

The Call and Opportunity for Faith Communities to Transform the Lives of People with Disabilities and their Communities

By Bill Gaventa, Wesley Allen,
Harold Kleinert, and Erik W. Carter



Putting Faith To Work

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The Call and Opportunity for Faith Communities to Transform the
Lives of People with Disabilities and their Communities**
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Bill Gaventa, M.Div., Consultant, *Putting Faith to Work* Project
Wesley Allen, M.Div., Quality Management Associates, Inc., New Jersey
Harold Kleinert, Ed.D., University of Kentucky
Erik W. Carter, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University

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The Vision

Faith communities have the opportunity and capacity to transform the lives of many people with disabilities, their families, and their communities by helping people find meaningful jobs, assume valued roles, and share their gifts and vocation with others.

The Need and Opportunity

Perhaps your first response to this vision is this: “Are there not any number of programs that help people with disabilities find employment?” In many communities across the country, the answer is a qualified “yes.” Yet in spite of decades of formal employment initiatives, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities remains appallingly high (see Box 1). The financial costs to people and communities are substantial and striking. But even more important are the costs in terms of unused gifts and abilities, the psychological and emotional costs of being unemployed or without meaningful work, and the spiritual costs in self-esteem, self-worth, and sense of purpose or calling.¹

Many people without disabilities know these costs firsthand, ones a majority of Americans are likely to face at some point in their lives. Indeed, the last decade has thrust millions of people in the unexpected role of being “unemployed.”² Stories abound about endless job searches that led to dead ends and abandonment of the prospect of working again. We know those costs from the television, newspapers, neighbors, relatives, friends, and members of our own communities of faith. Recessions and unemployment so often lead to personal depressions and family crises, lost homes and dreams, depressed communities, and a strapped society short of funds and uncertain of how to turn lives and economies around.³ Too often, everyone becomes numb; needs go unseen while hidden in plain sight.

Thus a personal and financial crisis can become a spiritual crisis as well. It becomes hard to “have faith,” to keep up hope, and reach out in acts of love and care when one has little left to give, or when a community or people think that their actions have made little difference in the past nor will in the future. Far too many people stand alone or feel alone at these times.

Of course, there are exceptions that run in the hundreds of thousands: good people who stand by others over the long haul, who keep trying new ways, and who personally sacrifice so that others can recover the roles of “employee,” “contributor,” “provider,” and “giver.” In this past recession, many communities of faith have embarked on ministries and programs to help their own members and members of their broader community. That help can come in many practical and tangible ways, but the first steps are often spiritual: listening, support groups, walking with others, prayer, and other acts that help individuals navigate the spiritual, emotional, and psychological costs of being unemployed. Having other people walk with you, listen, and work with you in ways that job agencies and vocational programs may not be able to do can make all the difference in the world.



BOX 1: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR THRIVING IN THE WORKPLACE

The persistence and pervasiveness of disappointing employment outcomes for people with disabilities offer real opportunity for congregations across the country to have a real impact. Almost every single available employment metric confirms these two points. First, far too many people with disabilities are missing out on the numerous benefits of having a good job and the opportunities to share their gifts and talents within the workplace. Second, far too many employers are missing out on opportunities to benefit from the considerable contributions people with disabilities have to make to the success, culture, and bottom-line of their business or organization.⁴ Consider these statistics:

- According to April 2014 statistics from the Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is double that of people without disabilities (12.5% versus 5.6%). Perhaps most striking is that only 19.1% of people with disabilities participate in the labor force, versus 68.3% of people without disabilities.⁵
- Only 16% of young adults (ages 22-30) with a cognitive disability who receive SSI are employed, and most work hours and receive pay that are substantially lower than peers without disabilities.⁶
- Only about one quarter (26%) of young adults with severe disabilities were employed up to two years after leaving high school. Many work in segregated work settings, make low wages, and work few hours.⁷
- Up to six years after leaving high school, barely half of young adults with autism have held a paid job in their community *at any time* since graduation.⁸
- The poverty rate for people with significant disabilities is 29%, compared to 14% for people without disabilities.⁹
- Only 5% of people with disabilities who are working report they used a state, federal, non-profit, or community-based service provider agency to assist them in finding their current job.¹⁰

Although these have been tough times for so many Americans, this is a crisis that has been well known by too many people with disabilities for an even longer time.¹¹ Nearly one in five Americans—more than 50 million people—is impacted by a disability of some kind (see Box 2). People with disabilities are a diverse group. But they are also a very inclusive group. Indeed, it is the world’s most inclusive minority: all of us can join this community at any point. It too often puts someone in the category of “unemployed” as well. Being labeled “disabled” often keeps others from seeing the capacity, strengths, and gifts that so many have. It also leads others to overlook their desire to be “givers” as well as “receivers,” contributors rather than “clients,” and productive members of both community and congregation.

Over the past several decades, thousands of congregations and communities of faith have begun to realize the ways that people with disabilities and their families have too long been excluded—intentionally or unintentionally—from their midst. People with disabilities and families have expressed and acted on their desire and dream to be part of the “people of God,” however defined, because of the importance of spirituality and faith in their own lives, their belief that they too are created in the image of God, and their desire to practice faith traditions that have at their core the belief that “everyone is welcome and a part of God’s people.”¹² People with disabilities are growing up in congregations and finding ways to be active, contributing members where their gifts are seen, their faith respected, their needs supported, and their impact on the lives of others and the congregation as a whole both appreciated and valued. But they still might have little to do the other six days of the week.¹³

The *Putting Faith to Work* vision and project are founded on beliefs that:

1. Work is both a gift and a responsibility. There are scriptural, theological, and historical understandings in all the major faith traditions that affirm (a) the importance of everyone using their gifts in service to God and community, and (b) the community’s call to make that possible for all.
2. The path to employment for some may first start with their human spirit, the belief that they have gifts to share and a call to contribute, and can draw upon the capacity for committed spiritual communities to translate vision into reality.
3. A next step for inclusion and ministries in many faith communities where people with disabilities and their families may be is simply to help members with disabilities find jobs and other ways to contribute within and beyond their congregation.
4. Active employment ministries in congregations that do not yet serve people with disabilities could use their support strategies to also meet pressing needs among people with disabilities.
5. The path to employment is often through relationships, connections, and people not hindered by policies, rules, and funding mechanisms.
6. Current “best practices” in the worlds of disability supports and employment services could be adapted and shared with congregations to help people with disabilities (and others without jobs) to find them.
7. Congregations are full of members with connections to many parts of a community and who have the freedom and capacity to support people on their journeys in a variety of ways.
8. Many people would rather seek help first from their congregation than public, profit, or non-profit services. A congregation does not have to set up a “program” to help one or two people. Each faith community knows its own people best and can determine the best ways to extend support.
9. The impact of a congregation’s spiritual, emotional, and practical help in finding one person a job or other important social role can literally be both transformative and redemptive.
10. The involvement of any part of the over 350,000 congregations in this country, in any faith tradition, rural or urban, in this kind of ministry would make a powerful witness to the importance of communities of faith in the face of what too often are seen as intractable social needs.



BOX 2: THE PRESENCE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

There are more than 56 million Americans with disabilities.¹⁴ Indeed, approximately 19% of *any* community in *any* part of the country fits this description. Such disabilities can take a variety of forms, including physical disabilities, intellectual disability, autism, traumatic brain injury, and psychiatric disabilities. These disabilities can emerge in childhood (e.g., Down syndrome, autism) or be acquired later in life (e.g., wounded veterans, automobile and other accidents). And they can vary in intensity, from disabilities having minimal impact on daily activities to those requiring extensive and ongoing support. Consider the following statistics:¹⁵

- 2.2% of Americans have serious difficulty seeing or are blind
- 3.4% of Americans have serious difficulty hearing or are deaf
- 6.9% of Americans have a physical disability making it difficult to walk or climb stairs
- 4.9% of Americans have a cognitive disability
- 2.7% of Americans have a disability that makes self-care difficult
- 5.6% of Americans have a disability that makes certain independent living tasks difficult
- Almost 3.5 million veterans have a service-connected disability¹⁶

While people with disabilities are sometimes viewed by society primarily in terms of what they cannot do or struggle to do, they also have wonderful strengths and talents that exist alongside any challenges, just like anyone else. Moreover, many adaptations and modifications can bridge the gap between workplace demands and the abilities of people.

As you consider who in your midst is impacted by disability, apply the percentages above to the number of people in your congregation, in your city, or in your region. To learn how many people with disabilities live in your community, visit American FactFinder at <http://factfinder2.census.gov>. They may not be visible in your congregation, but they are in the community, and your members may be able to draw upon their networks to find out.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the vision and foundations of the “*Putting Faith to Work*” project. We begin by exploring some of the religious, theological, and spiritual understandings of the importance of work (the “whys”) and then provide more detail about how faith communities might put that vision into practice (the “hows”). This paper (and, eventually a good-practice guide) is not meant to be a rulebook but rather a set of considerations, recommended practices, and creative possibilities. We anticipate and count on the congregations that pilot this project to learn from and be inspired by each other.

Work as Gift and Call: Religious and Spiritual Foundations

In the Christian tradition, there is a paradox about “faith” and “works.” It starts in the New Testament, with discussions by the Apostle Paul and others about whether “faith” is more important than “works,” or vice versa. In those days, like today, religious communities were easily polarized into opposites. However, a paradox is not an “either/or question,” but a “both/and.” In the Bible, people of faith are called to be “faithful followers” or “faithful servants” (i.e., people of faith and people who work). Likewise, faith and work are each seen as both gift and responsibility. Faithfulness is not all our own doing nor ultimately a question about which is most important.

Likewise, we believe that “putting faith to work” by assisting individuals with disabilities and others to find jobs is a vision that transcends polarities in many discussions and arguments about the role of faith in the public sphere. Individuals with disabilities and their families can be caught up in those arguments just like everyone else. Their presence in communities and congregations—and lack of opportunity for them to contribute as valued members, employees and citizens—both call people of faith and service to put faith into action. That action has the possibility of real, concrete change in the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

The Spiritual and Religious Foundations of Work

The spiritual questions of being human have been outlined and discussed in countless ways and have shaped core values in cultures and societies. In the public and secular world of disability services and supports, the core values that have guided most pieces of legislation and service systems have been those of independence, productivity, self-determination, and community.¹⁷ Psychologically, those values reflect, respectively, issues of identity, purpose, self-agency/control, and belonging. Spiritually, we might outline them as the questions of “Who am I?” “Why am I?” “What power do I have?” and “Whose am I?”¹⁸

In the United States, we often answer those questions by referencing our job. Start a conversation: “Who are you?” and the next question is often “What do you do?” As you go further, you may find someone’s job defines who they are, reflects their sense of vocation of calling, says something about what kind of impact or control it gives them, and often shapes one’s sense of community through associations with others who work in similar positions or professions. Having a job, being needed, making a difference, being productive, earning a living, providing for others— all make a huge difference in our self-esteem, our sense of hopefulness, and our identity as citizens and members and managers of many other identities (e.g., religious, cultural), roles (family, community) and vocation (things we feel called to do).



Ask anyone: “What does your job mean to you?”

The answers are myriad. One can sometimes get caught up in how bad or hard one’s job is, the terrible supervisor, or the lack of pay, but at other levels, jobs and other valued roles can reflect a deep sense of vocation, satisfaction, joy, and healing. Bruce Anderson¹⁹ calls it the discovery and use of our core gifts. Everybody has some. Spiritual leaders and writers like Frederick Buechner talk about what brings us “deep gladness”:

*Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.*²⁰

The Biblical tradition starts with God at work, producing one thing after another, creating the world in six days. On the sixth day, in this first chapter of Genesis, God created man and woman in God’s image, to “subdue” and “have dominion” over the earth, phrases that in Hebrew can also mean “take responsibility for” or “manage.” On the seventh day, God rested. However one interprets the Genesis story, it is a story of work as creation, care, and responsibility, an expression of the bounty and “goodness” of what was created, including man and woman, and a recognition of the sacred rhythms of work and rest.

In the second chapter of Genesis, commonly called the second creation story, the order is a little different, and God created the Garden of Eden, and put man in the garden “to till and keep it”(2:15). After Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden, they are told they will have to work, only that it will involve more travail and suffering than before they disobeyed the command not to eat of the forbidden fruit. In the Jewish tradition, we are called to the work of “tikkum olam,” repairing that breach between God and humankind.

The whole Hebrew Bible continues to tell the story of a God working with God’s people, redeeming them from work as slaves in Egypt, and continually inviting them to be faithful followers, stewards, partners, and collaborators in God’s ongoing act of creation. The nation’s righteousness was frequently judged by the ways it treated those at the margins. The issue was not simply one of care but of justice and opportunity. What’s more, in an economy that was primarily agrarian, farmers (employers) were commanded to leave a tenth of their field so that the “widow and orphan” might harvest their own food (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21, Ruth 2:2-23). When the dream of a return from exile in Babylon was foretold, the vision was that everyone returned, including the “blind” and the “lame” (Jeremiah 31: 8-9). Everyone was to belong. All had a part. To be faithful meant integrating that faith in the realms of daily personal, civic, and *economic* life.

In the New Testament, the call to faithful service by Jesus goes out to everyone. In the Parable of the Talents, the message was that it was not how many talents you had that was important, but what you *did* with them (Matthew 25: 14-30). The Apostle Paul wrote of the gifts of every single person, every part of the body of Christ, noting that everyone was called to be faithful stewards of the gifts and talents that God had given them (I Corinthians 12). Like the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, he noted the extra care and attention that needed to be paid to those considered to be the “weaker members of the body”:

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.²¹

As with the prophets, this Biblical tradition envisions a community where everyone has a place and sense of purpose, where the whole community takes special responsibility for ensuring that those on the margins have that same opportunity.

Perspectives from Other Faith Traditions

Every spiritual and religious tradition has something to say about the value of work (see the quotations in Box 3). In the Putting Faith to Work project, we hope to develop a model that can also be used across faith traditions. For example, in Islam:

With works comes dignity...no one enjoys a meal more than a person who actually gives their time, effort, and labor to go out and to provide a way to take care of themselves and their families.²²

Re-discovering and re-claiming the depth of our faith traditions and perspectives on work is part of the purpose of "Putting Faith to Work," not just for people with disabilities but for every person who seeks to live out his or her faith in ways that inform and are informed by one's daily life. It is an individual task. But it is also a communal one as each community of faith seeks to remember, live, and proclaim out of the tradition that draws them together.

From Vision to Practice: The Sum is Greater than the Parts

In the world of supported employment, *task analysis* is the process used for taking a job apart, thinking about the various tasks it entails, and figuring out ways to teach those skills or to customize a job to the skills and gifts of an individual. When a person's skills and talents are used well and he or she finds a job that is personally fulfilling and which makes a contribution to an employer, the resulting transformation is often experienced as a sum that is greater than the parts. Using a version of that process on the "Putting Faith to Work" project, there are any number of possible roles and tasks for everyone involved. We offer these ideas not as a "cookie cutter" recipe, but to prompt faith communities to think carefully and creatively.



BOX 3: EXAMPLE SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF WORK

- “Contemplating God’s saving activity in history, the psalmist cries out, ‘For you, O Lord, have me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.’” (Psalm 92:4 NRSV)
- “Here is the crux of working faithfully in companionship with God the Creator. We are gladdened by God’s many-splendored labors of love that adorn our lives. And we bring joy to others through the works of our hands.”²³
- “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.” (Proverbs 14:23 NIV)
- “There is something very beautiful in work which is well and precisely done. It is a participation in the activity of God, who makes things well and wisely, beautiful to the last detail.”²⁴
- “We were not put on earth to be cared for. We were put on earth to care for it.”²⁵
- “That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.” (Ecclesiastes 3:13 NIV)
- “The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was asked what type of earning was best, and he replied: ‘A man’s work with his hands and every (lawful) business transaction.’”²⁶
- “He may reward those who have believed and done righteous works out of His bounty.”²⁷
- “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, NIV)
- “To practice Right Livelihood (samyag ajiva), you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion. The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self, or it can be a source of suffering for you and others. ... Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or erode them. We should be awake to the consequences, far and near, of the way we earn our living.”²⁸

The Power of a Committed Community of Faith

First of all, a community of faith is a spiritual community. By fully including people with disabilities in the life of that community, by raising children with disabilities in that wider faith family, and by standing with people who acquire a disability because of accident or disease, a faith community provides a spiritual home and foundation where one is accepted, supported, and belongs. As stated earlier, it is a place where people get to know one another and deal together with the emotional and spiritual challenges of losing a job or capacity. Prominent faith traditions all clearly affirm the value and gift of every person as well as the gift and call of God to join in the work of the world as faithful servants.

Emotional and spiritual supports are just the beginning. Those supports can take the form of friends, pastoral care from clergy, support groups within a congregation, a task force, or a congregation as a whole. When specific needs and dreams of a specific person, especially one known within a congregation, are made visible and public in the midst of a community called to care and respond, new possibilities emerge. If you have been part of a community of faith, you have seen it in relationship to other needs and dreams time and time again.

The possibilities for concrete and practical forms of support depend only on the vision, commitment, and gifts of other members. Consider just a few examples:

As a person with a disability grows up in, becomes included in, or returns to a congregation, clergy and others can get to know the need and dream for a job or way to contribute to the community.

A teenager with a disability “transitioning” into young adulthood is someone known by the congregation. How might that community assist that teen and his or her family with planning what comes next? In a Pennsylvania congregation, a job coach working with a young man with autism who loved power tools talked to the teenager’s pastor. They come up with a way for him to use a leaf blower to help care for the church grounds. He becomes so good at it that he is noticed by a local landscaping crew, which leads to a paid job.

A small group or existing ministry within a congregation responds, gets to know the individual, and works with that person on his or her interests, passions, gifts, and dreams. In other words, they help a person define his or her own sense of vocation and calling.

A veteran returns home with a physical disability, one that perhaps keeps him or her from doing a previous job. How might the community of faith rally to help in that transition and work with him or her to find a job that fits that person’s gifts and interests? They involve another congregational member and a contact with an employment counselor or job coach to help plan together the pathway to work.

If there are specific skills someone needs to learn to return to work, then she turns to other members of the congregation for mentorship or someone who can help him or her learn these skills.

A young adult with spinal cord injury knows neither how to develop a resume nor how to dress for interviews and work. The support circle could approach employers in the congregation or members of their team to help him learn these important skills.

An older man transitioning from a state developmental center is excited and eager to give back and assimilate into the community, despite being labeled “not capable of competitive



employment.” With the assistance of support staff, he gets connected with a local parish and begins volunteering his time to organize and inventory food pantry items. In time and with the appropriate assistance, he develops other skills, including bagging/boxing items and assisting persons in the community as they come weekly to get food items. Through the volunteer work, he secures a job at a local grocer. Eventually, he encourages the grocer to contribute monthly to the food pantry in an effort to feed more people.

Using the network of contacts within the congregation, and from members of the congregation to community, people start looking for places and ways for that individual to interview, test out a position, or work with others to build a customized job.

A 22-year-old man leaving high school for the world of adult services is kicked out of his sheltered workshop for inappropriate behavior. He is then kicked out of two day programs for similar reasons. For the next year, he spends his days at home with only the companionship of his support staff. The staff discover that he loves cars, being around cars, and most of all, cleaning cars. He begins cleaning and monitoring (state vehicle regulations) the agency vehicles. Members of his support team know that other members in the congregation work for car dealers. They talk with them, and together, working with the dealer, work out a part-time job for him detailing cars and keeping the vehicle bay clean. From this connection, another opportunity at a sister-dealership opens up where a mobile crew is paid to clean the mechanic bays and customer service area three days a week.

If a person and congregational team need the help of public services and vocational programs, they may have members in their congregation or a partner in the world of human services who can help them negotiate bureaucracies, benefits, and red tape. They also realize that the faith community can be an effective advocate for needed supports.

A group working with an individual with a disability in their congregation needs help figuring out with that person all the particular gifts and strengths she has, and they invite someone from a local human service or vocational agency to be part of this conversation. There may be public supports such as transportation or an ongoing job coach that could help, but red tape seems to have tied that up. So they decide to talk and advocate with local agencies to help get the public supports available while they help find the right kind of job opportunity.

A person’s friends or support circle commits to assisting as long as it is needed. Finding someone a place and role is sometimes not easy, for anyone. There will be challenges. This is not a charity or pity enterprise, what is sometimes known as the “beg, place, and pray” strategy. The goal is to help people find meaningful and satisfying roles and for employers to find good, dependable employees who bring value to their business.

A group within a congregation helps a woman with a psychiatric disability find a position in a dry cleaning store run by a congregational member. But they then hear from the employer/member that she is acting in ways that are inappropriate. Because of the particular trust built up between two members of the team, who are also women, they start to work with the young woman on what is appropriate, and, as necessary, call in someone to help her figure out better ways to get some of the attention she wants and address the issues she is feeling.

The Congregation as a Network of Leaders and as Leader

A pastor, other leaders in the congregation, a committee or task force, and/or an ongoing circle of support can get things started with one person, one at a time. They can also enlist the whole congregation by sharing their vision of what they are doing in the name of that community of faith. Not everyone needs to be involved, but the whole congregation can and should know that this group might come to the congregation for help in finding the right opportunities for someone they are supporting.

“When there is a thorn in the foot, the whole body stoops to pluck it out.”²⁹

If you don't think they have the right contacts, think again. Remember the often-cited “six degrees of separation.” From a small congregation to a large one, most members are employees, employers, and/or members of civic groups and community associations. Getting the word out about the work and community opportunities a person with a disability is looking for can become everyone's role. People who work in employment services know that it is often the informal connections, especially by people who know the person looking, that more frequently lead to jobs.³⁰ Networking works well for people with disabilities just like anyone else. Consider these examples:

A medium-sized congregation realizes that several of its members have lost jobs in the recession. The pastor and a small team start putting an announcement in each weekly bulletin about the kind of job or opportunity wanted, based on someone's interests and skills, without identifying the person but asking the congregation to look. Those contacts lead to many more interviews and options than people had been able to find on their own.

An employment provider meets with a local pastor who puts him in contact with a member of the congregation who is an employee working for a local bank. The agency representative meets with the banker as a favor to the pastor. The agency representative shares the organization's vision and mission around supporting people with disabilities with the banker. While the banker cannot make hiring decisions, a door is opened to discuss things further as she shares with her employer about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. Through more conversation, the employer ends up creating a supported employment initiative aimed at hiring qualified persons with disabilities.

A congregation member whose job is with a community employment provider is asked by his church's pastor to speak about his work. After the service, another congregant approaches him and shares the difficulty he has had navigating the state systems for his younger brother who has a disability. They set aside a day to meet for coffee to discuss his brother and the appropriate avenues to pursue. Eventually the young man is connected to the vocational rehabilitation office and quickly secures a job with a Boston-based coffee company. The job is carved out specifically for him, and he does his work exceedingly well.

But there may be an even more important role a faith community can embody in both leadership and networking. As a faith community takes on this kind of ministry and religious service, there could be many opportunities to help all of its members reflect on the meaning of work and how they, as a people of faith, might integrate their own faith and calling into their own roles as employers and employees. Faith communities can reflect on the following:



- Employers are not in business to be charity organizations. They want reliable, dependable, and passionate employees, people who can contribute to the mission of their organization and its team morale and spirit. There are countless examples of people with disabilities bringing these assets into businesses that were initially uncertain about hiring.
- For many companies, hiring people with disabilities is part of their commitment to social responsibility and helps them create a positive, reputable image in their community.³¹
- Employers are also concerned about contributing to the welfare of the community. This concern may have been part of the biblical injunction in an agrarian economy to leave a “tenth of the field” so that the widow and orphan could work and gather their own food. Think and dream about what might happen if all employers tried to embody that call by determining a percentage of their work force they would utilize to seek out people with disabilities and others in the community who needed a job for all kinds of reasons. Employers would not do so as an act of pity or charity but from a belief that everyone needs an opportunity to work and that everyone has the capacity to learn. Many employers believe that the private sector might be a better solution than public services perceived as a “handout.” If so, then a commitment to live out a positive vision and belief in the sacred power of work by intentionally providing opportunities for those with disabilities or other issues that do not fit the “norm” becomes another example of “putting faith to work.”
- Employers might be even more willing to provide these opportunities if they know that a group of concerned and committed congregational members are behind the person they are hiring to help in any way possible.
- The power is not just with employers who are congregational members. Members who are employees might help open doors for the person looking, and, if it worked out that an opportunity arose in their business, be the very employees who help support that individual at work. Research shows that employees often best learn with and from their co-workers.³² Thus one might say that any member of a congregation involved in a faith community that “puts faith to work” could live out that vision by helping to support people with disabilities who work where they do, even through simple gestures like developing friendship.

Finally, the call of “putting faith to work” also means that a congregation itself may be the place to start as the group living out that vision. There are at least two primary ways that can happen. First, as people with disabilities are more fully included in the life of the congregation, members can help find volunteer and leadership roles within the congregation that a person can do. People with disabilities are also called to be people who live out their faith and respond to God’s call, whether that is defined as “being disciples,” “doing mitzvah,” “following the Five Laws,” or other forms of giving to others and the life of the community. People with disabilities, like everyone, value the opportunity to have their gifts recognized, to be “givers” as well as “receivers.” The very life and flourishing of a faith community depends on the multiple gifts of its members in support of others and its life together. Putting faith to work can thus start right at home. If we cannot figure out a way for someone to contribute to the life of a faith community, it may say more about our imagination than their disability. In *Dancing with Max*, Emily Colson³³ describes how her Max, her son with autism, got connected and involved successfully with a congregation through the guys’ group known as the “grunt crew,” the group that stacked the chairs after services and set them up. They invited Max to help, became his friends and “support network,” and Max had a job that brought both satisfaction and a community.

Second, congregations are also employers. There are positions and services used by the congregation in its life and work together that might be a perfect match for someone with a disability. That could be in any position.

Both strategies are ways to live out this vision and ways for others in a congregation to begin to see people with disabilities as givers as well as receivers, contributors rather than charity, and people with gifts, strengths, and the desire to use them in service to and with others. Henri Nouwen perhaps says it best:

The great paradox of ministry, therefore, is that we minister above all with our weakness, a weakness that invites us to receive from those to whom we go. The more in touch we are with our own need for healing and salvation, the more open we are to receive in gratitude what others have to offer us. The true skill of ministry is to help fearful and often oppressed men and women become aware of their own gifts, by receiving them in gratitude. In a sense, ministry becomes the skill of active dependency: willing to be dependent on what others have to give but often do not realize they have.³⁴

Jobs Programs and Human Services: The Role of Allies and Shepherds

The vision of “Putting Faith to Work” is primarily based on the potential power of a caring community to support a person’s journey to employment and other valued roles in a community such as volunteering. But it is also based partly on the fact that many people would rather ask for and/or receive help from their faith community than from a public organization. That reluctance can be for any number of reasons, including red tape, confusing eligibility criteria, waiting lists, negative past experiences, and the assumed stigma of being a “client” or receiving services from a government or non-profit organization. You can probably name others.

Moreover, in many areas of the country, public and non-profit services are limited or distant. In some of those areas, both rural and urban, faith communities are *the* primary or preferred support organization. That does not mean, however, that public and non-profit vocational services cannot or should not be able to assist and help. In fact, they can be invaluable in at least two roles.

First, they can be *allies*. Staff from vocational agencies or supported employment programs can assist a congregational team and individual with whom they are working in discovering core gifts and strengths, support needs, potential jobs, and training strategies. Likewise, they can assist an established employment ministry, especially if the congregation is assisting people with disabilities for the first time. They can help with person-centered planning strategies, guide a congregation by helping it learn basic supported employment strategies, approach employers, and provide information and training to employers and fellow employees. Most vocational agency staff would be delighted to see a group of people in the community working to help someone find and keep a job.

Second, they can be *shepherds*. This may be a strange name for public or non-profit employees or professionals, and they might not respond if you called them by this title. But a shepherd is also a “guide” who can help an individual and/or a congregational team through what often seems like a confusing maze of vocational supports, eligibility issues, and public employee benefits, as well as employers, rules, regulations, and jargon that are very different than the “helping” language in a community of faith. A faith community is ideally situated to have other guiding roles, such as



emotional and spiritual supports, networking with the wider community, celebrating successes, and helping overcome hurdles, but employees from vocational services in a wide variety of human service areas can be very helpful.

Both are roles that call for careful and committed partnership and collaboration. Many human service agencies have not had much experience working with congregations. Many professionals who work in the area of disability have also heard stories about the lack of support by congregations to people with disabilities and their families. Or they may think that because they receive public funds or tax dollars that they cannot work with a church or synagogue.³⁵ Clergy and congregations may have experience in referring individuals to human services but may not have worked together in ways that draw on the strengths and gifts of both the congregation and the agency.

It may be very important for human service professionals to remember that a community of faith does not need to have degrees in vocational rehabilitation to be effective, just as it is important for congregations to realize that human service agencies have to cope with massive amounts of guidelines and restrictions that may come from funding sources. But with a common goal of helping an individual/s and their families out of a commitment to using everyone's strengths, both faith communities and service providers may find unique and invaluable ways in which they can help one another.

The Person with a Disability: The Power of Finding Vocation and Calling

Earlier in this paper, we explored the spiritual and psychological importance of finding ways in which “one’s passion meets deep needs” or ways that one can fulfill a sense of purpose and make a contribution that makes a difference. Finding a sense of vocation, of what one feels like he or she was meant to do, or volunteer/paid ways to grow, learn and be productive by doing what one loves or is called to— those are important to everyone.

For people with disabilities of any type, the power of a job and meaningful roles simply get magnified by the ways employment can boost self-esteem, by feeling and being part of a business or community in which one makes a difference, by being giver as well as receiver, and more. The importance is best described by individuals themselves, especially the ones you are assisting. If you have ever seen or been with someone who got his or her first paycheck, you know both how real and symbolic that can be.

People with disabilities and their families are definitely not passive players or recipients in all of this. Finding one’s sense of vocation and call, searching for a job or valued role in a community, and being successful in it means taking responsibility, working hard, dealing with disappointments, and hearing and using feedback. It means being willing to work with others by taking risks and trusting them to walk alongside you in the ways that are most helpful. Those ways vary on a person-by-person basis. There are no guarantees. This kind of initiative is based on commitment and care, not legal requirements or rights. The vision is that the person with a disability and his/her family and friends are the ones in the driver’s seat. Finding a job can make a powerful difference to someone; having the commitment to learn, work, grow, and make effective decisions in and with a job is the power and responsibility that person has, with help, from the very beginning. As stated at the beginning of this paper, and in religious traditions from *their* very beginning, work is both gift and responsibility.

In Summary: Putting Faith to Work

As we conclude this paper, we return to our vision:

Faith communities have the opportunity and capacity to transform the lives of many people with disabilities, their families, and their communities by helping people find meaningful jobs, assume valued roles, and share their gifts and vocation with others.

As the *Putting Faith to Work* pilot projects get underway, we recognize that we are not the first tillers of these fields. Other projects, professionals, clergy, congregations, and writers have seen these possibilities. We know theologians, clergy, faith-based organizations, and human services have also explored issues at the intersection of faith and work. One of our hopes is to find and learn from others working in these same “fields.”

We also know that more and more congregations are taking the lead in including people with disabilities of all kinds fully within the lives of their congregations, finding not only ways to give support but also ways for people to become valued, contributing members to congregational life. What’s more, there is an increasing number of stories about how that support leads to other forms of community participation.

Yet we do not know much about how these movements of faith, care, and spirit have worked with each other. We are convinced employment ministries can also include people with disabilities, that individuals in human service and ministry roles can help them do so, and we want to learn how. We also believe that inclusive, supportive congregations might also take steps toward helping members be employees and contributing members to the wider community, in addition to their own congregation. We believe there are an untold number of ways for that to happen.

Putting Faith to Work is not a call for congregations to take over the role and responsibility of individuals themselves, public services and government programs. It *is* a call for partnership and collaboration that can make much more effective use of all of the human, financial, and spiritual resources in a community and society. We believe that people who have led and labored in these respective areas—as well as in vocational programs, rehabilitation programs, and transition-to-work programs—have much that they can use to help each other.

We invite you to join in these efforts. From whichever field you come, we hope to work along with you as we try to live out our hopes in this project and learn from both successes and mistakes. This is not about a group of experts. It is about capturing and using the expertise of all involved and creating a community that learns from one another while opening opportunities for others. Our belief, based on both experience and research, is that it can make a huge difference in the lives of individuals, their families, and congregations.



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