in ecclesial spaces.

¹¹ See, e.g., Max Coltheart, "Iconic Memory and Visual Persistence," in *Perception and Psychophysics* 27 no. 3 (1980), 183–84.

Structural access points to the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis*, the mutually enmeshed dance of the three persons of the god worshipped by Christians. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian devoted to peace, describes perichoresis as the divine reality of interdependence and oneness within multiplicity. The Deity contains a singular purpose of creative love amidst their infinite aspects. Volf asserts that the Church can emulate the dance of the Trinity in a social sense, because people in whom God’s Spirit dwells can act out the Trinity’s loving mutuality. Borrowing from German practical theologian Jürgen Moltmann, Volf argues that *catholicity*, the integrity of the Church, means that each believer includes every other. All that said, Volf reminds his readers that there is no strict human correspondence to the Trinity’s dance.¹² Thus, the relationships of people of diverse abilities inside and outside the Covenant, or any church, resemble but are not identical to the triune God’s mutual indwelling.

That said, perichoresis offers people of all abilities structural access to the life of the Covenant, and to all churches. Some secular resources might clarify that further: when I worked on the Our Doors Are Open Project—a fascinating venture that offers faith communities in Toronto and across the world a model for inclusion called “inclusive thinking”—our Brief Accessibility Checklist offered multiple strategies for the creation of structural access.¹³ These strategies include accessible parking, high-contrast signage (signage that uses bright and contrasting colors), adequate door width, and access to every level of the building. These strategies speak to the physical arrangement of a church’s space, in empathetic and engaged ways that point to the dance of the triune God.

Covenant pastoral theologian C. John Weborg, himself a person with disabilities, agrees indirectly with Volf concerning both Volf’s claims about perichoresis and his insistence on the church’s catholicity. Weborg makes these resonant claims by way of baptism and Holy Communion. First, after listing common theological images associated with baptism—washing or cleansing, rebirth, deliverance or safety, dying or rising, God’s ownership, enlightenment or illumination, clothing in a garment, incor-

¹² For this rich portrayal of perichoresis, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 193–94, 199–200, 208–10.

¹³ For a description of the whole project, see Our Doors Are Open, “About,” *Our Doors Are Open*, <https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca/about/>, accessed February 20, 2023. For architectural or structural barriers or features of faith communities, see “Our Doors Are Open: Guide for Accessible Congregations,” <https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Our-Doors-Are-Open-Accessible-PDF.pdf>, 16.

poration into Christ's body, circumcision, seal, baptism in the sea, and identification by name for service—Weborg insists, “Baptism is never a private act just as one's life is never private...never can a baptized person live into an adapted version of ‘what happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas’; it does not and will not.”¹⁴ Weborg clarifies Volf's point: baptism, like every rite in the church, involves multiple parties, so it stands to reason that that rite must take into account each person's needs.

More thoroughly than Weborg, Sarah Jean Barton, a theologian and occupational therapist at Duke University, argues that her friends with intellectual disabilities in Episcopalian churches feel a sense of belonging and protection within the baptismal covenant. Barton interviewed many people with disabilities and their allies about baptism; her interviewees indicated that baptism centers them in neighborly, compassionate relationships that feel like family.¹⁵ Thus, if baptism is about secure, familial, and compassionate relations, then one facet of structural access for an ecclesiology of disability within the Covenant, and all churches, is secure attachments. In the ecclesial spaces that we inhabit, believers of varied abilities ought to feel safe and welcome, and that others have their needs and best interests at heart. That security is a critical part of the integrity of the dance of embodied difference in any church.

Weborg further buttresses Volf's ideas about perichoresis when he writes of Holy Communion as a place where wounded people heal each other. Weborg contends that people who come to the Lord's Table are wounded people, and that they wound each other. Weborg insists that worshipers of different abilities ought to let Jesus do the work of healing across time. He asserts, “Participation at the Table is...a place where, over time, the wounded free the wounders but only after they face the wounds that have been inflicted on fellow communicants or the wounds that persons bring from various times and places.”¹⁶ Weborg contends that, as believers of diverse abilities embody Christ's woundedness and wholeness, we can heal within ourselves, and go out to heal the waiting world.

The late great sociologist of religion Nancy Eiesland (1964–2009), who taught at the Candler School of Theology, would agree fundamentally with Weborg's nuancing of perichoresis. A wheelchair user by virtue of a lifelong hip condition, Eiesland knew the incivility of exclusion. In

¹⁴ C. John Weborg, *Made Healthy in Ministry for Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 69–72.

¹⁵ See Sarah Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 67–69.

¹⁶ Weborg, *Made Healthy*, 81.

her riveting monograph *The Disabled God*, Eiesland recounts her experiences of shame within her own sense memory, as she was barred from full participation in Holy Communion in her Evangelical Lutheran Church of America congregation:

The bodily practice of receiving the Eucharist in most congregations includes ... kneeling at the communion rail. When I initially attended services, I would often be alerted by an usher that I need not go forward for the Eucharist. Instead, I would be offered the sacrament at my seat when everyone else had been served. My presence in the services using either a wheelchair or crutches made problematic the “normal” bodily practice of the Eucharist in the congregation. Yet rather than focusing on the congregation’s practices that excluded my body and asking, “How do we alter the bodily practice of the Eucharist in order that this individual and others with disabilities would have full access to the ordinary practices of the church?” the decision makers would center the (unstated) problem on my disabled body, asking, “How should we accommodate this person with a disability in our practice of Eucharist?” Hence receiving the Eucharist was transformed for me from a corporate to a solitary experience; from a sacralization of Christ’s broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body.¹⁷

Eiesland’s explanation of her exclusion from the Lord’s Supper, one of the church’s formative rituals, fills me with incendiary rage. Metaphor may serve as an outlet for that ire: following our claim that dance is a fitting metaphor for some components of an ecclesiology of disability, Eiesland’s exclusion by the elders of her congregation entails an interruption of the perichoretic dance of intimacy that allows believers of all abilities to thrive. By asking the closed question of how they can “accommodate” her in the communion service—a thoroughly embodied ritual that has varied meanings for those who participate in it—Eiesland’s colleagues in ministry center their own experience and deny her the

¹⁷ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 112.

structural access that is so necessary.¹⁸ Eiesland feels isolated and ashamed and calls communion a “ritual of exclusion and degradation.”¹⁹ This is the opposite of how believers of all abilities should act with each other.

How can experiences of exclusion and shame like Eiesland’s find remedy? I return to the *Brief Accessibility Checklist* from the Our Doors Are Open Project. If as the *Checklist* asserts, “All levels of the building are accessible from the inside,” then worshipers of all abilities will have complete, or at least thorough, physical access to every structure within a church building, including a communion rail.²⁰ Similarly, if churches can be constructed or retrofitted in ways that allow for open-concept furniture, then more communicants can offer each other the access we need to move around—to physically dance together in perichoretic familiarity.

Structural access blends smoothly, though not seamlessly, into what we might call *communicative access* to ecclesial life for people with disabilities. This mode of accessibility integrates empathy and dignity into the ecclesial use of signs and symbols. With dance as my continued motif, I will again dip into the canons of church music and popular music to express the blessings of free-flowing, accessible communication for believers of all abilities.

B. Integrating Access into Idioms: Communication as Crucial to a Christian Ecclesiology of Disability

In another Toronto church community, the pastor understood the need for clear communication: all our service bulletins were printed on colored paper, which reduced the glare from the chapel’s fluorescent lights. Every Tuesday morning between September 2012 and July 2018, we used orders of service printed on salmon-, teal-, and robin’s-egg-blue paper. That colorful communication permeated the service, for every service was bookended with a pop song. In those six years, I heard and sang much Leonard Cohen, with an occasional dash of Ani DiFranco and Tracy Chapman. My friends in this participatory church practiced what I can safely call *communicative access* to ecclesial life for people of all abilities.

When I say communicative access, I mostly refer to language, signs, and symbols, but I refer generally to the ways that people with and

¹⁸ For the multivalent ritual meanings of baptism and communion for believers of varied abilities, see Michael A. Walker, “Caring and Covenant: Notes on a Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability,” *Journal of Religion and Disability* 23.2 (May 2019), 170–73.

¹⁹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 113.

²⁰ “Our Doors Are Open; Guide for Accessible Congregations,” 16.

without disabilities can understand each other in churches. How can believers in Covenant churches, and every church, tell stories that use few or no “forty-dollar words” (my lifelong struggle)? How can we print signs that people with low visual acuity can distinguish from other objects? How can we proclaim in our deeds and our discourse that every person, of every kind of ability, is welcome in our communities?

Communicative access to Christian community has two elements; the first is imagination. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this elusive quality in two pertinent ways: imagination is both “the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations,” and “the mind’s creativity and resourcefulness in using and inventing images, analogies, etc.”²¹ The first definition matters because imagination helps Christians in the Covenant, and every denomination, to find innovative ways to use language and symbol in ways that invite the capacities of people with varied abilities. Likewise, the second definition applies to our inquiry because it points to the *creativity* that is necessary for communication to take place.

The second component of communicative access for Christians of varied abilities is linguistic. Communicative access requires simple language that invites people of all abilities into solidarity, understanding, and joy. Simple, direct language can enliven human imagination by speaking to people’s affective parts. Significantly, direct, clear language avoids the intellectual laziness of using disabilities as pejorative metaphors. Thus, in a community that practices communicative access to Christian life, no worshiper will be “blinded by sin,” “deaf to God’s word,” or “crippled by circumstance.” Believers need to name things in ways that do not derogate their spiritual siblings with disabilities.

One entry point to direct, clear language is storytelling. From my early childhood, I loved to read and tell stories. In my 1990s elementary school, we had story time where every classmate could share a story he or she had written; my classmates would pay rapt attention when I spoke. My intense imagination lent excitement to mental scenes, and I felt convicted that my stories needed to be told. In my middle age, I still passionately desire to narrate my life; thus, writing about access for my readers gives me great joy.

Theologians and other scholars examine the human need to share, and embody, stories as part of community. For instance, American music therapist and theologian Brett Webb-Mitchell claims that “stories tell

²¹ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., “imagination, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/91643>.

us who we are.”²² Outside the religious establishment, American and Canadian Indigenous novelist Thomas King asserts, “The truth about stories is, they’re all we are.”²³ Both Webb-Mitchell and King are suggesting that stories can help human beings to transform our actions and our identities. Let me be plain: *imagination can help human beings to change*. I recognize that, as a person with graduate degrees, I can tell a different story from a person with Down Syndrome who has limited verbal capacity. Even so, people with physical and intellectual disabilities require loving communities to help us tell our stories, because stories help people to live out God’s radical welcome. Stories offer us evocative visions of Jesus’s life and the lives of those who emulate Jesus; they let believers glimpse the life of God at second hand.

Jesus’s earthy and direct narratives and his compassionate listening display God’s vivid, vivacious openness. Also, when the Lord tells a story—be it about an indiscriminate sower of seeds, a lost coin, a dishonest manager, or a treasure in a field—less is more. Jesus’s parables, compact and concise stories that share oblique symbolic connections, portray God’s topsy-turvy reign.²⁴ For instance, in Lk 10:25–37, Jesus illustrates the extravagance of God’s mercy to an audience that includes tradespeople, scribes, and lawyers, with a story about a man on the road to Jericho, beaten and left for dead by robbers. The one who saves him from encroaching death and delivers him to safety is neither a priest nor a Levite, but a Samaritan—someone on the margins of Jewish society. Two meanings of this parable are pertinent. First, God’s grace can be conveyed to people in need by unlikely sources, and second, God’s compassion breaks in from life’s periphery.

The parables raise another point: ecclesial narratives about disability need to be authentic if believers with disabilities are to embody the dance of difference. People with physical and intellectual disabilities tell stories that convey God’s grace in surprising and indirect ways. Thus, it is not enough that Brett Webb-Mitchell tells the stories of children with disabilities he has loved, like Sal the “hugger” who

²² Brett Webb-Mitchell, *God Plays Piano, Too: The Spiritual Lives of Disabled Children* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 153.

²³ Thomas E. King, *Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (New York: House of Anansi, 2003), 2.

²⁴ For one linkage of Jesus’s parables to God’s reign, see Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1975), 13–15, 22, 68–71; see also Walter Brueggemann, e.g., “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity,” *Christian Century* 116, no. 10 (March 1999). Brueggemann argues that Jesus’s parables entangle readers and hearers in moral issues to invoke their imaginations.

knows an American Sign Language version of “Jesus Loves Me,”²⁵ or that Jean Vanier recounts his remembrances of communal joy and belonging in L’Arche and other communities.²⁶ While it is helpful for our allies to tell our stories, people with disabilities need to tell our own stories too, as uncomfortable as some of those stories may be.

We have asserted that Christian use of communication and story must change to include imagination and narrative to welcome and include people of all abilities. The *Brief Accessibility Checklist* from the Our Doors Are Open Project offers relevant and refreshing suggestions to make that possible. It strongly suggests the thorough use of plain language in faith-based services and gatherings, as well as sign-language interpretation, assistive-listening devices, alternative formats for printed materials (e.g., Braille, electronic devices, or pen and paper), and large-print captions for video transcription.²⁷ All of these adaptations allow for the flourishing of the imagination in churches inside and outside the Covenant.

Significantly, too, these suggestions can create the conditions for written, spoken, and tactile concepts to touch the heart. Changes to structural and communicative access portend, and point to, the change in *attitude* and *affect* that is necessary for people with disabilities to flourish within the Covenant and other Christian communities. Thus, the final major section of this essay will articulate the tacit speech of the heart, and consequently address the transformation of attitudes that will stimulate a flourishing ecclesiology of disability.

C. A Waltz of Worldviews: Attitudinal Access to Christian Ministry

In the preceding two sections, I have delineated the ways that dance serves as a metaphor for a functional ecclesiology of disability in terms of both structural and communicative modes of access to church life for Christians with varied abilities, inside and outside the Evangelical Covenant Church. First, Christians with and without dis-

²⁵ For Sal’s touching story (pun intended), see Webb-Mitchell, *God Plays Piano, Too*, 130–31.

²⁶ I mention Vanier while fully acknowledging the import of the multiple heart-breaking reports on his sexual abuse of women in L’Arche communities (on which I will, for reasons of space, not elaborate here). That said, Vanier’s insights on belonging are still relevant, because he invokes belonging as a concept in gentle and insightful ways. See, e.g., Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 324, 315.

²⁷ “Our Doors Are Open: Guide for Accessible Congregations,” <https://open-doors.idrc.ocadu.ca/guide-for-accessible-congregation/>, 15.

abilities can perform the perichoretic dance of difference most easily when we feel safe and welcome in church spaces and structures. For instance, gently sloping ramps, bright colours, and intuitive way-finding make Christians with disabilities feel welcome, whereas stone steps, low lighting, and uniform, drab-coloured walls may not.

Second, the dance of difference is easy to do when people tell their stories simply, imaginatively, and using inclusive and plain language. Sermons with numerous forty-dollar words and strict beliefs about people's ability to comprehend the baptismal covenant do not usually resonate with many believers with disabilities; by contrast, narratives that begin with smiles and welcome and end with dance, music, and tasty food may be much easier to integrate into the longer story of our journeys of faith. These changes evoke the dance of difference.

These prior modes of access to church life within and without the Covenant apply equally to *attitudinal access*, a subset of what I have elsewhere called *affective access* to divine equity.²⁸ Attitudinal access entails an examination of the attitudes or worldviews of Christians of able body, and those with disabilities; such an evaluation can create the conditions for Christlike hospitality and radical solidarity in churches. Some attitudes are positive, and some negative.

Able-bodied believers have not always wanted to dance with the difference of disability in authentic ways. Many Christians of able body—the kind that speaker and Christian accessibility advocate Amy Kenny calls “prayerful perpetrators”—claim that disability reflects God's will, is a punishment for sin, is a test of someone's character, or has a deeper meaning or purpose.²⁹ By contrast, throughout Christian history, many practitioners, healers, and theologians have reflected on and embodied God's love by demonstrating loving-kindness.³⁰

My own experience of affective access and its lack is germane here;

²⁸ For thoroughgoing definitions of affective access to God's equity, see again Walker, *Embodying Community*, 179–82, 200–204.

²⁹ For images of “prayerful perpetrators” of ableist discourse, see Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), e.g., 2, 5; for other incomplete explanations of disability as part of God's purpose, see Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 23–31.

³⁰ Brian Brock and John Swinton survey the entire Christian tradition to draw together strands of reflection with threads of compassion; their exegeses of the patristic era, John Calvin's thought on disability and illness, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life experiences are instructive, because they demonstrate both their subjects' erudition and their empathy. See Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), e.g., 1–37, 216–26, 353–68.

well-meaning believers can say and do hurtful things that do not accord with the compassion Christ commands. On one hand, for example, in summer 2015 at a major intersection in Toronto, a lovely young woman observed that I had trouble walking and offered to pray away my perceived “difficulty.” She did so twice without success and left me hurt and confused. I felt as though our short interaction was negative, rather than positive; I often wonder what misguided impulse led her to seek me out, and whether she had reflected on the love of Christ in simply offering others a ministry of presence like that described elsewhere in this article.

On the other hand, I clearly remember that, sometime in 2010, a friend from church asked me if my disability “hurt.” I thanked him for his attention, and told him no, because – rather than pain—I most often experience confusion and a lack of sensation. (Naturally, I told my friend a harmless lie—I feel pain constantly, and the intensity of that feeling is a question of degree.) Whatever I do, occasionally my muscles will simply not do what I ask of them. My paralysis makes parts of the dance of friendship difficult for me because I feel anger and sadness at my body’s reluctance. That said, when I feel that others accept me, welcome me, or listen to the cries of pain (like this article!), the dance of friendship is much smoother.

In her warm, gentle, and incisive book *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* Catholic disability advocate Jennie Weiss Block recounts one (imaginary) Eucharistic service that welcomes people with disabilities and one that does not. The one that includes and welcomes embodied difference has an usher with Parkinson’s disease and a priest with mobility issues.³¹ Block’s vignette suggests strongly that affective access builds from the structural and communicative access we have examined. When it is shored up by concrete thoroughgoing acts of inclusion, the mode of belonging that comes from the human heart offers believers of all abilities entry into the Trinity’s loving dance.

The *Brief Accessibility Checklist* from the Our Doors Are Open Project can offer some concrete guidelines for the empathic and energetic engagement of people with disabilities in Covenant churches, and every denomination. The first four guidelines are most apropos: in communities that practice the dance of difference, first, all community members feel that they have been included “in worship, leadership, and other programs.” Second, in such communities, people with disabilities and those without have equal opportunities to lead; third, leaders and vol-

³¹ Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 114–15.

unteers know how to engage compassionately with newcomers who are disabled or otherwise vulnerable. Fourth and finally, when accessibility advocacy is the work of an advocate or a committee, a community displays adequate levels of attitudinal access to church life.³²

These activities display the change of heart that is necessary for people with disabilities to feel included in Covenant churches and other faith communities. Just as Jesus asks Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51, NRSV) before restoring his sight, church leaders need to ask worshipers with disabilities how welcome they feel in church leadership, in volunteer roles, and in programming. We want to feel that our differences contribute to the good of the community, that our friends and neighbours know how to help us if we need their help, and that we have the ear of a person or group who will defend our dignity.

I have sometimes had that experience of fulsome attitudinal access where I felt wholly welcomed by a church community. One of my Torontonians would gather every month for a “Rock Eucharist,” a celebration of the Lord’s Supper saturated with the music of a particular contemporary artist. In that gathering, I recall both praying corporately on behalf of the community and singing along to Van Morrison and Mavis Staples, hearing fiery preaching book-ended by searing songs by Bob Dylan, and (one wonderful time) dancing in the aisles, with loved ones, to a show-stopping rendition of Bruce Springsteen’s “Promised Land.” In surreal and small moments infused with the varied modes of access to ecclesial life I have described, this community exemplified the Lord’s perichoretic and pathos-driven dance of intimacy.

D. Concluding with Compassion: Dancing with Somebody

In this short article, I have described three aspects of the dizzying dance of intimacy in which believers of varied abilities must engage to live into an ecclesiology of disability, in the Evangelical Covenant Church and every church. First, believers with and without disabilities begin the perichoretic dance of desire with sustained structural accessibility—access to the buildings, furniture, and structure of church life together. Furthermore, believers of diverse abilities create a communicative web empowered by imagination. When we engage empathetically with each other’s stories, and use language appropriate to our audiences, believers

³² For these four marks of attitudinal accessibility, see “Our Doors Are Open: Guide for Accessible Congregations,” 14.

of every capacity can forge the bonds of friendship that lead to energized and caring community. Finally, when we make certain that everybody and *every body* feels welcome in a congregation in work, play, and all of life together, believers of diverse capacities can dance joyfully with each other, and offer cacophonous communal praise to our Maker.