

ABCs of Equity, Part 1

52 Devotions on Experiences of Persons with Disabilities

by Rev. Dr. Sharon Ballantyne

This booklet offers a reference to a scripture verse and works alphabetically from A through Z to provide 52 reflections.

Following each verse is a short quote drawn from the pages of the September 2013 report of the Permanent Committee on Programs for Ministry and Mission, [“Gathering Together: Toward a Culture of Mutuality and Full Participation for Persons with Disabilities and Their Allies”](#), as prepared and submitted by Adele Halliday, Team Leader for Discipleship & Witness, Church in Mission, The United Church of Canada. The report was written following a Consultation for Persons with Disabilities and Their Allies held in July 2013. This report reflected the work of the consultation and made recommendations to The United Church of Canada, inviting us all to embrace equity, with its particular focus on experiences with persons with disabilities and their allies.

After each quote from the report is a brief reflection, and at the end of each reflection are a few brief words quoting people who have shared their experiences of marginalization as compiled from interviews done by Sharon Ballantyne in 2019 for research that is part of the generous award of a McGeachy Senior Scholar research project (2018) from the United Church Foundation, on the topic of equity, granted to the Rev. Dr. Sharon Ballantyne.

Each entry concludes with “We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.”

This resource can be used as a personal devotional, be shared in small group meetings, or be integrated into use in worship similar to the way a Minute for Mission might be shared.

May we all embrace what God reveals for our own reflection, learning and living into being equitable and being church together.

God of all love, breathe on us your spirit of compassion.
Open us to receive you, communicating through us.
Open us to find you in the face of each person.
Open our hearts and minds to experience your presence.
Guide and direct us with your wisdom.
Help us discern how to live into creating an equitable
and just world, embracing all creation.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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A

Cast all your anxiety on him. 1 Peter 5:7

From the United Church report: “church has not been a positive experience.”

These words echo the feelings of so many, those who have left or have persevered to stay involved but are feeling frustrated. Our ministries are inequitable. More work is being done, and can and will be done, if we all work together. Empower people to be confident and advocate, not having to do all the work themselves, but in solidarity with all of the ministries. How can we empower each other?

For those who say:

“I feel inspired to speak up when situations are inequitable and just wrong.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together..

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

B

Happy are those who trust in the Lord. Proverbs 16:20

From the United Church report: “living with grief and pain because of exclusionary attitudes experienced within their faith communities.”

We’d like to think that people will come together to really support others. This is not lived experience. “Welcoming” is often words on signs, screens, and in documents, but care needs to be taken to continually and intentionally assess lived practices. We still have a long way to go to ensure that all belong and are valued, included, needed, and enabled as leaders. All must be intentional and committed to ensure everyone has a place at the table. What are our lived practices?

For those who say:

“I loudly heard him speak to me at my age and stage to remind me of the need to pray for and with others for my own needs.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better.

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C

Commit your work to the Lord. Proverbs 16:3

From the United Church report: “important space where transformative change could take place.”

Communities of faith and other ministries have the potential to really be models for transformation and models of transformation. With growing affirming ministries and people developing equity teams, using equity monitors, doing accessibility audits, and figuring out how to keep drawing the circle wider, there is encouragement. Needing all at the table means actively engaging everyone directly, consulting, and co-creating best action plans together. How are we actively drawing our circle wider?

For those who say:

“No one has actually come to me and said hey, what would be helpful?”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

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D

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37:4

From the United Church report: “I felt that I wasn’t what she was looking for in a new member.”

Too often lack of knowledge and breakdowns in communication lead to greater marginalization. People need to be aware of biases, attitudes, and ways in which inequity, power, and privilege get transmitted through language, body language, actions, and behaviours that are the culture of a community but not necessarily recognized. Taking action is vital. How are we communicating?

For those who say:

“I did report this to two ministers, but it did no good.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

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E

His steadfast love endures forever. Psalm 136:1

From the United Church report: “[Don’t] only think about physical spaces, such as building a wheelchair ramp.”

People fail to look at all the ways to be accessible to all, to level the playing field and ensure all have a place at the table. Somehow equity and accessibility have been focused on a physical building when they need to focus on all practices, attitudes, actions, and planning. Equity for all does not begin with dollars. The strength of communities of faith is rooted in relationships, not a building. Equity is about relationships. How can we build bridges of relationship?

For people who say:
“If church can’t be a safe place, where can we go?”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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F

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:22–23

From the United Church report: “it is really about attitude, and not about money.”

Openness to learning, to journey the path together, accompanying one another to discover inequities, gaps in knowledge, and understanding will move us toward everyone growing together. Affirm United’s resource, [Open Hearts](#), invites learning about LGBTQIA and Two Spirit people. To grow and learn together, people need to learn about all the ways people can be marginalized. Explore and learn about people who are marginalized and not represented in your community of faith. Explore how to reach out to those who are marginalized, and invite them to help you learn. What can we learn, and who can we invite to help us?

For those who say:
“They failed to address this with the appropriate group.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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G

“My grace is sufficient for you.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

From the United Church report: “how you treat people is more important than whether you have a ramp or stairs.”

Many people who are marginalized are forced to keep their true selves hidden because they fear being ridiculed or treated differently. Non-visible disabilities, being LGBTQIA2S+, living with certain allergies and sensitivities, and socioeconomic status might be hidden. People with visible disabilities, racialized groups, and other groups’ experiences often get spoken about more because of visibility. The challenges of finding full acceptance are great. Do we let people be their true selves?

For those who say:

“I offered so much leadership and pastoral care and devoted so much time to giving, but now no one is offering me any support as I live with disability.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
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H

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Psalm 139:23

From the United Church report: “inclusion is when people make room for you. Belonging is when people go looking for you.”

Dr. Thomas Reynolds of Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, challenges people to break the “cult of normalcy.” He speaks of belonging in which people will be longing for those not present. He speaks of witness adding an “h” to live into “with-ness”: people with one another. We need to ensure all people really belong and experience with-ness. Are we committed to belonging and with-ness?

For those who say:

“Coping with mental illness is not something the medical field or church wants to hear about.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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I

Invite everyone. Matthew 22:9

From the United Church report: “When one is ‘included,’ it means that someone else has the power to include—and exclude.”

Inclusion is a challenging word. It sounds like it would be a good thing, but sometimes it is really binary: those included and those excluded. It is like the “them” and “us” divide. When describing a group, it can create negative differentiation. To lump everyone together can also devalue parts of who a person is or mask or diminish part of who they are. Receive and accept all as whole, and receive wholeness of each unique, diverse part of the body of Christ. How do we understand inclusion and wholeness?

For those who say:

“You can’t have my abilities without my disabilities.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

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J

“Do not judge.” Matthew 7:1

From the United Church report: “There are power imbalances implied in the word and process of ‘inclusion.’”

Inclusion is too limiting. It has become a word to use, but often no time is given to unpack all the ways there are inequities and what to do about them. Like being “welcoming,” being inclusive needs a lot of education, learning, and intentional commitment to understand and live into the fulsomeness of claiming to be welcoming and claiming to be inclusive. Conducting an accessibility audit and reviewing the template for equity can help ministries discern strengths and needs. How do we understand power imbalance?

For those who say:

“There is no real support, not in a church; I’m isolated.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

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K

Be kind to one another. Ephesians 4:32

From the United Church report: “To say that someone can be included names a particular place of privilege.”

As soon as we say who can or cannot be included, there is hierarchy, some spoken or unspoken privilege system that invokes power and privilege. How often have people disappeared from a community of faith or other ministry and no follow-up is done to find out why, whether they experienced harm, or whether something can be learned, relationships healed, stigma broken down, or barriers and inequities addressed? We need to talk about who is present in our community of faith and who is not, and explore why. Until we understand why people are missing or not represented, we will have no adequate strategies to consult or processes to resolve the inequities. Who is missing among us?

For those who say:

“I left church because there was no place for me.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

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L

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105

From the United Church report: “saying that another is welcome into their space—it implies a host and a guest.”

Host and guest hierarchy is unwittingly evidenced in so many ministries. People sit in particular places and connect and visit with those who are familiar but do not invite full participation. People do not speak to visitors. It can be the responsibility of everyone and no one, meaning people assume others are doing the welcoming. The collective “we” can translate into no one taking initiative or responsibility. Sometimes visitors are singled out with special name tags, even guest mugs, in the name of creating welcome, but doing so can actually create separation and discomfort. Everyone must be intentional, committed, and consistent for all to belong. What evidence of the host and visitor hierarchy exists here?

For those who say:

“People did not engage.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better.

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M

Do justice and love kindness. Micah 6:8

From the United Church report: “To say that someone can be included names a particular place of privilege.”

Too often people have a very closed mindset. A child who communicates non-verbally has mannerisms and behaviours that are their personal expression and may be viewed as cute. When they grow up, however, less tolerance is the reality. People might not mean what they say and provide indicators both positive and negative toward the differently expressive child or adult. If the customs and experiences within a community of faith are so ritualized, we can miss the movement of the Spirit and diversity of worship expression and full participation! Families still report being ridiculed with looks and comments that make them feel reprimanded, judged, or worse. What does our behaviour transmit, and how is it received?

For those who say:

“I was stared at or shushed. Body language communicates wish to remove the worshipper.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

N

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches. Proverbs 22:1

From the United Church report: “Someone can offer to include another, without making any other changes in their way of being.”

Getting “out of the box” is easier and, at the same time, more difficult than you think. Openness to change requires a growth mindset—being willing to figure out new ways of being together and belonging together. Conversation is needed to develop equitable practices. Good for one is good for all is often the reality, though not discussed. Singling out individuals that something is for their benefit is not equitable. For whose benefit need not be voiced, judged, or assessed. Just do it! What language do we embrace?

For people who say:

“It’s to the point where I’m going to give up.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together,.

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O

“Those who love me will keep my word.” John 14:23

From the United Church report: “a social justice perspective on initiatives regarding inclusion, belonging, and accessibility.”

It is still surprising when we experience so many teachings of Jesus telling stories of equity and modelling in story after story to love everyone, including those who are marginalized. We read the stories and feel frustration and angst when the people of Jesus’ day did not get it, did not understand, exercised harmful judgements and pain, and plotted to intentionally set Jesus up to test whether he would demonstrate love. How can we more authentically relate to the teachings of scripture?

For those who say:
"They just keep making excuses."

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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P

“My peace I give to you.” John 14:27

From the United Church report: “Often, instead, a minority person (or community) is invited into a culturally dominant space, without any other changes to help them feel at home.”

Why is it that people often do not see themselves represented in images, songs, words of liturgy, stories, and messages? When the focus is only on a majority perspective, when minorities are smaller in number or not represented at all, habits can unintentionally lead to no representation. Voices need to be lifted up and keep being lifted up. Family configurations, promotional literature, newsletters, Web and social media presence, worship practices, and meeting planning and implementation need equity. Review whatever is being shared, from bulletin boards to junior church curriculum, in the mindset and role of equity monitor. What needs changing and monitoring?

For those who say:
“It would take great courage to attend.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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Q

Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly. Luke 18:39

From the United Church report: “find only minimal inclusion or worse.”

In children’s education, bullying is often the focus of learning to be good citizens, with the hope of deepening relationships, building bridges, and facilitating safe space. Bystander behaviours are also addressed. Do we advocate for situations that need addressing, confront inappropriate language choices, confront inequities, stand up against bullying behaviour, and name harmful practices? Too often people know something is not right but say or do nothing! Taking action will tear down and facilitate the building up of equity! No more silence! How will we speak up?

For those who say:
“He sits alone.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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R

Refuge in the shadow of your wings. Psalm 36:7

From the United Church report: “‘ability’ to participate in congregational life wanes as their disabilities increase.”

We do not notice needs that do not impact us. The Rev. Dr. Bill Smith, past Executive Secretary of Bay of Quinte Conference, shared this list on perspective:

- We do not notice smaller fonts when we can see them.
- We do not notice softer sounds when we can hear them.
- We do not notice stronger scents when we do not react to them.
- We do not notice the harmful/deadly effects of nuts or shellfish or many other foods when we do not react to them.
- We do not pay attention to washrooms when they are accessible or welcoming to us.
- We do not recognize privilege when we are the privileged.
- We do not worry about stairs when they don’t hamper us.

We need to keep adding to this list and commit to noticing, to looking beyond ourselves, realizing the many barriers we do not know about, and then work to take those barriers down so all can joyfully be safe and fully participate. What barriers do we need to notice and take down?

For those who say:
“The church remained silent.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better.

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S

I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35

From the United Church report: “opened the door to talk about the topic.”

What people yearn for is empowering change and reflecting God at work in all people—their attitudes, words, and actions. People who are marginalized, their families, and their allies are constantly advocating. If our communities of faith learn about, anticipate, plan, and prepare, modelling that everyone is safe here, visitors will experience safety. Communities of faith become brave spaces to explore and ask questions, safe spaces where people have permission to truly be themselves, trusting their needs will be heard and who they are will be honoured and represented. Are we a safe space?

For those who say:

“You are showing me that I have a voice and a right to explore.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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T

Trust in the Lord, and do good. Psalm 37:3

From the United Church report: “difficulty in taking communion.”

People with the best of intentions help without first asking what help is needed. An usher takes away a person’s walker, setting it out of the way, not realizing they have removed a person’s mobility and trapped them in place. A person is directed to be seated in a designated space because of their mobility support. Communion is brought to a person without consultation about what is best for them. There are no cookie cutter ways to address people’s needs and be supportive. Talk directly to the people whose needs you think you are accommodating. Make sure all have a voice and are on the teams or committees to have an ongoing voice in planning and programming. We should not assume what another person needs, or that someone with a particular disability needs or wants the same support in the same way as another individual with that particular disability. What is helpful?

For those who say:

“You can ask if I would like help.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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U

I trusted in your steadfast love. Psalm 13:5

From the United Church report: “developed a disability later in life, the congregation was not able to cope with the impact of their progressive degenerative condition.”

We actually don't know enough about interests or abilities of anyone in our community of faith. We often discover people who did not know their skill was important and did not sense it would be needed or helpful, so they did not share their gift. Others have not known about the gift or how it might be used. People are usually not as fully active as they might be, perhaps because they have not been invited or have not discussed how they can contribute their gifts and leadership. People can too easily make assumptions. Some brainstorming discussion can really energize everyone to find ways to make things work and offer creative suggestions that will benefit everyone. Combining skills and strengths can lead to innovative new projects and new energy and enthusiasm, bringing people together. New ministries are waiting to be born. What gifts will we share?

For those who say:
“It makes it hard to get involved.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

V

Above all, clothe yourselves with love. Colossians 3:14

From the United Church report: “[Church] did not make any changes to enable them to continue to participate in congregational life.”

Most communities of faith can address so many needs that will help everyone. Use a font large enough for all to see (40 points is basic). Don't clutter PowerPoint slides with extras or too many words, making them hard to follow. Use bold yellow font for participant responses. Use language that honours everyone. Review language and explain or adapt; don't just ignore it but openly bring attention to it. Put signs with picture symbols on accessible, gender-neutral, and family-friendly washrooms. Use clear name tags, including preferred pronouns. Say your name when speaking in meetings, modelling the practice of self-identifying. Design seating plans for all to be comfortable and fully participate. Have food available that all can eat. Request everything and everyone to be scent-free. Review what you do, explore from different perspectives, and implement plans to do better! What do we do?

For those who say:
“No one listens anyway.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

W

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.
Ephesians 4:1

From the United Church report: “if the church is not willing to change for me, then who will they change for?”

Treating people equitably means everyone has the same opportunity. Empowering everyone to feel safe will energize ministries to reflect faith. Even if all issues and needs cannot be addressed, people respect and support the continued learning and efforts. Action plans that are being lived into are evidenced in the everyday life and work of ministries. If people are engaged, making changes, and trying different things, everyone is part of the equity journey and part of the evolving process. No one is left out. What are our action plans?

For those who say:
“I am too tired to try to address problems of church.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

X

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you. Psalm 118:28

From the United Church report: “When I could no longer reach the pulpit, my voice was no longer heard reading scripture.”
(person who needs or is sitting in a wheelchair)

I ask myself, where am I at? Where do I think my community of faith is at? Who might help me? Have brave conversations! Some people who have been left out are so frustrated and angry that they do not feel empowered or that they have a choice. People leave or limit their participation. They don’t feel like they are really needed or belong. Having just one safe person, one advocate who will support and empower can be transformational, energizing everyone to work through changes and adjustments and to address necessities to build vibrant, thriving ministries. What brave conversations are we having?

For those who say:
“I’d love to go but I can’t drive now, and no one will take me.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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Y

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:29–30

From the United Church report: “My participation in congregational life was restricted by the limited accessibility of the building, and by the attitude of those who scheduled ‘all inclusive’ meetings in places I could not reach.”

Inclusive design recognizes one solution won’t fit everyone. People can think a place is inclusive when it is not. A basic necessity like an accessible washroom might include gender-neutral, family-friendly, independent and clear barrier-free pathway, distinct symbol/print signage, independent door access, and width that allows full-size electric power chairs, walkers, strollers, and cleaning carts. In the washroom, consider safety bars; attendant support; access to toilet, sink, faucets, door handles, soap, paper towels, waste baskets, and a large change table. When planning any renovations or new construction, consult those who regularly need accessible features, and ensure they are on the planning teams. Are we all able to be here?

For those who say:
“I am treated like I am a burden.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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Z

Do not lag in zeal. Romans 12:11

From the United Church report: “It didn’t have to be this way.”

Imagine yourself as a person who is marginalized in some way. Go with whatever comes to mind. It might be a group you represent, someone you know, or something you have not thought about much before. As that racialized person who is part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, a person who is differently abled, a person with an invisible disability, a person who has a less represented family configuration, one with no faith background, a grieving person, a homeless person...what do you anticipate that person’s experience of this ministry would be? Are there gaps between theology and practice? What do we need to discuss. and what changes need to be implemented?

For those who say:
“I don’t go, and I used to be so active.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
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