



# Community Conversations on Faith and Disability: Identifying New Practices, Postures, and Partners for Congregations

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Published online: 5 May 2017  
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**Abstract** For many people with disabilities and their families, involvement in a congregation provides an important source of spiritual connections, community, and support. Yet congregations often express uncertainty about how to support meaningful participation for these members of their faith community. We used “community conversations” as a methodology for identifying potential pathways through which congregations—individually and collectively—might foster inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities and their families. We analyzed the nearly 1000 ideas generated by 175 participants representing an array of local congregations within two distinct counties in Tennessee. Their recommendations fell within 23 categories spanning five themes: disability-specific efforts, internal activities, external activities, influencers, and resources. Attendees’ impressions of their own congregation’s actions and attitudes related to including people with disabilities were quite mixed. However, they strongly affirmed this approach to community dialogue and considered it to be fruitful. We offer recommendations for future research at the intersection of faith and disability and suggest ways in which congregations might move forward in this aspect of their ministry.

**Keywords** Disabilities · Inclusion · Religion · Spirituality

Congregations have long strived to serve the communities gathering both within and beyond the boundaries of their buildings. This double posture of inward and outward attention reflects decussate desires. On the one hand, congregations actively create contexts in which their members can come together in community for worship, learning, discipleship, support, and fellowship. At the same time, they often invest substantially in meeting pressing needs in the communities that surround their congregation. People with disabilities and their families comprise core members of both communities.

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Nearly one in five Americans (18.7%) identifies as having a disability (Brault 2012). Although disability can be defined in myriad ways, approximately 41.5 million people identify as having disabilities related to the physical domain (e.g., upper or lower body limitations), 16.8 million related to the mental domain (e.g., autism, intellectual disability, dementia, or developmental disabilities), and 15.7 million related to the communication domain (e.g., visual, hearing, or speech impairments). Almost two fifths (38.5%) of people with disabilities report an impact in more than one of these domains. Moreover, nearly one in three families (30.9%) has at least one relative with a disability (Wong 2005). Such metrics confirm that the communities congregations are committed to serving include substantial numbers of people with disabilities and their families.

Research at this intersection of faith and disability is still relatively new. However, findings from available studies coalesce around several key points. First, religious faith holds an important place in the lives of many people with disabilities and their families. Several qualitative studies have highlighted the salience of spirituality and congregational involvement for people with a range of disabilities (e.g., Lifshitz et al. 2009; Liu et al. 2014; Turner et al. 2004). Moreover, quantitative studies indicate an almost identical percentage of Americans with and without disabilities consider their faith to be an important aspect of their lives (e.g., National Organization on Disability 2004). For parents and caregivers of children with disabilities, the place of faith can also be prominent and provide an important source of support (e.g., Boehm et al. 2015; Poston and Turnbull 2004; Speraw 2006).

Second, involvement in congregational activities can be much more limited for people with disabilities than for people without disabilities. For example, a national survey of 1789 people with and without disabilities found that 45% of respondents who identified as having a severe disability reported attending a place of worship at least monthly compared to 57% of respondents without disabilities (Kessler Foundation 2010). In their study of 12,000 individuals with intellectual disability receiving publically funded services, Carter et al. (2015) found that more than half of the adults had not attended any type of religious service in the prior month. Barriers of awareness, attitude, architecture, and access have all emerged as factors that may hinder desired involvement (Carter 2007; Minton and Dodder 2003; Schultz 2012).

Third, the reception people with disabilities and their families receive within a faith community can be uneven. Studies exploring the congregational experiences of people with disabilities and their families illustrate both extravagant welcome and deep wounding (e.g., Jacober 2010; Richardson and Stoneman 2015). In their study of 433 parents of young people with disabilities, Carter et al. (2016c) found that 70% agreed they were very satisfied with how welcoming others at their congregation are of people with intellectual disability or autism; the rest disagreed. Likewise, Melinda Ault et al. (2013) reported that nearly one third (32%) of parents in their study indicated they had changed congregations because their son or daughter with an intellectual and developmental disability was not welcomed or included.

Fourth, congregations can be inconsistent in the supports and opportunities they offer to people with disabilities and their families. Carter et al. (2016c) further found that less than one fifth of parents indicated the following supports were available in their congregation: support for their child with a disability during religious education programs, respite care, congregation-wide disability awareness efforts, a support group for parents, or transportation to congregational activities. Melinda Ault et al. (2013) reported that more than half (55.6%) of parents had kept their children with disabilities from participating in a religious activity because support was not provided.

How might congregations—individually and in collaboration with others—move in ways that reflect a commitment to being places of welcome and belonging for people with disabilities and their families (Carter 2016)? A small but growing collection of studies has

highlighted potential pathways. Most of this research has used surveys or interviews to (a) examine the perspectives of a particular stakeholder group or (b) explore selected dimensions of congregational life (e.g., religious education, youth ministry, building accessibility). For example, participants have included parents (Ault et al. 2013; Carter et al. 2016a, c; Howell and Pierson 2010; Jacober 2010; O'Hanlon 2013), individuals with disabilities (Liu et al. 2014; Shogren and Rye 2005), and clergy (LaRocque and Eigenbrood 2005; Patka and McDonald 2015). Missing from the research literature is work that integrates the perspectives of multiple stakeholders across all dimensions of faith community life.

Research in the field of pastoral psychology is marked both by its methodological diversity and its interdisciplinary approaches (Hood and Belzen 2013; VandeCreek et al. 2008). The present study applied community conversations as a novel methodological approach to understanding how congregations might move in relation to supporting people with disabilities and their families. A “community conversation” is a structured approach for engaging diverse stakeholders in generating potential solutions to a pressing issue facing a particular community (Carter et al. 2016b). Drawing upon the World Café model (Brown and Isaacs 2005), each two-hour event integrates a series of small- and large-group conversations in which the best ideas of a cross-section of community stakeholders are invited, shared, and catalogued. Extensive notes are taken to capture the breadth of solutions generated by attendees across the four rounds of discussion (see Method section below). Emerging from the fields of special education and disability studies, community conversations have been used to identify ways in which schools might enhance educational services, communities expand integrated employment, and families advocate for inclusive opportunities (e.g., Carter et al. 2012; Dutta et al. 2016; Trainor et al. 2012). In contrast with quantitative survey studies that elicit feedback on a predetermined list of possible actions, community conversations encourage new ideas to emerge and evolve through iterative conversations. And unlike qualitative interviews done individually, community conversations capitalize on the generativity that comes when multiple stakeholders dialogue with one another (Carter and Bumble *in press*; Trainor *in press*). In other words, this interpretivistic design strives to engage a large and diverse set of stakeholders in an iterative process of problem-solving aimed at an issue of pressing importance to all participants.

This study focused on fostering inclusion and belonging among people with disabilities and their families in faith communities. We hosted community conversation events in two diverse counties in Tennessee. We sought to answer three research questions. First, what strategies and themes emerge when communities intentionally dialogue about expanding inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities? Second, how do attendees view the commitment of their own congregations to support the participation of this segment of their community? Third, how do they view these community conversation events?

## Method

### Setting

The community conversation events took place in two locales in the southeastern state of Tennessee in the United States. The first was held in an urban county of approximately 650,000 residents. According to the most recently available American Community Survey data, 62.0% of residents were White, 27.7% were Black or African American, 3.2% were Asian, 0.3% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.1% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 4.4% were another race and

2.4% were multi-racial; and 9.8% were Hispanic or Latino (of any race). About one third (36.5%) had a bachelor's degree or higher, the unemployment rate was 8.2%, and median household income was \$47,434. Prior 2010 estimates indicated there were 782 congregations in the county. The second was held in a suburban county of nearly 200,000 residents—89.8% were White, 4.2% were Black or African American, 3.3% were Asian, 0.1% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.0% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 0.9% were another race and 1.7% were multi-racial; and 4.6% were Hispanic or Latino (of any race). Most (57.1%) had a bachelor's degree or higher, the unemployment rate was 4.9%, and median household earnings were \$91,743. Estimates in 2010 indicated there were 200 congregations in the county. According to the U.S. Religious Landscape Study (2014), the religious composition of the state as a whole was 81% Christian faiths (vs. 71% nationally), 3% non-Christian faiths (vs. 6% nationally), and 14% unaffiliated (vs. 23% nationally).

## Participants

A total of 175 faith community members attended the two community conversation events—98 in the urban community and 77 in the suburban community. Attendees identified themselves as a family member of a person with a disability (29.1%), disability service provider (18.3%), person with a disability ( $n = 17$ ; 9.7%), clergy (9.1%), disability ministry volunteer (8.0%), religious educator (8.0%), other congregational staff (6.9%), faith-based community group member (5.7%), residential provider (1.7%), worship leader (1.7%), or some other role (23.4%; e.g., students, educators, medical service providers, advocates). (Percentages exceed 100% because multiple roles could be selected; in addition, some attendees did not identify their role during registration.) Among those identifying their religious affiliations on an anonymous end-of-event survey, 20.2% were Presbyterian, 16.9% were Baptist/Southern Baptist, 15.3% were Methodist, 9.7% were non-denominational 7.3% were Catholic; 6.5% were Christian, 6.5% were Church of Christ, 6.5% were Episcopal, 3.2% were Unitarian, 2.4% were Disciples of Christ, 2.4% were Jewish, 1.6% were Pentecostal 0.8% were Lutheran, 0.8% were Humanist, and 0.8% were Atheist. (Percentages exceed 100% because multiple affiliations could be selected.)

## Community conversations

As researchers, our role in this study involved identifying locales for the events, organizing the planning team, extending invitations broadly throughout each community, facilitating each event, and analyzing all data collected through the events.

**Planning the events** Our planning committee was comprised of one faculty member, two university center staff, and eight graduate students studying diverse disciplines related to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The role of this committee was to plan the logistics of each event (e.g., date, location, refreshments), design recruitment materials, reach out to local networks and organizations to extend invitations, and assist with event arrangements. Planning began approximately two months prior to each conversation, both of which took place in the spring.

**Inviting the community** An essential aspect of the community conversation approach involves gathering a cross-section of diverse stakeholders who can speak to the issue from different vantage points and experiences (Swedeen et al. 2011). Therefore, we identified avenues for distributing invitations locally to individuals who could provide insights from

both within congregations (e.g., clergy, worship leaders, religious educators, disability ministry leaders, other congregational staff) and beyond them (e.g., disability service providers, residential providers, faith-based organizations, students preparing for professional roles in the field of disability). We also prioritized invitations to people with disabilities and their families to ensure their firsthand perspectives were prominent. We created print flyers and e-mail invitations to the event, asking congregations, community organizations, disability agencies, and other groups to share the event announcements through their social media, websites, listservs, and other communications. We used a free online event management system to register attendees, identify the stakeholder groups with which they identified, and determine any needed accommodations. Although we established an initial goal of between 40 and 60 attendees per event, we prioritized diverse representation over total attendance.

**Conversation process** Each two-hour event was held in the fellowship hall of a large, local church on a weekday evening. We selected these two churches based on their physical accessibility, their central location within the county, and the availability of gathering space that was adequate in size and supportive of the conversation structure (e.g., small round tables, open space to move around, less formal decor). We strived to create an atmosphere conducive to conversation by decorating the tables and providing light refreshments.

We used an identical agenda and structure for both events. After attendees signed in, we asked them to sit at unassigned tables of about five to eight people, preferably with people they did not know. As they found a table and mingled with other attendees, we displayed on a large screen a series of rotating presentation slides comprised of disability demographic information and selected statistics related to congregational inclusion. We formally opened each event by providing a short overview (about 10 min) aimed at setting the context for the conversation. This presentation addressed the purpose of the gathering (i.e., to identify possible pathways through which congregations—individually and collectively throughout the area—could welcome and support people with disabilities and their families within and beyond their faith community), the ubiquity of congregations in the county, the prevalence of people with disabilities and their families locally, and the formal call within many religious traditions to be accessible places of welcome and support. Two young adults with disabilities—one physical and one intellectual—then shared brief (2–3 min each) personal stories of the place of faith in their lives and the extent to which their faith communities had been supportive. We concluded with an overview of the structure and guidelines for the conversation process (about 3–5 min). Specifically, we used an adaptation of the World Café conversation process (Brown and Isaacs 2005) to organize the evening. During this overview, we posed three questions that would guide the subsequent rounds of small-group discussion:

- Round 1: What could we do to include people with disabilities and their families well in the life of their faith community?
- Round 2: What could we do to come alongside people with disabilities and their families in other areas of their lives?
- Round 3: How might we support one another—and new congregations—in these areas?

In each question, “we” referred to event attendees and the larger local faith community. We also explained the roles of the table facilitators (e.g., to maintain a focus on ideas and possibilities rather than problems; to encourage everyone to share their perspectives, aloud or written on placemats; to write down every idea shared at the table) and discussed conversation etiquette.

The majority of the event was comprised of three rounds of concurrent small-group conversations and one large-group discussion (about 15–20 min each). Each of the first three rounds focused on a different question. After brief table introductions initiated by the table facilitators, attendees began sharing aloud their own ideas, drawing from their own experiences and perspectives on the issue. Others at their table reacted to, refined, and extended the ideas they heard. Table facilitators wrote down every idea raised at their table and encouraged attendees to write any additional ideas or notes on the paper placemats. Although we intended the questions to be open-ended and placed no parameters on the types of answers attendees provide, we did ask them to focus on solutions and avoid dwelling on barriers. After the first and second rounds of discussion, everyone except the table facilitators shifted to a new table with a different group of 5–8 attendees. This mixing of attendees was designed to ensure attendees were hearing from a range of other stakeholders in their community and to generate a richer and more diverse dialogue.

The hour of sequenced small-group discussions was followed by a whole-group discussion during which each table facilitator was asked to share the most promising or exciting ideas from any of the three prior rounds. In addition, attendees could share additional ideas not mentioned by the table facilitators. We typed and projected each response on a large screen seen by the entire group. To conclude the event, we thanked everyone for their contributions and invited them to complete a brief anonymous survey. Many attendees remained afterwards to converse and network with others.

## Data sources and analyses

We analyzed conversation notes and event surveys to answer our research questions.

**Conversation notes** We developed a comprehensive list of all of the ideas generated throughout the evening by combining notes taken by table facilitators during the three small-group discussion rounds and notes on the whole-group discussion. We had identified in advance table facilitators who had served in this role at prior community conversation events on other topics or who had served on the planning or research team. Each table facilitator received an overview of their role, a written list of facilitation guidelines (Swedeen et al. 2011), and materials on which to record notes for each round. We also emphasized the importance of capturing the breadth of ideas shared and of including sufficient detail for subsequent analyses.

We received a total of 24 sets of notes—13 from the urban event and 11 from the suburban event—and labeled each idea by conversation round and table. In addition, we incorporated the ideas typed up during the whole-group discussion at both events. Collectively, these data sources yielded 984 individual ideas available for analysis, defined as each discrete action recommended by an attendee. When a written note included more than one distinct action, we split it into two ideas. All ideas were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

Three members of the research team carried out all coding, including one graduate student, one staff member, and one faculty member. The team members had different religious backgrounds and expertise in diverse disciplines (e.g., special education, occupational therapy, youth ministry). We adopted this team-based approach to help attenuate biased or idiosyncratic interpretations of the data. We used constant comparative techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to categorize all of the ideas, and we adopted a consensus approach to their coding. Our initial proposed coding framework focused on broadly categorizing each idea based on the particular aspect of faith community life it related to—whether its emphasis was on actions within or beyond the congregation, the extent to which the idea focused primarily on integrated or specialized

experiences, and the underlying barriers each idea addressed. Three team members independently coded all of the data from the first (urban) conversation, and we then met to compare and discuss our codes. Finding that our initial framework did not fully fit the available data or produce an organizational structure that we felt would be interpretable to and practical for congregations, we substantially revised the framework. Our final coding framework—which was refined throughout the subsequent coding process—included 23 different categories reflecting distinct action areas. These categories were subsumed under five broad themes reflecting different domains of faith community life (see Table 1 for definitions of these themes and categories).

All three team members independently recoded the urban event and then coded the suburban event using this revised framework. We then compared all three sets of coding to identify areas of agreement, discuss any discrepancies, and identify any needed revisions to the overall framework or to category and theme definitions. Because some ideas could be categorized in multiple ways, we determined that at least two team members would have to recommend the same category for that coding to be adopted. A fourth team member—who attended both events but did not carry out the coding—participated in this stage of the process to give an additional perspective on our coding and provide peer auditing. Embedding this debriefing into the coding process provided additional checks of our assumptions and conclusions.

Our coding process allowed us to examine the frequency with which each category of solution and overarching theme was raised across events. Although we emphasize that overall frequency counts do not necessarily correspond with the priority attendees attributed to an idea or how promising they considered it to be, they do provide insight into how widely ideas were shared within and across events (see Table 2).

**End-of-event survey** At the end of each event, we invited attendees to complete an anonymous, 19-item questionnaire before leaving the venue. Five items addressed their views on the community conversation event, two items focused on their impressions of city-wide opportunities, and twelve items solicited their perceptions of their own faith community in relation to the involvement of people with disabilities (see Table 3 for items). Attendees rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement using a 4-point Likert-type scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*. We included an option to mark “unsure” in lieu of providing a rating. Attendees indicated which of eleven roles described them (e.g., clergy, person with a disability, religious educator) and wrote in their denomination or faith tradition. We received completed surveys from 137 (78.3%) of attendees.

We used descriptive statistics (means, percentages) to summarize the responses of attendees. We examined survey findings separately by event and participant role to gauge whether ratings varied based on these two factors. Because survey patterns were similar across events, we collapse them for presentation purposes.

## Results

### Overarching themes and strategies generated

We coded 984 strategies across both community conversation events—557 from the urban county and 427 from the suburban county. Table 2 displays the number of times each category of action was mentioned within and across the events as well as the percentage of all ideas reflecting each of the 23 categories of action and the five overall themes.

**Table 1** Summary of Themes and Categories with Definitions

Theme/Category	Description
Disability-specific efforts	The actions and supports congregations undertake that are specifically designed for people with disabilities and families
Family supports	Resources, accommodations, and adaptations provided to parents and family members of individuals with disabilities to support participation in the faith community or meet other family needs.
Individual supports	Resources, accommodations, and adaptations provided to individuals with disabilities to support participation in various aspects of the faith community.
Awareness efforts	Efforts to raise broad understanding of issues related to disability in order to promote greater acceptance or familiarity within the congregation.
Training	Formal teaching provided to staff or volunteers to increase their skills or knowledge related to supporting people with disabilities and their families.
Intentional teaming	Efforts that involve identifying individual volunteers or intentional teams to be involved in making the congregation more supportive of people with disabilities and their families.
Focused reflection	Efforts to review different aspects of congregational life (and facilities) in relation to the participation of people with disabilities and their families.
Internal Activities	The collection of activities and events designed primarily for congregation members and aimed at their growth and community.
Fellowship	Gatherings or activities that focus primarily on social interactions and relationship building.
Serving and using gifts	Efforts to identify the spiritual and other gifts of people with disabilities and to create opportunities for them to serve others within or beyond the congregation.
Worship services	The regularly occurring (typically weekly) corporate gathering of the congregation with a primary focus on worship of God.
Religious education	The formal instruction related to beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and personal roles faith communities provide to children and adults at their place of worship, usually in conjunction with worship services.
Hospitality initiatives	The invitation and welcoming of new members or visitors to the faith community.
General congregational activities	General references to the activities, events, or programs facilitated within and by the faith community and its members.
Small-group discipleship	Customized gatherings of faith community members that facilitate a community within a community.
External Activities	Projects, missions, and relationships with organizations or individuals outside of the faith community.
Partnerships with other congregations	Activities, relationships, or collaborations that involve more than one faith community.
Communication and dissemination	The efforts a faith community makes to share information about its congregation and its programs with the general public.
Outreach missions and social service	Activities directed toward groups or individuals who may not be members of the faith community and designed to meet practical and other community needs.
Partnerships with community organizations	Activities, relationships, or collaborations involving disability organizations and other groups that are not faith based.
Influencers	The leadership, beliefs, and attitudes that shape the actions of the faith community.



**Table 1** (continued)

Theme/Category	Description
Congregational culture and climate	The attitudes and atmosphere that characterize the congregation.
Leadership, staffing, and governance	The individuals who are ordained, hired, or empowered to make key decisions for the congregation or lead particular activities.
Doctrine and theology	The collection of beliefs, principles, and teachings that define and guide the particular faith community.
Resources	Physical or tangible attributes of the faith community.
Transportation	The assistance that can be provided by the faith community or its members in regard to travel.
Facilities and buildings	The buildings and grounds—as well as the physical features within each—in which congregational activities take place.
Finances	The monetary assistance that can be provided by the faith community or its members.

**Table 2** Congregational recommendations organized by theme and category across events by frequency and percentage

Theme/Category	Urban conversation (%)	Suburban conversation (%)	Both conversations (%)
Disability-specific efforts	229 (41.1)	148 (34.7)	377 (38.3)
Family supports	53 (9.5)	56 (13.1)	109 (11.1)
Individual supports	39 (7.0)	29 (6.8)	68 (6.9)
Awareness efforts	41 (7.4)	18 (4.2)	59 (6.0)
Training	37 (6.6)	18 (4.2)	55 (5.6)
Intentional teaming	28 (5.0)	22 (5.2)	50 (5.1)
Focused reflection	31 (5.6)	5 (1.2)	36 (3.7)
Internal activities	121 (21.7)	108 (25.3)	229 (23.3)
Fellowship	37 (6.6)	39 (9.1)	76 (7.7)
Serving and using gifts	25 (4.5)	21 (4.9)	46 (4.4)
Worship services	13 (2.3)	16 (3.7)	29 (2.9)
Religious education	15 (2.7)	14 (3.3)	29 (2.9)
Hospitality initiatives	18 (3.2)	7 (1.6)	25 (2.5)
General congregational activities	10 (1.8)	9 (2.1)	19 (1.9)
Small-group discipleship	3 (0.5)	2 (0.5)	5 (0.5)
External activities	133 (23.9)	105 (24.6)	238 (24.2)
Partnerships with other congregations	48 (8.6)	36 (8.4)	84 (8.5)
Communication and dissemination	43 (7.7)	26 (6.1)	69 (7.0)
Outreach missions and social service	24 (4.3)	22 (5.2)	46 (4.7)
Partnerships with community organizations	18 (3.2)	21 (4.9)	39 (4.0)
Influencers	47 (8.4)	27 (6.3)	74 (7.5)
Congregational culture and climate	24 (4.3)	18 (4.2)	42 (4.3)
Governance, leadership, and staffing	20 (3.6)	9 (2.1)	29 (2.9)
Doctrine and theology	3 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	3 (0.3)
Resources	27 (4.8)	39 (9.1)	66 (6.7)
Transportation	11 (2.0)	25 (5.9)	36 (3.7)
Facilities and buildings	14 (2.5)	12 (2.8)	26 (2.6)
Finances	2 (0.4)	2 (0.5)	4 (0.4)
Total number of coded strategies	557 (100.0)	427 (100.0)	984 (100.0)

Frequency refers to the number of ideas falling under each theme and category. Percentage refers to the proportion of all ideas generated at the same event(s)

**Table 3** End-of-Event Survey Findings Across Community Conversations

Statement	Percentage responding (%)					<i>M (SD)</i>
	I don't know	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
<b>Views of the event</b>						
This conversation was a good investment of my time.	0.0	2.2	0.0	13.1	84.7	3.80 (0.54)
This event improved my views of the capacity of congregations to include people with disabilities and their families.	1.5	0.7	0.7	33.8	63.2	3.62 (0.55)
I identified specific steps my congregation or organization could take to support inclusion in faith communities.	4.4	2.2	0.7	39.0	53.7	3.51 (0.64)
I identified new steps I personally plan to take to support inclusion in faith communities.	5.1	1.5	2.2	37.5	53.7	3.51 (0.63)
I learned about ideas or resources in my city that I previously did not know about.	1.5	2.2	8.1	50.0	38.2	3.26 (0.70)
<b>Views of city-wide opportunities</b>						
Congregations across our city are welcoming places for people with disabilities and their families.	27.0	2.9	29.2	35.8	5.1	2.59 (0.68)
Strong partnerships between congregations and disability organization exist in our city.	27.0	6.6	37.5	24.3	4.4	2.36 (0.74)
<b>Views of your faith community</b>						
We truly see our community as incomplete without the presence of people with disabilities and their families.	18.0	2.3	18.8	35.2	25.8	3.03 (0.81)
Our leadership is clearly committed to including people with disabilities.	15.4	1.5	24.6	30.0	28.5	3.01 (0.84)
Our children's programs are clearly committed to including children with disabilities.	13.3	2.3	21.9	36.7	25.8	2.99 (0.82)
Our buildings are accessible to people with physical disabilities.	9.2	2.3	21.4	45.0	22.1	2.96 (0.76)
We are aware of people with disabilities and their families in our community.	9.2	3.1	19.1	47.3	21.4	2.96 (0.76)
Our attitudes toward people with disabilities are very accepting.	13.2	2.3	20.9	42.6	20.9	2.95 (0.77)
We have recently taken public steps to be more inclusive of people with disabilities and their families.	19.5	1.6	31.3	30.5	17.2	2.79 (0.80)
We do a good job of making people with disabilities feel welcomed.	17.7	0.0	30.8	38.5	13.1	2.79 (0.70)
Our youth programs are clearly committed to including youth with disabilities.	17.2	3.1	34.4	32.0	13.3	2.67 (0.79)

**Table 3** (continued)

Statement	Percentage responding (%)					<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
	I don't know	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
We actively invite people with disabilities to congregational services and other activities.	11.5	4.6	45.4	22.3	16.2	2.57 (0.85)
Our senior programs are clearly committed to including adults with disabilities.	30.2	6.2	31.8	23.3	8.5	2.49 (0.82)
Our adult programs are clearly committed to including adults with disabilities.	18.8	8.6	35.9	28.1	8.6	2.45 (0.82)

*N* = 137. Percentages are based on number of persons completing each item. Means and standard deviations are based on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*), with *I don't know* omitted

**Disability-specific efforts** The most prominent theme across both conversations—reflecting 38.3% of all ideas we coded—encompassed actions and supports congregations might undertake that are specifically designed for people with disabilities and their families. Many of these ideas focused on *family supports*—to either enable the family's participation in congregational life or to meet other family needs. Offering respite—alone or in partnership with other congregations—was frequently suggested as a way to enable parents to be part of worship services or attend to personal needs (e.g., appointments, shopping, time with a spouse) other times during the week. The organization of parent support groups or similar networking opportunities, resources and referrals related to the needs of children with disabilities, support for siblings, and assistance for aging caregivers were also advocated. Attention to aligning these offerings with the individualized needs of families marked much of this discussion.

The provision of *individual supports* focused on finding personalized ways of connecting individuals with disabilities to resources, accommodations, and adaptations that would support their involvement in desired ways. Some ideas reflected different person-centered practices through which the preferences and needs of an individual could become known and met (e.g., creating an avenue through which individuals can share support needs, designating a congregational advocate, personal meetings). Most identified examples of supports that might be identified through this process, such as arranging peer-mediated supports (e.g., buddy systems, mentors), offering accommodations (e.g., visual supports, alternative media and print formats, assistive listening systems), having alternate spaces or activities available to accommodate sensory needs, and finding ways to maintain connections with individuals who are homebound and cannot be present at congregational activities.

*Awareness efforts* concentrated on a variety of pathways for increasing understanding of issues related to disability throughout the congregation. Although some recommendations were aimed at particular groups (e.g., clergy, elders, ministry leaders, volunteers), most were intended for the whole congregation. Specific strategies included holding disability awareness events (one time or recurring), inviting individuals and families to share their stories in public ways (e.g., testimonies, videos), addressing language and depictions of disability in congregational materials, and using videos and other forms of media strategically. Some attendees mentioned the importance of placing congregational leaders, people with disabilities, and

family members at the forefront of these efforts. Similarly, *training* was identified as an avenue for raising awareness as well as equipping staff or volunteers with needed skills and knowledge related to supporting people with disabilities and their families. Suggestions for training varied depending on the audience (e.g., volunteers, clergy, religious education teachers, greeters), formality (e.g., workshops, online tutorials, videos, curricula), and topic (e.g., addressing behavioral challenges, challenging stereotypes, disability etiquette, providing respite). In some cases, it was recommended that congregations connect with either disability organizations or other congregations to carry out these efforts.

Undergirding each of these other categories was recognition of the need for *focused reflection* and *intentional teaming*. A constellation of ideas emerged for carefully reviewing distinct aspects of congregational life and the congregation's physical facilities in relation to the participation of people with disabilities and their families. Such a process—variously described by phrases such as “needs assessment,” “accessibility audit,” “church report card,” and “physical inventory”—was suggested as a way of determining where and how a congregation ought to move next. The suggested scope of the reflection ranged from targeted (e.g., accessibility of buildings, assessment of attitudes) to broad (e.g., all aspects of faith community life). Similarly, attendees advocated the involvement of different combinations of people (e.g., outside disability professionals, a small team of people with expertise, individuals with disabilities, family members) and suggested different procedures for obtaining input (e.g., surveys, interviews, congregation-specific community conversation events). Key to carrying out this suggestion—along with the individual and family supports mentioned previously—was the identification of individual volunteers or a formally established congregational team. A formal team was suggested as a group that could serve as a designated point of contact for the congregation, assume an advisory role to other ministries within the congregation, reflect a demonstration of the congregation's commitment, advocate on behalf of individuals and families, provide a conduit for finding volunteers, and/or interact with community partners. In addition to serving on an intentional team, volunteers were also suggested to provide one-to-one support to interested individuals and families.

**Internal activities** Almost one quarter (23.3%) of all ideas shared by attendees were anchored to activities and events aimed at promoting growth and community among current congregation members. Creating opportunities for meaningful *fellowship* received the most attention within this theme. Fostering friendships and social interactions was suggested in multiple ways, including expanding the degree to which existing congregational activities are inclusive, making sure people with disabilities are personally invited to all activities, involving children with disabilities in activities with same-age peers, creating new social events (e.g., dinners, cross-congregation socials, dances, block parties), encouraging informal connections among members throughout the week (e.g., meeting for coffee, doing hobbies together), matching people with and without disabilities based on shared interests, and extending peer partner models into congregational settings (e.g., Best Buddies).

Another category of ideas addressed expanding opportunities for people with disabilities to *serve and use their gifts*. One strand of discussion focused on identifying the gifts of members with disabilities. Many attendees highlighted the importance of making sure steps were taken to identify the spiritual gifts and talents of people with disabilities, as would be done for any members. Similarly, several attendees emphasized the need to shift the focus away from what people struggled to do and toward their areas of strength. Another strand of this discussion focused on deploying the gifts of people with disabilities within and beyond the congregation

by encouraging people with disabilities to volunteer in various contexts (e.g., nursery, greeter), providing roles in worship services (e.g., reading scripture, serving on the music team), promoting leadership roles within the congregation, arranging mentorship opportunities, and supporting involvement in service projects.

A number of ideas focused on supporting the involvement of people with disabilities in worship services, religious education, small groups, and other congregational activities. In terms of *worship services*, recommendations focused on (a) loosening unduly rigid expectations related to movement, noise, and participation; (b) creating alternate worship services designed specifically with people with disabilities in mind; and (c) expanding access to different aspects of worship services (e.g., visual supports, multilingual worship, sign language interpreters, different ways of participating in rituals and rites, faith partners who provide individualized assistance). In the area of *religious education*, some attendees recommended crafting individualized plans to articulate how a child would be supported in Sunday school, Confirmation, and other religious education experiences. Others addressed types of adaptations and accommodations that could be embedded within classes or vacation Bible school as well as the necessity of supporting religious education teachers and volunteers well. Attendees expressed divergent views about the context within which religious education should be delivered—some suggested creating specialized classes for children with disabilities, whereas others referenced inclusive experiences. Likewise, disability-specific activities were highlighted in discussions of *small-group discipleship*.

*Hospitality initiatives*—those steps congregations take to welcome visitors—were addressed in a variety of ways. Some attendees emphasized a posture of proactivity and intentionality, noting the need for visitors to encounter gestures of hospitality early on. Attendees most often identified greeters and ushers as the persons who have this role in the congregation. Suggestions included training these volunteers in disability etiquette, equipping them to notice possible support needs, providing them with guidance on “hidden disabilities,” designating a greeter as the accommodations expert, and making sure people with disabilities are known by name. Other ideas included embedding information about accommodations and programs into welcome and orientation materials, letting visitors know they can share individual support needs in advance of arrival (e.g., calling, e-mail), and modeling for congregation members how to extend personal invitations to people with disabilities to congregational and other activities.

**External activities** A similar proportion (24.3%) of ideas focused on projects and partnership with or on behalf of individuals outside of the congregation’s membership. Attendees raised possibilities for *partnerships with other congregations* in a wide variety of areas, including around jointly sponsored events (e.g., socials, Bible studies, respite, recreation, volunteer opportunities), creating networks for sharing ideas and resources related to the inclusion of people with disabilities, communicating needs with one another, coordinating ministry offerings and events across congregations to ensure coverage and minimize redundancy, holding joint trainings, mentoring others in areas of ministry strength, creating a directory of programs and supports available across congregations in a region, hosting additional community conversation events, and developing a formal group to invite and train local congregations to become more welcoming. *Partnerships with other community organizations* were mentioned as well, though much less frequently. Among the recommendations offered by attendees were turning to disability organizations (e.g., the Arc, autism organizations, Best Buddies, Special Olympics, residential and employment agencies) for help with training and awareness activities, requesting resources and materials from these organizations

that could be shared with families, asking for help sharing congregational information with families, offering meeting space to these organizations for disability-related events, getting involved in community networks focused on disability, encouraging congregation members to volunteer with local disability organizations, making sure local disability-related Internet sites know about and include inclusive congregations, and inviting organizations to provide input on a congregation's accessibility and welcome.

In the arena of *outreach missions and social service*, a prominent theme was the possibility of congregations being part of expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Example ideas included tapping into the personal networks of congregation members, asking congregation members to be advocates within their places of employment, advocating in the community for better employment opportunities and programs, finding mentors for people with disabilities who are searching for a job, helping provide transportation to work (e.g., using available congregation vehicles, carpooling networks), and hiring people to work for the congregation.

To support these initiatives, as well as to share information widely with individuals and families in their community, attendees offered numerous ideas for *communication and dissemination*. At the level of the individual congregation, recommendations focused on embedding within all print materials, Internet, and social media information about the congregation's commitment to including people with disabilities (e.g., mission statements, explicit statements of welcome, diversity of images), as well as any available supports and accommodations. However, many ideas in this area addressed community-wide efforts to create some sort of central location for information sharing, support, and connection among congregations involved in inclusive ministry. One example included the creation of a searchable database of local congregations, their accessibility features, and their programmatic offerings.

**Influencers** A variety of factors may have influence on the extent to which disability-specific efforts, internal activities, and external activities will take hold within a congregation. Establishing an accepting *congregational culture and climate* reflected one area of emphasis. Attendees suggested finding ways to communicate that “disruptions” are indeed okay, encouraging clergy to set the tone for the entire congregation, abandoning a “one-size-fits-all” posture within congregational planning, adopting more inclusive language and imagery, avoiding attitudes of pity, and normalizing the notion that everyone needs support. *Leadership, staffing, and governance* were also considered instrumental to such an atmosphere. Attendees recommended that clergy learn more about disability, become familiar with congregational and community resources in their area, preach about disability from the pulpit in wise ways, serve as the catalyst for open conversations about disability in the congregation, reach out proactively to families, and serve as a role model to others. Discussion of *doctrine and theology* was minimal at both events.

**Resources** Avenues for addressing the various resources of a faith community were the focus of a fairly small proportion of ideas (6.7%). Conversations addressing *transportation* focused on a variety of destinations (e.g., worship services, social events, grocery shopping, workplaces), age groups (e.g., youths, seniors), and pathways (e.g., carpooling networks, congregation vans, collaborating with other congregations). In addition to providing gas money to facilitate transportation, ideas related to *finances* also included providing monies to assist families in their caregiving responsibilities (e.g., respite, babysitting). Calls to attend to the physical accessibility of congregational *facilities and buildings* were common but tended to be framed very broadly.

### Views of community conversation events

As shown in Table 3, nearly all (97.8%) attendees completing the survey agreed or strongly agreed that the event was a good investment of their time. As a result of the event, most attendees (87.6%) indicated they had learned about ideas or resources in their city they did not already know about; most (92.7%) identified steps their congregation or organization could take to support faith community inclusion; and most (91.2%) also identified steps they could personally take. Nearly all (97.0%) of attendees indicated the event improved their own views of the capacity of congregations to include people with disabilities and their families.

### Views of faith communities and city-wide opportunities

Attendees' perceptions of their own congregations were more mixed (see Table 3). At least half of attendees agreed or strongly agreed with positive statements related to the areas of awareness (68.7%), building accessibility (67.1%), attitudes (64.5%), children's ministry (62.5%), theology ("we see our community as incomplete without the presence of people with disabilities and their families"; 61.0%), leadership (58.5%), and hospitality ("we do a good job of making people with disabilities feel welcomed"; 51.6%). For all other items in this section, the majority of attendees disagreed or did not know. In terms of city-wide opportunities, less than half of the attendees agreed or strongly agreed that congregations across their city were welcoming places (40.9%) or that strong partnerships existed between congregations and disability organizations (28.7%); more than one quarter (27.0%) did not know.

## Discussion

How might congregations act in ways that lead to greater inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities and their families? Using community conversations as a mixed methodological approach, we examined the ideas emerging when diverse stakeholders from a cross-section of congregations dialogued about promising pathways for becoming a more welcoming faith community. We were struck both by the generativity of these events (nearly 1000 ideas were shared) and by the breadth of recommendations (spanning 23 categories within five themes). These findings highlight a wide range of possibilities for congregations committed to becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities and their families.

### Practices, postures, and partners

Disability-specific efforts emerged prominently as an avenue for expanding inclusion and belonging. The collection of recommendations falling within this theme comprised intentional and individualized approaches focused specifically on supporting people with disabilities and their families. This accent reflects recognition of the importance of giving additional attention beyond what a congregation might ordinarily allocate for members who do not have a disability. Each of the six categories of action falling within this theme interacts with the others. For example, *focused reflection* might be undertaken by an *intentional team* to determine areas in which additional *training* and *awareness efforts* are needed within the

congregation and to identify the personal support preferences of *individuals* and *families*. Such educational efforts serve to enhance the commitment and capacity of congregation members to be more inclusive and to offer opportunities and supports in respectful ways.

An inward focus on supporting access to activities and events for current congregation members was also quite pronounced. Recommendations spanned the breadth of activities taking place in typical congregations—worship services, religious education programs, small groups, service activities, and social events. This finding suggests that an exclusive focus on what takes place in the sanctuary or classroom may be too narrow to meet all needs. We were particularly encouraged by the attention given to two areas—fellowship and serving. Actively addressing relationship opportunities can serve to diminish the sense of isolation experienced by many children and adults with disabilities (Carter et al. 2014)—whether by expanding informal opportunities for people with and without disabilities to participate in shared activities or through introducing more formal relationship-building efforts (see Amado et al. 2013; Genzink 2006; Preheim-Bartel et al. 2011). Likewise, the emphasis placed on identifying and deploying the gifts and strengths of people with disabilities encourages congregations to adopt a very different ministry posture—one in which people with disabilities are not viewed solely as the recipients of service (“ministry to”) but as individuals with indispensable gifts to share (“ministry by”; Gaventa 1986).

An outward focus on life beyond the buildings and between Sundays (i.e., external activities) also received noticeable attention. Most current “disability ministry” resources emphasize the steps congregations can take to support people for a few hours on a Sunday or Saturday morning. However, attendees also raised a number of intriguing possibilities for supporting people with disabilities and families the other six days of the week. For example, attendees suggested ways congregation members could address the employment needs of people with disabilities by drawing upon their personal networks, hiring people with disabilities, advocating for employment in the community, or establishing a “putting faith to work” ministry (see Carter 2011; Nord et al. 2014). Likewise, they recommended working with other congregations to expand social, recreational, and respite opportunities throughout the week. The success of such outreach efforts may depend on the willingness of congregations to collaborate with other congregations or with local disability agencies and organizations. Unfortunately, less than one third of attendees indicated strong partnerships existed between congregations and disability organizations in their city.

The three categories falling within the theme of influencers received less attention than we anticipated. Although a substantial number of new books address complexities at the intersection of theology and disability (e.g., Harshaw 2016; Schumm and Stoltzfus 2016), discussion of theology and doctrine was largely absent from both events. Perhaps attendees prioritized changing practices over beliefs or presumed theology and doctrine were not a concern. In the area of leadership, studies suggest disability is given limited consideration in seminary curricula and continuing education programs (e.g., Anderson 2003; Annandale and Carter 2014). Although some suggestions were offered for clergy and other ministry leaders, most attendees indicated their leadership was already committed to including people with disabilities. Perhaps the other ideas suggested by attendees throughout the events were predicated on the endorsement and support of their congregation’s leadership.

Finally, recommendations for strengthening resources received modest attention. The enduring absence of accessible transportation and continued concerns about physical



accessibility are prominent themes within the literature and advocacy efforts (The Arc 2008; Kessler 2010). Both reflect critical barriers that make full participation difficult or impossible for some people with disabilities and their families. Indeed, the availability of transportation and accessible space often serve as the precondition for implementing many of the other ideas shared during the community conversation events.

### **Congregational commitment**

Attendees presented a mixed portrait of their congregation's commitment to supporting the presence and participation of people with disabilities and their families. Approximately half to two thirds of attendees affirmed current efforts in the areas of awareness, accessibility, children's ministry, theology, leadership, and hospitality. However, far fewer felt a commitment to youth, adults, and seniors was evident in their congregation's programs. This emphasis mirrors the themes of currently available congregational resources, in which attention to the inclusion of youth and adults with disabilities has been fairly limited (see Conner 2012). A noticeable number of attendees (9.2–30.2% across items), however, indicated they were unsure about a particular area of congregational response. Such a finding affirms the potential value of *focused reflection* suggested by attendees of both conversations.

### **Limitations and future research**

Several limitations of this study raise possibilities for future research. First, our study centered on two particular communities and involved a self-selected sample of stakeholders. Although this approach aligned with our goal of capturing the breadth of ideas congregations might pursue, we cannot speak to whether similar findings would emerge in other communities or among a different mix of attendees. Indeed, community conversations have been advocated as an avenue for identifying solutions that fit the culture and capacity of a particular local community (Carter et al. 2016b) rather than importing ideas generated elsewhere. Replication of this study in communities that differ geographically, economically, and religiously from the two counties we studied would provide insight into the generalizability of these ideas.

Second, although this paper provides new perspectives on possible directions for congregations, we cannot yet speak to whether the strategies attendees shared will ultimately lead to greater inclusion and belonging. Single steps (e.g., installing a hearing loop, providing a peer buddy, arranging transportation)—as essential to supporting someone's participation as they may be—are likely insufficient on their own to promote the depth of connection and involvement that marks belonging (Carter et al. 2016a). It may be that a combination of actions is needed to ensure people are invited, welcomed, supported, and connected (Carter 2016). In addition, this combination may look somewhat different from one person and family to the next. Future research should explore how the approaches highlighted in this study might be enacted in congregations and whether they lead to involvement in deep and desired ways.

Third, most of the recommendations were framed broadly without specifying the individuals to whom they might be most applicable. People with disabilities comprise a diverse group; they are extremely heterogeneous in their needs, strengths, and preferences. For almost any idea shared at the events (e.g., peer partners, particular accommodations, certain awareness efforts, specialized activities), some individuals would consider the support helpful and other individuals would consider it unnecessary or stigmatizing. Adopting a person-centered posture

that avoids assumptions and strives to discern what would be most helpful for a given individual or family reflects the approach advocated by many attendees. Additional research should explore person-centered planning approaches that would fit well within a congregational context and serve to identify personally valued supports.

Fourth, our study did not include a follow-up component to examine whether and how attendees ultimately applied the ideas raised in the community conversations within their own congregation. Community conversations certainly can be organized as a catalyst for local change efforts (e.g., Carter et al. 2012). Our interest, however, was more descriptive because we sought to create a resource describing the range of ways congregations might become more inclusive. Future studies might focus on how congregations make decisions about which ideas to adopt and how they enact them within the life of their faith community.

## Summary

Community conversations provide a novel and productive approach for identifying areas of potential action for congregations. Attendees considered these events a valuable investment of time that expanded their awareness of ideas and resources, increased their personal commitment to support inclusion, exposed them to new possibilities within their congregation, and elevated their views of their congregation's capacity to include people with disabilities and their families. We also invite readers to consider the ways in which this methodological approach might be applied to other aspects of congregational life or pastoral engagement. Research in the field of pastoral psychology has a rich history of incorporating diverse methodologies and interdisciplinary interactions. We hope the approach described in this article—novel within this field—might serve to spur new thinking about the ways in which issues of pastoral and ecclesial importance might be explored in novel and effective ways.

**Acknowledgments** We are grateful for the contributions of Sarah Bauman, Natalie Berra, Jenny Gustafson, Lindsay Herron, Michelle Lemolo, Courtney Taylor, Allie Utley, and Chloe Vaughan to these events and this study.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Funding** This work was supported in part by the Kessler Foundation (“Putting Faith to Work”) and by the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [grant number T73MC00050], Rural Leadership Education for Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Related Disabilities (NDRD). This content and conclusions of this article are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of these groups.

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