

# ADVOCACY

*People First of Toledo Monthly Newsletter*

## When Disability And Religion Clash

*By Quinn Thomas*

84% of people with disabilities say that their faith is very important to them. And yet, across the board, we're significantly less likely to attend religious services. In fact, the odds of an autistic child never setting foot in a place of worship are almost double that of a non-disabled child. About a third of families with disabled children have been forced to switch congregations because their child was not welcomed. Why is this the case?

Exclusion. Exclusion happens in a number of ways. It could be social, physical, or even theological. Some religious leaders teach that disability is a punishment or curse from God, or the result of demonic possession. This idea is not exclusive to any one religion, but shows up in different faiths around the world. When taught, it turns disabled people and their families into outcasts.

This is one theological model of disability. Some secular models of disability include the medical model and the social model. The medical model teaches that disability is caused by medical issues, and that these



### UPCOMING EVENTS

#### **AUTISTIC SELF- ADVOCACY NETWORK VIRTUAL GALA**

November 16, 3:30-9:00.  
Tickets are free with optional  
sliding scale donations.

#### **WELLNESS RECOVERY ACTION PLAN WORKSHOP**

November 16-17, 10:00-4:00,  
at 1250 Ridgewood Drive,  
Suite A, Bowling Green. By  
NAMI Wood County.

#### **DISCLOSING YOUR DISABILITY AT WORK WEBINAR**

November 16, 6:00-7:00, for  
free online. Put on by the  
Muscular Dystrophy  
Association.

#### **SARTAC FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM OPEN**

January 9, 9:00 application  
deadline. 1 year advocacy  
project funded at \$5000.

issues can be solved or prevented. For example, Janet uses a wheelchair and cannot walk up the steps into her church. The medical model would say she is disabled because her legs are paralyzed. The problem is her body.

The social model of disability teaches that disability is caused by inaccessibility and exclusion. It would say that Janet is disabled from entering the church because there isn't a ramp. The problem is the community that built a church not everyone could enter.

Other theological models of disability say that disability is a test from God, or it exists to remind humans how frail we all are, or to teach people to be more appreciative. Different religions have different views.

Behavioral concerns have also led to exclusion. Segregated, parallel activities are sometimes proposed as the solution. This happens when



supports are viewed as “extra” rather than basic and essential.

Some religions teach that people must have a certain level of cognitive functioning in order for their faith to be meaningful. But the beliefs, thoughts, and love of intellectually disabled people are meaningful. Whether or not someone is “getting anything out of” participating is not a call anyone else gets to make.

Some self-advocates have recently declared themselves to have been “made disabled in God’s image,” and even view God as disabled.

Communities of faith can and must do better addressing these barriers.

## OUR NEXT MEETING

November 16th, 6:00-7:30, virtually on Zoom or in-person at the Ability Center at 5605 Monroe Street, Sylvania. Meeting dues are \$5 or \$50 for twelve months.

This meeting will be on disability etiquette across a broad range of disabilities, and how we all want to be treated even with sometimes conflicting needs.