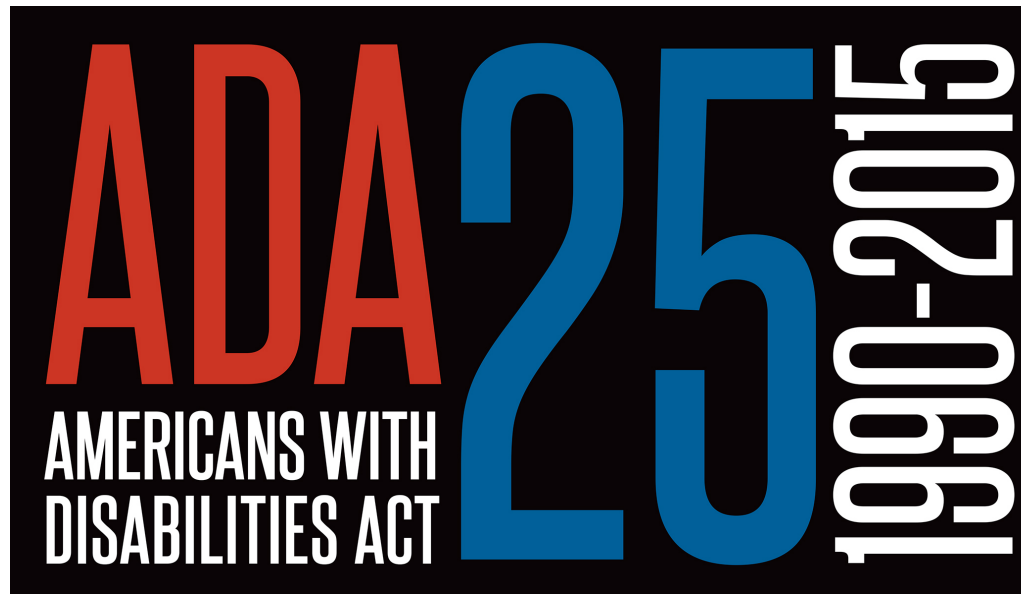


Disability and theological education: Progress and possibilities

By DEBBIE CREAMER

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States, the 30th anniversary of the Canadian Human Rights Act, and the 33rd anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. One expert offers guidance to schools for building on the progress to date.



THE ADA AT 25

This summer marks the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States. While Canadian legislation has been attentive to disability for far longer (for example, both the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms [1982] and the Canadian Human Rights Act [1985] prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities), it is hard to overstate the ADA's impact on accessibility policies and practices in the United States. While some remain critical of the ADA (that it imposes too much or that it covers too little), there is no question that many areas of life have dramatically improved for people with disabilities as a result of this legislation.

Many students in our schools do not know life without the ADA—and they come to seminary looking for the same sense of inclusion and support that they may have found in earlier educational and workplace settings. As a recent research study in *Theological Education* observes, most ATS schools are aware of students with disabilities,

and many schools include disability as a content area at some point in their curriculum.¹

Yet many students with disabilities still experience significant barriers, seminaries struggle with what it means to be accessible and inclusive, and graduates express concerns about whether they are adequately prepared to work with congregations or other communities that include people with disabilities.

Schools have made noticeable progress in addressing architectural barriers to mobility and in providing support and resources for those with learning differences. Some of this is required by law, as well as by the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation, but many schools go even further to embody theological characteristics like hospitality and inclusive community. Others struggle with the architectural limits in historic campuses and with tight budgets, or they wonder how to address a wider range of disabilities, including hidden disabilities and mental

illness. Accessibility is not simple and always needs to be explored in light of a school's own mission, context, and resources. But these are also issues that students will face as they move into congregations or community spaces, and so involving students in these challenges can also be a teaching opportunity for future leaders.

BEYOND ARCHITECTURE TO ATTITUDES

Even as schools address architecture and other barriers, it is also important to address attitudes toward disability. Many folks still think of disability either in a medical/functional lens (that disability simply refers to body parts that do not work) or in moral terms (that disability signifies that something is wrong or automatically makes a person inspirational—as one regularly sees on reality TV!). It is important to remember that disability is also a social phenomenon—in other words, that people are often more “handicapped” by society’s practices and attitudes than they are by their own bodies. To picture this, you might imagine a person in a wheelchair at the bottom of a flight of steps leading up to a church, next to a sign saying “All Are Welcome.” Where is “disability” in this picture? Many of us have been taught that the disability is the wheelchair, when in fact the wheelchair is a piece of enabling technology (just like cars and phones are pieces of enabling technology, allowing us to do things that we might not otherwise be able to do). Disability comes about because of how the building was designed, or because the community assumes that the “all” who are welcome would only include people who have typical modes of mobility.

A COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Alongside this social model of disability, it is also important to note that disability is common human experience. The World Health Organization estimates that 1 billion people, globally, experience disability²; this includes an

estimated 3.8 million Canadians (14 percent of the adult population)³ and an estimated 56.7 million people in the United States (19 percent of the population).⁴ Most of us will experience disability at some point in our lives, if we live long enough, and most of us regularly experience situations that might be seen as being on a continuum with more significant disabilities (for example, wearing eyeglasses, temporary injuries, pregnancy). Disability is a “normal” human experience. Among other things, this means that, while only some of our students currently experience disability, it is likely that *all of them* will experience disability at some point in their lives. It also means that, while only some of our students may feel particularly called to ministry or leadership in contexts that attend specifically to disability (such as chaplaincy or



All across the country, people are celebrating ADA25 and following The ADA Legacy Tour. This tour bus stopped at the California Capitol Building.

advocacy settings), it is likely that every community that our students serve will include individuals and families with disabilities. For these reasons, we are remiss if we do not consciously and proactively engage disability in our schools and our curriculums.

RESOURCES

Fortunately, there is a wide range of resources available to those interested in disability in the context of

theological education. Of particular note is the [Summer Institute on Theology and Disability](#), which brings together scholars, students, practitioners, and others (with and without disabilities) for a week each summer to explore the intersections of theology and disability. Guided by a core group of distinguished faculty, this annual gathering creates a significant space for conversation and collaboration, advancing the academic study of disability theology while also exploring practical issues related to inclusive communities. The 2016 Summer Institute will be hosted by Western Theological Seminary and Hope College in Holland, Michigan, May 23–26, and presentations from past years are available on the Institute’s website.

A number of other resources related to disability and theological education are available:

- ♦ Faith-based and denominational materials and programs, such as the [Widening the Welcome Conference](#) (United Church of Christ) or the United Methodist Church’s [Accessibility Audits](#).
- ♦ Organizations such as the [Collaborative on Faith and Disability](#), which serves as a clearinghouse for resources related to faith and disability, including ideas for celebrating the 25th anniversary of the ADA.
- ♦ Professional societies that focus on the academic study of religion and disability, such as groups within the [American Academy of Religion](#) and the [Society for Biblical Literature](#).
- ♦ Housing models that connect seminarians and people with disabilities, such as [Friendship House Partners](#) at Western Theological Seminary and [Divinity Friendship House](#) at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

Schools may also find it helpful to refer to the ATS Policy Guideline titled “[Disability and Theological Education](#).”¹⁵ Adopted in 2008, this document serves as advice and counsel to the membership and explores issues ranging from recruitment and physical accessibility to curriculum and church relationships, with attention both to services for people with disabilities and to the needs for education for folks currently living without disabilities. The

policy guideline reminds us that attention to disability is theological work, as well as a practical obligation, and is an opportunity for us to model genuine efforts toward inclusion and education, messy and impartial as they might be, for our students and for our greater communities.

The National Collaborative on Faith and Disability has created a [self-assessment tool](#) for schools to use to consider their progress with respect to the ATS Policy Guideline titled “[Disability and Theological Education](#).” Unlike the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation, neither the guidelines nor this self-assessment tool holds ATS member schools accountable for implementing them in school policies or procedures. But it provides a useful means of taking stock.

The anniversary of the signing of the ADA in the United States, as with other anniversaries in Canada and worldwide, reminds us to celebrate the progress we have made toward living into such visions and offers an opportunity to recommit our efforts to the work and possibilities that still lie ahead.

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ENDNOTES

1. Naomi H. Annandale and Eric W. Carter, “Disability and Theological Education: A North American Study,” *Theological Education* 48, no. 2 (2014): 83–102. ATS does not collect data on the number or percentage of students with disabilities at member schools.
2. World Health Organization, “World Report on Disability” (2013), <http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/>.
3. Statistics Canada, “Disability in Canada: Initial findings from the Canadian Survey on Disability” (2013), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2013002-eng.htm>.
4. United States Census Bureau, “Americans with Disabilities: 2010” (2012), <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html>. It is important to note that disability is a complicated category to define and measure, and so statistics tend to vary from agency to agency as well as over time.
5. The Association of Theological Schools, “Disability and Theological Education,” *Policy Guidelines* (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools, 2008): 13–17, <http://www.ats.edu/uploads/about-ats/documents/policy-guideline-disability-and-theological-education.pdf>.