



The Heart of the Matter

Fashioning a Theological Community Inclusive of People with Disabilities

by Barbara A. Chaapel

- “I heard the woman say ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ as I sat in a puddle of milk on the floor of the grocery store in front of the celery.”
- “I’ve been in the candidacy process for 10 years and I still have to take four courses and pass ordination exams before I can even start looking for a call.”
- “I don’t want to tell them I have MS before they even meet me; people make assumptions that determine whether or not they want to try to establish a relationship.”
- “In sixth grade I was identified as a non-reader, and I always felt an inch away from being stupid.”
- “The only elevator in Speer Library was alarmed, and the alarm had to be turned off every time I used it. It was a big deal, so I just struggled up the stairs.”

These comments and many like them, woven through “Making Room at the Table,” PTS’s fall 2004 conference on theological education and people with disabilities, indicate the honesty, the pain, and the realism of the more than 50 people who attended. What they do not reveal is the hope, the humor, and the love for Christ’s ministry and the church that was palpable in the Cooper Conference Center that day in late October.

Students, faculty, staff, and alumni/ae from ten seminaries gathered to talk about issues that affect people with disabilities who want to become ministers, as they try to navigate their way through seminary, ordination, and finding a job. Most participants knew what they were talking about: they were themselves people with disabilities.

Kathy Black, professor of homiletics and liturgics at Claremont School of Theology and a United Methodist minister, gave the keynote speech via videotape on a large screen because of her own disability. “I was raised on a toxic waste dump in New Jersey,” she said. “Rather than growing peaches and apples, the land grew metal canisters of stored waste that seeped into the lake I swam in, making it into a toxic soup. It was named the worst toxic waste dump in the U.S.”

She contracted a dysfunction of her autonomic nervous system that resulted in what she calls “spells” when she cannot speak, open her eyes, move her muscles, or swallow. “My friends call it forced meditation,” she laughed. The spells come about twice a week, and flying and time changes exacerbate them, thus the video screen.

Called “a hidden disability,” Black’s condition was often unapparent to others. “I hid it, and tried to stay out of the public when the spells were coming on. I was embarrassed.” She never brought it up during her ordination trials and lived with it silently for more than 30 years.

During that time, she had a lot of time to think about what theology, the Bible, and God had to do with her life. What she discovered was that the first two were often part of the problem.

“The church tends to say we need to fix people with disabilities, as in ‘to bind up the brokenhearted.’ That’s what the church does well—to provide a space where the body can cure itself. We start prayer chains, send cards of concern, bring meals, provide transportation to hospitals.

“But binding up also means to tie down, as in to oppress and to limit. And the church does that, too. We ostracize people with disabilities. The purity codes in Leviticus make determinations about who is clean and who unclean, in order to keep the pure away from those who are impure. Historically, the church has singled out people who were deaf, mentally ill, or who have learning disabilities and excluded them from the ministry.”

Black critiqued the New Testament, too, citing its equation of faith with health (“Your faith has made you whole”) and sin as a cause of disability.

“We still have our own purity codes, our ugly codes, in church and seminary,” she challenged.

But Black added that the New Testament also speaks a positive word. “In Jesus’ day, illness was seen as a communal problem, not just a problem of the individual. When Jesus touched people who were impure, he freed them from isolation; he broke the purity codes that separated people from people.”

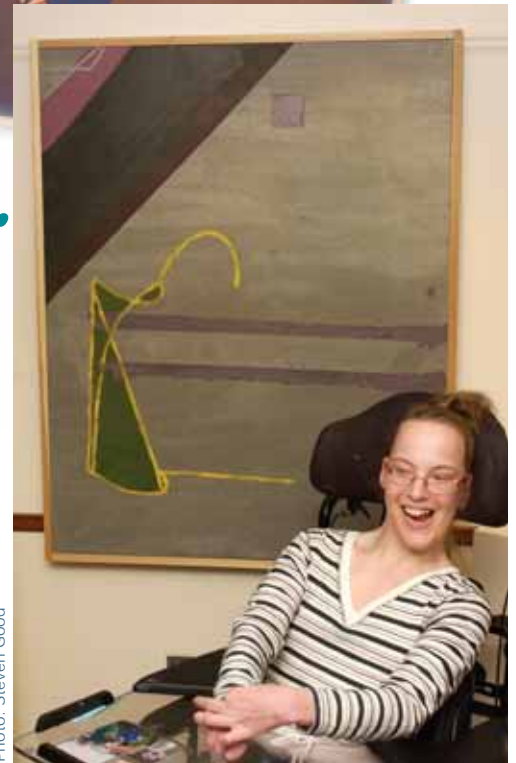


Photo: Steven Good

Annie from The Mathenev School’s Arts Access Program is proud of her painting “Wisdom,” part of the art exhibit in Erdman Hall. Above are other paintings by Mathenev School students.

Freeing people from isolation seemed to be what the conference was about, too. Clearly by bringing together people with disabilities. But less obviously, by bringing together the “abled” whose institutions are isolated by not knowing how to fashion an inclusive educational community.

All agree that is an enormous task. Bill Gaventa, director of community and congregational support at the Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities (and husband of PTS professor Beverly Gaventa), spoke on a panel on theological curriculum. “How do we infuse the curriculum with a new way of looking at people with disabilities?” he asked. He envisions seeing the enterprise as a crosscultural experience, “maybe sending the whole student body to visit a development center like Boggs, like we send students to a foreign mission field.”

Or systematically adding books on disability to seminary libraries, and paying more attention to the words of hymns and prayers in worship services that can unwittingly exclude, like “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

Or developing modules about disability in every course, not just typically the courses on pastoral care. “Why not teach about what vocation means for a person with disability in a course on the theology of vocation,” Gaventa proposed. “We need to weave issues of disability through the life of a seminary.”

Jennifer Lord, a PTS graduate who taught at Lancaster Theological Seminary and now at Columbia, said that seminaries often have “an active process of disregard” for students with disabilities. “I hope we will not hide behind flat budgets to prevent the changes that need to happen. We need faculty who can expand their pedagogical skills to include the different ways people learn, just as they learned to work with ecumenical diversity.”

Such a curriculum would thrill Warren McNeill, a 46-year-old Presbyterian elder who left a business career to follow God’s call and has been a ministerial candidate for 10 years and counting. McNeill, who found the conference announcement while surfing the PTS web site, calls himself “more than dyslexic.” He has trouble reading, gathering information, integrating it, and putting it in sequential order. That means he finds it hard to follow directions, and has to read things many times in order to comprehend them.

“I have to see and hear at the same time in order to retain information. My language problem could probably have been overcome if my teachers had discovered it when I was in third or fourth grade,” he said. “But it wasn’t until a professor at Eastern Baptist Seminary said I was an entirely different person when I spoke in class than when I took written exams that we discovered my disability. From then on he gave me oral exams and I passed the class.”

Wayne Meisel, PTS Class of 1998 and president of the Bonner Foundation in Princeton, spoke on a panel about challenges and progress for students with disabilities at Princeton Seminary. Dyslexic and suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Meisel told the group “there is something wonderful about being with people who get it!” He entered Princeton Seminary 15 years after college, but it was clear to him that he wouldn’t be ordained: “Greek and Hebrew were off limits! I took six years of Latin and at the end, I knew only one word, *canus*, “dog.”

When he applied to PTS, he was told, “We make exceptions for exceptional people.” At first flattered, he soon realized that was not a policy, just a “way of playing favorites.” The Seminary did give him a tutor for Old Testament, which “was a huge help.” Less helpful were the 90 audio-cassettes of Calvin’s *Institutes* from Recording for the Blind, which did not work in his tape deck. “Then I realized that not too many blind people were driving,” he laughed.

Ginsburg School Sestina

Fog smears this November morning.
I tramp toward the orange school bus
idling in the driveway. A woman
in a tight blouse shifts in the driver’s seat. Mom hands
me my brown-bagged lunch, kisses my cheek.
The driver stretches a hairy arm to slam the door.

I slide into a seat near the door.
Ripples crease the driver’s neck. This morning
a girl whimpers, hugs a teddy bear to her cheek.
A boy murmurs the Dukes of Hazard theme. The bus
wreaks of diapers and sweat. The driver’s hands
turn on the radio, then grip the wheel. The woman

plays Billy Joel and Boy George. The woman
sags in her seat. I rub my eyes. The door
opens for crutches, canes, for spastic legs & hands.
Finally, Ginsburg sparkles big & brown in morning.
My legs quiver. I nearly slip stepping off the bus.
Drizzle. Exhaust. Dampness presses my cheeks.

Therapy right away. The receptionist checks
her clipboard and smiles. Jeannie’s the only woman
at Ginsburg with orange hair. Therapy smells like the bus:
Ammonia and sweat. White everywhere. Gold door-
knobs gleam, turn, then click. Chris grins: “Good Morning.”
Her Hawaiian-brown face smiles. Her therapist hands

pull my legs, squeeze my knees. Hard hands.
My back aches. Now my side. My cheek
rubs cold linoleum. Each schoolday morning
Chris wrings my legs. During this work, women
murmur. Phones purr. My green star-sticker gleams on a door-
chart. But the prize dims on yellow paper. All day til the bus.

Classmates bend low and rigid over round tables, busy
practicing cursive. Mrs. Jones gives me a pencil, hands
over a sheet of r’s. Recess next. We march outdoors
to swing and slide and play on chalked
blacktop. I watch the fat woman
on duty who never smiles in the morning.

Noon comes. Many hands make paper sacks crackle.
Lunches open like doors.
Ginsburg roasts big and brown as morning ends. The afternoon bus-
driver-woman says she smokes. I smell only sweat & diapers.
Tears tickle my cheeks.

Jeremy Henry Funk
Spring 1995, Revised, Summer 1999

A sestina is a poem of six-line stanzas and one concluding triplet, in which the same six words end the lines, in a cycling pattern.

He wants the Seminary to create a culture of understanding; “Disability is not just about elevators and ramps,” he said. “It’s important for the Seminary to remember the cost of discrimination against disabled people. We are losing leaders. I did my work for 20 years outside the church; how different if I could have done it inside.”

Ginny Thornburgh, PTS trustee and vice president and director of the Religion and Disability Program of the National Organization on Disability (NOD), agrees. “We’re proud that PTS’s Center of Continuing Education has offered a program on disability every year since 1996, but we’re not in the Promised Land yet,” she said. “Along with the Association of Theological Schools, we at Princeton want to explore the whole range of theological and educational issues we need to address to help our seminary become more welcoming, and to better serve and serve *with* people with disabilities and their families.” According to the NOD, there are 54 million men, women, and children in America with disabilities.

Thornburgh’s organization works with congregations, national faith groups, and seminaries to identify and remove barriers of architecture, communication, and attitude that prevent people with disabilities from full and active religious participation. She is grateful that Princeton’s new president, Iain Torrance, is committed to full inclusion of people with disabilities in the Princeton community. “He worked on these issues at Aberdeen,” Thornburgh said, “and understands that the physical barriers were the least of the obstacles in education for people with disabilities, and that we have to think more than spatially.”

Another major issue the conference addressed was vocation. Robin Lostetter, associate pastor of Point Pleasant Presbyterian Church in New Jersey, describes herself as having “mobility issues,” and told of a time that someone said to her “What have we here, a little cripple?” “I hauled off and kicked him in the shins,” she said. “That’s pretty much been my style. I got tired of people saying things like: ‘Oh, we had another handicap here this morning.’”

“I learned while I was studying at Rochester Divinity School that people just didn’t get it, so I became an educator for them. I had a friend at Princeton, and I tried to help her see the problems on the Princeton campus. Like offering people a class in Stuart Hall via a closed circuit TV but not realizing they couldn’t get up the stairs to the building.” (She had kudos, though, for Erdman Hall’s accessible entranceway and bathrooms.)

Lostetter was not so direct, though, when it came to looking for a call. “I didn’t tell the search committee I was disabled during the phone interview,” she explained, “and I didn’t list my disability on my PIF [job dossier]. You need to let people get to know you first, so they won’t shut the door immediately.”

Theo Cornish, a 1995 PTS graduate now working in the Theological Book Agency, appreciated her advice. He began looking for a call to ministry in January, and hopes to work at a church or on a presbytery staff in the area of redevelopment or youth ministry. He has MS, but doesn’t want to say that right up front.

“I want them to get to know me first, to establish a relationship, and then I’ll tell them that I’m a person dealing with MS. I may not be able to do some things, because my energy level gets low. But God uses everything and everyone, and I believe there is a place I will be called to. I’m waiting to see what it is, and I’ll be ready.”

Jeremy Funk graduated from Princeton in 2004 and is back home in Wheaton, Illinois, looking for a call. He has cerebral palsy, low vision, and some hearing loss. “I was educating others as soon as I got to Princeton,” he says. “I needed note-takers, and longer times on tests. I needed to schedule a mobility instructor every week, so PTS hired a student friend to help me. I learned to describe to people that getting from Point A to Point B was different than getting from Point B to Point A.

“Friendship is so important. There are classmates who wanted to help, yet some created too much of a dependency. I needed interdependence. Friendship is solidarity more than helping.”

One way Funk expresses his feelings is through poetry. He has an M.A. in English and loves to write. He will teach freshman writing this fall at Wheaton College while he looks for a call in ministry.

A member of the Mennonite Church, he is considering doing CPE and becoming a chaplain. Another possibility is working through Young Life’s Capernaum Project, which ministers to young people with disabilities. “I would love to be a sort of spiritual companion to kids,” he said. “If I could get a kid through high school having a better time than I had, that would really use my gifts and experience.”

The gifts of kids with disabilities were patently clear to attendees at “Making Room at the Table.” Beautiful art created by the students at the Matheny School in Peapack, New Jersey, hung in the Erdman Gallery during the conference. The school’s art access program brings severely disabled children and adults together with professional artists, who help them to create paintings, dance, and music that express their feelings.

“They tell us through art what they feel, and that their humanity is alive and well,” Matheny staffer Daniel Vallejo said when PTS welcomed him and five of his students to a reception at Erdman Gallery. “We don’t see art as therapy, but as a means to help our students express their souls.

“It’s inspiring when someone who can’t move can express his or her feelings in paint or wheelchair dance. All of our students make us humble with their passion and persistence. They are all accomplished artists.”

Sitting in her wheelchair, her grin dwarfing her twisted body, Annie slowly described one of her paintings. “I like it because I like the color green,” she said. “It’s called ‘Wisdom,’ from the Bible.”

Wisdom—a gift that people with disabilities can certainly give theological education and the church. ■

“Making Room at the Table” was cosponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, Auburn Theological Seminary, Moravian Theological Seminary, The Religion and Disability Program of the National Organization on Disability, The Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, and the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council, which provided generous funding.