

A multisensory, embodied approach to worship works well for many people with disabilities—and for everyone else, too.

# God's whole body and ours

interview by Melissa Florer-Bixler

**L**AST YEAR the Disability Ministry Network published *Worship for the Whole Body*, an online resource produced as part of a research and learning project DMN conducted on multisensory worship. That project was led by **Bill Gaventa**, founder and director emeritus of the Institute on Theology and Disability, and **Jason Le Shana**, program director at the Baylor Collaborative on Faith and Disability.

## Tell me about the seeds of this project. How did it come into being?

Bill Gaventa: I was involved with the Disability Ministry Network, and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship invited us to apply for a grant. First we invited our member organizations to talk about issues in inclusive worship. In those conversations, an important question arose: In what ways do people who can't read deepen their worship experiences, and how can the church support them?

Our proposal was built around this question, and that developed into this resource for multisensory worship.

We were also curious about how existing multisensory worship experiences were developed for disability inclusion, in either separate or integrated settings, and how this impacted the culture of worship for the whole church. We

invited those who wanted to participate in the grant project to gather small groups of people to describe what people have done in worship. The 17 organizations that participated gathered more than 500 ideas from those conversations.

## Tell me about your theology of worship.

BG: Our theologies of worship are diverse and can include praise, learning, and community celebration. For me, worship means gathering as people of God to remember that we are in the story of God's creation and Jesus' coming, where we are called to the kingdom of God and to be disciples. That requires the whole body of Christ, both our individual bodies and the body of the church.

So much of our scripture attests to these bodies worshipping. The psalmist invites us to taste God's goodness. Paul reminds us that the important parts of the body are those often deemed less important.

Jason Le Shana: Paul is quite critical of the church excluding people from worship because of social status. For example, in 1 Corinthians we learn that some church members were gorging themselves on the communion feast while others went hungry. Designing worship in a

Researchers Bill Gaventa (left) and Jason Le Shana (right)



way that works for everyone has been an issue since the early church.

Some questions we might ask include: How can we be mindful of worship that works for everyone? Is there anyone who, in the normal course of worship, is excluded because worship was not designed with them in mind? Who is missing? Who, because of the barriers we construct, cannot be a part of this whole body? To me, these considerations are central to a holistic theology of worship.

BG: My first ministry job was as a chaplain at a large institution for people with disabilities. It helped me realize the extent to which the Christian tradition I grew up in equated reason with understanding the written word—rather than what you might understand from a moving, dancing, or sung word. I learned that pastoring in that context meant helping people come and feel celebrated. My purpose was to create worship of celebration and belonging with these institutionalized people who had been told they weren't worthy of anything.

**I noticed that you didn't frame this as a resource for accessible worship or for the inclusion specifically of people with disabilities. Can you tell me about that decision?**

JLS: As a group of us from the Disability Ministry Network were in discussions about the material we collected, someone suggested we call the resource *Worship for the Whole Body*. We liked the double meaning, worship both for everyone in the church and for every part of our bodily experience.

Sometimes when we talk to pastors and other faith leaders about disabilities, they wonder if we are asking them to create a special service or ministry. Although those approaches are not necessarily bad, we find that both are incomplete. We think this guide offers an example of a better starting place: We are embodied creatures, and we all need embodied worship in community. So, the multisensory worship ideas in this guide are helpful for creating disability-friendly worship environments, but it turns out that these practices tend to be helpful for those without disabilities as well.

BG: I know of a Catholic church where a man with a brain injury came up to stand right next to the altar before communion. Some people found that upsetting. But he just wanted to be first in line, because communion was so important to him. It was as easy as giving him a chair in the front row.

# In worship, we are invited to show up as fully human.

**I imagine that as this resource goes out into the world, some churches may be challenged by ideas like prayer while passing a beach ball, the use of props in a sermon, or a Bible reading as puppet show. How do you explain the significance of these practices to those who believe worship should be somber and traditional?**

JLS: Embodiment is *always* at the core of Christian worship. In communion, we eat and drink. Our bodies interact with water during baptism. Worship itself is corporate, interacting with other humans. And those common things of life and common interactions are transformed as we worship. We aren't spirits floating around—we're enfleshed human beings.

We also stress that the resource is an invitation. On a personal level, as I helped put together the resource, I realized that some of the ideas resonated deeply with my background and experience. Others intrigued me, and I thought, "I'd never thought of this, and it could be really interesting to try." Others wouldn't work in my context. I'd encourage a mind-set that is curious, respectful, and grounded in the tradition that one is in. And we hope this resource sparks imagination and creativity in response to God.

**What final encouragements would you like to share with a church leader who is considering their church's next steps in disability inclusion?**

JLS: I'll frame this by noting that in our research at Baylor University, we're finding that, in general, US pastors desire to serve faithfully alongside those with disabilities in their churches. We also find a lot of confusion, uncertainty, and overwhelm. There are many barriers to change. Instead of beginning with a deficit, I'd encourage pastors to start by

identifying one thing they are already doing to incorporate embodied experiences into worship. Celebrate that!

Next, I'd encourage conversations with people with disabilities and their family members in a pastor's own congregation. Beginning with the real people in our midst is always better than hypotheticals.

And pastors should feel they have permission to reflect and revise as they go. Not everything fits well in every context, and that's OK. Instead of having to get it right on the first try, foster a mind-set of creativity and curiosity. Worship is not a performance but a way of engaging with God together.

BG: I look back on the services where something unplanned occurred but, on the spot, the pastor managed to make it into a holy moment for the congregation. I'm reminded of the hidden curricula in every worship service that tells us how we ought to behave. We have to ask, Did that come from God, or is it just tradition? I think learning how to work with the unexpected is important in worship. We all yearn to be accepted just as we are, yet in certain situations we often make ourselves into people we are not.

JLS: There's a phrase from the communion liturgy I used when I was in campus ministry: "Come not because you must but because you may." In worship, we are invited to show up fully human, in all the different ways we show up as human. We hope this resource can provide a spark of imagination and encouragement for that journey. □

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MELISSA FLORER-BIXLER is a doctoral student in homiletics at Duke Divinity School and author of *How to Have an Enemy*.