

Working Paper

Welcoming People with Disabilities to Communion and Church Membership

- The sacrament belongs to Christ, and elders of the local church Session have the privilege and responsibility to determine, to the best of their ability, whether the individual desiring to partake of the Lord's Supper possesses a "true interest in Christ" and "desires to be found in Christ" (WLC 172).
- Saving faith is not a function of intellect; it is a gift of God's grace, the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God's elect (WCF 14.1). When God bestows the grace of faith, he also provides the capacity to receive it. The Holy Spirit works regeneration when, where, and how he pleases (WCF 10.3).
- In answering the disciples' question about who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus called a little child and admonished the disciples, "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4 ESV). Although the disciples were concerned with what one could do for God, Jesus emphasized that humble, childlike faith is foremost in the kingdom of heaven. Such a faith does not require the ability to articulate complex theology or provide a compelling verbal testimony.
- In Scripture, expressions of saving faith vary: "I believe; help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24); "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42); "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Saving faith differs in degrees, weak or strong, and may be often and many ways assailed. The principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for salvation (WCF 14.2-3).
- Persons with intellectual disabilities, such as those with Down syndrome, and other developmental disabilities, such as autism or cerebral palsy, may not be able to verbally express a testimony of saving faith in their lives in ways to which elders are accustomed. However, people can communicate through a variety of ways besides oral language. Elders should avoid the error of allowing unfamiliarity to be an obstacle to the person's participation.
- The requirements for participation in the Lord's Supper are the same for all people—regardless of ability or disability. The accommodation elders need to make is in how they communicate with the person with a disability. Elders must converse with the person on the level or in the manner in which he or she is able to communicate effectively. Often a family member or caregiver can help facilitate conversation, similar to the way a translator helps convey a message when a person speaks a different language.
- The two-fold task that elders face is 1) knowing the individual has understood the Gospel, and 2) discerning the personal confession of faith in Christ. Prudent discernment can be gained by focusing on the transformed life as sure evidence of the Gospel. This may be enhanced by the insights of those who spend time with the person regularly, including family members, special needs ministry leaders, and teachers.
- Despite any appearance to the contrary, persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not perpetual children. They are simply persons whose minds have different capacities than those of persons without disabilities. Consequently, elders should respond with sincerity and respect to anyone who expresses a desire to participate in the life and worship of the communion of the saints.

- Persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities are often concrete learners. Rather than learning through abstract thought, they learn through what they can see, touch, and taste. The sacraments are a means of grace “wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers” (WSC 92). In other words, sacraments communicate Christ in a way that people with disabilities can understand.
- Some may object: “This person only wants to take the Lord’s Supper because everyone else is doing it.” Without careful investigation, such a conclusion wrongly judges the motives of the person with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, this mindset undermines one of the key elements of the sacraments: they are given to celebrate the communion of the saints and “put a visible difference between those that belong to the church, and the rest of the world” (WCF 27.1).
- The pastoral care for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities provides the Session an opportunity to demonstrate the compassion of Christ, whom they represent to the congregation. In the Parable of the Great Banquet, Jesus illustrates the nature of God through the story of a man who sent his servants to “go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame ... compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.” (Luke 14:21, 23 ESV).
- In considering the request of a person with disabilities to participate in the Lord’s Supper, the elders should err on the side of grace and generosity. In a person with these disabilities, the request itself can be evidence that the Holy Spirit has given this person saving faith. Elders should ask the question, “Would Jesus turn away one who requests to participate in the salvation feast but whose disability makes him/her seem less qualified than others who are invited to participate?”

Anecdotes:

- In one PCA congregation, an adult man with Down syndrome had a favorite question he would often ask: “Do you love Jesus?” His favorite declaration was, “Jesus is coming again!” Though he was unable to articulate a full understanding of man’s sin and Christ’s atoning death on the Cross, he proclaimed the basic message of the Lord’s Supper: man’s need for and love of Christ, as well as an eager expectation of Christ’s return.
- When Stephanie Hubach’s son Tim (who has Down’s syndrome) asked to take communion at age 14, she and her husband kept putting it off—not because he wasn’t ready, but because they were too busy to meet with the elders. One Sunday, as the bread and cup were passed, Tim wept through the service because he so desperately wanted to partake of the elements. At dinner that afternoon, Tim said, “I love Jesus just like you and Dad do.” Two weeks later, they met with the elders, and Tim started participating in the Lord’s Supper the next Sunday. Stephanie’s conscience was stricken as she asked herself, “When was the last time I wept because I couldn’t partake?”

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Ongoing discussions are being facilitated by MNA Special Needs Ministries. Please contact Stephanie Hubach at shubach@pcanet.org for further information. www.equalconcern.org