

From acceptance to belonging

Living into Anabaptist community values

Emily Hunsbaker

Unintentional ableism

Growing up in the Great Lakes farming region of the Midwest, I was raised to believe in the power of community: a group of people who gather routinely, learn from each other, and aid each other in times of crisis. The Mennonite church I attended was heralded as a prototypical faith community, and my parents taught me to be a member in good standing by working hard and serving wholeheartedly, even when doing so inconvenienced their time or bodies. My mom served as the church janitor and taught children's Sunday School each week, and my father served as a trustee, caring for maintenance and leading the church in the direction he thought it should go. My parents were valued members of the church community, and I drew a correlation between their acts of service and that value.

Unfortunately, this correlation meant that I also learned that a person's standing as a valued community member was determined by what they offered the community, despite their own limitations. My mother pushed through the daily pain of an undiagnosed chronic illness to clean the church. My father cared for maintenance projects at the church in addition to his jobs as a crop farmer and a semi-truck driver while experiencing chronic pain and a disability due to an amputated leg. Through watching my parents, I learned, both implicitly and explicitly, that to be a good, Midwestern Mennonite meant rising with the sun, working past exhaustion, and inconveniencing yourself to serve others. A person had value in the community when their body could work, and the more the body worked, the more valuable they were.

An unintended consequence of valuing community members for their able minds and bodies is that those whose bodies and minds work differently are valued less. Those whose bodies don't function well, or whose minds can't keep up, are shuffled to the margins of the community. People using wheelchairs only fit in the back of the sanctuary, and

those with cognitive disabilities or dementia aren't asked to teach Sunday School. Community members may feel they must hide their differences or slowing bodies, lest they also be pushed to the margins of the community.

The Mennonite church I grew up in reflected this ableist mentality: farmers who hid their aches and pain, ignored their illnesses, and pushed themselves beyond their limits; elderly people who refused hearing aids; parents who harshly punished their neurodivergent children; and a youth group that was mainly made up of athletes. There was no room for an atypical body or mind. To fully belong to the community, you had to navigate and conquer the many barriers the ableist culture constructed. Otherwise, your existence was tolerated and accepted, but you didn't fully belong.


When, as an adult, I began to experience the disabling effects of anxiety, depression, and a chronic illness, my understanding of community membership had to change. I could no longer prove my worth to the congregation by volunteering to do yard work, make meals, or set up for events. I needed to carefully plan my energy expenditures to ensure my body continued to function. Nor could I maintain my (imagined) status as a top-tier member by leading worship, teaching Sunday School, or heading up youth group. Getting in my car to drive to church became a massive undertaking due to my mental health. Whereas I once assumed that I belonged to my congregation because I had a lot to offer physically and mentally, I was left with a body and mind that I viewed as subpar. This made me wonder whether I was still a valued member of the community, capable of giving and receiving—whether I still belonged or would merely be tolerated and accepted, now that my disabilities were limiting my offerings.

Accessibility and accommodations

My work with Anabaptist Disabilities Network provided an avenue to redefine my understanding of Anabaptist faith communities within the context of disability and mental illness. I saw how God speaks to and through everyone in the community, everyone has a valuable gift to offer the community, and everyone belongs in the community just as they are. Living out these values requires attention to the needs of disabled people and intention to make changes to engage them fully in the community. Nurturing a community that is physically and attitudinally accessible to people with disabilities and mental illness allows for a more beautiful and enriched community, one in which everyone is invited to be their whole

selves without hiding the parts of themselves that don't fit society's idea of normal. Below I discuss concrete ways congregations can live into these values, providing accessible spaces and creating places of true belonging for all people.

The first item typically considered when speaking about disability and the congregation is the physical church building: Can a person with a wheelchair or other mobility aid (scooter, cane, crutches, etc.) enjoy full



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access to the church? My original faith community included many elderly people and a man who used a wheelchair to access the world. Entering the church building with physical limitations was difficult: opening the doors required significant upper body strength. Additionally, the sanctuary podium was only accessible via stairs. Though this congregation claimed that God could speak to the community through anyone, the

lack of accessibility reflected a different truth: that God speaks to the community only through those whose bodies work the way society deems “normal.”

When a person with a mobility aid cannot enter the church building, they receive the message that the community is mainly for able-bodied people, but they're allowed to enter *if* someone else invites them in. Their membership in the faith community is contingent on others choosing to allow them access. When a person with a mobility aid cannot access the leadership area in the sanctuary, they receive the message that their insights are less valued than those of their able-bodied peers; God does not speak to the church body through them because of the state of their physical bodies. Modifying the church building to be physically accessible to all people proclaims that access to the community and to God is for everyone, regardless of the way a body functions.

Physical accessibility is merely one step in nurturing communities that everyone can access. Accommodations must also be made for hidden disabilities, such as hearing loss, intellectual disabilities, and neurodivergence (those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, or other mental illnesses). In the congregation of my childhood, microphones were optional when addressing the congregation, excluding those with hearing loss from the conversation. In response to judgmental looks from

others, parents harshly shushed their children who struggled to sit quietly, with the result that children and adults with neurodivergence and intellectual disabilities stopped attending Sunday morning worship altogether. Considerations were not made for adults who struggled to read litanies, follow a long sermon, or refrain from outbursts, and as a result these people and their caregivers withdrew from the faith community. The lack of consideration for people with invisible disabilities in the worship service excluded them from partaking in the community, limiting their ability to receive the gifts of others and to offer gifts of their own.

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Devices can feed sound from a microphone directly into someone's hearing aids, though congregants must remember to use the microphone, and staff or volunteers must ensure the devices remain functioning.

At other times, accessibility might require a bit more creativity and a change in behavior from more people.

For someone with hearing loss to participate in a Sunday School class discussion, the whole class may need reminders to speak slowly, one at a time, and to show their lips when talking. These simple acts invite full participation by the person with hearing loss who can now understand what is being said and offer their own perspective on the conversation.

Creating spaces in which people with intellectual disabilities or neurodivergence can participate fully in the community demands even more creativity and flexibility, as the structure of the typical white Midwestern Mennonite Sunday morning service includes many barriers for them to receive the gifts of the community and to contribute their own gifts in return. Within worship, embodied prayers and dramatic reenactments of Bible stories, as opposed to long spoken prayers and a reciting of Scripture, engage parts of the brain that allow people with varying cognitive abilities to find meaning in the rituals. Creating spaces for movement along one side of the sanctuary and offering ways to direct excess energy (coloring pages, fidget tools, or origami) gives neurodivergent people the permission to stay in the worship space when they get restless or anxious, rather than leaving the communal space when they are not able to sit still like the rest of the congregation. A sensory room (or quiet room) with

low-lighting, sensory aids, and fidget tools can offer spaces for people to go when they need a sensory break, allowing them to return to the sanctuary or fellowship area when they are ready to re-engage, instead of leaving the church building altogether.

An adult Sunday School class in which participants are invited to participate in tangible ways—recreating Bible stories out of LEGO blocks or Play-Doh, knotting comforters for an Anabaptist nonprofit, singing well-loved hymns and sharing memories elicited from those hymns, and so on—provides spaces for adults with dementia and intellectual disabilities to engage with biblical concepts, connect with their peers, and offer their gifts of service to the broader community. While an academic book study or heady theological conversation is a barrier to full participation by someone with an intellectual disability, embodied practices and service offer adults of all ages and abilities a way to build relationships and learn from each other.

Each of these suggested changes welcome disabled people into the faith community as they are, without demanding they change to be included. By accommodating the needs of people with disabilities and mental illness, faith communities live into the belief that access to God is for everyone, regardless of abilities. When everyone can understand the content of a worship service or Sunday School class, they can participate fully, offering their own perspectives to the church body. God speaks to the community through everyone. Everyone's participation in the body is valuable.

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Nurturing spaces of belonging for people with disabilities and mental illness invites nondisabled members of the community to relax into their own ailments and limitations. The congregation I currently attend is comprised of people with varying abilities and disabilities: able-bodied farmers and teachers; elderly folks beginning to experience hearing loss, memory loss, and limited mobility; young adults with autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and anxiety; high school students with mental illness, trauma, and physical disabilities.

While some attendees serve by helping with building renovations or leading worship, others serve by playing board games once a month or making cookies for the youth group. By drawing on the gifts of everyone in the community, those with limited energy need not stretch themselves

thin, and the church body benefits from multiple perspectives and experiences in leadership positions. Those of us with disabilities and mental illness do not feel the need to hide; we are treated as valued members of the church body, and our needs and experiences are considered when planning programs, renovations, and services.

When I am experiencing a flare-up from my chronic and mental illnesses, I interpret the care I receive as a mark of belonging to the community, a way for others to offer their gifts in care for me, just as I offer my gifts in care for them. When disabled people can physically access the faith community's gathering areas *and* understand the content being shared, we are accepted into the community. When our needs are met with joy rather than resentment, we are included. When we are then able to share our own insights and receive the insights of others, we belong.

About the author

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