

*Beyond Expectations: A Case Study of Inclusion*

*(Excerpt from Embracing Difference by Dr. Matthew P. Anderson, M.Div. Dr. Anderson is a ministry consultant and has done training for churches and supported people with disabilities)*

Local churches can take cues from the organization Beyond Limits. Beyond Limits is a residential college program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities—those who otherwise could not participate in a typical college experience.<sup>81</sup> Bethany Global University, (BGU), in Bloomington, Minnesota, hosts Beyond Limits and has made it part of the university's student experience. BGU had to adjust to allow space for Beyond Limits students. According to Craig Spofford, Executive Director of Beyond Limits College, adjustments included "being open to the fact that [Beyond Limits] was going to be a work-in-progress and accepting that [Beyond Limits students] were going to bring a different voice and perspective to the conversation."<sup>82</sup> Allowing space in the classroom enabled one Beyond Limits student to speak out about how he was impacted during a class discussion in a World Religions course regarding caste systems. Spofford explained, "He was able to observe as one within the disability community how he was treated as a different caste within a culture that doesn't believe it has a caste society."<sup>83</sup> Students were able to see the world from a new perspective. "Such a powerful teaching opportunity would have been missed," Spofford insists, "had space not been created for this Beyond Limits student to learn and contribute to the conversation."<sup>84</sup> Making space for those with disabilities will require a commitment to "align yourself with someone as an ally," says Spofford.<sup>85</sup>

A practical way to help make space for others is to be aware and consider things that might present barriers for others. For example, planning events that might induce anxiety. At a school-sponsored party, a Beyond Limits student with an anxiety disorder had an anxiety attack and subsequent meltdown because of an unexpectedly loud, dark, and disruptive environment. Spofford suggests giving "trigger alerts" ahead of time so people can be informed and make appropriate preparations.<sup>86</sup> He warns, "When we don't make people aware we exclude them and create fear."<sup>87</sup> Spofford believes it would be helpful for any ministry area or team to be informed of potential triggers. Psychiatrist Dr. Stephen Grcevich concurs that adequate communication on the part of churches and preparation by attenders can help alleviate barriers for those with anxiety and other disabilities.<sup>88</sup> These are just a few practical considerations to embrace those with different abilities.

Embracing different abilities will challenge us to ask ourselves, "What are we willing to do to have people included?"<sup>89</sup> When Spofford's church implemented changes regarding security and performing background checks, he recalls saying repeatedly: "Security is not convenient; it is secure."<sup>90</sup> People had to adapt to be safe. Likewise, doing ministry with people of all abilities will not be a convenient process, but a loving, welcoming, and empowering one. Adjustments, accommodation, and shifted expectations will ensure every person participates at some level. Spofford's practice for embracing discomfort is instructive:

Whenever I feel discomfort or not okay with stuff in my life I read Philippians. It is there that we read Paul's words, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion [Phil. 1:6]....[therefore] I will rejoice [1:18]....[knowing] to live is Christ, and to die is gain" [1:21]. We then read Paul's words about Jesus—who came to earth and set aside his privilege and came as a servant [2:1-18]. Paul tells the Philippians to do as Christ did. It is then we get to, "Rejoice in the Lord" [3:1]. For the joy set before him Christ Jesus endured the cross; he leaned into it [Heb. 12:2]. Therefore, deal with your differences by leaning into them and imitating Christ. That's how we get to Paul's concluding words, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" [Phil. 4:13]. We need to first know what it is that Paul is calling us to in Christ that needs God's strength.<sup>91</sup>

Whatever context we find ourselves we need to lean into that situation with the mind of Christ. This applies to ministering to and with people of all abilities. Spofford says, "The world is full of stories that don't go along as we think they should be narrated. Are we willing to lean in and work within that given context?"<sup>92</sup> Making space and embracing differences allow our stories to be shaped by others. It is God who provides the strength to do it. It is God who makes people one in the midst of difference through Jesus Christ.

<sup>81</sup> "Beyond Limits," Beyond Limits College, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://beyonlimitscollege.org/>.

<sup>82</sup> Craig Spofford, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Spofford.

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<sup>87</sup> Spofford.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen Grcevich, MD, *Mental Health and the Church: A Ministry Handbook for Including Children and Adults with ADHD, Anxiety, Mood Disorders, and Other Common Mental Health Conditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 133-134.

<sup>89</sup> Spofford.

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