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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Liturgical Practices for Full Participation: Creating Opportunities for Engagement in Worship for People with Intellectual Disabilities

Catherine Spiller

Abstract: This paper discusses the theological foundations and learnings from a journey undertaken at the Mooroolbark Salvation Army to explore full participation in corporate worship for people with intellectual disabilities. The key themes of acceptance, participation, and authenticity are discussed, as well as some of the challenges to full participation, such as exclusion, lack of awareness, and lack of time. Some principles of participation that emerged from this process are then considered as they may provide a helpful framework for developing tools and resources to foster full participation in worship.

We all like to think that our church is a welcoming space where everyone can be free to be themselves and participate in the life of the church. I found this to be true when I first encountered my congregation at the Mooroolbark Salvation Army.¹ The congregants were warm and welcoming and embraced all who came. However, over time I began to observe that the members of our congregation who lived with intellectual disabilities did not have the same opportunities to participate in corporate worship as most of the congregation. This was not due to any intentional act; rather, I discovered that people with disabilities were not on the radar of those who plan worship in our church. The challenge is that when we are unaware of people with disabilities, we do not see their needs. When we do not see the needs of others, these needs often go unmet. This can result in people with disabilities having limited opportunities to engage in worship.

Consequently, I confronted a pastoral dilemma of desiring to include people with intellectual disabilities in worship but not knowing how to foster this participation for people in my congregation. I undertook a journey along with a small group of people in my church, where we sought to develop a series of liturgies that would help to facilitate full participation

¹ Mooroolbark is located in the eastern suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne, Australia.

in corporate worship for people with intellectual disabilities. The following explores our journey and highlights some important discoveries that we made along the way.

As we commenced our time together, it was important that we were using the same language to guide and shape the process. We use language to express our beliefs, but language also shapes our understanding. One of the first terms that we needed to understand was *disability*.² Often there is discomfort for non-disabled people with the use of this word. Rather than masking the discomfort with euphemisms or avoiding the conversation, it is important to listen to people with a lived experience of disability. There are two main ways the disability community refers to people who have a disability. The first is person-first language, which places a person before their disability. This acknowledges the primacy of personhood.³ The second approach, identity-first language, asserts that “it is impossible to separate a person from their disability, and that it functions in the same way as any other identity marker. Disability is part of how a person identifies and experiences the world, and therefore is indivisible from them.”⁴ We chose the approach of the Disability Resource Centre in Australia, which is to use person-first language.⁵

The second challenge concerned the commonly used word, *inclusion*. This can sometimes be a problematic term when engaging with people living with disabilities. Samuel Wells states, “Inclusion is a word the comfortable use to say, ‘We are a bunch of people in the centre whose lives are normal and sorted and privileged, and we really ought to open the doors and welcome people in and be a bit more thoughtful and kind and generous.’ That makes inclusion a patronizing and paternalistic model.”⁶ According to Wells, inclusion is something that people with power do to include people without power. However, structures of power can still remain. Amidst the power differential, there is also no acknowledgment of the importance of mutuality. Inclusion can result in a one-way street where the person including often does not expect to receive anything from the person being included.

² The word *disability* is difficult to define. It can cover a wide variety of impairments from physical disfigurement, learning disorders, to mental health issues.

³ The language used would be “a person with a disability.”

⁴ Kerri Cassidy, “Disability Culture,” *Voices Autumn Edition* (2021): 4. The language used in this instance would be “a disabled person.”

⁵ The Disability Resource Centre is an organization that advocates for people living with disabilities in Victoria. Additionally, people with disabilities run the organization.

⁶ Samuel Wells, *A Future That’s Bigger Than the Past: Towards the Renewal of the Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2019), Kindle edition, introduction.

Whether intentionally or not, the term *inclusion* can devalue or even dismiss the contribution that people on the margins, such as people living with disabilities, can make to the life of the church. One of the disability experts that engaged with me on this journey suggested overcoming the baggage associated with inclusion by using the term *full participation*.⁷ This terminology moves away from the language of the powerful. It acknowledges that there is an opportunity to contribute and receive when one fully participates. Full participation seeks autonomy for people to choose to participate and contribute as much as they are able.

That said, this shift in mindset from inclusion to full participation is challenging. It may involve confronting the fear of disability or require giving up power to provide opportunities for others to contribute and flourish. Full participation necessitates being open and willing to receive, particularly from people who may have been dismissed or marginalized because of their disability. Everyone should have an opportunity to contribute to the life of the church as much as they are able. As Christians, this desire for full participation is more than a good idea; it is a theological imperative.

Theological Foundations: Liturgy and the Body of Christ

There were two significant theological themes underpinning this project. The first was an understanding of liturgy. The second was the significance of the body of Christ. Both separately and together, these theological themes contributed to the shape of the project as we sought to move toward full participation. The following section will briefly explore the significance of each theme.

Before unpacking the importance of liturgy, it is helpful to take a step back and define what we mean by *worship*. The word's original meaning in English is to give worth to someone.⁸ When Christians worship, they give this worth to God. Along with the word *worship*, another term that helpfully contributes to this discussion is the German word *Gottesdienst*. This word combines *God* and *service*, which “refer to either the church’s service to God or God’s service and self-giving to the people.”⁹ Alexis Abernethy classifies worship as vertical and horizontal communion. The vertical highlights the relationship between God and God’s people, and the horizontal indicates

⁷ Disability expert, personal conversation with author, 21 August 2020.

⁸ Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century*. 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), Kindle edition, chapter 1.

⁹ Duck, *Worship*, ch. 1.

the relational aspect of worship through service to each other.¹⁰ Both elements are to be present in worship.

The meanings of *worship* and *gottesdienst* form the necessary underpinning from which to wrestle with our perception of *liturgy*. Liturgy, simply put, is the format that Christian worship follows. However, as we engage with the historical root of this word, we can truly begin to grasp the significance for congregations today. The word liturgy is formed from two Greek words meaning *work* and *people*.¹¹ Therefore, liturgy is not one person performing acts of worship on behalf of the congregation. All people are to participate in the work of worship. Paul captures this when writing to the Corinthians, highlighting the importance of participation in worship. “What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor 14:26 NRSV). Paul is speaking of corporate worship with each person having a role to play and something to contribute.¹²

Defining liturgy as the work of the people has significant implications for the church, particularly when considering members of the congregation who live with disabilities. The trend in churches today is to turn worship into a professional production where only a small number of qualified or gifted people participate. This contrasts sharply with the historical understanding of liturgy and conflicts with Paul’s writings in 1 Corinthians.

Providing a framework through which to understand worship and liturgy was the first crucial step toward laying a good theological foundation for this project. The other equally important theological underpinning was the body of Christ. In *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ’s Body*, Brian Brock describes the church in Corinth as a group of people bickering over who was the most gifted and the most spiritual.¹³ He then argues that Paul portrays the church as a body in order to challenge this strife in Corinth. 1 Cor 12:14–21 says:

¹⁰ Alexis D. Abernethy, “Introduction: Spiritual Experience, Worship, and Transformation,” in *Worship That Changes Lives: Multidisciplinary and Congregational Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation*, ed. Alexis D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 16.

¹¹ Duck, *Worship*, ch. 1.

¹² Duck, *Worship*, ch. 2.

¹³ Brian Brock, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ’s Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 122.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

Paul confronts the Corinthian church by declaring that “togetherness depends on genuinely different people being unified.”¹⁴ For worship to truly be the work of the people, it must include *all* people. God has arranged the body so that everyone has a place and something to contribute. Miroslav Volf asserts that this is the work of the Spirit. Despite our differences, God gives gifts to every person to be used to build up the body.¹⁵

It is easy to understand liturgy and the body of Christ as theoretical concepts. It is more challenging to put this into practice in the world. Bethany McKinney Fox contributes helpfully to the discussion by providing a word of caution. She emphasizes the importance of reminding ourselves why we seek to include people with disabilities. The motivation must be love—love for God and love for people, who are the body of Christ. Anything less than this can result in abandoned efforts when the next good idea or project comes along.¹⁶

When our understanding of the corporate act of worship is grounded in love, our efforts to create opportunities for full participation for people living with disabilities go beyond accommodating the needs of a person to acknowledging the contribution that each member of the body of Christ is called to make. When we isolate different parts of the body, the church misses out on receiving the very gifts that God has given to bless the

¹⁴ Brock, *Disability*, 124.

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 48.

¹⁶ Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 186.

church. Once a person with a disability is overlooked or deemed unable to contribute, it is not just the individual that misses out; we, as the body of Christ, are also missing out. We are missing out on encountering the *imago Dei* in others and receiving the gifts God has given to the church through them. In light of this, the aim of this project was not to start a disability ministry but instead to explore possible avenues for everyone in the church to join together as the body of Christ in worship.

Key Themes from the Journey

With the body of Christ as a central motif, it would not have been helpful to undertake this project as a sole person in isolation from my church community. Therefore, I invited several people in my congregation to join me on this journey. I intentionally chose a diverse group of people to participate, including people with disabilities.¹⁷ Brock states, “Too often Christians have positioned themselves to relate to disabled people as the ones who know the truth and who know what disabled people need.”¹⁸ Therefore, it was imperative that I guard against this assumption. I also sought to integrate participants with differing levels of engagement in congregational worship, from people who were experienced at leading worship to people who had only been a participant in worship.

As the group met each week, we explored worship practices together, both in theory and in practice. While the group joined together in these practices, they considered how they could be used or adapted to open up full participation for people with intellectual disabilities. I wanted the group to immerse themselves in the practices together rather than merely discuss them as theoretical or abstract ideas. David Hogue helpfully points out that discussing a practice is not the same as experiencing it. “Until we go through the prescribed symbolic actions of the ritual, we have no experience of the ritual or of the grace it makes available to us.”¹⁹ In engaging in these practices together, the group was able to better attend to its primary goal, compiling twelve liturgies that would foster full participation for the congregation at the Mooroolbark Salvation Army, with specific consideration for people with intellectual disabilities.

¹⁷ I used maximum variation sampling when choosing the group. This is a process of selecting a diverse group of participants based on demographic differences such as “age, gender, marital status, employment, ethnicity, [and] length of membership.” Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 83.

¹⁸ Brock, *Disability*, 42.

¹⁹ David A. Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 133.

Over the course of the project, several themes emerged—acceptance, participation, and authenticity. These themes contributed to our understanding of full participation in worship. The following section will briefly explore these themes and the insights gained as a result of their development.

Acceptance

Acceptance was a significant narrative within the group. The participants identified that feeling accepted was an essential part of coming to church. This desire for acceptance is a part of being human. It is the common ground that we all share. Genuine acceptance leads to belonging, which is the foundation for full participation. Moreover, under this overarching theme of acceptance, two theological points were considered. The first was the body of Christ, which formed part of the theological foundation of the project. The second, the *imago Dei*, came to light throughout group discussions.

The presence of *imago Dei* is significant as it forms our understanding of who we are and how we relate to each other. Every human is created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). This is what gives people value. The participants highlighted that we value and accept people not because of what they can do but because of this inherent worth. This theme was so significant that it was included in the liturgies that the group constructed. Acceptance, the body of Christ, and the *imago Dei* all contribute to and form the basis for participation, which was the next theme to emerge.

Participation

Participation was identified from the outset of this project. We used a framework of participation developed by Craig Erickson to think about how people are invited to participate in worship. In *Participating in Worship*, Erickson developed six types or categories of participation: (1) spontaneous involvement, (2) silent engagement, (3) interiorized verbal participation, (4) prophetic verbal participation, (5) lay leadership, and (6) multisensate participation.²⁰ The aim was to incorporate elements from each of these types, enabling congregants to join in a participatory worship experience.

Each week, the group used Erickson's types to guide our reflection on worship from the previous Sunday. This exercise enabled us to expand our understanding of participation. While the types developed by Erickson

²⁰ Craig D. Erickson, *Participating in Worship: History, Theory, and Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

do not specifically address participation for people with disabilities, they provided a mechanism for us to identify the potential participation gaps (i.e., where there was a lack of options for people to participate in corporate worship). This exercise also helped the group to pinpoint the liturgical practices with better participatory outcomes.

Erickson's framework was also valuable because it explores multisensate participation as one of its types. When planning worship, it is easy to focus on participating with the mind and not the body. This cognitive emphasis may create barriers in worship for people with intellectual disabilities. Actively focusing on Erickson's types of participation to guide our work meant we were constantly considering different modes of participation. It was as we explored using our senses in worship that we stumbled across an important insight.

During one session, the group participated in a call to worship by Sam Hargreaves.²¹ When I encountered this prayer, I decided to incorporate gestures to go along with the words for the group to try. We found that using the gestures and words together was a powerful combination that had the possibility of engaging everyone in the congregation. The prayer in this format provides several ways to participate in this liturgical practice. A person could choose to read the prayer. They could choose to participate with gestures. They could choose to do both. Providing options increases participation by allowing people to engage in a way that is meaningful for them.

As the group joined together each week in these liturgical practices, they began to identify core practices such as the sermon, prayer, call to worship, singing, testimonies, and Scripture reading. However, the significance of some of the practices to the group was surprising. Silence in worship emerged as a meaningful practice for many of the group members, and I was not expecting it to surface as strongly as it did. Notably the group spoke of silence as an active form of participation. Often, silence is considered passive, as if we are *not really* participating in anything. However, silence is anything but passive. This understanding by the group echoes Erickson's silent participation type, where he also indicates the dynamic nature of silence in worship.²²

I was also surprised to see some old traditional Salvation Army practices arising from the group's discussions, such as the *hallelujah wind-*

²¹ The prayer "open us up" is from the website engageworship.org. This prayer was included as a call to worship in week three of the liturgies.

²² Erickson, *Participating*, 40.

up and the *love feast*.²³ Notably, the historical practices the group chose were two in which anyone could participate. The *love feast* is a sensory experience that aligns with Erickson's multisensate type of participation, while the *hallelujah wind-up* invites people to embody their worship by marching, singing, clapping, and occasionally shouting out a "hallelujah!" These traditional practices would have provided opportunities for the early Salvationists, who were often poor and uneducated, to join in worship. They provided an opportunity for full participation for all people.

Authenticity

People must feel accepted if they are to participate. To encourage full participation, there needs to be a variety of ways to engage in worship. In addition, worship needs to be authentic. The act of worship is not about being perfect, nor is it performative. Along with the need for the leadership of worship to be authentic, the group discussed the importance of the freedom to be one's authentic self in worship.²⁴

This desire for authenticity was also evident as the group discussed the need for worship to be grounded in the real world. Worship needs to address issues of significance in people's lives. One participant spoke about people in the congregation who were experiencing challenges. Rather than saying, "I will pray for you this week," the congregation will pause, surround a person, and pray for them during worship. This authenticity was important to the group as it helped to facilitate a sense of genuineness in worship.²⁵

²³ The *hallelujah wind-up* is a practice that goes back to the early days in The Salvation Army, where a person, during a rousing song, marches around the hall with The Salvation Army flag. The congregation spontaneously joins in marching behind this person while singing and clapping. The other old practice was the *love feast*. This practice came to The Salvation Army through our Wesleyan roots. The *love feast* is based on the practice of the early church to participate in communal meals. The *love feast* is not considered a sacrament and can be practiced using bread and water, cake and tea, or other readily available foods. Because it is not considered a sacrament, any person can preside over the feast. Denise L. Stringer, *How Is It With Your Soul?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), Kindle edition, chapter 2.

²⁴ It is particularly important that people with disabilities feel that they can be themselves in corporate worship. Often people with disabilities feel judged by others due to physical characteristics, behaviors, or language barriers. Full participation will not be achieved without freedom and acceptance for people to be their whole selves in worship.

²⁵ This desire for authenticity aligns itself with one of Ruth Duck's emphases of worship: worship as rehearsal. Duck highlights that this understanding of worship demonstrates an honesty about the challenges of life. Duck, *Worship*, ch. 1.

Challenges to Participatory Worship

While some positive and helpful themes emerged as we sought to understand full participation, there were also some significant challenges. First, the challenge of exclusion arose. Exclusion is a significant issue that people with disabilities regularly face in many aspects of their lives. Sadly, the church has been and often still is guilty of perpetuating exclusionary practices.²⁶ It was, therefore, important to me that people with disabilities were part of the group. In putting together this intervention project, I stated that at least three group members should be people with disabilities. Despite my best intentions, the group became an example of exclusion.

Before the project commenced, I had three people with disabilities ready to participate. However, COVID-19 cases spiked in Melbourne just as we were about to begin meeting together. I made the decision to move the group online. This decision resulted in the exclusion of a member of the group with an intellectual disability. This simple and seemingly innocuous decision demonstrates how easily someone with a disability can be excluded from a group. The other two members with disabilities both ended up withdrawing from the project over the ten weeks due to health and personal concerns. Self-exclusion is a form of exclusion that people experience for a variety of reasons. However, it is important to note that it is still exclusion.²⁷ It can have the same negative impacts upon a person whether the exclusion results from a necessary personal decision or comes from a source outside a person's control.²⁸

I wanted to ensure that people with disabilities could have a voice and participate; yet the result was the exact opposite, as the group concluded without any members with disabilities. My external expert for the project picked up on the exclusion, highlighting the importance of emphasizing "people's voice and agency."²⁹ This experience has stressed

²⁶ Several Christians in North America actively campaigned against the Americans with Disabilities Act. Religious organizations are excluded from this act as a result of this campaigning. "The law that finally granted accessible bathrooms, curb cuts, and ramps in public spaces was vehemently condemned by some Christian churches and schools as 'imposing burdensome costs . . . [and] needless injury to religious exercise.'" Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022), 28.

²⁷ Self-exclusion is when a person with a disability or their carer does not have the physical energy to engage in an activity. Sometimes, people's day-to-day challenges are enough to drain them of their energy resources. Self-exclusion may also occur due to a lack of financial or other resources.

²⁸ Studies have shown that exclusion can negatively impact a person with a disability's well-being and lead to long-term health issues. Nathan J. Wilson et al., "From Social Exclusion to Supported Inclusion: Adults with Intellectual Disability Discuss Their Lived Experiences of a Structured Social Group," *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 30 (2017): 848.

²⁹ Dr. Andy Calder, notes from external expert.

the importance of building a safe and welcoming space where people with disabilities are encouraged to contribute. However, to create this, genuine relationships need to be built with people with disabilities in the congregation. This means being willing to listen and learn from each other. A slogan from the disability activist movement in the 1990s, “Nothing about us without us,” articulates this commitment.³⁰

While the group became its own case study on exclusion, there was still some positive growth in this area. The members of the group began to identify barriers to participation. As the group journeyed together, they began questioning and recognizing ways that people with disabilities could be excluded. An early example is when one participant asked about the colors used on PowerPoint slides in worship. They wanted to know the best color combinations to give people the greatest opportunity to see what was on the screen. It was encouraging to see this group member beginning to think about how tools we currently use in church can potentially become barriers to participation.

Another potential barrier was acknowledged when the group practiced and discussed a specific liturgical element, *visio divina*.³¹ When the group practiced this together, we used the painting “The Bound Lamb (Agnus Dei)” by the artist Francisco de Zurbarán. This image was paired with Scripture from John 1:29–36.³² This painting was quite disconcerting to some group members as the lamb’s feet are bound together. The group voiced concerns that the wrong image could become a barrier for someone participating fully. The painting we used could be distressing for some people as the lamb is seemingly being mistreated. A person with an intellectual disability may lack the cognitive abilities to grasp the connection between the image and the Scripture reading. If a person is distressed by an image, it may be too difficult to bridge this gap. It was good to see the group identifying again that something like a painting can have unintended implications that could become a barrier for someone with an intellectual disability.

The next significant challenge to participatory worship that we experienced was a lack of awareness. I assumed at the commencement of the project that people had not previously participated fully in corporate

³⁰ James Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³¹ *Visio divina* is a practice that uses an image to go with a Scripture reading. People are given an opportunity to reflect on an image and then the Scripture is read.

³² This *visio divina* exercise was borrowed from an ACU class on Spiritual Formation taught by Dan McGregor on Friday, 22 January 2021.

worship because the church lacked awareness of those in the congregation who experience disability, and this indeed was the case. This was reinforced by one of the participants who said, “I’d never given any thought to how to consider inclusion in what we do in worship.” While it was good to see this participant identify and name this issue, evidence of this lack of awareness continued to raise its head throughout the group’s process of constructing the liturgies. Even though the project’s focus was on full participation for people with disabilities, the group constantly slipped back into the paradigm of “This is what I like” or “This is what impacted me” when discussing the inclusion of liturgical practices. This default lens is not something that can be addressed with one sermon or training session. Our tendency, as human beings, is to view the world through the lens of *what works for me*. While this is not wrong, it conflicts with the idea of full participation, particularly when considering the needs of someone who experiences the world in significantly different ways.

Lack of time was yet another challenge that surfaced as a participant reflected upon worship they had planned for the previous Sunday. They were not able to connect with the person preaching until Friday night, which gave little time for planning the liturgy. The result was a “cookie cutter” experience. Creating liturgies for full participation requires time as the needs of people with disabilities are considered and worship practices are adapted. It also takes time to compile the resources necessary to aid in full participation, such as pictorial prayer sheets.³³ When planning is left to the last minute, adapting for the needs of others is limited and creativity can be stifled.

While these challenges to full participation are significant, they are not insurmountable. As we build relationships, we become more aware of the needs of others. When we are aware of these needs, we can consider the barriers that exclude or make participation difficult for people. Overcoming these challenges will require intentionality, time, and a commitment to listen and learn.

³³ This practice involves creating prayer topics in a pictorial format. A person who is non-verbal would be able to participate by pointing to the pictures. It may also assist a person with low or no literacy.

Principles of Participation

While it is important to consider the challenges and barriers to full participation, it is also crucial to consider the different ways people can be invited to participate in worship. The members of the group used Erickson's types of participation to guide our journey. While these proved helpful, they do not specifically address participation for people with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, I was pleased to find that some new principles of participation developed throughout this process.³⁴ While I was not expecting to develop principles, their emergence highlights their significance to this project.

Practice Repetition

The first principle of repetition appeared consistently throughout the group process. Repetition is a way of helping someone participate because it repeats and reinforces an action or idea. The group was able to apply repetition in a variety of ways. One was in the repetition of the themes in the liturgies.³⁵ In addition to this form of repetition, the group wanted to repeat or recap what had occurred previously to reinforce learning. One participant pointed out, "We spend time going back over the previous [television] episode before we get into the next episode." He felt that if a television series can use this form of repetition, then so could we. He continued, "We're not adding massive, big steps. We're adding incremental steps." The group hoped this would help people in the congregation with intellectual disabilities to remember what we previously looked at, thereby reinforcing learning.

Repetition was also used when introducing new liturgical practices. As previously mentioned, *visio divina* was used for four weeks for the Scripture reading. This practice was repeated to familiarize people with the process rather than introducing it for one week and then not engaging with it for several weeks. The hope was that this repetition would foster greater participation.

The principle of repetition was also used when the group members were writing responsive prayers. As we practiced these together, we observed that each of the responsive lines for the congregation were different and sometimes long. To facilitate full participation, we decided to

³⁴ I do not think these principles that emerged form an exhaustive or conclusive list. However, they are a good starting place for anyone who is considering creating opportunities for participation in another context.

³⁵ There was an overarching theme for the liturgies that was broken down into subthemes each week. Therefore, the overarching theme was repeated and reinforced each week via the subtheme.

keep the responsive lines short and consistent. This helps a person with limited or a lack of literacy to participate.

Use Imagery

As the group members shared in liturgical practices, another principle of participation emerged: the use of imagery. The group felt visual images would provide opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to more fully participate. Thus, prayer exercises in the developed liturgies are often accompanied by pictures for people who cannot read or are non-verbal to help communicate the prayer topics. In week four of the liturgies, a video clip of the Good Samaritan is used. This video has no dialogue and shares the story solely through images. Imagery is also used with the practice of *visio divina* in several sermon outlines. In each instance, we hoped that the imagery would enable people with intellectual disabilities to participate in corporate worship by providing non-verbal opportunities for engagement.

Show Respect

A critical principle that arose was to show respect for all. In the first liturgy we constructed, we discussed ways that people could participate in the reading of the Scriptures. I found a video clip of Genesis 1, which contains footage of a person painting the passage as it is being read.³⁶ The video is excellent, but it is designed for children's ministries. After we watched it, we discussed whether it was appropriate to use as we want to be respectful of people with intellectual disabilities. Adults with intellectual disabilities are adults and should be treated as such. The group decided to include the video clip in the liturgy because they felt the content was excellent and engaging for everyone, not just children.

The importance of showing respect was also raised during the final group interview. One participant remarked that they had learned through constructing the liturgies that we did not need to "dumb it down." Full participation should be respectful as we consider how we ask or invite people to participate.

Recognize that Anyone Can Participate

One of the challenges to full participation is that people tend to view a person with a disability through the lens of what they cannot do. We see

³⁶ This resource, *In the Beginning*, is available to download free from Quiz Worx. <https://quizworx.com/resources/in-the-beginning-genesis-1/>

the limitations and not the possibilities. Therefore, I was delighted to hear the group participants articulate the principle that anyone can meaningfully participate and contribute. The openness to others participating in the leading of worship is already in the DNA at Mooroolbark, and the group viewed it as a necessity that this openness to participate extend to everyone.

The group also considered how to provide appropriate resources to allow everyone to participate in worship. One of the liturgical practices that the group tried together was Psalm prayers.³⁷ This practice involves printing out selected Psalms on a handout and then allowing people to select a verse as a prayer to read out. The group liked this idea and thought it would be a practice that would enable people to participate. However, sometimes people do not know how to participate or maybe are nervous, so they hold back. Resourcing people this way helps limit this anxiety and frees people to fully participate.

Additionally, everyone has a greater chance of participating when there are multiple ways to engage with a liturgical practice. Therefore, the group considered various ways for people to engage in each liturgical practice.³⁸ This intentional mindset and subsequent praxis provides flexibility and choice for people as to how they participate.

Recognizing that anyone can participate is one principle of participation where our understanding of the body of Christ is evident. Everyone has something to contribute to the church. There was a strong desire from the group to facilitate full participation for people in our congregation with intellectual disabilities. Still, this consideration was often extended to include other congregants who may be reticent to participate. The group recognized the application of this principle to people beyond our target audience.

While this desire for everyone to participate was evident in the group, currently, there is a disconnect between our desire and our praxis. This disconnect is regarding who can participate in the leadership roles in

³⁷ This was a suggested prayer method from Sam Hargreaves and Sara Hargreaves, *Whole Life Worship: Empowering Disciples for the Frontline* (London: InterVarsity, 2017), 35.

³⁸ Using corporate singing as an example, people can participate through singing a song. They can participate by using the provide percussion instruments or by clapping along with the singing. There is a further opportunity to join in through dance or movement. By providing multiple ways to engage in corporate singing, people with disabilities who have low or no literacy are able to participate. In addition, other members of the congregation have a choice to participate in a way that is meaningful to them. I have learned that there are many congregants who love doing actions to songs and playing instruments in worship. When these options to corporate singing are added with the principle of repetition, people who are unable to read have the opportunity to memorize the words to a song and this also provides further opportunities for participation.

worship. The group highlighted that our corporate worship times should not be reliant upon the corps officers.³⁹ In fact, there is a broader group of people able to lead worship, read Scripture, and even preach. However, the opportunity for a person with a disability to participate in upfront leadership is rare.⁴⁰ There is still work to be done so that full participation, and even leadership, is not limited for people with disabilities in the congregation.

Be Intentional

Another principle that arose from the group was to be intentional. As mentioned above, one of the members of the group who leads worship regularly confessed that they had never intentionally considered the needs of people when planning worship. During the group interview at the end of the intervention sessions, the same participant stated that the liturgies produced “are just minor tweaks of consideration to ensure that there is a more enhanced opportunity for full participation.” Being intentional means considering the needs of others and how we are asking them to participate. It is about providing different ways to engage with the liturgy in worship. One participant remarked that it is about being “more mindful” of the process of planning worship “to allow for greater participation.” Another participant affirmed this and said, “We can create a worship service and try to engage people.”

Try Something

Occasionally, while the group was wrestling with including a practice in one of the liturgies, a concern would be raised about whether a particular practice would help facilitate full participation for people with intellectual disabilities. One group member remarked that things might fail when we test our work, but we would not know unless we tried. The group was aware that their work on the liturgies was stage one in a process and that the liturgies would need to be tested at Mooroolbark to see how well they did or did not facilitate full participation. Trying to foster full participation for people with disabilities and failing is better than never

³⁹ In The Salvation Army, a corps officer is the ordained minister in the congregation.

⁴⁰ I am not advocating that everyone is gifted to lead during a worship service. Some people are gifted to do this, and others are not. This is the beauty of the body of Christ: we each have a part to play, and those parts will be different. However, I am advocating that people with disabilities are invited and given an opportunity to participate in the leadership of worship. People need to be given a chance to explore how they can contribute and to discern the gifts they bring to the church. A way to do this for people with intellectual disabilities is to provide an opportunity for them to try.

trying.⁴¹ And it is through this process that we will continue to learn and grow.

Final Considerations

While it was unexpected and welcomed to have the principles of participation emerge, it is also important to note that these principles all apply to the horizontal nature of worship that was discussed in the theological foundations above. I was also hoping to detect throughout this process an understanding of the vertical nature of worship. Part of the vertical axis acknowledges that in worship, people participate in the mystery of God. It recognizes that the Spirit of God is at work when people worship. However, there was no indication of this amidst our discussions. Likewise, there was no recognition that the Holy Spirit ministers to all. I believe this to be an important piece missing in our understanding. Just because we cannot measure well what God is doing in someone's life due to an intellectual disability does not mean that God is not at work. Without the acknowledgment of the role of the Holy Spirit, preparing worship for full participation could potentially focus on what *we* do to minister to people with intellectual disabilities in the congregation as opposed to what the Triune God does. In doing so, we miss the vertical invitation to participate in the mystery of God.

This lack of articulation around the role of the Holy Spirit is also potentially problematic. Ruth Duck, in *Worship for the Whole People of God*, pinpoints that if we are unaware of the Holy Spirit's work, we will struggle to identify the gifting of people within our congregation.⁴² This then begins to snowball. If we cannot identify people's gifts, we will struggle to provide opportunities for people to serve. If we are not providing opportunities for people with disabilities to serve, we are not creating opportunities for full participation. Instead, we are perpetrating a model in which there is no acceptance of mutuality and reciprocity. Acknowledging that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of all people is vital to full participation.

Summary

Working toward full participation has its challenges. There are challenges with the language used to speak about disability and participation. There are theological challenges in defining what it means to

⁴¹ I will add to this principle that it is fine to try something as long as it has been thought through and will not harm the people being invited to participate. If it could be harmful, then it should not be tried.

⁴² Duck, *Worship*, ch 2.

be the body of Christ. And then, there are the practical challenges and barriers faced by people with disabilities that need to be addressed. Despite these challenges, full participation offers great rewards. It has the benefit of providing opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to fully participate in worship, and it also opens up new opportunities to participate for the rest of the congregation. It has the potential to give people with disabilities a place to belong and to share their gifts with the church. Full participation benefits more than the individual with an intellectual disability; it benefits the body of Christ, the whole church.

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