

# Disability and Theological Education: A North American Study

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*ABSTRACT: This article reports findings from a study examining the ways in which disability is addressed and experienced in theological schools across North America. Despite numerous calls for addressing disability in theological curricula and providing a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities, a majority of theological educators have indicated that their graduates receive relatively limited preparation to address disabilities in ministry. Moreover, many seminary students with disabilities face challenges regarding accommodation and support on campus. This article offers recommendations for strengthening the extent to which attention to disability permeates the theological curriculum.*

Disability is central to the human experience. While much theological support for this statement can be offered, it is also evident in demographic metrics. According to national censuses, more than 56 million US Americans and 4 million Canadians—almost one in every five North American citizens—identify as having a disability.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, more than one of every four families has at least one relative who experiences a disability.<sup>2</sup> Although the nature (e.g., cognitive, emotional, physical) and impact (e.g., minimal to pervasive) of these disabilities varies widely, it is clear people with disabilities and their families have a presence in every community in both countries. Over the last few decades, myriad legislative, policy, and advocacy efforts in North America have focused on ensuring that individuals with disabilities and their families have the opportunities and supports needed to participate fully in all aspects of community life.<sup>3</sup>

Theologically, attending to disabilities is a critical concern for any endeavor seeking to understand the human person and to strengthen human communities for authentic life and ministry. Attention to disabilities presents an opportunity to resist cultural addictions to unrealistic qualities such as invulnerability, perfection, and conformity and to find strength and integrity in accepting the reality of human difference, struggle, and sometimes suffering. And disabilities bring to the forefront some of the most critical, eternal questions for faith communities: Will they welcome, affirm, incorporate, and celebrate all people? How will the larger community care for those with particular vulnerabilities? Will all people be open to receive care as well? Clearly, questions related to disability point at the heart of what it means to be human and to live in human community, including in faith communities.

Sadly, the presence and participation of people with disabilities and their families within faith communities are often described as uneven.<sup>4</sup> While half of all Americans with disabilities attend a church, synagogue, mosque, or

other place of worship at least monthly, a clear participation gap exists relative to the attendance of Americans without disabilities.<sup>5</sup> And while many parents of children with disabilities have found welcome and support within their congregations, nearly one third report having changed their place of worship because their child with a disability was not included.<sup>6</sup> Two important themes cut through available research into this dimension of the lives of people with disabilities: (a) having a place within a community of faith is important to many people with disabilities,<sup>7</sup> and (b) many congregations struggle to welcome and weave people with disabilities into their faith communities.<sup>8</sup>

Much recent attention has been directed toward addressing those factors that limit the active participation of people with disabilities and their families in faith community life. For example, barriers of awareness, architecture, and attitude have all been cited as pervasive obstacles to congregational inclusion.<sup>9</sup> The essential role of congregational leaders in addressing these barriers has been highlighted as especially salient in a number of studies.<sup>10</sup> Clergy can play a powerful role in spurring (or stifling) efforts to ensure that people with disabilities and their families are invited, welcomed, and supported within a faith community. The degree to which clergy are committed to and confident in these roles may depend in part on the extent to which they have had prior training and experiences that have equipped them well to lead a congregation that will inevitably involve people with disabilities and their families as members.

Theological schools provide the primary training ground within which future clergy receive their preparation for leadership and service within congregations across North America. Theological education seeks to engage students in a process of formation that incorporates ever-deepening and complexifying engagement and reflection upon ancient texts and rituals, historically developed understandings, and contemporaneous life experiences and challenges for persons and communities. Students are called to learn a new way of seeing and responding to a world searching for meaning, justice, and human flourishing.<sup>11</sup>

The persistent movement between tradition and experience, and action and reflection, makes theological education a rich context for the development of an embodied commitment among clergy to justice and care for persons with disabilities and their families and loved ones. Ministry students can be formed as they learn about, for example, the roles disabilities have played in our sacred texts or the history of cultural treatment of persons with disabilities. They can be formed by the practical, embodied understandings that emerge when experiencing worship with persons with disabilities or helping a congregation learn new ways of supporting families facing disabilities. They can be formed by moral imperatives that arise from witnessing injustice, cruelty, or neglect. Together, these three types of formation represent what has been called “three apprenticeships” (cognitive, practical, and normative) of theological education.<sup>12</sup>

Good learning in theological education can lead to a sort of embodied wisdom, or *phronesis*, in which one not only acts out of one’s intellectual understanding, but also enacts and reenacts what one has come to understand

by witnessing and experiencing life-giving practices of faith. “Experience the practice, practice it, tell about it, ask questions about it, read about it, write about it, practice it, do it, empower others to do it.”<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, seminaries have historically paid little attention to persons with disabilities. In fact, for more than thirty years, calls have been issued for greater inclusivity for people with disabilities—in enrollment, in curriculum, and in faculty.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, The Association of Theological Schools issued a policy guideline inviting its member schools “to live toward a vision of inclusion of all God’s people in theological education.” ATS challenged theological schools to both “welcome people with disabilities into the communal life and mission of the institution” and “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.”<sup>15</sup>

To date, few efforts have been made to document the extent to which these calls have penetrated theological school curricula across the United States and Canada. In 2001, Robert Anderson and W. Daniel Blair surveyed ATS member schools<sup>16</sup> and found little representation of disability concerns (via curricula or by accommodation for students with disabilities) in North American theological education. Anderson used these data to argue for what he called “infusing” graduate theological education with disability. Similarly, between 1999–2000, Laura-Jean Gilbert studied fourteen United Church of Christ seminaries, using a combination of interviews (faculty, students, administrators, alumni), a survey, document analysis, and site visits to learn about acceptance and accommodation of students with disabilities. She found that seminaries were making progress regarding physical accessibility, but that little was being accomplished in terms of curriculum, even while schools typically had courses on women, gender roles, and sexualities.<sup>17</sup> Additional studies are needed to describe the current landscape of theological education in relation to disability.

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which disability is addressed and experienced in theological schools in North America. We sought to answer four research questions by querying theological school leaders:

1. To what extent is disability addressed within the theological education curriculum?
2. What factors might hinder or support addressing disability within theological education?
3. To what extent are people with disabilities present and participating within various aspects of theological education?
4. How confident are theological leaders in the preparation of graduates to include people with disabilities in congregational life?

Such information could help seminaries better prepare students to work with persons and families facing disabilities, to welcome the gifts of students with disabilities into seminary communities, and to facilitate the transformation of faith communities so they can offer life-giving ministries to all, and thus more truly represent the human reality of diverse abilities.

## Method

### *Participants and theological schools*

Participants included 118 academic deans, deans of student life, faculty, and other administrators from theological institutions accredited by the ATS Commission on Accrediting, the leading accreditor in graduate theological education. Among these participants, 41.5 percent identified themselves solely as academic administrators, 4.2 percent solely as faculty, and 47.5 percent as both faculty and academic administrators; 6.8 percent reported other roles (e.g., director of student services). The majority (76.1%) indicated they were *highly* involved with setting curriculum, 19.7 percent were *somewhat* involved, and 4.3 percent were *not at all* involved. When asked about their involvement in setting school policy, 64.9 percent indicated they were *highly* involved, 32.5 percent were *somewhat* involved, and 2.6 percent were *not at all* involved. However, only 19.1 percent were *highly* involved in leading or guiding student organizations, 43.5 percent were *somewhat* involved, and 37.4 percent were *not at all* involved. In their leadership roles, participants reported strong knowledge of the ministry preparation curriculum at their schools: 81.2 percent described their knowledge as *very* broad, 16.2 percent said it was *somewhat* broad, and 2.6 percent said it was *adequate*; no one said their knowledge was *not very* extensive. Anticipating that many academic leaders would be serving in both faculty and administrative roles, we asked about their academic background. Among these leaders, 26.7 percent reported having specialization in the area of biblical studies, 26.7 percent in pastoral or practical theology, 23.3 percent in theology, 8.6 percent in historical studies, and/or 14.7 percent in other areas (e.g., bioethics, higher education administration, philosophy).

Most respondents had served in their current roles for an average of 5.6 years ( $SD = 6.1$ ). However, the average number of years they had been employed at their current institutions was 12.5 years ( $SD = 7.7$ ). Only two respondents reported having less than one year of experience at their current institutions. We asked participants whether they identified as having a disability and, if so, how this had impacted their thinking and practices related to theological education. Twelve (10.6%) leaders said they had a disability, 101 (89.4%) said they did not have a disability, and six did not answer the question. Half of those with disabilities said it influenced their thinking about disabilities and theological education *quite a bit*, four said it influenced them *somewhat*, two said it influenced them *a little bit*, and one said *not at all*. Four indicated that having a disability impacted their practices as leaders at their institutions *quite a bit*, five said *somewhat*, and four said *a little bit*. [Missing data are due to skipped items.] Finally, we asked participants about their personal experience with persons with disabilities and prior training. More than two thirds (69.8%) of participants reported having extensive personal experience with persons with disabilities. More than half (53.4%) of participants had some training related to working with persons with disabilities. The primary avenues of training were conferences and workshops (70.9%), practica or fieldwork (50.0%), their own research (45.2%), course work (35.5%), and some other avenue (17.7%; e.g., online tutorial, colleagues).

Most respondents (82.2%) represented theological schools from a particular denominational or theological tradition. Indeed, approximately thirty-nine different traditions were represented. These schools varied widely in student enrollment ( $M = 313$  students;  $Mdn = 200$  students; range, 20 to 6,500). Specifically, 18.0 percent had enrollments of less than 100, 50.0 percent between 100 and 250, 20.3 percent between 251 and 500, and 10.2 percent more than 500; enrollment was not provided for two schools.

### *Survey instrument*

We invited respondents to complete a print- or web-based survey addressing the intersection of disabilities, theological education, and ministry. In addition to soliciting the demographic information described previously, the main sections of the survey addressed (1) where and how disability was addressed in the curriculum, (2) potential challenges to addressing disabilities within theological education, (3) the preparation of students related to including people with disabilities in future ministries, (4) interest in accessing resources related to religion and disability, (5) the involvement of people with disabilities in activities at the school, and (6) the availability of accommodations for people with disabilities at the school. We estimated completion time for the survey to be approximately twenty minutes.

**Curriculum.** We asked respondents to rate the extent to which disabilities were addressed in each of six potential areas of the school's curriculum: biblical studies, theology, historical studies, pastoral care/pastoral theology/congregational care, religious education, and spiritual formation. Responses were provided on a four-point, Likert-type scale (i.e., not at all, infrequently, occasionally, extensively). Respondents could indicate which (if any) of the areas were not offered within their schools' curricula. We asked two additional questions to gauge students' access to disability-related information: Does your library offer resources related to disabilities and/or disabilities and religion? In the past three years, has your school offered any courses specifically focused on disabilities? For this last question, we asked respondents to list the titles of those courses.

To determine the extent to which issues related to disability might be addressed outside of course work in the past three academic years, we asked whether their schools have offered any (1) internships specifically focused on disabilities, (2) fieldwork specifically focused on disabilities, (3) lectures (outside of particular classes) specifically focused on disabilities, (4) service/outreach specifically focused on disabilities, (5) student groups specifically focused on disabilities, and (6) student publications specifically focused on disabilities. Responses were provided on a four-point, Likert-type scale (i.e., not at all, infrequently, occasionally, extensively). For each activity, an option of "I don't know" could also have been selected. Additional activities not listed on the survey could be added.

**Challenges.** To gather information on why the topic of disability might not be addressed explicitly within theological education, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed with each of seven potential reasons for this omission (e.g., "Other issues are more important." "We don't have any



faculty with interest or expertise in this area.”; see Table 3). For each statement, responses were provided using a five-point, Likert-type scale (i.e., strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree). Additional reasons could be added by participants, if desired.

**Ministry preparation.** We asked participants to rate how well prepared their schools’ graduates are to integrate individuals with disabilities into the full life of a congregation in each of five areas: worship and ritual, leadership roles, fellowship, religious education, and service. Responses were provided on a four-point, Likert-type scale (i.e., not at all prepared, a little prepared, adequately prepared, highly prepared). In addition, participants rated how well prepared their graduates are “to respond to spiritual and theological questions resulting from human experiences such as a loved one’s disablement, the birth of a child with a disability, or the potential challenges of living with their own disability.” The same four-point scale was used.

**Resource needs.** We invited participants to gauge the level of interest there would be in accessing six types of resources to help address issues related to religion and disability, if such resources were offered to them. These resources included curriculum resources, books, internships/fieldwork ideas, examples of nondiscrimination policies, resources for community life (e.g., worship, discussion groups), and guest speaker recommendations. Responses were provided on a four-point, Likert-type scale (i.e., not at all interested, a little interested, somewhat interested, very interested). Additional resource ideas could be added by respondents.

**Inclusion of people with disabilities.** We asked respondents to rate the extent to which awareness of disabilities and related issues is part of the ethos of their schools using a four-point scale (i.e., not at all present, a little present, somewhat present, very present). We asked whether people with physical disabilities, emotional or behavioral disabilities, learning disabilities, and intellectual or developmental disabilities were (1) present among students enrolled at their school and (2) present among people employed at their schools. And we asked participants to approximate the percentage of the students, faculty, and staff at their schools who had disabilities (i.e., none, 1%–5%, 6%–10%, 11%–15%, more than 15%). We asked about the extent to which individuals with disabilities participated in each of four aspects of theological school life: worship leadership, student governance, student organizations, and service opportunities. Responses were provided on a five-point, Likert-type scale anchored to the involvement of students without disabilities (i.e., much less than, somewhat less than, about the same as, somewhat more than, much more than).

**Accommodations.** We asked participants to describe the level of accommodations their schools had made for students and faculty over the last three years in five different areas (e.g., physical structures, student housing, flexibility in worship practices; see Table 6). Response options included no accommodations were needed; accommodations have been needed, but we haven’t made them yet; some of the needed accommodations have been made; or all of the needed accommodations have been made. Additional accommodations made by the schools could be noted in an open-ended section.

*Miscellaneous questions.* We also asked whether each school had its own written nondiscrimination policy, whether such a policy explicitly addressed disabilities, and whether disabilities were addressed in the life of the community in other ways. In the final section of the survey, we asked respondents whether they were aware of the policy guideline, *Disability and Theological Education*, adopted by members of The Association of Theological Schools.

### ***Data collection procedures***

We conducted this study with support from The Association of Theological Schools, the primary accrediting body for graduate theological education institutions. ATS provided us with email and mailing addresses for academic leaders at each of its 274 member institutions. In fall of 2012, we sent by email a brief invitation letter describing the study, outlining steps for completing the survey, and assuring participants that all responses would be kept confidential. All invitations were addressed to academic deans; however, we noted that the survey could be completed by another person if the dean felt someone else would be better positioned to respond on behalf of the school. A link to a web-based version of the survey was included in this invitation letter.<sup>18</sup> Approximately three weeks later, we mailed a paper version of the same survey to all individuals who had not yet responded. In addition, the electronic survey was distributed on two more occasions approximately three and nine weeks after the first invitation. Data collection was carried out over a fourteen-week period.

The invitation letter indicated that respondents could complete either a web-based or a print version of the survey, but that only one should be submitted on behalf of the organization. We assigned a numbered code to each organization and included it on the bottom of each print survey. We did this to track incoming surveys and to identify any duplicate submissions. We did not ask for names of respondents.

To promote participation, we promised each of the first fifteen respondents a \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card. We also indicated that participants would receive a resource guide on disabilities for theological schools that we would prepare based on our study findings. Overall, representatives from 118 theological schools participated in this study, for a strong response rate of 43.1 percent.

### ***Data analysis***

We used descriptive statistics to summarize findings for individual survey items across all 118 respondents. Although missing data was minimal, we report percentages in Tables 1–7 and in the narrative based on the number of responses provided. We calculated Pearson correlation coefficients to examine the association between seminary size (i.e., total enrollment) and relevant survey items. Similarly, we examined the correlations between school size and the ways in which disability is addressed within the curriculum or as part of enrollment.

## Results

### *Disability within the theological education curriculum*

Although most schools offered course work in all six areas, a relatively small percentage of respondents indicated that their schools addressed disability extensively within each of these curricular areas (see Table 1). When disability is addressed, it appears to be most prominent within the areas of pastoral care/pastoral theology/congregational care (*occasionally* or *extensively* addressed in 91.3 percent of schools) and religious education (*occasionally* or *extensively* addressed in 70.4 percent of schools). On the other hand, 27.9 percent of schools never addressed disability within historical studies, 22.4 percent never addressed disability within biblical studies, and 14.7 percent never addressed disability within theology. When considering all six areas concurrently, all but eleven respondents indicated that disability was *occasionally* or *extensively* addressed in at least one of the six areas. School size (as measured by total enrollment) was not significantly correlated with the extent to which disability was *occasionally* or *extensively* addressed in these areas ( $r = -.16$ ). Thirty schools indicated that they had offered a course specifically focused on disabilities in the past three years. Example course titles included *Welcoming People with Disabilities in Worship Communities*, *Cultivating Communities of Inclusion*, *Theology of Disability and Suffering*, *Ministry to the Disabled*, and *Bioethics: Sickness and Disability*. Most respondents (72.0%) indicated that their libraries offered resources related to disabilities and/or disabilities and religion.

Disability was specifically addressed outside of course work less extensively (see Table 2). For example, more than one third (37.7%) of schools had not offered fieldwork specifically focused on disabilities during the past three years, while 80.0 percent of schools had not offered student publications specifically focused on disabilities in the past three years. When disability-focused activities were offered, they largely occurred *infrequently* or *occasionally*. School size was not significantly correlated with the extent to which disability was *occasionally* or *extensively* addressed in these activities ( $r = .08$ ).

Those schools that named experiences related to disabilities in an open-ended question, however, often cited interesting activities that seemed to have a potential for meaningful impact. For example, one seminary partnered with a university center on developmental disabilities<sup>19</sup> to advance disability education in worship communities; several hosted lectures from prominent disability theologians; two encouraged participation in camp programs for youth with disabilities; one held student/faculty training on receiving deaf students into the seminary community; and one had a certificate of ministerial formation in American Sign Language. Several schools offered fieldwork in a variety of settings to facilitate student engagement with disabilities and one school developed an inclusive residential program that brought together adults with developmental disabilities and theological students in a living community.



### ***Barriers and supports related to addressing disability***

Respondents varied widely in the degree to which they considered each of the six statements to reflect salient barriers to addressing disabilities explicitly within the theological curriculum (see Table 3). Nearly half of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that an already crowded curriculum (48.3%) or the lack of faculty with expertise (46.2%) limited the extent to which their schools could explicitly address disability within theological education. On the other hand, the majority of respondents *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that new clergy could best learn about these issues on the job (67.0%) or that their students were unlikely to work with people with disabilities after graduation (86.1%). Among the eight open-ended responses, three additional reasons were raised (i.e., a denominational office takes responsibility for helping clergy learn about disability in the field, disability is simply “not on the radar” of schools, and students fear stigma or discrimination if they identify as having a disability). School size was not significantly correlated with ratings of any of these potential barriers ( $r$  range, -.12 to .17).

At the same time, respondents indicated being fairly interested in accessing most of the identified resources for addressing issues related to religion and disabilities. More than three quarters of respondents indicated that they were *somewhat* or *highly interested* in accessing books (81.2%), resources for community life (78.6%), and internship/fieldwork ideas (75.8%). According to respondents, 93.9 percent of schools had a written nondiscrimination policy and 90.8 percent had a policy that specifically addressed disabilities. School size was not significantly correlated with interest in accessing resources ( $r$  range, -.01 to -.14).

### ***Participation of people with disabilities in theological education***

When asked whether students with disabilities were enrolled at their schools, 89.0 percent indicated their student bodies included students with learning disabilities, 81.4 percent included students with physical disabilities, 61.0 percent included students with emotional or behavioral disabilities, and 22.9 percent included students with intellectual or developmental disabilities. When asked about faculty or staff, 47.5 percent indicated that they employed people with physical disabilities, 24.6 percent employed people with emotional or behavioral disabilities, 20.3 percent employed people with learning disabilities, and 5.9 percent employed people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. When asked to approximate the percentage of students, faculty, and staff at their schools with disabilities, 4.4 percent said none, 59.6 percent said 1%–5%, 23.7 percent said 6%–10%, 7.9 percent said 11%–15%, and 4.4 percent said more than 15%.

As shown in Table 5, the majority of respondents perceived that people with disabilities participated in worship leadership, student governance, service opportunities and student organizations to a similar extent as did students without disabilities (range, 72.0%–82.5% across activities). Almost all other respondents indicated that participation in these activities was somewhat less than to much less than relative to students without disabilities.

Schools varied widely in the degree to which various accommodations had been made (or were needed) for students and faculty with disabilities (see Table 6). More than one third of all schools reported that accommodations were needed in each of the five areas but had not yet been made or were only partially made. The highest percentages of these two responses were found in the areas of accessible physical structures other than student housing (54.8%); flexibility in class/curriculum requirements and practices (46.9%); and accessible student housing (44.1%).

### ***Preparation of graduates for future ministry***

Overall, the majority of respondents perceived that their graduates were *not at all* (3.4%) or *only a little* (70.7%) prepared to respond to spiritual and theological questions resulting from disability-related human experiences (see Table 7). Only 42.2 percent of respondents said their students were *adequately* or *highly* prepared to integrate individuals with disabilities in fellowship, 29.1 percent in worship and ritual, 25.6 percent in religious education, 24.8 percent in service, and 23.9 percent in leadership roles. School size was not significantly correlated with any ratings of preparation ( $r$  range, -.04 to .08).

## **Discussion**

A central charge of theological education involves preparing students for ministry in myriad contexts with a broad range of people. Present within the future congregations and communities these leaders will serve are numerous individuals impacted directly and indirectly by disability. Indeed, nearly one fifth of all North Americans have a disability, and more than one in four families has a close relative with a disability.<sup>20</sup> As the presence and participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society continue to steadily increase,<sup>21</sup> it is important to consider the avenues through which congregational leaders are equipped to minister to and with people with disabilities and their families. We designed this survey to ascertain where and how disability appears in the curricula and overall life of theological institutions, to identify barriers that function to keep disabilities from penetrating the theological curricula, to examine how students with disabilities access campus life and learning opportunities, and to gauge the interest of theological school leaders in supports and resources designed to assist them in addressing disabilities. We focus on five primary findings of this study that extend the literature on religion and disability in important ways.

First, our findings suggest a focus on people with disabilities often receives relatively limited attention within the theological curriculum. Relatively few leaders indicated that disability was addressed extensively in any of the six curricular areas. Although occasionally addressed in courses addressing pastoral care, religious education, and spiritual formation, disability was less frequently addressed in the disciplines of theology, biblical studies, and historical studies. This represents an important omission in terms of student preparation for ministry. When coverage is constrained to particular curricular areas, students may not access the growing volume of scholarship at

the intersection of disability, theology, and religion.<sup>22</sup> This growing interdisciplinary field addresses the degree to which people have long struggled to understand mental and physical differences and asks how the human experience of disability intersects with, affirms, and challenges major historic theological perspectives and traditions. By limiting attention to disabilities to a particular area, theological educators may be sending a subtle message that disability, an experience of embodied difference which in fact lifts up some of the most important questions of the human condition, has little to do with the broader theological tradition. This reinforces a long tendency in the theological fields to split the so-called practice disciplines (e.g., homiletics, pastoral care, Christian education) from the so-called academic disciplines. These findings are disappointing given Robert Anderson's call, mentioned earlier, for a focus on disability to "infuse" the graduate theological curriculum. He argues that "interweaving knowledge about the human experience of disability throughout the existing curriculum" would open the door for critical, multifaceted dialogue about a ubiquitous and complex human experience.<sup>23</sup>

Second, theological schools offered relatively few opportunities for direct involvement with persons with disabilities and disability-related issues outside of the classroom. Fieldwork and internships related to disabilities were reported as being fairly limited during the prior three years. Specifically, less than one quarter of schools offered internships focused on disabilities at least occasionally, while fewer than two fifths offered fieldwork focused on disabilities at least occasionally. Lectures, service and outreach opportunities, and publications related to disabilities were fairly infrequent. Such personal encounters represent powerful opportunities for deepening understanding of disabilities and ministry because they hold potential to facilitate relationships between seminary students and persons with disabilities. Indeed, decades of research on attitude change in multiple areas suggest that contact is among the most consistent factors influencing awareness, understanding, and intentions.<sup>24</sup> Personal encounters add affective learning and experience to the knowledge gains made within the classroom, and thus can contribute to growth in interest and empathy. The impact of the limited availability of these experiences is amplified by the fact that a large proportion of schools not offering field-based experiences also lacked course work. As a result, many students will progress through three or more years of theological training with no exposure to the significant ministerial issues related to disability and few opportunities to develop a theological outlook on disability experiences and how these relate to the call of faith communities.

Third, we identified several potential challenges associated with addressing disability in the theological curriculum. Limited time, faculty expertise, and available resources were all cited by school leaders as being among the most prominent barriers. In light of these findings, it was not surprising that many respondents also expressed high levels of interest in accessing books, community life resources, internship/fieldwork ideas, and speaker recommendations. While numerous resources on disability and spirituality have been developed over the last decade, accessing them remains a difficult undertaking as this work is published across disciplines and there is not yet a national

clearinghouse where resources related to disability and theology are compiled and disseminated.<sup>25</sup> Such resources could be incorporated within the formal curriculum or shared in order to equip faculty to address disability well in their work with students. At the same time, we considered encouraging the responses of school leaders to two particular survey items listed as potential challenges. Nearly 70 percent of respondents disagreed that disability was an issue clergy could best learn on the job, and nearly 90 percent disagreed that students at their school were unlikely to work with people with disabilities after graduation. Such responses reflect at least implicit recognition among theological school leaders that disability is a relevant and timely issue in the education of future clergy.

Fourth, many students with disabilities require accommodations to meaningfully access postsecondary schooling, including theological education.<sup>26</sup> Theological schools in our sample varied widely in the degree to which they viewed themselves as having already made or not actually needing to make particular accommodations on their campuses. However, between one third and one half of respondents indicated that the following accommodations were needed, but they were not yet or only somewhat made: accessible buildings and student housing; flexibility in classroom, curricula, and/or worship practices; and access to needed services and assistance. While some structural renovations can be costly, most accommodations related to classroom and worship activities are not. Indeed, guidance and support to make needed changes could be accessed through partnerships with community agencies and advocacy organizations with deep expertise related to disability. Yet, the absence of these accommodations can prevent students with disabilities from participating fully in theological education and classmates from learning with people with disabilities.

Fifth, and perhaps most striking, we found that most academic leaders felt that their graduates received little or no preparation that would help them to include people with disabilities into multiple dimensions of congregational life (i.e., fellowship, worship and ritual, religious education, service, and leadership) or to respond to spiritual questions resulting from disability experiences. Although people with disabilities are participating more fully in their wider communities,<sup>27</sup> many clergy in North America are not leaving seminary well-prepared to address the needs of a growing proportion of their congregation members. While we acknowledge the very real complexities associated with ensuring that theological schools prepare students for the myriad aspects of ministry they may undertake, we are convinced that the ubiquity of disability calls for much greater attention than is currently provided. Better preparation for ministry with persons with disabilities might involve incorporating strong readings and resources related to disabilities into existing course work; making hands-on experience with disabilities available through fieldwork and internship options; providing service and outreach opportunities; and, perhaps most importantly, enabling peer relationships that can only happen when students with disabilities are fully welcomed, supported, and respected as full participants in theological education. While these efforts hold potential to greatly enhance student preparation for ministry in communities that certainly will

include people with disabilities, they also will greatly expand students' understanding of what it means to be human—diverse in gifts, inevitably imperfect and inescapably vulnerable, and bound to one another by a moral fabric not of our own creation.

### *Limitations and future research*

Several limitations to this study suggest areas for future inquiry. First, information about the programs, practices, and preparation available through theological schools reflected the perspectives of a single administrator from each school. Although these respondents reported having considerable involvement in programming and policy at their schools, it is possible that disability is addressed in other avenues unknown to these school leaders. Future researchers should query individual faculty and ministry leaders to identify whether and how disability appears within specific courses, programs, and campus activities. Second, we were unable to explore exactly how disability is considered when it does receive attention within the curriculum. Disabilities can be addressed in both helpful and hurtful ways, as many authors have noted.<sup>28</sup> Thus, *how* disability is addressed in course work, field placements, and elsewhere is as important to consider as *whether* it is addressed. Future studies might focus on sampling syllabi, assignments, and programmatic materials to better understand what particular efforts communicate about disability. Third, while we obtained a strong overall response rate, it is possible that we heard back primarily from those institutions already focusing greater attention to issues related to disability. It may be that nonresponding schools are even less attuned to this area. Additional research is needed to identify those factors influencing how and why disability is on the agendas of some schools but not others. Fourth, the strengths and needs of people with disabilities are diverse. Although we did not distinguish between types of disability (e.g., intellectual, emotional, physical, and learning disabilities) when querying school leaders, it is important to emphasize that people with disabilities are a heterogeneous group. The approaches used to support individuals with autism within congregational life may look quite different from those used to include individuals with physical disabilities or visual impairments, for example.

### **Conclusion**

Theological schools comprise a principal training ground for clergy throughout North America. Although important reflections on the processes, promises, and pitfalls of theological education have been voiced in recent years,<sup>29</sup> relatively little attention has focused on the place of disability within the theological curriculum.<sup>30</sup> Findings from this study suggest that additional efforts are needed to ensure that this training adequately prepares congregational leaders with the knowledge, attitudes, and practices needed to serve within faith communities that will certainly include people with disabilities and their families. This study offers a current glimpse into where disability appears in theological school curricula and administrators' overall sense of



student preparation to be in ministry with persons with disabilities; it points to the lack of direct experience with disabilities in the more “hands-on” aspects of theological curricula; it uncovers some of the barriers that keep disabilities out of the curriculum; and it offers some sense of how students with disabilities are participating in theological education.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Partial support for this research was provided by the Vanderbilt Institute for Clinical and Translational Research grant support (UL1 TR000445 from NCATS/NIH).

**Table 1.** Extent to which disability is reportedly addressed in six curricular areas

Curricular area	Percentage of responding theological schools				Area not offered <sup>1</sup>	Missing data <sup>2</sup>
	Not at all	Infrequently	Occasionally	Extensively		
Pastoral care/pastoral theology/congregational care	0.9%	7.8%	63.5%	27.8%	3	0
Religious education	7.1%	22.4%	60.2%	10.2%	17	3
Spiritual formation	5.7%	29.2%	59.4%	5.7%	9	3
Theology	14.7%	33.0%	48.6%	3.7%	9	0
Biblical studies	22.4%	46.7%	29.0%	1.9%	10	1
Historical studies	27.9%	46.2%	24.0%	1.9%	11	3

*Note:* Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

<sup>1</sup>Total number of schools reporting not offering this curricular area.

<sup>2</sup>Total number of surveys with missing information on this item.

**Table 2.** Extent to which schools offered activities specifically focused on disabilities in the past three years

Has your school . . .	Percentage of responding theological schools				I don't know <sup>1</sup>	Missing data <sup>2</sup>
	Not at all	Infrequently	Occasionally	Extensively		
offered any fieldwork specifically focused on disabilities?	37.7%	18.9%	41.5%	1.9%	10	2
offered any lectures (outside of particular classes) specifically focused on disabilities?	37.8%	28.8%	29.7%	3.6%	5	2
offered any service/outreach specifically focused on disabilities?	45.8%	26.2%	25.2%	2.8%	10	1
offered any internships specifically focused on disabilities?	54.1%	20.2%	24.8%	0.9%	8	1
offered any student groups specifically focused on disabilities?	67.0%	17.4%	11.0%	4.6%	7	2
offered any student publications specifically focused on disabilities?	80.0%	12.7%	7.3%	0.0%	6	2

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

<sup>1</sup>Total number of surveys indicating I don't know.

<sup>2</sup>Total number of surveys with missing information on this item.

**Table 3.** Potential challenges related to addressing disability explicitly within theological education

Challenge	Percentage of responding theological schools					M (SD)	Missing data <sup>1</sup>
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
There just isn't time to address everything in the curriculum.	6.0%	25.0%	20.7%	38.8%	9.5%	3.21 (1.11)	2
We don't have any faculty with interest or expertise in this area.	7.7%	29.1%	17.1%	40.2%	6.0%	3.08 (1.12)	1
We lack the resources to address this issue.	6.0%	25.9%	27.6%	37.1%	3.4%	3.06 (1.01)	2
We don't know how to address disabilities and questions related to people with disabilities within the church.	7.0%	32.2%	33.0%	27.0%	0.9%	2.83 (0.94)	3
Other issues are more important.	8.7%	39.1%	38.3%	13.0%	0.9%	2.58 (0.86)	3
This is an issue new clergy can best learn about "on the job."	12.2%	54.8%	25.2%	7.0%	0.9%	2.30 (0.81)	3
Our students are unlikely to work with people with disabilities after graduation.	46.1%	40.0%	10.4%	2.6%	0.9%	1.72 (0.82)	3

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

<sup>1</sup>Total number surveys with missing information on this item.

**Table 4.** Interest in accessing resources related to religion and disability

Resources	Percentage of responding theological schools				M (SD)	Missing data <sup>1</sup>
	Not at all interested	A little interested	Somewhat interested	Highly interested		
Books	3.4%	15.4%	43.6%	37.6%	3.15 (0.81)	1
Resources for community life (e.g., worship, discussion groups, etc.)	5.1%	16.2%	37.6%	41.0%	3.15 (0.87)	1
Internships/fieldwork ideas	6.9%	17.2%	37.9%	37.9%	3.08 (0.91)	2
Curriculum resources	2.6%	23.1%	39.3%	35.0%	3.07 (0.83)	1
Examples of nondiscrimination policies	12.1%	13.8%	25.0%	49.1%	3.11 (1.05)	2
Guest speaker recommendations	10.5%	28.1%	30.7%	30.7%	2.28 (0.99)	4

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

<sup>1</sup>Total number surveys with missing information on this item.

**Table 5.** Participation of individuals with disabilities in theological school activities relative to students without disabilities

Activities	Percentage of responding theological schools					Not offered <sup>1</sup>	Missing data <sup>2</sup>
	Much less	Somewhat less	About the same	Somewhat more	Much more		
Worship leadership	9.3%	18.7%	72.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5	6
Student governance	2.9%	20.6%	74.5%	2.0%	0.0%	10	6
Service opportunities	2.9%	17.1%	78.1%	1.9%	0.0%	5	8
Student organizations	1.0%	16.5%	82.5%	0.0%	0.0%	8	7

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

<sup>1</sup>Total number of surveys indicating that the school does not offer this activity.

<sup>2</sup>Total number of surveys with missing information on this item.

**Table 6.** Level of accommodations made for students and faculty with disabilities in past three years

Efforts	Percentage of responding theological schools				Missing data <sup>1</sup>
	None needed	Needed but not yet made	Needed and some have been made	All needed have been made	
We have redesigned/rebuilt physical structures (other than student housing) to make them more accessible.	19.1%	3.5%	51.3%	26.1%	3
We have redesigned/rebuilt student housing to make it more accessible.	35.3%	10.8%	33.3%	20.6%	16
We have offered flexibility in class/curriculum requirements and practices.	10.6%	0.9%	46.0%	42.5%	5
We have offered flexibility in worship practices.	36.4%	2.7%	36.4%	24.5%	8
We have offered access to services and assistance for those who need it.	9.7%	4.4%	34.5%	51.3%	5

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

<sup>1</sup>Total number surveys with missing information on this item.

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**Table 7.** Extent to which graduates are perceived to be well prepared to integrate people with disabilities into the full life of the congregation

Area of preparation	Percentage of responding theological schools				M (SD)	Missing data <sup>1</sup>
	Not at all prepared	A little prepared	Adequately prepared	Highly prepared		
Integrating individuals with disabilities in the areas of						
Fellowship	3.4%	54.3%	38.8%	3.4%	2.42 (0.62)	2
Worship and ritual	9.4%	61.5%	27.4%	1.7%	2.21 (0.63)	1
Religious education	7.7%	66.7%	23.9%	1.7%	2.20 (0.59)	1
Service	7.7%	67.5%	23.1%	1.7%	2.19 (0.59)	1
Leadership roles	15.4%	60.7%	22.2%	1.7%	2.10 (0.66)	1
Overall preparation to respond to the spiritual and theological questions resulting from human experiences such as a loved one's disablement, the birth of a child with a disability, or the potential challenges of living with one's own disability	3.4%	70.7%	24.1%	1.7%	2.24 (0.54)	2

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

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