TOWARD STRUCTURALLY INVITING AND INCLUSIVE CHURCHES

Kenneth A. Pudlas, EdD

Seminarians and others preparing for vocational ministry, whose calling is to minister to the Body of Christ on earth in some capacity, must bring into confluence their head, hand, and heart if they are to be inclusive in their praxis (Pudlas, 2007). While knowledge and skills are important, they are most effective when directed and motivated by the heart.

For the past three decades, I served at Trinity Western University, educating prospective teachers in the areas of educational psychology and special education. Education psychology relates to how people develop and learn. Special education relates to why some learners face challenges and how those challenges or barriers to full growth and development might be ameliorated. Writing for NIMER, I have sought to present insights gleaned from personal and professional experience and make them relevant for ministry to churches. Given my focus on "exceptional learners" or "special education," my desire is that all who minister would be fully inclusive of all members of the body.

For the Body to thrive, all parts must be included and utilized (Pudlas, 2019). Achieving inclusiveness begins with awareness. That awareness must reside in both those who minister and those to whom they minister.

Consider Romans, chapter 10, beginning in verse14.

> [14] How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? [15] But how are they to preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!" [16] However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" [17] So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (NASB)

Another interpretation of the original reads,

> [14-17] But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it? That's why Scripture exclaims,

A sight to take your breath away!
Grand processions of people
telling all the good things of God!

But not everybody is ready for this, ready to see and hear and act. Isaiah asked what we all ask at one time or another: "Does anyone care, God? Is anyone listening and believing a word of it?" The point is: Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to. (MSG)

Apprentices of Jesus are called to be invitational in their words and actions. If they want people to trust in Jesus, they must be trustworthy. Using different terminology, they are to be personally inviting. To be perceived as such, the buildings in which they meet must also be structurally inviting. While most within churches understand that a church is more than a building, those who are still seeking may perceive the organizational structure and the building as being "the church." Church leaders need to be consciously aware of barriers, real or perceived, that stand in the way of "...people calling for help." They may not know whom to trust and may not know the One who can be trusted unless churches represent Him in an inviting and trustworthy manner.

Foundational Principles

The principles of normalization, and invitational theory establish the foundation for this discussion. For further exploration of the notion of being "inviting" I recommend the seminal work of Purkey and Novak (1978, 1996) and the more recent application of that work to an "ethic of care" as articulated by Schat (2020). Readers who don biblical worldview glasses and carefully examine these principles or theories will find that they offer meaningful insights toward inclusive praxis.

Normalization

The term and principle of "normalization" first appeared in North America in the late 1960s. Horrified at the treatment of persons in various asylums and institutions in North America, Wolfensberger (1972) wrote, *Normalization: The Principle of Normalization in Human Services.* Since then, normalization has evolved into a systematic theory that can be used as a universal guiding principle in the design and conduct of human services. It is especially powerful when applied to services to people who are devalued by the larger society; that is, those who historically have been marginalized.

Normalization may be used as a foundation for discussing how churches may, perhaps unknowingly, impose barriers to full participation; that is, inclusion of members of the body who may have physical or sensory challenges. Normalization developed from an era when "feeble minded" or "cripples" were housed in deplorable conditions with no provision for human dignity, such as privacy or personal control over the physical environment. Being housed institutionally meant sleeping in a large, shared space with no control over heating or lighting, having no hope of privacy in toileting or personal hygiene, and being beaten for non-compliance with submissiveness (Wolfenberger, 1972). Considerable progress has been made in the decades since, in part because of greater understanding and a more compassionate worldview. However, barriers to being fully included still exist in the form of the meta-physical, such as negative attitudes or stereotypes, and in the form of physical structures.

Previous articles concerned barriers imposed by attitudes (Stace-Smith & Pudlas, 2020). This article attempts to be more practical, identifying areas that those who have some degree of "normal" functioning may take for granted in the ecology in which we live and work and worship.

For example, my very large introductory class in special education at the University of Wisconsin were assigned a "blind walk" in which they simulated being functionally blind and played roles as both the visually impaired person and the guide of that person. The unexpected discovery was the number of physical obstructions that normally sighted persons, ironically, failed to see and took for granted. The most compelling example was the proliferation of coat and boot racks in public hallways. Living in a snowy climate, these were welcome features. However, as the students discovered, these conveniences protruded from the wall at approximately eye level. Persons who were functionally blind, seeking to be independent and move about perhaps with use of a cane, could easily be injured by walking into these racks.

From this scenario a question arises: has the building in which the church meets been consciously evaluated for potential physical or structural barriers? This evaluation is especially important in older structures that were built prior to newer codes that mandate accessibility. Are the meeting spaces structurally inviting?

Invitational Care

The very essence of the Gospel message is inviting. Jesus says, "Come unto me all..." (Matt. 11:28). While that call is to meet the person of Jesus, until his return meeting physically is through encountering those who seek to be his apprentices, sometimes in a physical structure called a church. To be called structurally welcoming, churches may apply the Invitational Theory of Practice (ITOP) put forward by Stanley, Juhnke, and Purkey (2004). Originally applied to school settings,

this approach is relevant to churches because they also are places of learning. Many churches attempt to provide inclusive environments. The ITOP approach is helpful because it "requires a holistic approach that encompasses everybody and everything in the [church]" (p. 302). Church leaders who use ITOP as a framework for analysis will consider its Five Ps: people, places, policies, programs, and processes. The Five Ps are foundational to Invitational Theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996) and provide the means to implement ITOP. The focus of this article is on places, the physical structure of the church.

Places

The physical environment of the church can play a significant role in whether people feel invited. Does the church physical environment look like a place where people want to be and want to learn? Regardless of the age of the building, has careful attention been given to the aesthetic, functional, and efficient qualities that make the building intentionally inviting? Almost anyone can recognize unpleasant restrooms, peeling paint, cluttered offices, burned-out light bulbs, broken furniture, dirty windows, or unkempt buildings. These physical features are more obvious than negative attitudes or disinviting processes and prejudices. The church leadership and congregants may have the warmest hearts and the best of intentions, but at first the public will only see the physical environment. Being structurally inviting matters; consider the detailed instructions given to the aesthetics of the Tabernacle and the Temple in the Old Testament (Ex. 26; 1 Chron. 28). Beyond aesthetics, what are some potential physical barriers that may make a place of worship disinviting?

Potential Barriers

Structural

Once awareness is present, some physical or structural barriers may stand out. Protruding shelves or fire extinguishers hanging past the wall in narrow hallways, or uneven floors with unexpected steps are unintended physical barriers. The route to the washroom in a venerable and historic church can be an obstacle course. Persons with physical challenges can find that narrow hallways with unexpected steps preclude access with a wheelchair or other mobility aids. Persons with visual challenges would benefit from a careful assessment of and amelioration of orientation (where am I in space) and mobility (how can I move effectively in space) barriers. Churches that have clearly marked ingress and egress areas, accessible washrooms, and room to move safely are welcoming places for all people.

Acoustic

The *soundscape* of the church structure also needs to be considered. The term "soundscape" refers to the auditory aspects of the environment; most typically, it would relate to the learning environment. To be successful learners, students need to focus on important sounds, such as speech, while not attending to or tuning out background noise. As they listen, they have a limited amount of cognitive processing capacity. If they use too much of that capacity in attempting to discern what they think they might have heard, the meaning of messages may well be lost.

Various acoustic or auditory factors impact human ability to receive and interpret speech sounds, including sound intensity or loudness measured in decibels (dB), and frequency, perceived as pitch and measured in cycles per second or Hertz (Hz). Another important factor in a soundscape is reverberation, where sound waves reflect off hard surfaces in the room rather than travel directly from the speaker to the listeners' ears. Reverberation time (RT) refers to the amount of time required for a signal to decrease 60 decibels (dB) below its initial level (Flagg-Williams, Rubin & Aquino-Russell, 2011).

The majestic echoing of the organ pipes may rattle the windows and stir the soul. Similar reverberation from the voice presenting the sermon is a potential barrier. What is the decibel level of the music in whatever form? Some with acute sensitivity to loud sounds or who have been advised by their hearing specialists to avoid them must leave the sanctuary during worship or wear ear plugs. Are these congregants likely to perceive themselves as invited to participate? While soundscape issues may be difficult to confront, they need to be investigated with a loving spirit.

These potential barriers are by no means an exhaustive list. However, they raise awareness of factors that prevent full inclusion and full participation by all members of the body. The necessary first step to change is awareness, that is, knowledge. A concomitant requisite for inclusive praxis on the part of church leaders is the attitude or heart. What possible steps can be taken to ensure that church buildings are inviting to all?

Possible Solutions

Some decades ago, I returned to the church that had been home during my childhood. The congregation had outgrown the original building and moved to a new location in a building designed by two church members who were architects. The building was impressive with a stylized bell tower and steps that ascended from two sides to large double doors. The pleasing effect carried on to the interior as the sanctuary rose multiple stories in height, with a raised baptistry and a cross that drew the gaze upward. The walls were simple with beautiful tall windows emphasizing the

height of the interior. There was a problem: the hard walls and high but hard ceiling were excellent reflectors of sound, creating a distracting reverberation – a disinviting acoustic environment. The church recognized the problem and modified the interior design with sound absorbing materials. Also, with some gentle pressure from families who had members with mobility issues, the church recognized that the front entranceway had not been designed to be accessible to persons with physical challenges. Demonstrating an inclusive and inviting spirit and honouring those families, the entry to the church also was ameliorated with the installation of an aesthetically tasteful ramp.

Exemplar Churches

Thinking of the structural challenges faced by persons with sensory or physical limitations, I solicited input from students in a graduate course I was teaching at Trinity Western University. The Forum Post that solicited the examples below read as follows:

> As we begin the course, I have an informal request.
>
> Please consider your "houses of worship" as they were pre-pandemic. How "inclusive" are they in terms of physical structure? If "special education is all about removing barriers" (Pudlas), then what are the barriers to full inclusion in our church buildings?

Students' responses included:

> From student 'T':
>
> I think that older churches such as ours have done what they can to be more physically inclusive by retro-fitting [sic] wheelchair ramps or stair lifts and the like, but given the design of the buildings, that becomes very challenging. And I wonder how inclusive they actually feel - I'm sure there is some feeling of pride that their needs are being taken into consideration - but I wonder if it feels a bit "second-class citizen" when they have to (for example in our church) go outside to the wheelchair ramp, and around the outside of the building just to get downstairs for post-church coffee. Or, ..., are they simply so used to this that they don't even think about it anymore? My article that I added to the readings talks about the importance of actually talking to people with disabilities, and asking them what matters to them, which is why I put these as wonders. I need to ask!

From student 'L':

> I attend a large church in _____ and have always been drawn to the large Special Needs ministry.
> Part of the mission statement includes, "We exist as a place where people with special needs and their families are welcomed and included as full participants in the life of the church."
> I grabbed a few facts from the website for more information:
> - Serves 250 families each year
> - Programs, volunteer opportunities, and Bible studies are provided all week long at _____
> - A monthly outpouring service is designed and led by people with special needs, drawing in parents and families of people with special needs, even if they don't yet know Christ.

These examples raise several noteworthy points. First, even if churches make accommodations, what is the reason? Do they make accommodations to feel good about themselves and their efforts or do they do so sincerely from a desire to be inclusive? Second, speaking with the people with the physical and other challenges is important. Churches value them by recognizing their experience.

In addition, how many people with sensory or physical challenges (or other challenges) serve in church leadership positions without externally imposed special conditions? What do we perceive as "normal" when it comes to those who serve in churches? An article entitled, *Who is the God we Worship?* by John Swinton (2011) promotes a perspective articulated by the late Nancy Eisland (1994), author of *The Disabled God*. Eisland proffered that God cannot be fully understood unless his people are willing to see Him as "disabled." When Eisland's denomination ordained her, they forbid her from serving communion. Why? Because her physical disability might make some congregants uncomfortable. Swinton argues,

> In other words, impairments (blindness, deafness, lack of mobility) are not the things that produce disability. In a different environment these impairments would not cause a person to be disabled. Rather, it is negative social reactions to such impairments and inflexible social structures which assume a norm that excludes particular impairments which causes a person to become disabled. (p. 279).

Pointing to Eisland's perspective, Swinton states,

> People with disabilities are an oppressed minority group within the church. The inclusion of people with disabilities involves not only making churches physically accessible, it also means a fundamental re-symbolizing of the tradition. Her major focus for this task is the re-symbolization of God (p. 282).

Nancy Eisland's presence was allowed, but her full participation was not. It is encouraging, therefore, to note that in the second example provided by my student, a monthly service is designed and led by people with special needs. Thus, there is a sense of empowerment and of ownership. This derives from the explicit church policy embedded in the church's mission statement, to be intentionally inclusive and inviting. Consideration of ITOP's five P's (people, places, policies, programs, and processes) will make the church's ministry praxis both inclusive and inviting. Until that is the case, those who are seeking and who may feel marginalized may judge a church by its structure. Are our churches structurally inviting?

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

Leviticus, written by an ancient tribal author to ancient tribal people for their well-being, is still relevant to God's people today. Leviticus 19:14 speaks to the welcoming congruence of heads, hands and hearts on behalf of inclusion. "'Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD." (NIV). Another rendering of the verse says, "You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (NRSV). While the notion of a stumbling block is clear, what does it mean to revile? The principle here that God wants the church to live out is to not place barriers or allow them to be placed. The barriers may be social (to revile or to curse or to devalue) or physical/structural barriers that literally or figuratively cause someone to stumble.

These principles derive from another commandment, elegant in its simplicity: Love God by loving those He created. Churches demonstrate – live out and model - God's love by being intentionally inclusive of those on the margins and by intentionally providing places that are structurally inviting.

References

Eiesland, N. (1994). *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Nashville: Abingdon.

Flagg-Williams, J., Rubin, R.L & Aquino-Russell, C.E. (2011). Classroom Soundscape. *Educational & Child Psychology, 28*(1), 89-99.

Pudlas, K. A. (2007). Head and heart and hands: Necessary elements of inclusive praxis. *ICCTE Online Journal, 3*(1), available: http://www.icctejournal.org/ICCTEJournal/volume-3-issue-1/head-and-heart-and-hands-necessary-elements-of-inclusive-praxis

Pudlas, K.A. (2019). Faithfully inclusive communities: How welcoming is the Body? *Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research*. www.nimer.ca

Purkey W. W. (1978) *Inviting school Success: A self-concept approach to teaching and learning.* Wadsworth Publishing, Belmont, California

Purkey, W. W. and Novak, J. M. (1996) *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching, learning, and democratic practice*, Third Edition. Wadsworth Publishing. Belmont, California

Schat, S. & Freytag, C. (2020) What can Christians learn from care theory. In Shotsberger & Freytag (Eds.). *How Shall We Then Care.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Stace-Smith, H. & Pudlas, K.A. (2020, Spring) Moving beyond inclusion toward belonging. *Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research*. www.nimer.ca

Stanley, P.H., Juhnke, G.A., & Purkey, W.W. (2004). Using an Invitational Theory of Practice to create safe and successful schools. *Journal of Counseling & Development, (82),* 302-309.

Swinton, J. (2011) Who is the God we worship. *International Journal of Practical Theology, 14*(2), 273-307.

Wolfensberger, W. (1972). *Normalization: The principle of normalization in human services.* Toronto, ON: Leonard Crainford (National Institute on Mental Retardation.

Ken Pudlas earned his doctorate at the University of British Columbia, and recently retired as a Professor in the School of Education at Trinity Western University. He was instrumental in establishing and teaching special education courses at both UBC and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee prior to his tenure at TWU. Prior to his university career, Ken taught students with special needs in the K-12 public school system in several districts in British Columbia. Dr. Pudlas developed and was the Director of the MA in Educational Studies in Special Education program, approved by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and launched in the summer of 2014. This program seeks to bring together head (knowledge) and hands (skills) motivated by the heart in order to empower educators toward inclusive praxis. Dr. Pudlas also developed the Minor in Special Education program which has grown in popularity as pre-professional teachers realize the ever-increasing diversity among learners in today's classrooms. He

has done extensive research on the Full Inclusion model of service delivery and has presented locally, nationally, and internationally on topics related to learners with diverse needs.

Pudlas, Kenneth A. Toward Structurally Inviting and Inclusive Churches. Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).