

Select Page



The Nature of Disability in Our Complicated World

Part 1 of 3 in a new series on making your church disability friendly

Dec 8, 2020 | Arkansas United Methodist



By Rev. Stephen Waggoner

Chair of the ARUMC Disability Concerns Committee

What is a special need or disability? Disability is created not by our characteristics, but by the world around us. Disability changes as the environment changes. A young man might have a low IQ but if he is strong and willing to work hard he could do well. A young woman who is virtually blind can use her intelligence in technology and communications and earn

a better living than I do. Many of the movers and shakers in the tech world today are high functioning autistics who obsess over details and turn their obsessions into gold.

Yet, all of these would qualify for Social Security in the United States today based on conditions were they not able to find their niche. In the pre-modern world many of the disabilities we recognize today were not problems. In the pre-literate world, a strong back and a willingness to work was an asset regardless of a learning disorder. Many of the great artists, craftsmen, and scientists of the Enlightenment would today be medicated and receive therapy for their autistic, obsessive-compulsive mood disorders. In seminary, I remember being entertained with stories of both Wesley and Asbury who were great leaders but whose lives were so consumed with their ministry in a way that any Board of Ordained Ministry today would find unhealthy.

If one went to the village or the small town in the pre-industrial age in Western Europe, the streets were lined with small shops and workshops manufacturing, repairing, and marketing a wide range of items. The fields in the country would be filled with workers engaged in all sorts of manual labor. If an individual had a low IQ (what was then called a weak mind) or perhaps a mental disturbance of unknown origins, it did not mean that the village just paid them to sit; but quite the opposite. Whether it be a Scottish clan or a French village, there was work to be done.

Likewise in the Native American village and the African village alike, there was work to be had. One who could not walk could be a master fashioner of clothing, arrows, and spears for those who could hunt and fight. The focus upon those in the pre-modern age in which there were very little medicine and medical care and even less government assistance was upon the utility, or the usefulness, of each person. Whoever you were or whatever you could do each person was expected to contribute.

At the same time, the mentality of the premodern tribe was one of loyalty. To this day there exists in our culture, particularly in rural areas whose residents can trace their roots back to the Scottish highlands, the fierce distrust of strangers with the expression that "we take care of our own." It is our modern world that labels one as disabled and provides medical and financial assistance as long as they do not become productive.

My tent-making profession is that of Human Resources for an agency that identifies, labels, and then provides services to persons who are first identified as having a disability prior to the age of 21. But, in my Human Resource position, I have destroyed more than one person's disability claim by having the audacity to put someone to work. I will never forget the perturbed disability lawyer who insisted that one of our employees was incapable of holding a job informing me that this employee, for whom there were no modifications other than that we had found a job they could do, met all of the criteria to be unemployable. Honestly, his options were limited, but he was fully capable not only of working but also of being a great employee. One of the sad impacts lost upon those today who want to import low skill workers and export factory work is that in doing so we are

robbing our own low skill workers of opportunities to work. Light factory work has traditionally been an opportunity for people to make a decent living.

The more complex a society becomes; the number of people who are disabled increases. Complexity of society and the skills needed to function in it create disability. When COVID quarantines made shopping more difficult, people who could not or who dared not venture out became disabled. My wife orders groceries online and all she has to do is pull into a parking lot and push the button which raises the hatch on the car. We buy specialty items through online vendors. Those who are not tech-savvy are now disabled. I know a medical doctor whose medical condition had made it impossible to work a clinic floor and now in the time of COVID, his skills of diagnosing and prescribing over the phone are in high demand.

With COVID-19, a number of pastors have doubtless discovered their disability. At one time, one of the keys to career success in the church was the gift of gab and a passion for visitation. My mentor during candidacy told me to wear out a set of tires visiting in the first year in the new church. The pastor who thrives on in-person ministry today finds themselves in a dilemma.

Likewise, the nerdy pastor who loves to write flowery letters, creative newsletters, and engaging Bible studies suddenly has an eager audience. One of the best and most effective lay ministers today is the person with mobility problems who loves to sit at home and just call people to check up on them, brighten their day, and perhaps link them up with someone who can help them with an immediate need or problem.

Technology and complexity both have the effect of making our lives better and more difficult. Our experiences in the year 2020 have rattled all of us and actually made life better for some and more difficult for others. For congregations, our task is not simply to wait for the world to return to the way it was, but to adapt to an ever-changing world...and to redouble our awareness of those for whom the complexities of the world have created special needs.

About the author

Dr. Stephen Waggoner makes his home in Wilburn, Arkansas with his wife Angel who has worked with people with developmental disabilities for 28 years. They have four children including one with autism. Stephen holds degrees from Arkansas Tech University, University of Arkansas Little Rock, Duke Divinity School, and Asbury Theological Seminary. His dissertation, "No Such Thing as Normal: An Exploratory Study of Ministry with Persons With a Developmental Disability in the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church" was completed in 2017. Stephen is an Elder in the Arkansas Conference, a part-time pastor, and a full-time Director of Human Resources at the Community School of Cleburne County which serves children and adults with developmental disabilities both in clinical and supportive living settings.