

## Ad-Interim Committee on Disability & Accessibility to the Sacraments Pastoral Letter Draft

### *Introduction / Statement of Purpose*

Every person bears the image of God (Genesis 1:27): people experiencing disability are no exception. As image-bearers every person needs to have the opportunity to hear the gospel and respond. God calls us to share the truth of the gospel in a manner that is accessible and receive a response in the manner it is offered. Those who respond in faith to Christ should receive the sacraments of Christ to strengthen them in their faith by the grace truly offered there (WLC 154, 162). Therefore, access to the sacraments for individuals and families experiencing disability is essential.

### *Disability Defined:*

In order to proceed we need a common definition of disability.<sup>1 2</sup> Disability for the purpose of our letter has an effect on the individual, the family, and the church.

Disability has an impact on an individual's life on a permanent and daily basis. Disabilities can be visible and invisible and include:

- Physical Disabilities affecting things like movement, posture, and limbs
- Sensory Disabilities often relating to sight and hearing
- Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) affecting cognitive function, learning, and development
- Learning Disabilities resulting in specific challenges in acquiring knowledge
- Mental/Psychosocial Disabilities affecting mood, thinking, and behavior

Disability has both functional and social aspects. Functional aspects often refer to physical barriers that impede the ability to participate in the life of the church. Social aspects refer to attitudes and actions that often limit access and may lead to exclusion of individuals experiencing disabilities and their families from the church, either formally or informally.

Disability has an impact on families. Family members have a responsibility to care for each other [1 Timothy 5:8]. The family experiencing disability may undergo isolation (whether self-imposed and/or socially-imposed), shame, guilt, grief, financial-strain, time-strain, stress, self-doubt, experiencing devaluation, and a lifetime imposition of relentless responsibility. Christ

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<sup>1</sup> **1 in 4 adults and 1 in 6 children experience disability in the United States of America. Disability is the one minority group that anyone can join at any time and that most people will join at some point in their life.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic," last updated July 15, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html>, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Developmental Disabilities," last modified February 9, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/environmental-health-tracking/php/data-research/developmental-disabilities.html>.

<sup>2</sup> **Worldwide, the prevalence of disability was estimated to be 16% in 2023 according to the World Health Organization**—though definition of disability can vary widely depending on the country. World Health Organization. "Disability and Health." March 7, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>.

calls the church to strengthen families in their faith and walk alongside all Christians through joys and trials. Christ provides the church, as his body, to disciple families and for families to utilize their spiritual gifts, abilities, and talents as the church.

Disability has an impact on the whole church. To exclude individuals and families who experience disability from active life in the church is to impoverish Christ's bride. The church must provide access to the ordinary means of grace—word, prayer, and the sacraments [WSC 88] to all Christians, including individuals and families experiencing disability. Our attitudes and actions as Christians must be shaped by our understanding that all people bear the image of God. All Christians are given gifts [1 Corinthians 12:7] and have a responsibility to use those gifts for the glory of God and the building up of the Church of Christ [1 Corinthians 12]. Ministry is not just *to* individuals experiencing disability but should also be *with* individuals experiencing disability and their families.

Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives hope and grace to both families and the church through the ordinary means of grace, including the sacraments. The church is incomplete without the presence and participation of families and individuals experiencing disability. Access to the sacraments is one and the same with access to Jesus Christ himself. Since the Reformed Tradition has maintained that the most appropriate place for the administration of the sacraments is in the regular worship of the Christian Church, access to the place of worship cannot be separated from access to Christ himself as he reveals himself to the gathered community in word and sacrament.

### **Biblical and Confessional Background**

The story of Scripture is one of God expanding and welcoming ever more people into his Church, the covenant community. Members of God's covenant community have received the sign and seal of God's covenant through sacraments. In the Old Testament, circumcision was unconditionally commanded by God for all males of his covenant people (Genesis 17:9-10). In placing an unconditional command on his people, God never excluded those experiencing disability from bearing the bodily sign of the covenant. Through Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22), God instituted the sacrament of baptism, a sign that included women and Gentiles who put their faith in Jesus. The children of believers also receive baptism, the sacramental sign of the new covenant (see Acts 2:39, 1 Corinthians 7:14).

Jesus, in cleansing the Temple, provided access to “the blind and lame” to come to him (Matthew 21:14). It is the calling of the Church, therefore, to ensure that the Gospel is presented in a way that is comprehensible to all people that they too may come to Jesus. Jesus did not exclude any group based on ability from the Great Commission, but instead commands his Church to, “Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20a). As disciples of Christ it is our joy to bring others to the Savior that they too may know through faith that their sins are forgiven (see Mark 2:1-12).

Presbyterians throughout the years have placed emphasis on the profession of faith (Romans 10:9) as a mark of belonging to Christ—and rightly so. Our God, who made us all in his image, calls people to faith through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. All those who put their faith in Jesus Christ will be saved (Mark 16:16; John 6:29; Acts 16:21; Romans 10:9). The

Savior said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). The Savior assures us that through our faith we have been placed in his safekeeping.

The Lord’s covenant people, marked by blood on the doorposts, shared a covenant meal (Exodus 12). This Passover meal was repeated annually as remembrance and recapitulation of the promise of God to deliver his people from slavery through the dry ground of the sea (1 Corinthians 10:2). The Savior transformed the Passover meal into the new sacramental meal of the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-22; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The Apostles, following the expansion of the new covenant in Christ, welcomed ever more people to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7). The body of Christ is one when it shares in the one bread of the new covenant (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Throughout Scripture, many have been invited both into the covenant people of God and to the table of the king. Some have come because they feared the Lord and demonstrated their faith in action (Joshua 6:25). Others were invited because of conversion and gave evidence through their deep love of God’s people (Ruth 1:16-17). Others have come as an act of grace born out of covenant love and found a seat at the king’s table (2 Samuel 9). Others have come unexpectedly to the table of the king where he revealed himself in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35). The Savior welcomes all to come to him and find their rest in him (Matthew 11:28-30). Truly, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9) and for a foretaste of that glorious meal in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper now. It is the joy and duty of elders to extend that invitation to the Lord’s table to disciples now that they may find rest in Christ and have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come.

The Reformed Tradition teaches that both believers and the children of a believing parent are the proper subjects of baptism (WCF 28.4). In fact, the Westminster Confession states that neglecting baptism is a “great sin” (WCF 28.5). Thus, covenant children who experience disability have been, are, and continue to be recipients of baptism and thus are included in the covenant. The Westminster Confession states that “the power and effectiveness of the sacraments are the result of the work of the Spirit and rest on God’s word instituting them, since his word authorizes their use and promises benefits to worthy receivers of them” (WCF 27.3). When members of the congregation receive those who are baptized, they commit themselves to supporting and nurturing them in the faith. This commitment to discipleship for the baptized is for everyone regardless of age and/or the disability experience.

The Westminster Standards call for a serious, informed reception of the Lord’s Supper by those who receive it (WCF 29; WLC 168-175; WSC 96-97). Proper reception of the Supper as defined by the Standards may be challenging even to those who do not face cognitive or speech difficulties. Historically Presbyterians have placed great value on a familiar verbal articulation of faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith, however, acknowledges that not all the faithful (“the elect”) are able to offer up a profession of faith that meets those expectations. On the subject of Effectual Calling, the Confession states: “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who works when, where, and how he pleases. The same is true of all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word” (WCF 10:2). Since the WCF leaves room for mystery when it comes to the working of God in the salvation of his people, Sessions should be open to the display of the work of God among those experiencing cognitive and verbal disabilities in ways that may be different from the familiar way that the faith is expressed by those who are admitted to the Lord’s Table. We

encourage Sessions to discover ways to discern the faith of those under their care in ways that are ability-appropriate to their situations.

### **Pastoral Guidance:**

The sacrament of baptism should be offered to people of all ages experiencing disability. The Church is simply lesser when, apart from valid, biblical reasons, such as lack of faith, people are excluded. The Session of a particular church should ensure that all those seeking baptism for themselves and/or their children make a ‘credible profession of faith.’<sup>3</sup> The Session must also ensure that baptism is not imposed on people experiencing disability who express a desire not to receive it.

It follows that the Church is called to be open to the Holy Spirit to hear credible professions of faith, as need arises, that are in an unfamiliar way.<sup>4</sup> Our God, who is the Creator and is always more creative than humanity, has determined (Exodus 4:11; John 9:1-5) that some of those he has regenerated and called to faith who experience disability would need to make a profession of faith in ways that are not given in a familiar shape.<sup>5</sup> Such unfamiliar professions of faith by an individual experiencing disability may need to be given, for example, through an interpreter, by way of testimony of other disciples, through the observation by elders, or through use of assistive communication technologies and methods. Elders have the tremendous joy and duty to receive professions of faith—and these professions of faith that are not given in familiar ways are no different. The Session is called to carefully discern together the mind of Christ and welcome those who make a credible profession of faith, in any acceptable format,<sup>6</sup> to the table of our Lord.

It is the joy and duty, therefore, of elders to both admit and encourage those of faith who have been claimed by God for his covenant people in the waters of baptism and who have made a credible profession of faith (either in a familiar or unfamiliar format) to partake in the Lord’s Supper. The blessing of Christ, as discerned by the Session, and the working of the Holy Spirit (WLC 161) in the recipient through faith (WSC 91) are the criteria for the sacraments to be effective means of salvation. Those who receive the Lord’s Supper are “spiritually nourished and grow in grace” (WLC 168). Therefore, as the Session seeks to shepherd and nurture the spiritual growth of all the congregation, including those experiencing disability, the Lord’s Supper is a crucial aspect of discipleship and spiritual growth.

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<sup>3</sup> Pastoral Letter “Children and the Lord’s Supper” (approved June 1993), p 2.

<sup>4</sup> The familiar format of profession of faith is direct verbal testimony from the individual.

<sup>5</sup> The Book of Worship 3.J. “Baptized children may be admitted to the Lord’s Supper provided they have appeared before the Session and professed their faith in a manner acceptable to the Session.” The Session is given discretion to define what manner(s) are acceptable.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, p 125.

In response to an overture from the Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest (44-22) to amend the Book of Government 8-2.C, and Book of Worship 3-3.J, the PJC wrote, “Under the Constitution the Session currently has the authority to receive members taking into consideration the individual’s mental capabilities and life situation. This includes not only developmentally disabled individuals, but other conditions which may have impacted an individual’s abilities to evidence a true commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, including medical conditions, traumatic injury, and other scenarios and conditions...Likewise, Session and Minister have defined roles with respect to preparation for, and admission to The Lord’s Supper (see, e.g. **W. 3, H, I, J, and M**), along with **Westminster Confession** Chapter 29.”

The Session has the role in the life of the believer to admit to the table of our Lord those who demonstrate “evidence to the Session of a basic understanding of the sacrament.”<sup>7</sup> While evidence in its most familiar format is self-reported testimony, the Session is not limited to this as the only kind of evidence available. The Session may remain open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in receiving evidence in unfamiliar ways such as testimony of parents, guardians and other members of the congregation, or observation of the person experiencing disability.

Those who receive the Lord’s Supper, including those experiencing disability, have duties as well. The Reformed Tradition has placed a great emphasis on self-examination and discerning the body. The onus for this examination is left to the individual when tables are properly fenced by the minister, but are evident in repentance, love and a new obedience as our faith feeds on Christ (WSC 97). Discerning the body (1 Corinthians 11:28-29) requires reverence and sharing in the sacrament with others in regular, congregational worship.<sup>8</sup> While no one is required to take the Lord’s Supper, neither should those who experience disability be barred from the table due to a presumption of “spiritual ignorance” (WLC 173) because the faith of the individual experiencing disability is not expressed in a familiar way.<sup>9</sup> All those who have faith in Jesus, including those experiencing disability, receive the great benefit of Christ’s grace won for the elect on the cross in the Lord’s Supper.

The spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper is a comfort to the faith of all, including those individuals and families experiencing disability. The reception of the “seal of all the benefits of that sacrifice for true believers” (WCF 29.1) strengthens and aids spiritual growth through the application of Christ’s grace by the Holy Spirit and builds “communion with Jesus and with each other as members of his mystical body” (WCF 29.1). To receive Christ’s benefits and grace in the sacraments is a tremendous aid to the faith of all. God is truly glorified when all those who have faith in Jesus come together at his table and commune with him and with one another.

The Session should take special care with those members who entered into the experience of disability that has led to a diminishing or absent ability to continue to offer a credible profession of faith. Christ Jesus died to save the person experiencing such disabilities for all of time and salvation is not dependent on the continued ability to profess the faith. The Session may need to rely on the testimony of others if the person experiencing this kind of disability is not previously known. The Session may continue to offer the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to such persons who experience disability in these ways as they continue to exhibit a reliance upon Christ for hope and comfort.

Sessions are called to consider carefully in what manner the sacraments are offered to the people, ensuring that all those of faith may participate equally in the sacraments. Matters such as the placement and distribution of the elements of the sacraments, the location of the baptismal font and table, and the type of bread used can serve to magnify the glory of God through the demonstration of the greater unity of the body of Christ. Physical barriers to receiving the

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<sup>7</sup> Pastoral Letter “Children and the Lord’s Supper” (approved June 1993), p 2.

<sup>8</sup> Book of Worship 3.F.

<sup>9</sup> “Ignorance” is juxtaposed with “wicked” and “ungodly” in the Westminster Confession of Faith 29.8. The thrust of the paragraph is to warn those who lack faith in Jesus Christ (knowledge in the familiar sense) to refrain from partaking in the “holy mystery of communion.” Those experiencing disability may express their faith in unfamiliar ways, but this ought not to be conflated with ignorance from the perspective of the Session.

sacraments should, to the best of the Session's ability, be minimized—but charity is encouraged for the Session and for individuals and families experiencing disability as any needed accommodation may take time, effort, and funding to enact. Still, many accommodations are a matter of change of custom and are low-cost in terms of time, talent, and treasure expended.

The sacraments are a sign and seal of our unity with God in faith and with one another. The Church is truly enriched when participation in the sacraments of individuals and families experiencing disability is encouraged and enacted in the true joy of redemption through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

### Questions for Session to Consider

- How might Exodus 4:11 challenge our theology regarding those with disabilities? How would that then affect our attitudes about the access of those with disabilities to the Sacraments?
- How might King David's treatment of Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9 inspire how we should think about and engage with an individual with a disability and their access?
- Consider your worship spaces. Would someone with a disability encounter any barriers of access to the sacraments?
- Do the examples of Jesus and his table fellowship have anything to offer towards our fellowship with Christ at the Communion table?
- In light of Matthew 25:40, how intentional or cognizant are we of our interactions with those with disabilities?
- How would you deal with the request of a family for the baptism of their teenage child who is non-verbal?
- What might be the marks of a believer that cannot use words to articulate their faith?

### Additional Resources

#### BOOKS

Brock, Brian, and John Swinton, eds. *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012.

*Fourteen contemporary experts in theology and disability studies guide readers through each era or group of thinkers, offering clear commentary and highlighting important themes.*

Hardwick, Lamar. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

**Disability and the Church** is a practical and theological reconsideration of the church's responsibilities to the disabled community.

Hubach, Stephanie O. *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability*. Revised and updated. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020.

*When the church attempts to function without all its parts, the body of Christ becomes disabled. **Same Lake, Different Boat** is a transformational work designed to renew our minds to think biblically about disability in order that our lives, our relationships, and our congregations might wholly reflect Christ.*

Newman, Barbara J. *Worship as One: Varied Abilities in the Body of Christ*. Edited by Victoria M. White. Los Angeles, CA: Amazon Pro Hub, 2022.

*Barbara J. Newman's final book is the only resource of its kind that gives leaders the tools to fully include persons with varied abilities into the life of their congregations, demonstrating God's call for community in 1 Corinthians 12.*

Peoples, Sandra. *Accessible Church: A Gospel-Centered Vision for Including People with Disabilities and Their Families*. Foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025.

*Accessible Church provides a theological and practical framework for Christian churches to build sustainable, welcoming ministries for people with disabilities and their families.*

## WEBSITES

Baylor University. "Baylor Center for Disability and Flourishing."  
<https://disability.research.baylor.edu>

*The Baylor Center for Disability and Flourishing invests in research, training, outreach, and clinical services that promote the flourishing of people with disabilities, their families, and communities.*

Erik Carter "Dimensions of Belonging"  
<https://disability.research.baylor.edu/focus-areas/belonging>.

*Erik Carter's "Dimensions of Belonging" framework provides a 10-part, actionable model for fostering deep inclusion of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in community life.*

Theology of Disability; Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability;  
<https://www.wheaton.edu/wheaton-center-for-faith-and-disability/disability-foundations/theology-of-disability/>

*"As one of Wheaton College's newest Centers, the Center for Faith and Disability reflects God's heart and purpose for people impacted by disability. The work of the Center involves reframing disability discourse through a biblical lens in a way that honors God and all those who bear His image."*