Spirituality, Hospitality, and Disability

I. Purpose
This paper explores the theological and spiritual issues at stake in the church’s response to persons with disabilities. The focus here is not so much on practical considerations about accessibility and accommodation, important as they may be. Nor is the focus primarily on the experience of persons who have a disability, though those issues will always be in view. Rather, this study focuses primarily on the experience of the church, the Christian community, as it responds—whether positively or negatively—to the presence of persons with disabilities. What is at stake, from a theological perspective, when the church engages persons with disabilities? How can the church grow in its self-understanding and in its responsiveness to the Triune God, through deeper reflection in its encounter with persons with disabilities?

This study therefore does not attempt to speak “for” persons with disabilities. Nor does it attempt to speak “to” persons with disabilities. Rather, it speaks to the RCA as a denomination, and to individual congregations within the RCA, in an attempt to invite deeper reflection on how the RCA can simply become more obedient to Jesus Christ. In the practice of such obedience, the RCA may also discover how it can grow in its capacity to welcome persons with disabilities, and how it can grow spiritually as a result of such practices of welcome.

II. Relational Communities
How does one define “persons with disabilities”? The very word “disability” might suggest that the entire range of human experience can be neatly divided into two camps: the “able-bodied” and the “disabled.” Such divisions can give the appearance of making the world more manageable and understandable, but they can obscure other important truths. In reality, human beings are all differently-abled. We do not all have the same intelligence, athletic ability, flexibility, vision, or mobility...

Moreover, we are all dependent on each other in varying and complex ways; none of us can live without our relationships with others. Yet by dividing the world into the “able-bodied” and the “disabled,” those who see themselves as “able-bodied” may be tempted to reassure themselves of their “normalcy,” and obscure from themselves their deep dependency upon others in society as a whole, and even more importantly, within the body of Christ.

In reality, both “wholeness” and “disability” acquire their full meaning only within the shared contexts of communities of persons. People sometimes only recognize and identify a “disability” in comparison to others whose experience differs from theirs. In this specific sense, the very notion of disability is a relative and communally shaped concept. But at a deeper and more important level, persons with disabilities find wholeness in the shared experience of community. We experience wholeness, ultimately, when we find a place in community marked by contentment, acceptance, mutual caring, and love. These communities are always diverse and dynamic, made up of people with changing experiences, changing capacities to participate in community, and changing relationships within community...

One of the most helpful biblical categories to assist the church in reflecting on its welcome of persons with disabilities is the biblical discussion of “welcoming the stranger.” Of course, almost every congregation has members with disabilities—members who are not “strangers” at all to the rest of the congregation, but rather people who are known...
and loved. But at another level, persons with disabilities are indeed strangers to their more able-bodied neighbors. People with disabilities often awaken feelings of loss or discomfort in other, more able-bodied people. In this more particular sense, persons with disabilities are “strangers” to more able-bodied people. Their experience of the world is different and alien in profound ways.

Persons with disabilities often do not “fit” into the normal patterns of social life. They are often marginalized, excluded, made to feel inferior and unwelcome. In this respect as well, they are often treated as “strangers” in the midst of the church. Throughout Scripture, there is a powerful mandate to welcome such strangers. This is a challenge, not to persons with disabilities, but to the church that often struggles to recognize and welcome them as full members of the body of Christ...in Jesus’ gripping account of the final judgment narrated in Matthew 25:31f., all the nations are judged on whether, in caring for the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the stranger, they cared for Jesus himself. Jesus declares, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

Here we come to the crux of the matter from a spiritual and theological perspective: Insofar as persons with disabilities are strangers in the midst of the church (that is, insofar as they embody what may seem alien to their more able-bodied neighbors), they also represent—as all strangers do—the presence of Jesus in the midst of the church. The more the church grows in its capacity to welcome such persons who are strangers, the more deeply the church will welcome and serve Jesus.

III. Our Embodied Existence

This is not merely pious rhetoric. Welcoming the stranger, in biblical parlance, is an exercise in welcoming whatever it is that threatens us about our own humanity...We all know, at the deepest level, the precariousness of our own embodied existence, our own vulnerability to loss. And almost all of us, if we live long enough, will experience some sort of disability, as our bodies grow more frail.

Persons with disabilities thus can assist the church to discover more deeply and powerfully the mystery of its own embodied existence, the diverse ways in which we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). The ability of the Christian community to welcome persons with disabilities, and the ability of persons with disabilities to live joyfully in the midst of the church, will be an important measure of the church’s ability to live fearlessly and joyfully in the midst of a broken world, as it awaits the restoration of the whole creation.

As the church welcomes persons with disabilities, it will thus necessarily confront more deeply the mystery of its own embodied existence. Our bodily existence is indeed complex, and full of paradox. Paul speaks of our “mortal bodies,” subject to the power of death and beset by weakness (Romans 6:12, 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:53f.). At the same time, Christians celebrate and affirm the resurrection of the body. Bodily existence is not something for this life alone. Our bodies matter so much that they will be raised in the life to come. This importance of the body is what leads Paul to summon believers to “glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20). In welcoming persons with disabilities, the church necessarily confronts the joys, sorrows, limitations, and beauties of its embodied existence...and becomes more deeply what Jesus declares it to be: the light of the world, the pointer to a deeper joy that awaits the whole creation.

But if the church is to become such a light in this world, it must also recognize and confront its shadow side. Precisely because persons with disabilities can be strangers to the church—disruptive, alien, and threatening—the natural human tendency is to try to make such strangeness more manageable. One way this happens is by objectifying and categorizing people with disabilities. Far too often, the person becomes defined by their disability: “Jack is blind.” “Maggie has Down Syndrome.” “Mike is mentally ill.” “Susan is a paraplegic.” These labels then acquire a kind of defining power that shapes the way others interact with these people. What seems most obvious (the disability) to more able-bodied people who may not know the person well becomes the only thing to be noted about a person. In so doing, the church can lose sight of the manifold unique
ways in which each person is gifted and called by God to his or her unique place in the body of Christ.

If labeling and categorizing is one way in which humans objectify and depersonalize others, another way is the subtle tendency to identify persons with disabilities as “disruptions” in the shared life of the church. They “upset the flow” of things, and many congregations find innumerable ways, both overt and implied, to discourage and shame such “disruptors” of the status quo, and to reestablish the “normal” order of things. The tragedy, of course, is that this shaming of “disruptions” diminishes all our humanness, replacing the rich diversity of the body of Christ with a boring and oppressive uniformity.

These tendencies to objectify persons with disabilities may also appear in particularly problematic ways in the spiritual life of the Christian community. One characteristic problem is the tendency to associate disability with sin or uncleanness...[We cannot deny that the effects of sin are far-reaching—evident in every life and throughout human societies. But, in keeping with Christ’s own ministry,] the church must say loudly, and believe heartily, that disability is not a divine punishment.

This tendency to link disability and sin can take subtler forms as well. Those facing disability may be encouraged to pray for healing, and may be led, sometimes in subtle and indirect ways, to doubt their own faith if the prayed-for healing does not arrive. At the opposite extreme, a particularly subtle way of marginalizing persons with disabilities can take the form of excessive admiration. These expressions of respect may indeed be warranted, but these tendencies to idealize can also be another way in which the church creates boundaries that mark off persons with disabilities, inhibiting the capacity of the church to be a fully welcoming community for all persons who are sinners, saved by grace...

Jesus himself embodies this posture of welcome to the stranger, the marginalized and the excluded. He touched the “unclean.” He shocked the crowds by going to dinner with Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector who was also short in stature. He regularly showed interest in people who could not walk, who could not speak, who could not hear, who were disfigured through leprosy. He was surrounded by crowds seeking healing. His normal entourage was not made up of “normal” people, but people with a wide variety of disabilities...

We see almost all of Paul’s letters wrestling with the challenges faced by Christian communities, as they tried to live out God’s welcoming grace in the midst of deep diversity. Yet it might be observed that where the church is no longer struggling with such challenges, it has ceased, in important ways, to be the welcoming church God calls it to be...

The church rightly proclaims God’s healing power, and recognizes that there are times when, by the mercy and power of God, some people are set free from some disabilities. Yet throughout the experience of the church, healing does not always happen, and a one-sided emphasis only upon healing will almost always have the effect of marginalizing and stigmatizing persons with disabilities who have not experienced physical healing. Indeed, an excessive preoccupation with physical healing may be driven more by human anxiety than by the hope of the gospel, as we become desperate for God to “fix” us and to return us to a societal ideal of “normalcy.”

At a deeper level still, the church must wrestle with the question of whether wholeness can coexist with disability. If persons are defined by their disability, then their whole existence becomes defined by an absence, a lack, an aberrancy. The church must boldly proclaim that Christian identity—both for more “able-bodied” persons and for persons with disabilities—does not arise from what we can and cannot do, but rather from our union with Christ and with Christ’s church. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). This core identity in Christ permits the apostle to boast even about his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:30f.). It is only this deep and fundamental transformation in Christ that can free the church to be most deeply welcoming, both when healing comes and when it does not come. Who knows whether, just as the resurrected body of Jesus still showed its wounds, so our resurrected...
bodies will still bear the marks of our disabilities as well, not as limitations on our existence before God, but as the traces of divine grace, the signs of our deepest union with the Christ who shared our sufferings.1

IV. Endurance and Hope

This recovery of core Christian identity in welcoming persons with disabilities—an identity that can endure through all sorts of suffering or loss—invites the church to rediscover and revalue a virtue common in the New Testament, but often overlooked in our success-oriented North American culture: the virtue of endurance. The question is not whether the church is called to endure persons with disabilities, but whether the church can learn something more about the endurance to which Scripture calls all Christians, through sharing life with persons who struggle with disabilities. In Romans 5:3f., Paul speaks of how “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”...Christian endurance is grounded in the deeper hope that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, who shared our suffering, and with whom we will share eternal joy...

This call to endurance brings us to that curious way in which thanksgiving and lament blend with each other in Christian faith and experience. In welcoming persons with disabilities, the church recognizes two paradoxical truths: on the one hand, each life—including the lives of those who experience disability—is pure gift, to be received with grateful thanksgiving from the providential hand of God. On the other hand, as Paul says, “while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Corinthians 5:4). Even among persons with disabilities, the complex balance between gratitude and hope, between praise and lament, will vary, depending on the season in life and the specific point in one’s spiritual journey. The church’s embrace of both gratitude and lament is one of the richest and most unpredictable of its spiritual movements. In welcoming persons with disabilities, whose lives are deeply shaped by this complex spirituality, the church may learn more about and enter more deeply into its distinctive vocation to lie “between the times,” groaning with the whole creation, while also sharing in a foretaste of the age to come...

V. Culmination

Hospitality will naturally find its culmination when persons with disabilities are no longer merely the “recipients” of the church’s ministry, but when they find their rightful place within the body of Christ, assisting the church as a whole to embody the good news of Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that Christ’s capacity to save us flows directly from his incarnation—the fact that he shared our life in all its weakness and vulnerability (Hebrews 2:18). If this is true, it is reasonable also to expect that the church’s own witness will come to its fullest expression when it is mediated through the voices, bodies, and stories of those who have tasted, by divine grace, both the losses and riches, the weaknesses and strength that flow from life in this groaning world, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

This paper thus invites the church not only to deepen its welcome to persons with disabilities, but to take the opportunity, in its encounter with persons with disabilities, to deepen its grasp of the gospel, and to enter more deeply into its union with Christ, not only in his resurrection, but also in his suffering (Philippians 3:10–11). A fully welcoming encounter with persons with disabilities will almost inevitably lead the church into the very center of the gospel, and deepen the church’s capacity to follow Jesus. In short, the church must welcome persons with disabilities, not just because persons with disabilities need to be welcomed; the church must welcome persons with disabilities because, without such welcome, the church will not fully discover the unspeakable riches of its life in Christ.

1 Cf. Augustine’s discussion of the wounds of the martyrs in The City of God, Book XXII, Chapter 19.