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# Accompaniment: A Model for Congregational Mission Alongside Individuals with Disabilities

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“Pastor Twila, are we having Evangelism Team on Tuesday night?” asked Kelly. An ordinary question, right? Except for this: Kelly Brady is a 50+-year-old care receiver in the MOSAIC-at-Home program in Rockford, Illinois.

She first came to Christ Lutheran Church, where I serve, with her caregivers, Steinar and Sheryl Grimstad, six years ago. Since then, our congregation has learned to walk alongside Kelly, as she has grown in accompanying us.

“Where are my offering envelopes?” she piped up recently. Kelly knows the importance of and wants to participate in giving.

“I haven’t seen you in church in ages,” she announced to a member some time ago. “If Kelly says so, I had better get myself back to worship,” laughed the member. Kelly instinctively knows the importance of community and reaching out as she wanders around our fellowship hour doling out hugs to those she calls “my people”.

We call Kelly a “care receiver,” but her caregivers, Steinar and Sheryl, insist that they receive as much as they give. Never able to have children, the Grimstads say that Kelly has filled that void in their lives since they retired. “We just love Kelly. Kelly gives us a purpose,” says Sheryl on many occasions.

Kelly’s father, Clarence Brady, who is not able to care for Kelly, has said, “They are so good for each other. The Grimstads are wonderful people. And, I’m so happy Kelly is getting the care and love she deserves.”

What a model of mutual interdependence and mutuality: a congregation, a host family, a father, and a person with disabilities -- all being built up as the body of Christ in a web of loving and respectful relationships.

## Accompaniment: A model for interdependence and mutuality

In preparation for the 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) “Glocal” Mission Gatherings, the ELCA Global Mission unit prepared a document on its theological model titled *Accompaniment*. The model originates in scripture (Luke 24:13-35) when the disciples, on the road to Emmaus, are met by the resurrected Jesus.

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The Emmaus Road story reminds us that mission is a journey, “and that this journey, taken with many companions, shows us the unexpected and sometimes unrecognized Christ who walks with us. In this journey, as we break bread together, we move toward Christ’s mission of reconciliation between us and God, between us and one another.”<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I wish to demonstrate how the ELCA’s Global Mission model of *accompaniment* might serve as a resource or model for congregations wishing to serve individuals with disabilities.

## The context of mission

Throughout history, missionaries and mission agencies, alongside the whole church, have prayerfully contended with the question, “What is mission?” In recent decades, the church has begun to engage global companions in this conversation—companions who were once considered “objects” of mission, “the members of ‘younger churches’ in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We’ve begun to see that all of God’s people are called to think about the why and how of mission.”<sup>2</sup>

Central to this conversation is the importance of *reconciliation*. Reconciliation is based on the understanding that all of God’s children are broken, that God meets us in our brokenness, and restores us to both God and one another.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ reconciling love is the basis of the Gospel that we are

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1. “2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment,” 2.
  2. “2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment,” 3.
  3. John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

called to proclaim. Breaking down all barriers, it calls us into mutual mission by walking alongside, accompanying one another.

Christ Lutheran Church's Service and Outreach Team has found it important, as we engage our friends at MOSAIC, that they not be considered the "objects of our mission," but rather partners in ministry and reconciliation.

Upon invitation from the MOSAIC Rockford staff, Christ Lutheran became the home of one of MOSAIC's Friday Hub programs. Pre-pandemic, each Friday, a group of care receivers would come to Christ Lutheran for off-site activities. One Friday a month, our Service and Outreach Team would meet with their friends from MOSAIC to cook together and complete service projects. On several occasions, our MOSAIC friends would create gifts in support of Christ Lutheran's CAREGIVERS Ministry to the homebound. On one occasion, they assisted me in readying the palms for Palm Sunday worship.

Immeasurable was the delight of our homebound members as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Valentine's Day gifts were delivered to them by our CAREGIVERS Team from our Friday Hub guests. This tripartite web of ministry lifts up the beauty of loving and respectful relationships united and reconciled in the body of Christ.

### Accompaniment in mission

In the world of the earliest missionaries, mission work might have been summed by the connection of three stories: God's story, my story, and your story. God's story and my story were united as we crossed boundaries to bring them into unity with your story.

"Accompaniment helps us see mission differently. In reconciliation, we realize that my story and your story are not divided by boundaries, but are both reconciled within God's story."<sup>4</sup> God's mission of reconciliation requires that we must see both ourselves and others from God's point of view, rather than a point of view imbued with our own human values.

Henri Nouwen speaks poignantly about perceiving himself from God's point of view, unclothed by human accomplishment. A Harvard Divinity School professor, he left his post in the summer of 1985 and joined the L'Arche community in Trosly-Brueil, France. Henri spent nine months living and sharing in life with people with and without learning disabilities. Following this period of discernment, Henri joined the L'Arche Daybreak community in Canada where he served as pastor.

He wrote extensively about the richness of his experience with individuals with disabilities, penning,

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking and disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with the many useful things that I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, the books would not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and

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Harvard did not provide a significant introduction ... Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations could no longer be counted on.

The experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.<sup>5</sup>

Two summers ago, at the height of the pandemic, our confirmation students—as their summer confirmation service project—made sunshine boxes, fifty of them, to deliver to every resident in MOSAIC Rockford's group homes. In addition to ordering treats and thoughtfully discerning what might bring joy to the care receivers, they carefully designed and decorated each box uniquely.

Henry, one of the recipients, was not entirely enamored with one of the items in his box. "Yichchch!" he said, as he threw it on the ground.

The confirmand, indignant at Henry's response complained to his mother about the lack of gratitude. She astutely and promptly replied, "How wonderful! See what Henry has taught you?! Now you know exactly how I feel when you don't show gratitude for a meal I cook for you or a gift I choose especially for you. Imagine how God must feel when we don't appreciate his gifts to us?"

Accompaniment does not merely call us to love those who can love us back or understand us; accompaniment calls us to love and allow ourselves to be loved by those who are not like us at all or who may never quite understand us.

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4. "2013 ELCA Global Mission Gathering—Accompaniment," 5.

5. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 1989.

## Accompaniment values

People committed to living out accompaniment, God's reconciling mission, as a way of encountering global companions have identified values which characterize the relationships which are formed:

**Mutuality.** As we work to build up one another's capacities to live out the Gospel, we "recognize that all of us have gifts to offer to God's mission, and to value gifts of all, while caring for one another's needs."<sup>6</sup> Giving and receiving trust form the foundation for mutuality.

**Inclusivity.** Though we know and assume that God wishes for us to include everyone in our work of accompaniment and reconciliation; despite that, we know that all communities exclude someone. "Inclusivity requires self-reflection and honesty about our own communities and relationships."<sup>7</sup>

**Vulnerability.** In U.S. culture, vulnerability is often equated with weakness. "Jesus shows us that vulnerability—openness to relationship, giving up power—is God's way of redemption."<sup>8</sup>

**Empowerment.** To live out this value, it is essential to acknowledge that relationships are not always equal in power. Asymmetry of power can be created by position, linguistic superiority or inferiority, financial resources, race, sexual identification, etc. "Learning to let go of power—to become vulnerable—is an act of empowerment, as is recognizing and standing up to power that hobbles people in their walk through life."<sup>9</sup>

**Sustainability.** This value is an absolutely essential one, as we recognize that any relationship or project requires "an intentional commitment of attention and time to build up all those who are involved."<sup>10</sup> Sustainability is the value that has suffered most often in global projects.

I distinctly remember visiting a congregation in Guyana for which a U.S. congregation purchased a Western-style toilet. The toilet sat unused for years because the donors neither provided the resources for it to function nor did they build the capacity of the Guyanese to install indoor plumbing and dig a trench for piping to the well. Sadly, for twenty years the toilet sat as a porcelain monument to well-intended, but failed, accompaniment.

These five values—mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowerment, and sustainability—have all been discovered to be important in Christ Lutheran's work with MOSAIC's care receivers.

**Mutuality** was the gift that my former colleague, Pastor Neal Cannon, brought to our congregation's ministry. His capacity to fist bump, "high five," and have meaningful conversation with our Friday Hub group was endearing. He knew what each guest's passion was and respectfully engaged each one in meaningful

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conversation.

One day, I asked one of the Hub guys as we were eating, "You really like Pastor Neal a lot, don't you?" "Yeah," he replied, as he struck a pose with two thumbs up like "The Fonz", "He and I, we're real cool together!"

**Inclusivity** probably provided the greatest challenge for Christ Lutheran members as they grew in their comfort in working with MOSAIC care receivers.

When our Friday Hub guests first began to arrive, it was necessary for them to pass through the gathering space where another Christ Lutheran group gathered weekly. While Christ Lutheran has a well-known reputation for excellent hospitality, this group soon found its capacity for hospitality and inclusion stretched. After several months, some were able to identify and reflect on their initial discomfort with "noisy outbursts," body mannerisms deemed to be abnormal, and unrefined personal habits. This honest self-assessment signaled a turning point in the relationship and brought forth beautiful growth in acceptance.

An area in which Christ Lutheran members embraced inclusivity whole-heartedly was through MOSAIC's Rejoicing Spirits community. In pre-pandemic times, members of Christ Lutheran's Service and Outreach Team would join local clergy in monthly worship services for MOSAIC care receivers called *Rejoicing Spirits*. Members served as greeters, worship leaders, hosts, and in any capacity needed to provide a welcoming environment for all. They prayed together, sang together, rejoiced together, made noise together, and danced together—all this they did together in praise of a God for whom there is no outsider.

### **Vulnerability and Empowerment**

Vulnerability and empowerment are—when united—an invaluable key to accompaniment. When the COVID pandemic began, Kelly—like most of us—was required to "shelter in place" with the Grimstads. Not to be deterred by a pandemic, Sheryl and Kelly together decided that Kelly should learn how to read. Initially, Sheryl read to Kelly and allowed Kelly to follow along. Then, they moved to flashcards and pronunciation of letters. Soon, with Sheryl's tutoring, Kelly was making her way through books. To date, she has read over 700 books!

When vulnerability and empowerment are linked, new worlds can be opened for individuals with disabilities.

6. "2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment," 7.

7. "2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment," 7.

8. "2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment," 7.

9. "2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment," 7.

10. "2013 ELCA Glocal Mission Gathering—Accompaniment,"

### *Sustainability*

One aspect of accompaniment which this essay has not, yet, addressed is the role of financial resources. Financial resources, when not managed judiciously, can be used to tilt the accompaniment “playing field” in an unhealthy direction, creating dependence rather than interdependence. On the other hand, when used wisely and judiciously, financial resources can be used for capacity building and sustainability.

Two members of Christ Lutheran Church, the Rev. Mark and Kathy Helge, were blessed with a generous estate later in life. They became enamored with MOSAIC’S whole-person approach, which recognizes that spiritual life is an important part of a person’s overall well-being. Their philanthropy made MOSAIC’s goal of faith formation sustainable for future generations.

In a recent MOSAIC publication, Kathy said, “At this time, we want to ensure that MOSAIC is a place of rejoicing spirits, that MOSAIC stays true to God’s call to pursue opportunities that empower people.”

### **Conclusion**

We end this essay as we began: on the road to Emmaus. As we consider the story, it does not seem likely that this biblical narrative would happen in our own time.

Two are travelling together, having a serious discussion about what seems to have been a tragic event and how hope has been destroyed. They encounter a stranger who begins speaking to their loss of hope, their fear, and how God has been present throughout all of this. The two are shocked at this stranger’s perceptiveness

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and invite him for a bite to eat. In breaking bread together, they once again sense glimmers of hope. And, suddenly recognition dawns, and they realize they have been in the presence of the holy. They are compelled to share this unlikely experience of new hope with others.

As unlikely as it may seem that this story could occur in our time, Christ has given us this promise: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”<sup>11</sup>

ELCA Global Mission’s document, *Accompaniment*, leaves us with an optimistic, hope-filled perspective on accompanying individuals with disabilities in congregational mission: “In engaging God’s reconciling mission through accompaniment, we work to equip ourselves and our companions for our call to share the good news and to serve our neighbors. It is easy to do, and there will always be very real challenges. But God invites us to the table, and then sends us to go out with our companions to share and to serve. When we tire, our companions hold us up; when our faith is weak, our companions remind us of what we have seen and shared together. God gave us companions for this purpose. Together, we can continue to live out God’s reconciliation.”<sup>12</sup>

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11. Matthew 18:30 (NRSV)

12. “2013 ELCA Global Mission Gathering—Accompaniment,” 11.