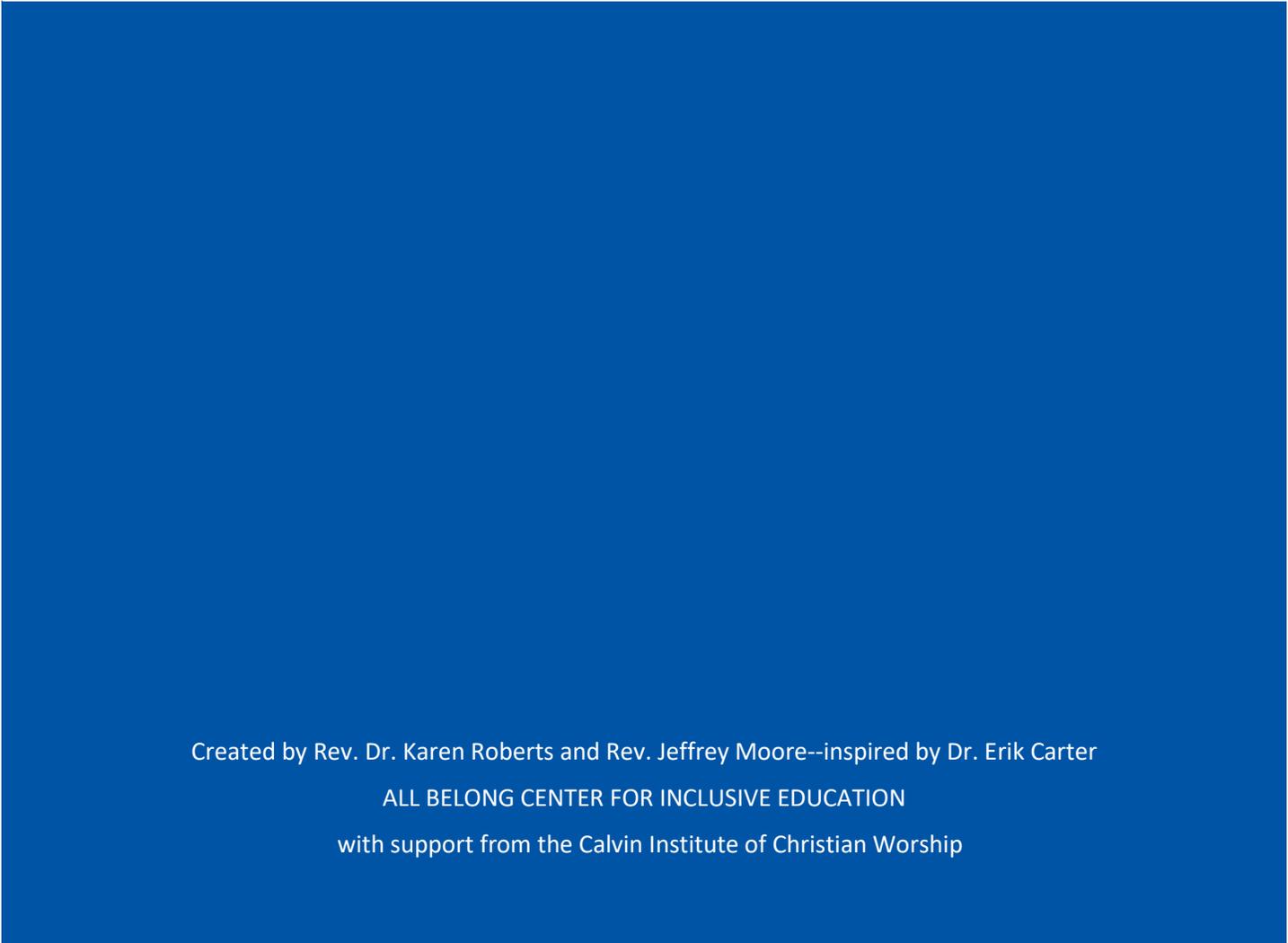




The Family Table: The Place We All Belong
A Sermon Series on the Biblical Foundations
of Belonging



Created by Rev. Dr. Karen Roberts and Rev. Jeffrey Moore--inspired by Dr. Erik Carter

ALL BELONG CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

with support from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

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Overview: 10 Dimensions of Belonging by Dr. Erik Carter

- [A Place of Belonging](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2732474520977482) found at journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2732474520977482
- [Fostering Belonging](https://bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html) found at bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html



Introduction

For the story that led to this sermon series, see All Belong's blog post [at allbelong.org/belonging-inspires-sermon-series/](http://allbelong.org/belonging-inspires-sermon-series/).

Defining disability: something that hinders life activities.

Disabilities may be visible or hidden and include mental health challenges. Disabilities may come or be discovered before, at or after birth. They may come with age, illness, injury, or other trauma.

Overview of Sermon Series

Week	Title/Theme	Scripture	Dimension(s) of Belonging
1	God's Heart of Welcome	Ephesians 4:4-6 Exodus 25:8; 33:11 John 1:1-5; 14 2 Corinthians 5:21 Acts 4:32-35	Present
2	Radical Inclusion	Luke 14:12-14; 21-23	Invited, Welcomed
3	I See You	Luke 19:1-10	Known, Accepted
4	Whatever it Takes	Mark 2:1-12	Supported, Cared-For
5	No Longer Strangers	John 15:12-16	Befriended
6	Better Together	1 Corinthians 12:12-26	Needed
7	The Way of Love	1 Corinthians 13:1-13	Loved

Week 1 - "God's Heart of Welcome"

Scripture focus: [Ephesians 4:4-6](#), [Exodus 25:8](#); [33:11](#), [John 1:1-5](#); [14](#), [2 Corinthians 5:21](#), [Acts 4:32-35](#)

Key idea: Belonging begins with being welcomed.

Our welcome of others flows from God's heart of welcome for all peoples. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit exists forever in eternal communion. The Triune God was present with his people in the temple. In the Incarnation, Christ tabernacles among us so that he may save us. Because of Christ we belong to him and to one another.

Dimension of Belonging: Present

To be present is to be there. People with disabilities are a part of all the things you offer as a congregation and all the places where people gather, just like anyone else. To be present to others is not simply to be alongside them; it is to recognize them for who they are and to learn what it means to love them.

What do these Scripture passages say?

- Nature of the Trinity—He has existed forever with the indwelling communion of the Trinity. Ephesians 4:4-6
- God desired to be present with His people, in the Temple. Exodus 25:8, 33:11.
- Christ being present with us. John 1:1-5; 14.
- The Gospel and the cross. 2 Corinthians 5:21
- God’s welcome to us is through Jesus Christ. Because of Christ we belong to Him and we belong to one another. Acts 4:32-35

So what? Why is this important?

God’s heart of welcome is for all peoples. God calls us into a relationship with Him. We are to be in relationship with one another: all ages, all abilities, all ethnicities, gathered around the Table. There are many individuals and families impacted by disability in our community who have not found a place at the table. Part of the body of Christ is missing.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

Be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts through this series so that our church becomes a community that embodies Christ-like love so that all belong.

Worship elements

- [Carried to the Table](#) Video by Faith Church, Dyer, IN, at vimeo.com/478656244 (4:01)
- Guided Reflection following Sermon (5:00)
 1. A Prayer for the Holy Spirit to lead and show us: Who is/has been missing? (quiet listening prayer)
 2. Scripture Reading: Acts 4:32-35 (ESV)
 3. What are we willing to do about it? (Guided prayer)
- “Set the Table” (see note, right).

We tried it...
...what will you do?

At Frist Presbyterian, the congregation sang the Song of Response while a family “finished setting the table” as a response to the message.

Additional worship elements

- During songs, use praise streamers with colors representing Father, Son, Holy Spirit (gold, red and white, respectively).
- Intentionally have greeting time, a moment to acknowledge each one who is present.

Story options

1. One from within your congregation: someone who had not made it to the table for some time but is now present. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
1. The story a pastor: his friend asked this pastor to come conduct his 5-year-old son's funeral, as the family had no pastor or church, but had found a church that was willing to allow them to use the building for the funeral. His son's disabilities had been what kept the family from being welcomed into the churches in their area (until the boy's body was welcomed as it came to the church in a casket).

Week 2 - "Radical Inclusion"

Scripture Focus: [Luke 14:12-14](#) ; [Luke 14:21-23](#)

Supplemental Scriptures: [Psalm 23:6](#) , [Isaiah 43:1](#) , [Revelation 19:9](#)

Key idea: The Grace of Welcome

These verses challenge our view of the kingdom and who will be at the Messianic banquet. We extend the grace of welcome to people who cannot reciprocate, because that is what God does for us.

Dimension of Belonging: Invited, Welcomed

Invited—Actively pursued, sought out; people notice when you are not there and reach out into the community; we want you to be part of this community; you are indispensable; being pursued is something different than simply showing up. The “ache of your absence” is felt by the congregation.

Welcomed—When they do arrive, they encounter wonderful, maybe even extravagant hospitality, that warm deep welcome, not just in terms of what

people say, but really in terms of how people feel when they are part of the family. A welcome without condition, without a caveat.

What do these Scripture passages say?

Verses 12-14: Jesus gives plain teaching on the people we are to include around our tables.

Verses 15-24: Jesus tells a parable to illustrate that teaching.

1. Grace of God to us: The king desires his house to be filled in celebration. All are welcome to celebrate with the king.
2. Grace of God extended to others through us: God's people are called to welcome others with the same grace. Verse 15 is a challenge brought by a hearer to Jesus to disclose his view of those who are worthy to feast at the messianic banquet. The hearer wants to hear a discourse on keeping the law (personal righteousness). Jesus responds with a call to radical hospitality which shows the heart of God.

So what? Why is this important?

These verses challenge our view of the kingdom and who will be at the Messianic banquet: we are to extend the grace of welcome to people who cannot reciprocate.

We tend to enter relationships to get something out of it. Jesus admonishes us to enter relationships where we're giving more than we're getting.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

Examine our own hearts.

- Are we actively welcoming those who are different from us, or who cannot reciprocate?
- Do we have an "ache" about the people who are absent in our fellowship?

Survey our church: Who is not here? Why aren't they here?

Use Erik Carter's *Reflection Tool for Congregations* available in the Study Guide (Resource A in the appendix) at allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/belongingsermonseries/

Go out. Seek. Compel. Invite

- What does this look like in our context?
- The church is to be table setters for the great banquet.

Worship Elements: Videos

- [Hyatt Moore painting the Luke 14 banquet](#) video by Joni and Friends, found at hyattmoore.com/videos/luke-14-banquet-time-lapse (3:00)
- [The Wedding Banquet](#) video by Rain for Roots, found at youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI (3:38)

Story options

2. A story from your congregation about invitation and welcome. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
3. The story of Adam Winstrom being invited and welcomed by pastor Andy (in *I Choose Adam*, pp. 111-113). Find this excerpt from the book in the Study Guide, at allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/belongingsermonseries/
4. Pastor George Grevenstuk talks about a group home coming to his church in this [video, "Worship as One"](#) by All Belong, found at youtu.be/Goiumi_CxLI (stop at 0:50).

Week 3 - "I See You"

Scripture Focus: [Luke 19:1-10](#)

Supplemental Scriptures: [Psalm 139:13-18](#), [Isaiah 43:1](#), [John 10:14-16](#)

Key idea: Our Creator God knows and sees us. Jesus saw and welcomed Zacchaeus. He sees us and says, "You are mine." However, welcoming is often not welcomed. It messes with everybody. Welcoming is hard but it also transforms those that are welcomed.

Dimensions of Belonging: Known, Accepted

Known—When people are known personally and by their name, not just by their label. They are known by their gifts and strengths, personality, and passion they bring to this community, not simply by all the things they can't do or struggle to do, which is so often how people with a disability are known in church communities: not by what they bring and those gifts, but by what they lack or struggle with.

Accepted—Without condition. I don't have to earn my entry and I don't have to wonder whether that entry will be re-offered the following week.

What do these Scripture passages say?

The acceptance that Jesus gives causes grumblings by others. Acceptance by Jesus causes Zacchaeus to give half of his goods to the poor. Zacchaeus, in contrast to Matthew, stays where he is (he doesn't follow Jesus to Jerusalem) and gives grace in response to being known and accepted by Jesus.

So what? Why is this important?

Believing is nurtured within the context of belonging (Erik Carter). Pity is not the same as acceptance.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

Our job is to love without condition, no matter the capacities of the new friend. God's Word and Spirit will do the rest. His grace and Word are sufficient.

What costs do we incur when we accept our friends with disabilities? Worship? Interruptions may be God-ordained moments to ponder and/or help us accept differences. How far are we as a church willing to go to accept invisible disabilities? Is our love conditional?

Worship elements:

Scripture Reading

Psalm 139 – Read or recited by people with varied abilities.

Song

“[He Knows My Name](#)” by Tommy Walker, a congregational song (3:43), found at youtube.com/watch?v=1bj-rlGcj8M.

Story options

- One from your congregation in which a person expresses how well they are known and accepted within the congregation. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
- [This video](#) (4:25) from All Belong, found at vimeo.com/480553894 tells the story of Nolan becoming known at his church.

We tried it...

...what will you do?

At Frist Presbyterian, we created [this video](#) of portions of Psalm 139 (2:55), found at youtu.be/dkbP265DDVI. We also sang “He Knows My Name” and during the instrumental interlude, we showed pictures of our Friendship Bible Club.

Week 4 - “Whatever it Takes”

Scripture Focus: [Mark 2:1-12](#)

Supplemental Scriptures: [Psalm 121](#), [1 Corinthians 12:25](#)

Key idea: God’s care for us is 24/7. He neither slumbers nor sleeps. There is never a time when He is not providing for our welfare. Likewise, in community we care and support one another, not only when we gather to worship but throughout the week. We do whatever it takes so that people can experience the love and presence of Jesus. We do whatever it takes to help one another flourish in Christ.

Dimensions of Belonging: Supported, Cared-For

Supported—I feel like I belong when people know me well enough to know what support is needed so that I can be part of all that is offered in that community. Support is the pathway to being present. The support you are providing tells me that you want me there and you are willing to make the effort that is required to support that presence. Congregations that are committed to being places of belonging see that support as essential, not optional.

Cared for—Care for my flourishing 7 days a week. You are not just involved in my life for 3 hours on Sunday morning, but you know what is going on in my life and you are meeting other needs we have as a family; needs for respite, needs for relationships, just times of having fun together. Needs for jobs, or housing, or practical help, those kinds of things. Care is really about what happens beyond the walls of our building.

What do these Scripture passages say?

Tenacity of the friends to bring the paralyzed man into the proximity of Jesus. Their expectation was for Jesus to heal him in body, but Jesus loves him even more to heal his heart and soul as well as his body.

Trust and vulnerability of the paralyzed man.

Jesus’ willingness to heal the paralyzed man’s heart as well as his body.

Response of the crowd and the Pharisees.

So what? Why is this important?

Jesus displays his absolute authority over sin and absolute love for the paralyzed man. There are no “disabled souls” after Jesus heals them. The friends have a singular task, passion to do whatever it takes to bring their friend to Jesus.

Jesus’ care for the man is first the healing of his soul. That is the sort of care that we as the church must be prepared to give to all people, including people with disabilities.

How do we pray for one another? If we are only praying for physical disability/healing and not their spiritual disability and reconciliation with Jesus, then our prayers are as limited as our view of God. How do we view God’s work?

Now what? What must I/we do now?

Talk with families. Listen to their needs. What feels like support? What isn’t helpful?

What are we prepared to do to bring people into proximity with Jesus?

Worship elements

Imaginative Prayer

[“Living the Story”](#) -Video example of how this was used available from First Presbyterian Church Aurora (9:33), found at youtu.be/VOVOIDBsn5g. Script available here [in PDF](#) for download and use.

Image

[Painting by James Tissot](#), found at i.pinimg.com/564x/cc/bc/f4/ccbcf49f4550aae771c0539885c46d1d.jpg

Video

[Sand painting of Mark 2:1-12](#) (4:47) by Harm van Schaik, found at facebook.com/watch/?v=10154924677586104

You can also find these in the Study Guide, available at allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/belongingsermonseries/

Story options

1. One from your congregation, in which a friend relied on others to participate in church. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
2. Kevin's story as told by John Swinton in the article "[From Inclusion to Belonging](#)" in the *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, April 2012 (pg. 180-181):

Kevin, a young man who has profound intellectual disabilities... [at] a local faith community... During the three months he attended, not one person spoke to him. One person patted him on the head in passing but that was it! The staff [who brought him] wondered if people were scared of Kevin, or embarrassed, or uncertain how to approach him. Either way the experience was not a good one, and they decided there was little point in Kevin continuing to attend. One member of staff said: Kevin gets a more positive response in the local coffee shop. Kevin has not been involved in any faith community since.

Week 5 - "No Longer Strangers"

Scripture Focus: [John 15:12-16](#)

Supplemental Scriptures: [Proverbs 17:17](#) , [Proverbs 18:24](#)

Key idea: Friendship is more than serving.

Jesus invites us into friendship with him and the Father, not just service. This friendship is the foundation of all relationships in the body of Christ. We are brothers and sisters and friends. People with disabilities are not projects to be served but people to befriend.

Dimensions of Belonging: Befriended

I know I belong when people name me as a friend, and when I can name them as friends. People to do things with, to go to the mall with, to have a meal with.

What do these Scripture passages say?

As Christians we are commanded to love one another. Jesus demonstrated the depth of His love for us by laying down his life for us. Friendship with Jesus involves the obligation of brotherly love. Christians grow by caring for and nurturing one another. (vs. 12)

Our friendships with one another are to reflect the self-giving love and sacrifice of Jesus. (vs. 13-14). Friends know one another (vs. 15). They have a close relationship. They know what one another is doing. Friendship is mutual, reciprocal. Friends share a common life together because we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

So what? Why is this important?

People of all abilities are created for relationships. People with disabilities desire friendship but often find many barriers. Often these barriers exist in the church. Christ's love for us is unconditional. He calls us friends. We are called to extend that same kind of love and friendship to one another, even if those friendships are initially inconvenient or uncomfortable.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

Make it a priority to spend time developing a friendship with a person who experiences disability. Often a good place to start is finding common interests. Become a prayer partner.

Worship elements

Reflection Prayer

Participate in a guided prayer using the words of Jesus, who calls us friends. (John 15:12-16).

Story options

- One from your congregation about people befriending one another. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
- [This video](#) (3:28), found at youtu.be/hdLVQwJNmW8, created by Living Stones Academy may take place in a school, but if they can build friendship and figure things out for whole schooldays for Ruby, perhaps your church can be inspired to think about how to include someone with needs like hers.

We tried it...

...what will you do?

At Frist Presbyterian, we created [this video](#) (7:39) from a recorded online session with our Friendship Bible Club in which we talked about being and having friends. Find it at youtu.be/a7Vl2xH70ts.

Week 6 - "Better Together"

Scripture Focus: [1 Corinthians 12:12-26](#)

Supplemental Scriptures: [Ephesians 2:10](#), [Philippians 4:13](#)

Key idea: One body; many parts.

The body of Christ is made up of many parts; all unique, all needed for the body of Christ to be complete. People of all abilities are co-laborers in Christ. We are better together.

Dimension of Belonging: Needed

The church doesn't see me only as a focus of ministry, that designated recipient of support, but sees me as someone who has gifts and talents and support to give to others. Reciprocity in ministry.

What do these Scripture passages say?

The Body of Christ is one body but many parts. It is God who arranges the parts. All are needed. We cannot say to one another, "I have no need for you." Greater honor is due to those who "seem" to be weaker. They are indispensable.

So what? Why is this important?

Does God (or God's people) accept me only if I'm healed?
What happens when we apply this passage to members of the body experiencing disability?

So...do we operate in our churches as if we NEED every body?

- As if *all* are "indispensable"?
- As if *all* are to be treated with greater honor?
- What would that look like if we did?
 - What would our leadership look like?
 - What would our facilities look like?
 - How would our fellowship need to change?

Active rather than passive participation. We NEED people with varied abilities to read Scriptures, because we hear it different from their lips rather than from pastor's. We NEED people with disabilities to help us remember that the Body of Christ is not about flawless performance or fake perceptions of perfection; rather, we are a community who are called to bear one another's burdens, both seen and unseen.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

Look for opportunities for people with disabilities to use their gifts in the congregation.

Encourage people with disabilities to be in leadership roles.

Be Co-laborers in Christ. Not ministry to, but ministry with.

Worship elements

Reflection Tool

Overview of 5 Stages: Changing Attitudes the5stages.com/resources/

Video/Story

Story of Christine Barreto and Debbie Abbs by InterVarsity Access, found at youtube.com/watch?v=-CxfqRpeUo (6:14).

Story options

- One from your congregation in which people with varied abilities serve alongside one another. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
1. A story from Barbara Newman's book, [*Body Building: Devotions Celebrating Inclusive Community*](#), such as the story about Melissa and Michele (pg. 57).

Week 7 - “The Way of Love”

Scripture Focus: [I Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

Supplemental Scriptures: [Galatians 5:22-23](#)

Key idea: Love is the most important thing.

Love is the motivating factor. If I am welcoming, but not loving, my welcome is meaningless. All these dimensions of belonging will be evident in the life of our congregation if we are actively practicing love. Love bears all things. Everything else will pass away.

Dimension of Belonging: Loved

Love permeates all aspects of belonging. The command to love one another fully extends to people with disabilities. When people talk about communities that matter most to them, they often talk about the love they experience there.

What do these Scripture passages say?

Love is the highest calling of the follower of Jesus.
Love is the only mark of the Christian life that lasts forever.
Love must be what the church is known for—the sacrificial love of Jesus must be our distinguishing characteristic.

So what? Why is this important?

Historically, the church has been the place where the lost, the broken, the sickly, the disabled, the abused, the orphaned, or hurting have found rest and peace and healing and the love of the Savior. Public hospitals first appeared as additions to Christian cathedrals in the Roman world.
Loving not only in word, but in action and deed. We love through what we do, not only with what we say. Our actions prove our love.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

The Church manifests such fruit in the way it deals with and supports members in its congregation. In doing so they demonstrate love in actions – as required by Jesus’ disciples (John 13:35). Go. Love.

Worship Elements

Song

- [“Be Glorified” by Bob Kilpatrick](#)
- [“The Servant Song” by Richard Gillard](#)
- [“Let Us Be Known” by Micah Massey](#)

Story options

- Tell stories from your own congregation, allowing individuals to share how they have found belonging in your community. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
- Share this story from All Belong about Aaron using his gifts to serve his congregation, while the worship director chose love over convenience: [Aaron’s story](#) (3:00), found at vimeo.com/480553291.

We tried it...
...what will you do?

At First Presbyterian, we created a video we called [Stories of Belonging](#) (6:34), because we could not all gather at the same time and place due to COVID, and in this way we could share stories of belonging in our congregation. Find it at youtu.be/QD9UXjiRjv4.

Additional Resources

Books

Abbs, Deborah Meyer. *Belonging: Accessibility, Inclusion and Christian Community*; 2021, InterVarsity Press.

Bolt, Sarah. *Your Feet, My Shoes*; 2009, All Belong (formerly CLC Network).

Gehan, Mary Beth. *Irresistible Invitation: A Bible study on God's Extravagant Love for People with Disabilities*; 2018, Mary Beth Gehan.

Grcevich, Stephen. *Mental Health and the Church*; 2018, Zondervan.

Hardwick, Lamar. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*; 2021, InterVarsity Press.

Hubach, Stephanie. *Same Lake, Different Boat*; Revised and updated 2020, P & R Publishing Co.

Newman, Barbara. *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*; 2014, All Belong.

Newman, Barbara. *Body Building: Devotions Celebrating Inclusive Community*; 2009, All Belong (formerly CLC Network).

Philo, Jolene and Weatherbee, Katie. *Every Child Welcome*; 2015, Kregel Publications.

Roberts, Tony. *Delight in Disorder: Ministry, Madness, Mission*; 2014, A Way With Words Publishing.

Winstrom, David. *I Choose Adam*; 2017, Lighting Tree Creative Media.

Ministries

[Ability Ministries, abilityministry.com/](http://abilityministry.com/)

[All Belong Church Resources, allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/](http://allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/)

[Joni and Friends Church Resources, joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/](http://joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/)

[Key Ministry Church Resources, keyministry.org/churches](http://keyministry.org/churches)

[Nathaniel's Hope, https://nathanielshope.org/about-us/](https://nathanielshope.org/about-us/)

[The 5 Stages: Changing Attitudes, the5stages.com/resources/](http://the5stages.com/resources/)