

A person with curly hair and glasses, wearing a light blue t-shirt, is seated in a wheelchair. They are viewed from the side and back, looking out over a body of water at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The person's face is partially in shadow, with the warm light of the setting sun highlighting their features. The wheelchair is dark, and the person's hands are resting on the wheels. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

By Joelle Kidd
STAFF WRITER

BOTH/AND

ACCESSIBILITY IN THE CHURCH IS ABOUT MORE THAN PHYSICAL ACCOMMODATION. FOR THESE ANGLICANS, ACCEPTANCE COMES FROM THE VERY CORE OF A CHURCH'S THEOLOGY.

PHOTO: RICARDO-IV-TAMAYO/UNSPLASH

The Rev. Matt Arguin was at a mall one day when a long-haired, bearded man with a large cross around his neck walked up to him.

“Do you believe that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior?” the man asked.

Arguin, who was wearing his clerical collar at the time, felt the urge to stifle some laughter, but responded that he did. A priest in the Anglican Church of Canada who lives in London, Ont., Arguin has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. The conversation continued, as Arguin recounts in the book *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*, with the man asking, “So if I prayed for you right now, do you believe that he would make you stand up and walk?” “He might, but I don’t think it’s very likely,” said Arguin.

“Why not?”

“I think it might be possible that God made me this way, and I’m not sure it’s something that needs to be healed.”

The man stammered a response and left, leaving Arguin with “the feeling that my reply had caused some sort of short-circuit in his faith logic,” the priest writes.

The interaction in the mall is not the only such experience Arguin has had. “I’ve literally had people stop me on the street to pray that I would get up and walk,” he recalls. “And you’re just kind of sitting there awkwardly, right?” He laughs. “So it’s one of those things that you do come across—I wouldn’t say, come across it all the time, but...it’s not something that can be glossed over.”

Caitlyn, who asked that her last name not be used for the sake of anonymity, recently began attending an Anglican church. She grew up Catholic, but has tried many Christian denominations in her search for a church. “I do think that the Anglican church I go to now is more inclusive than a lot of other churches I’ve gone to in the past, especially in regards to disability issues of various sorts,” she says.

Caitlyn identifies as having a mental illness. Recently she wrote about her experience with church for her priest, who suggested publishing it on the Anglican Church of Canada’s [MinistryMatters blog](#).

“When I started the article, I’d really just stumbled across a video on YouTube of a Christian faith healer.... [It] was a person with bipolar disorder that she was healing, and she was telling him to say, you know, ‘I am no longer bipolar, in Jesus’s name.’”



There are different kinds of disability...It’s not this single, monolithic thing,” says the Rev. Matt Arguin, a priest in the diocese of Huron. “It’s actually quite broad, quite diverse.”

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

In some denominations, Caitlyn says, mental illness is conflated with evil, or even demonic possession. The solution to the experience of symptoms is to banish it through prayer or faith, meaning that if one’s health does not improve, “then you are doing something wrong.”

“[[It’s] a lot of shaming and blaming and saying that there’s no way to be a ‘both/and,’” Caitlyn says—something which flies in the face of what she’s learned in her own recovery.

“A lot of my own recovery is choosing ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or.’ You can both have symptoms and you can experience joy in church—not necessarily you have to have no symptoms and then you will have joy. Instead of either/or, I definitely have shifted my own thinking to a ‘both/and’.... When, I think, churches focus on saying that it is either/or, then that is exclusionary.”

The implication, Caitlyn says, is that if you’re not joyful, “then you are missing out on the Holy Spirit” and that if you had accepted God’s peace, you would no longer have negative emotions.

“I think that both/and is a healthier way to move towards, for parishioners and clergy to look at things that way, rather than [as] one or the other.”

Caitlyn has been to churches in other denominations that put an emphasis on physical healing through faith.



Huron College, in London, Ont., recently made its chapel more accessible with the construction of a ramp, which was partially funded by a grant from the Anglican Foundation of Canada.

PHOTO: ANGLICAN FOUNDATION OF CANADA

“There are people I’ve spoken [to] that have said that’s been helpful to them; however...they see it as part of their recovery,” rather than “the moment they got healed.”

In some more charismatic churches she has attended, Caitlyn says, “If you’re crying or you’re upset, people will come to you without asking and lay their hands on you and say all these things to try to get rid of the crying, when in reality, my personal opinion—and I think a lot of clinicians would agree—is that suppressing emotion actually increases suffering.”

Having someone pray for your healing and “feeling awful when it doesn’t happen,” can be quite harmful, she notes. “They do say...in some faith healing-type services, ‘this is your faith that heals you’...[which gives] this idea that you are actually in control of your pain and your suffering. And I just think, we’re a lot more complicated than that. You know?” This either/or way of thinking can lead to a heavy sense of guilt, she says, or a resistance to seeking other treatments for mental health or other disabilities.

For those who live with disabilities or chronic conditions, the way the Bible talks about healing can seem troublesome.

“I think some people see Jesus as a healer, and for them that’s a positive thing—when you call out to Jesus, well, ‘Jesus heals people in the Bible, so he’s going to heal me too,’” says Caitlyn. However, she says, we get only a limited picture of healing from the Bible. “I think healing takes on different forms for different people.”

Caitlyn says she has heard many people speak about demons Jesus casts out in the Bible as a representation of mental illness. While this representation of healing may give comfort to some, she prefers to see other aspects of Jesus’s ministry as related to mental health.

“Jesus spent a lot of time sitting with people, hanging out with people, who were maybe not the most popular. And I think a lot of people with mental illness have isolation...or a variety of reasons, [some of which] might just be stigma. I think if we want to be like Jesus, maybe instead of trying to do the healing in that kind of overt way, like healing you from your demons—what would Jesus do? Maybe he would sit and have a coffee with you.... Maybe it means having coffee with somebody that’s super isolated or [is] struggling to just access services. Maybe it means advocating for that person who can’t advocate for themselves.”



**If you've met one person with autism you've met one person—I guess as with all of us,
if you've met one human being, you've met one human being.**

— *The Rev. Wayne Parsons*



“The thing is, in my experience of the church—not necessarily of the Anglican church, but the church more broadly...you will have denominations that like to pray for healing and wholeness,” says Arguin. The story recounted in *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, he notes, is one of several times that people have stopped him in public to pray that he would get up and walk.

However, Arguin says he's come to understand healing in a slightly different way. “I think there's a difference between healing and a physical cure, which is not necessarily the same thing.”

In the gospels, Jesus's acts of healing were not only about curing ailments, Arguin says, but reintegrating people back onto the communities that had ostracized them. Curing the lepers was less about eliminating their physical suffering, and more about bringing them back into the society that shunned them.

What would it mean for a church to focus on this reintegration aspect of healing instead of a cure?

When framed in this way, healing begins to look a lot like accessibility.



For many Anglican churches, accessibility often starts with retrofitting historic buildings that were not built to accommodate those with mobility issues. The Anglican Foundation of Canada in 2019 gave significant grants to churches for renovations to help improve physical accessibility in their buildings.

However, accessibility in churches and ministries takes many forms across Canada.

On the third Sunday of every month, guests gather in the parish hall of All Saints Anglican Parish in Conception Bay South, Nfld. The lights are dimmed. A comfy couch and loveseat are set out, as are a range of

items: colourful interlocking mats, weighted blanket, medicine balls. A visual schedule sets up the next half hour, listing opening prayer, story time, Bible study, activity time and snacks.

While it may look a little different from the typical Sunday morning, the scene is a church service that All Saints, under the guidance of its rector, the Rev. Wayne Parsons, is now offering for children with pervasive needs and their families.

Parsons has been rector at All Saints for just over a year. When he started, he felt led to reactivate a mission group at the church. “We started meeting almost every Tuesday night...one of the things I talked about was this and it kind of gained some traction,” says Parsons.

Starting a service for those with pervasive needs that make typical church services hard to sit through has been a dream of Parsons for a while—it's a struggle he's known personally. His son Noah, now 11, has autism, and is not able to attend a typical church service.

Parsons says the church partnered with the Autism Society of Newfoundland and Labrador to complete some training. He also went to schools in the area which offer services for kids with pervasive developmental disorders “and looked at some things that they had offered, what they had used—for calm-down corners, and for sensory needs and stimulation.”

Pervasive developmental disorders comprise a diagnostic category referring to disorders characterized by delays in socialization and communication skills, such as autism, Asperger syndrome and Rett syndrome. Often these disorders include heightened sensitivity to sensory stimulation.

Traditional liturgy can be inaccessible to people with sensory needs, Parsons says. “The restrictions...of sitting



Bakers at Trinity Youth Project prepare buns for two diocese of Edmonton parishes running food security programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. PHOTO: CLARK HARDY

in a hard pew, having loud noises of an organ or piano, singing, if there are people clapping—[these] things are really distractions and bothersome for people with sensory, particularly hearing, needs.”

But for parents of children with these kinds of needs, he adds, there is also the question of whether they would be welcomed in a typical service. “If there’s any noise or disruption, you know—will that disrupt the flow, the mood of the liturgy, the mood of the congregation?... Would it be welcomed [or] would it not be welcomed?”

Holding a special service allows the church to cater to children with pervasive needs disorders as well as allow a “safe space,” Parsons says, “[so] that they can come [into] a very sensory-friendly, familiar environment.”

Of course, Parsons says, “If you’ve met one person with autism you’ve met one person—I guess as with all of us, if you’ve met one human being, you’ve met one human being.” They have tried to be broad-minded in their solutions, and encompass the best practices they’ve learned.

Parsons says his son is already excited to go to church every month, and looks forward to spending time

with the other kids.

Not all churches may be able to offer a separate service for people who have pervasive needs disorders, but if a church wants to be more pervasive needs-friendly, Parsons says, they can start with a few practical things: softening lighting, or leaving lights off if the church has lots of windows; limiting live music or choosing quieter forms of music; and creating a calm-down or sensory area.

“I think education, as well, to the congregation, is a big thing,” says Parsons. Effective communication “can dispel any myths or biases or things that people may feel, if people talk about it very openly in a respectful and professional environment.”

The most important thing is to listen to the needs of your community, he says, both in and outside of the church.



Listening to individual needs is the key to ministry for Clark Hardy, who runs the Trinity Youth Project, a ministry of the diocese of Edmonton based out of Holy Trinity Anglican Church.

The ministry works with youth, ages 15-24, who



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— *The Rev. Matt Arguin*



are “facing a variety of different barriers in life” as they transition into adulthood. “It could be anything from struggles with mental health to experiencing homelessness, growing up in the foster care or children’s services system, living in poverty in general, being involved in the justice system—all kinds of things might be going on for them,” says Hardy.

Hardy has been working with at-risk youth since 2016, and he has noticed that no matter what supports or resources are offered, if the youth he works with don’t have a supportive community, it is hard for them to maintain jobs and healthy habits. “I started seeing what I call the redemptive potential...of local parishes, to kind of be that supportive community.”

The ministry began in 2017 as an art program run out of Holy Trinity, and in 2018 expanded to become a diocesan ministry. In addition to the art program, Trinity Youth Project now runs a social enterprise which employs youth to bake in Holy Trinity’s kitchen.

“It started really small-scale. Over the course of last summer, we started doing various farmers’ markets in Edmonton, started taking on larger catering orders,” Hardy says. “We did all the breakfast goodies for the synod here in Edmonton last fall. We did 200 pounds of shortbread cookies for a church out in Onoway. We did 70 dozen pretzels for a new Christmas market in Edmonton.” All of these sales go to fund the project and pay the youth who work in the kitchen.

The ministry is not specifically targeted at youth facing any particular disability. But Hardy’s program offers a model of accommodation and accessibility.

Some of the youth are facing physical limitations. “My senior baker, who’s been with us since last February when we started, she’s got some pretty severe health issues that can limit how long she can stand and how

long she can work, those things,” Hardy says. “So it’s just making small adjustments to bring a stool into the kitchen so that she can sit down, making sure that she can take breaks when she needs to.

“I have another youth that has a bit of a cognitive delay, and she has a lot of knee issues.... Similar[ly], with her, [it’s about] setting up a workstation where she’s able to sit the whole time. And she usually needs extra support, either from myself or another volunteer...helping her go through the recipes. She’s really passionate about baking...but obviously, just working in a typical baking environment wouldn’t be realistic for her at this point.”

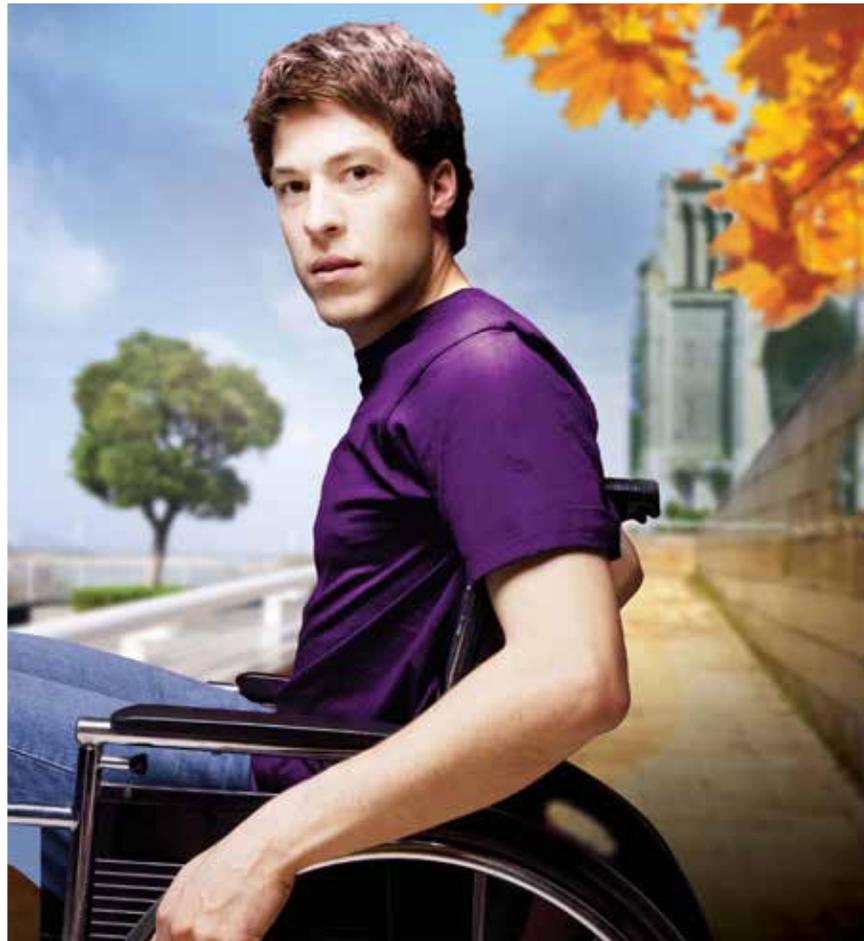
Accessibility comes from an approach that identifies people’s needs and addresses them creatively, Hardy says.

Most of the accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis, he says, but the program is also set up with the youths’ needs in mind—in general, baking sessions are usually three to five hours long, in contrast to employment programs which require regular Monday-Friday schedules and six- to seven-hour shifts.

“It’s just not realistic if you’re maybe a youth that’s staying at the shelter, maybe you’re couch-surfing, you’re in and out of jail, maybe you’re dealing with under-treated mental illness—all of those barriers.... Some of them need extra support with social skills, or even emotional regulation and things. So how do we create a space that’s safe for them to still work, still make some income, but in an environment that’s adaptive to their needs? That’s kind of where the vision for the baking program came from.”



In an ideal world, churches would be fully accessible for everyone from the get-go. But of course, Arguin points out, “we...live in the real world.”



Anglican voices say accessibility within the church should include seeking input from those with physical disabilities and making sure conversation does not stop at the physical space.

PHOTO: ANGLICAN FOUNDATION OF CANADA

“We have buildings that are 125, 150-plus years old, and you’re not going to be able to change the space or reconfigure the space 100% of the time.” This is understandable, he says—but he urges new ministries or new communities to think of accessibility from the beginning. “Don’t try to adapt it after the fact—try and have it in the forefront of your mind.”

The best way to embrace accommodation is to ask and to listen, he says. “One of the very important steps is to take people with disabilities, whether they’re in a wheelchair or whether they have another form of disability—say if they’re blind or deaf or whatever it happens to be—take somebody with a disability and get their input, say, ‘How do we make this more accessible? How do we encourage the growth of ministry in this place?’”

Asking the question of someone with lived experience will always beat one-size-fits-all attempts at accessibility like provincial standards, he says.

“I think this is really important too: when you make spaces and ministries accessible for the disabled, you also by extension make them accessible for everybody,” says Arguin. A bigger bathroom or fewer steps means everyone can participate fully, and eliminates challenges that arise when parishioners get older or lose mobility for other reasons. “It doesn’t just benefit those who have ‘natural disabilities,’ those who are born with a disability. It also accommodates and empowers those that eventually will have their mobility changed or challenged in some ways.”

When we think about accessibility in the church, Arguin says, there are two different levels.

“There’s the level of physical accessibility—so, how is your building in terms of, are people able to get in and out? Are they able to get up to key parts of the church building itself, the altar, the fellowship centre? Do you have accessible bathrooms? All of those practical questions.



If you're coming to accessibility in the church as simply accommodating somebody, or simply as fulfilling the needs of provincial legislation, that's different than saying, 'We're doing this because this is what we're called to do.'

— *The Rev. Matt Arguin*



“But then you also have what I consider another, perhaps even more important, dimension, which is: how do you involve disabled people in the ministry of the church? Not just getting them into the building, but seeing them.... What gifts do they offer to the church, whether that's preaching or teaching or doing the things that a priest does, in my case. It's sort of discerning, how do we also enable them, anyone who has a disability, to bring their gifts to the church?”

Arguin sees improvement in these areas in the church, though it's always “a work in progress.”

“Having a person with a disability in active ministry, it's not—at least in my experience—a norm yet. So it takes a little bit of negotiation as to, how do we make this work?”

The best practice for accessibility is asking, not assuming, Caitlyn says. “I've [seen] that for sure...the idea that, 'this is what you need.' A lot of times people, I've found, even with the most severe mental illnesses, they tend to know what they need.” Churches and leaders should think about asking “What do you need right now from me?” and “What can I do to be supportive?” she says.

“I would much rather have somebody ask me than tell me what I need. Because I'm definitely not an expert on mental illness—but I'm an expert on *my* mental illness.... Giving people that power back is really important, because it often gets taken away in the medical system, and when you're marginalized in different ways, it gets taken away. And I think the church can give it back to people.”

One change Arguin would like to see is the creation of a “cohesive theological vision for disability in the church.”

“If you're coming to accessibility in the church as simply accommodating somebody, or simply as fulfilling the needs of provincial legislation, that's different than saying, 'We're doing this because this is what we're called to do.'”

“We're called to empower everyone in the church to exercise their ministry and their identity as ambassadors for Christ and to be leaders and teachers. How you answer that question determines, to a large extent, how accessible you're going to make your church.”

Arguin says a national position or theological statement on the Anglican Church of Canada's views on disability might be helpful in this regard, noting other denominations have begun to do this. “I think on the national level it could be helpful to get some guidelines and some theological reflection that's quite apart from, 'well, this is what you need to do legislatively.’”

Ultimately, he says, there are two crucial prerequisites for churches when talking about disability and accessibility. The first is making sure to collect input and experience from people who actually have disabilities.

“I guarantee you that you have some churches that say, 'Oh, we don't have anybody disabled in our church.' I guarantee you, you do, because again, there are different kinds of disability.... It's not this single, monolithic thing. It's actually quite broad, quite diverse.”

The second is to make sure the conversation doesn't stop at the physical space.

“It also has that theological and spiritual dimension that makes sure that we affirm the gifts and talents that everyone offers, regardless of what their state is physically or mentally, emotionally,” Arguin says.

“Everybody has gifts to offer the church.” ■