

Respecting personhood in baptism

A response to greig’s “No exceptions”

Jeanne Davies

I would like to thank Jason Greig for his article “No exceptions: Baptism beyond inclusion,” which offers a spirited challenge to Anabaptists to consider how our theology, language, and practices of inclusion affect those with profound intellectual disabilities and their families.¹ At Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN), we know that the word *inclusion* has implicit power dynamics. We cannot talk about inclusion without considering such questions as *Who does the including? Who has the power to include? Does inclusion truly mean you are a valued part of the community or only that you are allowed to be present?* Because of this, I regularly teach about the paucity of the term *inclusion*. At the same time, *inclusion* is a word that people in congregations understand, and it therefore can be useful when educating congregations, particularly when we are asking them to examine their own collective behavior toward people with disabilities. ADN uses the word *belonging* whenever we can, but it makes for a lot of awkward sentence constructions. We sometimes use *fully include* to indicate belonging to a community where you are known, accepted, cared for, appreciated, seen as necessary, beloved.

In his article, Greig does not explicitly argue that baptism leads to belonging rather than inclusion, but I can see why he might make that argument, as baptism is, essentially, a ritual of belonging—both to the community and to God. The *Believing and Belonging* curriculum that he discusses in relation to baptism was intended to expand access to baptism for people who are intellectually disabled.² It was created in response to pastors, parents, and teachers who repeatedly requested it. It is a resource for the many people with intellectual disabilities who have not been given the opportunity to make a choice for whether to be baptized because it is assumed that they do not know enough or do not understand enough to


1 Jason Greig, “No exceptions: Baptism beyond inclusion,” *Vision* 25.2 (Fall 2024): 82–90.

2 Jeanne Davies, *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum*, teacher’s edition (Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Disabilities Network, 2023).

make a choice and that, therefore, their choice would not matter. It is for people who have agency but have not been given agency in this decision.

The curriculum was intended to lower the intellectual threshold for making a choice regarding baptism. It asserts that we are *all* growing into our baptism. We make a choice and then continue to learn what that choice means and live into it. Therefore, if someone desires to be baptized, that opportunity should be offered to them, without the restriction of assumptions regarding their intellectual ability.

So many choices in life are made *for* people with intellectual disabilities instead of *by* them. Because of this, the freedom and power to choose, to have agency, seems especially important for them. It is a measure of



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respect for an individual's personhood that we honor their right to choose. At the same time, if we are unable to discern their choice, we respect them enough to not enforce baptism on them. A person can have intention and will, even if we do not understand it. We trust that God

knows and understands that person completely and that our inability to discern their choice regarding baptism will not stand in the way of their embrace as a beloved, essential part of the community or of their embrace from God in eternal life.

In contrast to the approach presented in *Believing and Belonging*, greig's theological argument seems to be that we should respect the personhood of people with profound cognitive impairment by not making them special or exceptional through the use of rituals that are alternatives to baptism to include them in our communal life. Indeed, greig argues that they should be baptized, even if their ability to consent is unclear. This leaves me to wonder who makes the choice for the person with profound cognitive impairment (the family, pastor, or whole congregation?) and on what basis that choice is made.

In his conclusion, greig takes his argument a step further by stating that other people who are not able to make a choice, such as infants and people with dementia, should also be baptized. Acknowledging that this proposal "offers a direct challenge to Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice," he concludes that the theology and practice need to change to ensure that there are no exceptions.

It seems, then, that our main disagreement comes down to a fundamental theological difference. Ultimately, greig is arguing for universal

baptism, although presumably not for those who express that they do not want to be baptized. In order to avoid making an exception for those with profound cognitive impairments, greig makes an exception to who chooses baptism for the individual; it is not their choice but the choice of their community.

In contrast, I would argue that it is out of respect for the personhood of people who are profoundly cognitively impaired that we do not choose for them, just as we do not choose for infants or people with dementia. And just as with infants or people with dementia, we know and celebrate that people with profound cognitive impairments are not only a beloved part of our community but also beloved children of God. I would argue that alternative rituals to baptism can profoundly express the will of the community in lieu of the consent of the individual.

By making this argument, I am adhering to a traditional Anabaptist theological, liturgical, and ecclesial practice of believer's baptism. It seems to me that greig is not merely offering an invitation to Anabaptists to consider how disability theology might affect this practice. Instead, he is arguing from disability theology for the elimination of an Anabaptist

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practice of baptism altogether in favor of universal infant baptism. I will leave it to Anabaptist theologians and historians to address what would be lost in doing away with believer's baptism altogether.

I will simply note that these are personal decisions involving faithful families who are trying to make the best decision for their loved ones. I therefore

do not think it is helpful to criticize a family's choice to not baptize their daughter who has profound cognitive impairments. In the case that greig cites as a negative example, I do not believe greig knows all the details that led to that decision. In that situation as in others, ADN is simply offering the possibility of an alternative ceremony as a marker of belonging, without judgment or condemnation. ADN's goal is not theoretical but pastoral. We want to reduce family anxiety about their loved one who is significantly cognitively impaired. God loves us whether or not we are baptized. We can belong to a congregation whether or not we are baptized. Families are thus free to discern in their church communities what ecclesial practices seem best for their loved one.

I appreciate theological criticism of and reflection on our practices as Anabaptists. It is good for us to wrestle with these concepts together. But it is also good for us to disagree theologically in a way that does not disparage people's decisions for their families. At ADN, we will continue to offer education, resources, and support to such families, without judgment on their decisions. We appreciate the support of Anabaptist individuals and communities in our ongoing work of advocating for positive change in our congregations regarding how all people can not only be included but also experience true belonging.

About the author

Jeanne Davies serves as executive director of Anabaptist Disabilities Network, where she carries responsibility for outreach, advocacy, and development. She is ordained in the Church of the Brethren and has a Master of Divinity degree from Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Indiana, a Graduate Certificate in Homiletic Peer Coaching from Vanderbilt Divinity School, and a Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Davies has a passion for disability advocacy and inclusion, and she believes that the whole church benefits when all the members of the body are actively connected. She lives in West Dundee, Illinois, with her husband, Joel. They attend York Center Church of the Brethren in Lombard, Illinois.