

# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

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## Disability, Difference, and Inclusion in the Church: A Special Issue

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## **Disability, Difference, and Inclusion in the Church: A Special Issue**

*Issue Editor: Jennifer Reinsch Schroeder*

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*Abstract: This introductory article sets the context for the conversations in this special issue of **Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry** on disability, difference, and inclusion in the church.*

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When I reflect on the fullness of the kingdom of God, I think about the value that every voice brings to the kingdom—each voice contributing in its own unique way, each voice adding another layer to the conversation, each voice entirely essential. It is an immeasurable fullness that we cannot fully understand, yet it is also one that churches seek to embody. To lean into this embodiment means that the resulting conversations are not always easy ones with simple answers. Despite this tension, they remain important conversations.

This issue of *Discernment* seeks to wade into some of these conversations and examine the impact they have on people and their churches. The articles contained within this special edition issue represent some of the blind spots of the church, and while they are indicative, they are by no means exhaustive. For example, one article describes a church that undertakes a listening project in an effort to move toward greater inclusion and accessibility for individuals who live with disabilities. Another embraces the sacred work of involving the whole church, specifically its members who experience disability, as full participants within the liturgy of the church. While two other pieces address support by the faith community from the perspective of the child and the caregiver, respectively. The issue concludes with a book review that seeks to empower practitioners, scholars, and faith communities to articulate a theology of disability that honors the whole person and then respond accordingly within their congregations.

These articles are filled with complexities and vulnerabilities that speak to the essential nature of this conversation if we are to truly live into

the fullness of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, this collection of articles represents differing perspectives—that of parent, practitioner, social scientist, and liturgist—and each perspective leads us to a place of learning by allowing us the privilege of looking over their shoulders both in moments of success and in moments of defeat. However, they are all moments that seek to exemplify the kingdom of God.

Despite the common aims of these articles, though, it is important to acknowledge that there exists diverse vocabulary and even disagreement about what is acceptable, and for this, reader, we ask for your grace. The variation of language involved in this edition is indicative of a broader reality that affects more than just churches—the embedded perceptions and biases that have long shaped the way individuals who live with disabilities are viewed. Rather than avoid these important conversations, though, we are humbly engaging them while also acknowledging the potential for missteps. We are committed to doing so because, through the openness and the work of the authors within this edition, we move another step closer to imagining the fullness of God’s kingdom here on earth. To do anything less would be incomplete.

*Jennifer Reinsch Schroeder – Jennifer, a former children’s minister, now serves in multiple roles at Abilene Christian University. In addition to directing Summit as part of her work with the Siburt Institute for Church Ministry, she teaches undergraduate courses in children and family ministry and is the director for the Center for Women in Christian Ministry. Jennifer earned her Doctor of Ministry degree from Abilene Christian University, and she, her husband, Greg, and their four children live in Abilene, TX.*