

### At the Crossroads

The 2019 Summer Institute on Theology and Disability will be its 10th anniversary. Thus, it is a time for celebration, but also a time for taking stock and planning for the future. This snapshot is designed to give friends, supporters, and potential collaborators a foundation for looking at our successes, challenges, and possibilities for the future.

### Summer Institute on Theology and Disability: Mission and Vision

**Our Mission is** to foster diverse and authentic interfaith conversations at the intersection of theology and disability.

**Our Vision is** that international theological learning and religious practices embrace the gifts, needs, and contributions of people with disabilities and their families.

We work to achieve our vision through collaboratively hosting an accessible and inclusive **four-day institute** that gathers together leading scholars, writers, faith leaders, advocates, and others committed to advancing inclusive ministries and faith supports.

*The Institute celebrates, explores, and investigates the ways that:*

- Disability impacts all major theological disciplines as well as the many dimensions of religious life and faith community practices.
- Theology and practice mutually inform and support one another.
- Diverse perspectives enrich and inform theological formation and religious practice.

### Core Faculty & Leadership

The Institute has been coordinated by core faculty who serve as advisers, speakers, and mentors with participants throughout the conference to create a community of learning. Core faculty have been selected due to their expertise and prominence at the intersection of disability and theology. Current faculty and leadership include:

**Bill Gaventa**, Director, **Hans Reinders** (Vrije Universiteit, Netherlands), **John Swinton** (University of Aberdeen, Scotland), **Erik Carter** (Vanderbilt Kennedy Center), **Thomas Reynolds** (University of Toronto), **Amos Yong** (Fuller Seminary, California), **Julia Watts**

*Belser (Georgetown University) and Darla Schumm (Hollins University), Ben Conner, (Western Theological Seminary), Devan Stahl (Michigan State) with David Morstad and Neil Cudney (Christian Horizons) on the administrative team. (Note: Not all of the faculty come every year)*

## Format

The Institute includes a “**Community Day**” event open to a wider regional audience, followed by three days of plenaries, robust discussions, morning and evening meditations, and a wide variety of @30 engaging workshops led by Institute participants. A popular **Ph.D. Symposium** welcomes emerging scholars to present and discuss their work with scholars, peers, and interested participants. **A Cooperative Resource Exhibit** provides a way for publishers and resource programs to display new products without attending, although they may sponsor their own exhibit if they choose.

## History of the Institute

The Summer Institute began in Pennsylvania as part of a Faith Community Leadership Project funded by the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council, coordinated by Bill Gaventa at the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, Rutgers University. The first two Summer Institutes (2010 and 2011) were sponsored in collaboration with the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

### *Recording and media*

Audiotapes of those Institutes are available. Since 2012, the plenary sessions have been videotaped and are also available through the website of the national **Collaborative on Faith and Disability**: [faithanddisability.org/projects/summer-institute](http://faithanddisability.org/projects/summer-institute). They have been used in a multitude of ways as parts of seminary courses, continuing education, and organizational development. There have been **8611** views in the past three years.

### *Timeline, hosts, and sponsors*

From 2012 until 2015, the Summer Institute was sponsored by The Bethesda Institute and started moving around the country with the help of hosting educational institutions:

2012	Chicago	Hosted by Catholic Theological Union. Other local sponsors: Chicago Theological Seminary and the Arc of Illinois
2013	Toronto	Hosted by Emmanuel College of the University of Toronto along with Christian Horizons, with help from the United Church of Canada and L’Arche, Ontario

2014	Dallas	Hosted by Perkins Theological Seminary along with Highland Park United Methodist Church and the Faith Inclusion Network of Dallas (Jewish Family Services)
2015	Atlanta	Hosted by the Center for Leadership in Disability, School of Public Health, at Georgia State University along with support from Candler School of Theology

From 2016 to the present, the Institute has been hosted by the following educational institutions with sponsorship funding from a variety of organizations.

2016	Holland, MI	Hosted by Western Theological Seminary and Hope College.
2017	Azusa, CA	Hosted by Azusa Pacific University and Fuller Theological Seminary
2018	Raleigh, NC	Hosted by Edenton St. United Methodist Church in collaboration with Duke Divinity School.
2019-21	Holland, MI	Hosted again by Western Theological Seminary and Hope College.

*The benefit of moving the Institute around the country is that it enables people to attend who cannot afford the travel for a national conference as well as facilitating the involvement of the faculty, students, alums, and area congregations related to the hosting institution. The challenge is having to help each of the institutions host an event that is new to them, one that needs very particular attention to issues of accessibility, and the commitment of in-kind supports. In other words, the logistics have to be planned anew each year in ways that go beyond lodging.*

**Endorsements**

The Third Summer Institute was also endorsed by the **Association of Theological Schools** and the **Association of University Centers on Disabilities**. That endorsement has continued.

**Attendance and feedback**

The annual attendance since 2012 has been in the range of **125 to 175 people**, with attendees from 6-8 countries each year. We have worked with an understanding that we want to keep the number at a level that enables significant networking between all participants and, as has happened each year, a sense of community. Seven hundred people have attended one or more Institutes. Each year, the split between new and returning attendees is approximately 50-50. The primary Summer Institute Facebook page now has **1700+ friends and followers**. In an online evaluation conducted in 2016, 85 people responded. Their roles included 11

seminarians, 41 clergy, 17 lay people, 14 faculty, 18 people with disabilities, 25 family members, 15 provider organization professionals, and 19 others. (Some fit more than one category). *Institute participants have represented our commitment to both theological reflection and the practice of ministry, as well as highlighting the voices of people with disabilities.*

## **Administration and Costs**

Bill Gaventa has served as the director and coordinator for all ten years, the first six under part-time grants and contracts by the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council and then the Bethesda Institute. In the four years since, he has received an annual honorarium as the coordinator, paid through conference sponsors and registration income. Registration costs for individuals have ranged from \$400 to \$650, not including housing or all meals. We fully acknowledge that the Institute is expensive for many people, but it could not continue without that income. Each year has been an exercise in faith and hope that people will come and that we will get some support from sponsors. Each year, we have been in the black, with a little to spare. Students and people with disabilities, as well as family members, are eligible for a \$250 discount on registration costs. The two most significant expenses each year are the travel, lodging, and moderate honoraria for faculty and invited plenary speakers along with the honorarium for the Coordinator. Those are paid from the income to the hosting institution, and then any surplus funds have been forwarded to the next host. The Institute does not have a bank account because it is not incorporated.

### ***Sponsoring Organizations***

Funding support has included sponsorships from the host institutions, local foundations (the Robert and Susan Freeman Philanthropic Fund, The David and Carol Myers Foundation), national foundations (Ruderman Family Foundation and EquallyAble) , large faith based service providers (Christian Horizons and Mosaic, Inc.), denominations (the ELCA, the Archdiocese of Atlanta), the Developmental Disability Councils in some states (Georgia, North Carolina), University Centers of Excellence (Georgia and Michigan), several faith-based disability ministry organizations (Friendship House Partnerships, Joni and Friends) and ecumenical organizations (The Calvin Institute for Christian Worship) Total sponsorship support each year has ranged from \$15,000 to \$25,000.

## **Ecumenical and Interfaith**

The Institute's vision since the beginning was that we should endeavor to be both ecumenical and interfaith. Public funding in the first two years made this a necessity. Participants have always included people from a broad range of Christian traditions and denominations. The first Jewish participants attended in 2011, and the first Muslim participants came in 2013. There were plenary speakers that year from both Jewish and Muslim traditions. Rabbi Julia Watts Belser joined the faculty in 2014. In the years since, the Institute has invited other Jewish and Muslim plenary speakers, received some sponsorship funding from Jewish and Muslim

organizations, and welcomed a small but growing number of registrants and workshop leaders from those traditions. Christian participants have come from a very broad range of denominations and perspectives.

One operating principle of our practice has been that **everyone is welcome**. All are invited to speak out of the particularity of their own faith traditions and practices, while also fully respecting others in attendance. We know from our evaluations and practice that

1. The diversity of speakers, attendees, and funders, both in terms of disability and faith tradition, is one of the strengths of the Summer Institute,
2. The majority of the faculty and attendees have been Christian, and
3. The Institute, as one part of the ten-year crossroads, needs to clarify its ecumenical and interfaith identity.

Practically speaking, the Institute has not been fully interfaith in its hosting or sponsorship. It has been a primarily Christian conference with the goal of welcoming, including, and learning from people from other faiths and traditions.

## Impact

In 2016, an online evaluation for the Summer Institute was sent to all “alums” who had attended up to and including that year. We received a significant response of 85+ evaluations. We are glad to share the full quantitative and qualitative compiled results upon request. A companion document to this Snapshot includes a representative sampling from those responses. From these evaluations, and other feedback, we know that the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability has done the following:

- Provided a community for theological reflection and learning for people who are involved in multiple forms of ministries and services, deepening their foundation and confidence in leadership within faith settings. One faith-based service agency executive commented recently that the Institute *“is by far the best thing I have encountered in terms of theological Continuing Education. I am grateful.”*
- Served as a learning community for seminary and Ph.D. students who are specializing in this area of ministry and graduate work. For the Ph.D. students in particular, the Ph.D. Symposium has been highly valued as a support on their academic journey. The Institute has also inspired participants to enter into Ph.D. programs.
- Facilitated the learning and formation of seminary students with disabilities. For example, we received a recent invitation to an ordination to the Episcopal priesthood from one participant who said, *“The Summer Institute on Theology and Disability has provided me with many strategies and friendships which have made my journey through discernment to ordination as a priest smoother as a person living with Cerebral Palsy. I am grateful to the institute for the guidance and support.”*
- Prompted and encouraged many participants to develop skills in both writing and speaking.

- Developed a learning community where a wide diversity of beliefs and faith traditions have been respected and served as sources of learning for others.
- Developed a valued community that includes academics, clergy, laity, students, faith-based service providers, and people with disabilities and their families. A Biblical scholar who attended for the first time in 2018 wrote, *"I can honestly say that my experience at SITD last year was so incredible that it was easily the best conference I've ever attended. It was so wonderful to be in a place where everyone was dedicated to thinking through issues of disability from a theological perspective (and vice versa!)"*
- Prompted the development of new ministries, programs, and academic opportunities for learning in the arenas of theology, ministry, and disability.
- Developed a growing library of videotaped plenary sessions that have been used by individuals, organizations, and people around the globe. (8611 views: 2015-2018)
- Provided a model for others to use in terms of commitment to accessible conference and event planning.
- Served as an invaluable source for networking, friendships, and partnerships that are active between and beyond the annual Summer Institute.

## The Crossroads

The Summer Institute is returning to Holland, Michigan for 2019 and 2020 with the hospitality and support of **Western Theological Seminary** and **Hope College**. The proximity of their accessible facilities as well as the commitment of Western Theological Seminary to the inclusion of disability in its curriculum makes it a perfect place for a two-year process of determining future directions.

For 2019, a leadership team of regular attendees at the Summer Institute has been organized to work along with Bill Gaventa and the faculty in order to:

1. Learn in detail about the planning and coordination of the Institute.
2. Contribute new ideas and skills to its planning and marketing.
3. Begin a collaborative process of adapting our current structure to enable an effective and exciting transition of leadership and coordination responsibilities.
4. Explore the options, benefits, and limits of a variety of organizational options, such as an institution that could serve as a fiscal agent and home base for the Institute while also enabling it to move around the country, exploring 501(c)3 status, an unrelated for-profit business of a host organization, or others yet to be discovered.

The purpose of this ten-year snapshot has been to provide a summary overview of the Summer Institute and to seek feedback and insight from stakeholders. If you are interested in reading a summary sampling of the comments from the 2016 Evaluation and/or the full Evaluation results, they are available on request.

**We invite ideas, suggestions, advice and support from members of the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability community, as well as from organizations who have had, or would**

like to have, a role in supporting and improving the Summer Institute in the future. To do so, please email Bill Gaventa at [bill.gaventa@gmail.com](mailto:bill.gaventa@gmail.com) or phone, 732-718-5875.