Unlearning ableism in worship

Rebecca F. Spurrier

In this article I share some of the ways I am being shaped by and with disabled Christians as part of a multi-year project to create a new worship resource. As I chart our process in creating this prayer book, I offer a possible roadmap for those seeking to engage in anti-ableist collaboration and partnership within faith communities.

Encountering the disabled God

The God whom I first encountered in worship—through sermons, through hymns and songs, through confessions and prayers of intercession—was a God who chose to be with God's people by seeing and hearing them. God's seeing and hearing was both comfort and judgement, for God saw and heard what others did not. Moreover, this God called humans to be like God by opening their eyes and ears. God transformed those who were "blind" to divine activity in the world and "deaf" to the cries of those around them. Divine power and compassion were most evident when disability, literally or metaphorically, was healed or erased.

It wasn't until I began to learn from disability communities and scholars that I came to name and know God differently: in the disabled God present as the risen Christ, returned to his disciples with his body altered and marked by his crucifixion and resurrection.[1] This God, known in part through consensual touch, invited his beloved friends into new forms of embodied knowledge. Through attending to the witness of disabled Christians and to hidden histories,[2] this God appeared to me elsewhere: as one who chooses to move through the world on wheels in Ezekiel or to speak through the disabled voice of Moses and his interpreter Aaron.[3] This is a God who both chooses to access creation through created bodies and provides access for God's people when they ask.

1 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 98–105.

2 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 66–67, 98.

3 Note, for example, Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Boston: Beacon, 2023), 73–92, 214–37.

In *The Disabled God*, disability theologian Nancy Eiesland argues that "body practices of inclusion" require (1) acknowledgement of and accountability for harm; (2) centering the experiences of people with disabilities; (3) transformation of theological symbols and norms, such as our names for and images of God; and (4) political action toward liberation for all who experience oppression.[4] Inclusion efforts in congregations often focus on non-disabled Christians providing hospitality or accommodations for disabled people within ministry. Eiesland emphasizes instead that to repent of ableism and foster flourishing for disabled Christians means asking hard questions about ideals for God, for individual bodies and capacities, and for the social and political communities that shape relationships.

Anti-ableist Christian worship

As someone who oversees an ecumenical chapel space in a Christian seminary, I interrogate these ideals regularly in communal spiritual and religious practices. When I examine the practices for which I bear responsibility, I am convicted of the persistent harms that occur not only through lack of access to worship space and time but also through prayers, songs, and sermons that do not take seriously the lived experiences of disabled people. Ableist interpretations of sacred texts and use of disability metaphors perpetuate tragic or inspirational understandings of disability. These harms also occur through instructions that do not anticipate the full range of human embodiment and that do not anticipate disabled people as members of and leaders in our faith communities. Yet making changes that reflect my accountability for this knowledge can be hard. They cause me to ask questions like these: What kinds of changes are helpful while still respecting the communal nature of faith traditions over time as well as the challenge of altering faith practices that connect us to prior generations? How can those of us who lead worship and prayer not simply erase harmful language about disability but center those of us who are disabled and our lived experiences of disability?

As a partial response to these questions, I have been working alongside others to create an anti-ableist resource for Christian worship that demonstrates liberative commitments to those of us in the disability community and that prioritizes the experience of disability as a vital part of faith communities. Inspired by several creative liturgical resources that

4 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 70, 86–87, 90–98.

have emerged from and with minoritized communities, our collaborative team has created prayers and patterns for worship and devotion that engage wisdom from, with, and for the disability community.

As a group of scholars and pastors with and without disabilities, we began by investigating our own rituals: prayer books, hymnody, customs of extemporaneous worship, and other liturgical sources in order to identify places of harm and to develop a set of prayers, practices, and questions to guide us. This work looked different for each of us, for we have been shaped by different denominations and traditions. For some of us this included identifying prayers used during seasons of Advent and Lent that use negative metaphors or interpretations of disability. For others, this work meant examining instructions and prayers for Christian rituals of communion and baptism that have implications not only for who can participate but also for what it means to know and belong to one another. Still others in our group reflected on approaches to teaching and preaching and what kinds of topics and experiences are emphasized or ignored in these practices.

By inviting the divine spirit of creativity to move through a group of diverse people, we invested time in new ways of praying and understanding God and one another.

After exploring familiar prayers and rituals with attention to the kinds of language that perpetuate injustice and to the kinds of experiences the material was missing, we engaged with disability theologies, liberative approaches to worship, and sacred texts as conversation partners to inform and challenge us. These collaborative conversations were not only a means to creating the resource; they were also a spiritual practice. By inviting the divine spirit of creativity to move through a group of diverse people, we invested time in new ways of praying and understanding God and one another. For me, this collaboration was a practice of spiritual formation, one that expanded my experience of the divine in me and through my co-creators.

In addition to engaging the lived experiences of our writing team in conversation with disability studies and theologies, we also conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews with disabled Christians. We asked about experiences of disconnection and connection in worship, about names and images of God, about meaningful and troubled relationships with scripture, and about communion, baptism, and other services. Bearing

witness to the sacred stories that were shared, we sought to incorporate both common themes and unique experiences into prayers, instructions, and worship elements. For example, those we interviewed identified how meaningful both music and communion were to them and yet also signaled significant barriers, both theological and practical, to their participation. We took seriously both the joy and concern of these testimonies as we crafted a section on hymns and songs and another one on communion. Interviewees also identified a wide range of scriptural texts that they both relished and struggled with in their relationships with God and others. We included a number of these texts with strategies for praying and preaching them without succumbing to the temptation of ableist hermeneutics. Paying attention to the stories of our research participants helped us create prayers and practices to support anti-ableist worship.

The problem of inclusion

Even with our careful dialogical, qualitative, and textual work, we still had work to do. The first time I presented on some of this research, I received constructive concern from a disabled co-panelist. She respectfully pointed out that the focus of this gathering was not centered enough on the needs of disabled people in the audience; instead, we were most ostensibly focused on the reformation of non-disabled people from ableists to non-ableists. As a person attempting to integrate what I had learned from over a decade of education and spiritual formation with and through disability communities, I was deeply troubled by this analysis of the event.

Alongside other collaborators on this project, I reconsidered my own collusion with liturgical experiments that participate in what disability scholar Erin Raffety, among others, has identified as the "problem of inclusion." In her analysis of liturgical experiments intended to include disabled Christians in corporate worship, Raffety investigates practices of formation that purportedly center disability by making accommodations to existing liturgical patterns. While such patterns seemingly chart new routes for collective worship, they often require disabled worshippers to comply with norms, structures, and centers of power that perpetuate an understanding of people with disabilities as problems to solve rather than as participants who themselves nurture, shelter, and guide communities. Through interviews and critical reflection on projects that seek to create shared spaces for those who have experienced exclusion, Raffety critiques ministry experiments that "focus on integration but maintain the structures of power" because they "will always maintain the conditions for op-

pression."[5] In such models of inclusion, even the construction of shared spaces or communal paths for consensual worship reinforce particular normative structures that benefit some of us more than others in their distribution of energy, imagination, and resources.

And so, in the most recent versions of our liturgical resource project, we begin not with a focus on resources to support change in predominately non-disabled communities, even as we intend these resources to also contribute to more liberative conditions for worship for disabled Christians. Instead, we begin with a section on devotional prayer and communal action that was created by and for disabled Christians to lament and protest experiences of ableism and to affirm God's presence in these situations. In the interviews our research team did, disabled worshippers frequently asserted the importance of their own encounters with the disabled God, as one who was with people with disabilities. The disabled God is God with me, God with us, they insisted. And by *us*, they meant those who had abided with and shared in particular, diverse experiences of disability with God, knowing from God's perspective the divine experience of living in a disabled body. This was a God they had come to know through participating in community with other people with disabilities and through disabled authors like Eiesland. For many, Eiesland's text formed them in a love for themselves that was counter to the formation they had received in many Christian worshipping communities.

We begin with a section on devotional prayer and communal action that was created by and for disabled Christians to lament and protest experiences of ableism and to affirm God's presence in these situations.

Affirming the disabled God, who chooses to be with disabled Christians even when congregations do not, some of our writing team crafted prayers that center their lived experiences of disability and their knowledge gained through a group of disabled Christians with whom they regularly met to discuss theology. These prayers primarily focus on the devotional needs of others in the disability community, such as a prayer to be used before going to a new doctor, a reflection on being let down by friends, a prayer when encountering microaggressions, and a blessing for

5 Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 142.

travel through airports or before a difficult holiday.[6] While these writers affirm the need for anti-ableist liturgical work, seeking repentance and conversion among non-disabled worshippers, they also resist recentering the spiritual needs of some worshippers, even the needs of those worshippers to engage in more liberatory and less harmful practices.

Centering disability in worship

Our work has led us to reflection questions like these: What does it mean for faith communities to center disability wisdom, experience, and leadership in the planning and design of worship and prayer? How does centering disability in worship and ritual transform the prayer and spiritual practices of faith communities? Here are some ways I now answer these questions as a non-disabled worship leader, even as those with whom I collaborate continue to teach and shape me.

First, centering means continually evaluating who benefits most from continuity or changes in worship, whether in language, space, time, or gesture. This involves what some of those we interviewed described as practicing a culture of feedback so that those participating in liberative change can learn from those most impacted by changes. In my experience, such evaluation often means distinguishing the preferences of some who are used to having worship that centers their experiences from the access needs of others whose needs are often considered peripheral to worship planning and leadership.

Second, disability centering means considering how I am actively supporting disabled clergy, worship leaders, and lay leaders. As one of those who contributed to our project insisted:

> *Not just able-bodied people but also people with disabilities. So how are disabled people in your congregations using their gifts? What good work are they doing? And maybe not even in your congregation, but how are they using the gifts in their—in the rest of their life? And are you recognizing their contributions as a good work prepared in advance by God to do? Or are you getting in their way and being a barrier to them doing the good work that God has prepared for them to do?*

6 I am especially grateful to Rev. Allison Connelly-Vetter and to Rev. Bekah Maren Anderson, who is also the co-editor of this forthcoming worship source book, for their wisdom and creativity in this important work.

And as another put it: "It really would be important to have more pastors with disabilities (and other faith leaders) in a way that frees them to reshape things."

Third, I have learned from disabled leaders that such centering entails thinking more creatively, flexibly, and expansively about worship and about the ways worshippers might engage in and lead different actions simultaneously, embracing many ways to pray in worship rather than expecting everyone to participate in worship in the same ways. Some of us can stand and some of us can sit to sing a hymn, not as an exception to standing as a norm but as manifold response to the Spirit, who is present in a multiplicity of responses to God. Some of us can sit quietly at attention, and some of us can rock, stim, vocalize, move around, and leave the room as necessary. Some of us can rely on explicit oral instructions about how to participate in worship, and others can have that information printed in large print font in a bulletin. Such differences may entail conflict: Someone's need to move interferes with someone else's need for quiet; someone's need for kinesthetic participation is at odds with another's need for low sensory spaces. And yet, these kinds of conflicts too are part of imagining together what it means to worship in ways that prioritize the belovedness of each one to the God whom we worship. These tensions and possibilities help me to engage in deeper discernment with my neighbors in worship and to look to the creative power of the Spirit to make such manifold practices of access possible.

I have learned from those of us in disability communities to emphasize consent in worship and in projects that involve disability and worship.

Finally, I have learned from those of us in disability communities to emphasize consent in worship and in projects that involve disability and worship. Because some of us have often been subject to coercive practices of prayer, healing, pity, inspiration, inclusion, and erasure, I continue to learn how to emphasize and practice consent at every move. This consent also involves considering experiences of disability along intersections of other experiences of minoritization: racial and gender identity, sexuality, citizenship status, and the many other identities that inform disabled Christians' complex and varied experiences of worship.

Conclusion

Centering disability in worship and practicing anti-ableism invites me to turn and return to the God who continues to self-reveal through an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges." I follow new names for and understandings of God into "the worlds they open"[7] and witness what kinds of flourishing together may be possible within these new landscapes for prayer and worship, personal devotion, and political action. I proactively seek not only my own flourishing in these spaces but also the flourishing of others. This love for my neighbor in worship matters to me because it matters to the disabled God to whom I pray.

About the author

Rebecca F. Spurrier is associate dean for worship life and assistant professor of worship at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. She is the author of *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship* (Fordham University Press, 2019).

7 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 105.