

# Disability and Theological Education

*Adopted as advice and counsel by the Association in 2008.*

## Disability and theological education: Toward a fully inclusive community

Recognizing that all fall short of God's intention for creation, this policy guideline asks ATS member schools to live toward a vision of inclusion of all God's people in theological education. This policy guideline further calls upon each ATS member school to welcome people with disabilities into the communal life and mission of the institution. It also invites schools to become models for their religious constituents regarding ministry to and with persons who have disabilities. Indeed, it is a theological call for each school to work toward the fullest possible inclusion of all God's people in its work and witness. Disability is both an individual and a community issue. Schools should become inclusive communities where all qualified people can learn and serve.

Theological schools are communities of faith and learning, guided by a theological vision.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish and Christian concept of God is one of compassionate love showing special regard for persons who are marginalized in any fashion. At the conclusion of the Genesis witness to creation, God considers the natural order and calls it all good. God takes special delight in the creation of persons as made in the image of God, each with unique gifts and capabilities. The ministry of Christ demonstrates that divine hospitality is available to all persons and that human barriers designating some as inferior are forever destroyed. The resurrection shows us the power of God to overcome all human attempts at limiting God's love, even death itself. The fellowship of the faithful is charged to foster the giftedness of all within the community that all may worship and serve in response to God's call. If issues of disability are central to understanding both divine care and the character of the church, then certainly issues of disability should play a crucial role in Christian ministerial formation.

## Mission

Because God's church welcomes all people, the mission of a theological school ought to attend to the contributions and needs of all its constituents: students, staff, faculty, administrators, board members, ecclesial representatives, donors, family members, and visitors to the campus—including those who live with disability. Member schools should examine their mission statements, and any interpretive expansion on them, to ensure that qualified persons with disabilities are not excluded on account of those disabilities from education preparing them for the ministries of the church. Schools should also prepare men and women for ministry with attention to the unique gifts and needs of persons with disabilities who will be present in their congregations and communities.

Different governmental and other entities use different definitions of what constitutes a "disability."<sup>2</sup> This policy guideline is not legal advice, nor does it seek to describe the legal obligations of member schools with respect to persons with disabilities. Each member school is encouraged to seek its own legal counsel and to be informed of its legal obligations in that regard. Rather, this policy guideline is

aspirational in nature. It is intended to outline the goals by which theological schools can make theological education possible for persons with disabilities who possess the gifts and abilities for ministry. To that end, this policy guideline should be understood to be as inclusive as reasonably possible in terms of defining the scope of persons with disabilities who should receive from member schools welcome, understanding, and assistance.

## **Recruitment, admission, hiring, and retention of people living with disabilities**

A shared mission among theological schools is to identify and recruit students and faculty who will be effective religious leaders, contribute to theological wisdom, and provide ministerial service. Students and faculty members living with disability bring opportunity for new theological insight and understanding.

Schools retain the freedom to make reasonable judgments about students' appropriate potential for ministry, including spiritual maturity, moral integrity, and ministerial capacity. Qualified students with disabilities should have potential access to theological education and should be recruited with the same care and enthusiasm as other students. Students with disabilities should apply for admission under the same guidelines and careful screening as other students to determine whether they have the gifts and readiness for life and learning in a theological community and for future religious leadership.

Likewise, while schools also retain the freedom to make reasonable judgments about the appropriate potential and qualifications of faculty, qualified persons with disabilities should be sought and equally considered as faculty members, administrators, board members, and staff. They should be recruited with the same intentionality as other underrepresented groups in theological education.

## **Curriculum and outcomes**

Graduate theological schools equip future religious leaders. The curriculum, however, has usually included limited or no attention to equipping those leaders with knowledge about the human experience of disability.<sup>3</sup> Curricular attention to issues of disability and interaction with persons living with disabilities cultivate the capacity of leaders to respond in ministry, teaching, and congregational settings.

Courses specifically focused on disability are valuable and necessary, but equally important is infusing knowledge about the experience of disability throughout the curriculum. When people with disabilities are members of the educational community and interact with others in the educational setting, they precipitate generative discourse that is, itself, a powerful curricular resource. Faculty can enhance students' awareness and understanding by weaving the subject of human disability into their courses.<sup>4</sup> The growing body of scholarship about theology and disability provides an important resource for curriculum development.

Schools should develop a process for assessing their efforts to include the contributions of persons with disabilities and to respond appropriately to their needs, including (1) advances in curriculum development and formation for effective ministry to and with persons with disabilities, (2) the school's progress in recruiting qualified persons with disabilities, including students, staff, and faculty, and (3) the impact on students and their ministries from the greater presence of persons with disabilities in the seminary community.

### **Removing barriers to participation**

Member schools should strive to provide access to all aspects of seminary life for those living with disabilities by removing barriers to their fuller participation in the community, unless doing so would result in an undue hardship to the seminary or fundamentally alter the seminary's programs and its requirements. This may include but is not limited to changes in customary practice, the normal routine of activities and events, and the individuals' environment, and may include but is not limited to the classroom, living quarters, chapel, library, activities, and services. Making any such changes is not meant to limit the responsibility for appropriate bodies to determine students' qualifications, readiness, or fitness for ministry.

Schools should have a clear set of guidelines and a process for responding to students who present the need for such changes and services. Schools should support faculty and staff with training and resources to deal appropriately and sensitively with students who have special educational needs.

### **Access and physical environment**

Theological schools should strive to eliminate physical or architectural barriers that exclude or deter people who live with a disability and, in other appropriate ways, provide a physically hospitable environment for study, work, worship, and everyday activities. Schools should address environmental barriers related to parking, steps, doorways, bathrooms, and accessibility to classrooms, offices, library, food service, living quarters, and social and worship spaces. Technology can assist persons with disabilities to have full access to institutional resources, but attention should be given to ensure that access to technology and its ease of use are readily available to all in the community.

An accessibility audit of the campus can identify (1) needed modifications, (2) creative approaches to alter customary patterns, and (3) priorities for the future. Any audit should involve consultation with people with disabilities in the seminary or broader community.

### **Financial commitment**

This policy acknowledges the varying financial circumstances among ATS member schools and the possible costs associated with making facilities and programs accessible to persons with disabilities. Schools must make their own decisions concerning what is financially possible and appropriate. Financial constraints, however, should not unduly prohibit schools from making the commitments necessary to becoming environments that employ and educate qualified persons living with disability and

developing the necessary resources to make the vision a reality. Schools should not overlook potential resources and partner organizations in their communities that might provide expertise and assistance in meeting a range of institutional needs.

### **Seminary community awareness**

Effective theological education requires a welcoming, supportive, and enabling institutional environment. To include persons living with disabilities, schools must intentionally consider the necessary steps to ensure a hospitable community and to identify and remove barriers of attitude. Schools should provide appropriate opportunities to raise awareness and understanding of the gifts and needs that will accompany the presence of persons with disabilities in the school community. For staff, students, and faculty, this will mean training and awareness opportunities that provide theological grounding and practical equipping that will enhance the school's inclusion of persons with disabilities. Special attention should be given to personnel practices that open the workplace in theological schools to persons with disabilities. Assistance should be offered to faculty to identify and implement strategies for providing hospitable learning environments and sensitive pedagogies for students with disabilities. These strategies should attend to classrooms, study experiences, and contextual learning settings. Attention should also be given to formation issues in the student community that include broadened understanding of persons living with disabilities.

### **Relationships with church bodies**

Theological students living with a disability should have the support of their appropriate judicatory or denominational offices. As appropriate to the church relationship of the seminary, theological schools may serve as advocates and interpreters on behalf of students who may be negotiating processes with church officials and committees that are unaccustomed to working with candidates who have a disability. Care should be taken to consult with each student before information is shared with a denominational body. The seminary might help to provide continuing education of clergy regarding ministry to and with persons in their congregations who live with disabilities. Seminaries could also seek to give leadership in their church bodies to raise awareness and foster action around issues of inclusion for persons with disabilities. In many ways, the seminary can become a model for the broader community.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Commission on Accrediting, *General Institutional Standards*, Standard 1, section 1 (Pittsburgh, PA: The Association of Theological Schools).
2. The World Health Organization defines disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" ([www.who.int/en](http://www.who.int/en)). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual such as walking, speaking, and breathing; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment" ([www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm](http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm)). See also *Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community*, Ginny Thornburgh, ed. (Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 1996). The ADA has an information line, staffed by the Civil Rights Division of the US Department of Justice: 800-514-0301 (voice) and 800-514-0383 (TDD). The province of Ontario bases a definition of disability on the International Classifica-

tion of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), which views disability as the interrelationship between body functions, activities, and social participation: “a limitation in activity as a result of a health problem or condition” ([www.who.int/classifications/icf](http://www.who.int/classifications/icf)). Human Resources and Social Development Canada, a governmental department, “considers people to have a disability if they have a physical or mental condition or a health problem that restricts their ability to perform activities that are normal for their age in Canadian society” ([www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/odi/documents/PALS/PALS003.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/odi/documents/PALS/PALS003.shtml)).

3. Survey of Theological Education and People with Disabilities (Birmingham, AL: The Center for Religion and Disability, Inc., 2003, 2005), Robert C. Anderson and W. Daniel Blair, principal researchers.
4. A multifaceted approach toward inclusion could include activities such as encouraging faculty and students to include disability topics in their research; chapel services led by people with disabilities; special courses or symposia dealing with theology, disability, and religious life; teaching how people with disabilities can also minister to others rather than simply being the objects of care; or continuing education about disability for community clergy.