Who Is Missing from Your Liturgies?

Eileen D. Crowley

Statistics show that more than fourteen million Catholics live with disabilities. Some of them cannot get inside the church building. Others, because of physical confinement, cannot come to worship no matter how much they wish they could and no matter how many architectural barriers we eliminate from our churches. How can ministers address some of these hospitality hurdles in pastoral and creative ways?

As I worship at the 11:30 a.m. Sunday Mass at a local Roman Catholic parish, I glimpse a bit of the kin-dom of God. Around me stand parishioners who are native Chicagoans of every age from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, as well as people relocated from elsewhere in the United States like me and recent immigrants from Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. I see multiracial families, including families made by local and international adoption. I share a sign of Christ’s peace with gay and lesbian individuals and couples, including some with young children. I sit side by side with people living with physical and developmental disabilities. As I leave, I see young couples and their families waiting excitedly for baptism of their infants.

To the casual observer, it would seem no one is missing from this beautifully diverse Body of Christ. Yet, I know that is not the case. Even in a parish so evidently hospitable to such a wide range of people, still some of the baptized are missing. Who are they?

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Who Are ‘The Missing’?

A 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life confirms what most Roman Catholic adults already know from the choices made by their own family and friends: “Approximately one-third of the survey respondents who say they were raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic. This means that roughly 10% of all Americans are former Catholics” (7). As the pastor of the parish described above readily admits, some of The Missing feel that the church, through its teachings, has abandoned or rejected them. Others, including migrants and immigrants, may feel ignored or unwelcome by those already present in a parish and the way they worship. Of course, some of the baptized absent from Sunday worship are not there simply because, for economic survival, they must work on weekends.

My focus in this article is on two groups of the baptized who face a variety of hospitality hurdles that make their presence and participation difficult or impossible. They are people living with disabilities. Some of them cannot get inside the church building. Or, once inside, they cannot navigate or participate with ease within the church building where the community celebrates liturgy. Also of concern is a subgroup of the other group. It includes the baptized who, because of physical confinement, cannot come to worship with the assembly no matter how much they wish they could and no matter how many architectural barriers we eliminate from our churches.

I consider here how to move aside, to get around, or to eliminate some of the hospitality hurdles these two groups can face. Although I deal with these issues specifically from within the Roman Catholic context, unseen hospitality hurdles may exist even in the most welcoming faith communities, whether Protestant or Catholic. In Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, Christine D. Pohl calls upon all Christians to engage in the practices of hospitality that make room for people who otherwise would not be invited in or feel welcome:

We become proficient in a skill by performing it regularly, and by learning from persons who are masters of it. Hospitality is a skill and a gift, but it is also a practice which flourishes as multiple skills are developed, as particular commitments and values are nurtured, and as certain settings are cultivated. (9)

I suggest here some of the commitments and values that parishes need to nurture and the practices of hospitality that all the baptized need to cultivate to ensure that all are welcome in worship.
Architectural Hospitality Hurdles

A disability advocate, Mary Jane Owen, tells this story:

Following a stroke, an elderly parishioner required the use of a wheelchair. She worked hard at her therapy, planning to return to her many activities in her parish. However, when she asked about accessibility to the church building, she was told not to worry about such things. “Now that you are ‘homebound,’ we’ll bring you the Host.” She asked a friend, “Who bound me?” (Owen 2002)

If in our parishes we have not been active in ensuring that our parish spaces, including the worship space, are fully accessible, we have bound her and those like her. Needless, that woman ended up among The Missing. The architectural and attitudinal hospitality hurdles she faced were simply too great for her to overcome.

In my former parish in New Jersey, a member of our choir named Bruce relied on a motorized chair as a result of an accident that made him a quadraplegic. With the aid of other choir members who drove his van and a ramp installed in a church renovation in the mid-1970s, Bruce made it to every rehearsal and liturgy that he could. Ironically, what he could not do was attend the parish educational sessions held in the school hall on proposed renovations to the church. He could have contributed greatly to discussion of that renovation . . . if he had been able get into the building. In 1998, the U.S. bishops urged Catholics to see the injustice perpetrated by inaccessible church buildings:

Since the parish is the door to participation in the Christian experience, it is the responsibility of both pastors and laity to assure that those doors are always open. Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty. (USCCB 1998, principle 6)

In my current parish, I recently noticed an elderly man with a walker struggling to get up the front stairs of our church building. His family members labored to help him. By the time I parked my car, he had gotten inside, after some great effort. We have an accessible entry at the side of our church building, but these visitors did not know that. After Mass, I made it a point to tell them about that ramped entry, as did a lector who came along after me. Unfortunately for that man and his companions, our parish lacks two things that could have moved aside the hospitality hurdle of those stairs. We need to install an obvious sign at the main entrance directing people to the accessible entry and handicapped parking alongside it. More importantly, we need to position our ministers of hospitality outside on the sidewalk of our urban church, not just inside the church.
According to “The Demographics of Disability” report of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD), more than fourteen million Catholics live with disabilities. A variety of hospitality hurdles confront them, because their needs can be so diverse. Making the situation more complex, “Forty percent of those with disabilities (about 6 million Catholics) report they have more than one disabling condition. Disabilities do not fit into neat categorical boxes and there can be considerable overlap” (NCPD 2002a, 4). That includes people born with disabilities, such as my adult son who is legally blind, developmentally disabled, and mildly hearing impaired. That statistic also includes people with later onset disabilities, such as my 87-year-old father who has in recent years lost most of his vision because of macular degeneration, has difficulty hearing even with hearing aids, and whose arthritis flares up so badly that it is hard for him to stand at worship for more than a few minutes at a time.

According to NCPD, some fifty-eight percent of the total disability population (8.1 million Catholics) deals with physical disabilities involving orthopedic impairments, neuromotor or muscular disabilities, brain dysfunctions, and other physical limitations. Another nine percent (slightly less than 3.1 million Catholics) has sensory disabilities affecting their vision or hearing. Four percent (about 560,000 Catholics) is cognitively or developmentally disabled to varying degrees. Another five percent (approximately 700,000 Catholics) is mentally ill. However, this figure does not count the many thousands who suffer with occasional bouts of non-clinical and clinical depression. Some 3.6 million Catholics live with other hidden disabilities. They have significant heart or circulatory problems that limit their activity. They are living with cancer, kidney dysfunction, diabetes, and respiratory and pulmonary dysfunction (NCPD 2002a, 2–4). What hospitality hurdles would these Catholics find in your church?

In short, people living with disabilities are your parishioners, but many factors come into play as to whether on Sunday they are part of your assembly or instead are among The Missing. In a 1978 pastoral letter, the U.S. Catholic bishops first called upon pastors and parishioners to welcome people who were living with disabilities. They named prejudice as a significant factor in their exclusion:

Prejudice starts with the simple perception of difference, whether that difference is physical or psychological. Down through the ages, people have tended to interpret these differences in crude moral terms. Our group is not just different from theirs; it is better in some vague but compelling way. Few of us would admit to being prejudiced against people with disabilities. We bear them no ill will and do not knowingly seek to abrogate their rights. Yet people with disabilities are visibly, sometimes bluntly different from the norm, and we react to this difference. Even if we do not look down upon them, we tend all too often to think of them as somehow apart—not completely one of us. (USCCB 1978, no. 2)
Thought-provoking essays and poignant examples in *Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access* address the prejudice so many families and their children encounter in their efforts for their disabled loved ones to be welcomed and to become active members in their parish’s worship life (Foley). However, such prejudice not only afflicts those who are born with disabling conditions. It also can be a factor in whether a recovering veteran disfigured by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Iraq or Afghanistan is able to join in worship in his or her own home parish or to step inside a parish near a military hospital where the veteran may know no one. How would your ushers and the rest of your community treat someone whose face was badly burned and scarred and whose limbs were missing?

In 1998, the U.S. bishops outlined a moral framework that contained ten principles that, if followed, would encourage welcome and justice for persons with disabilities. Principle number 5 specifically addresses worship and catechesis: “Parish liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.” A church building’s accessibility can facilitate that participation in liturgy and communicate hospitality; its inaccessibility will communicate exclusion.

For example, when the people of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary in Albuquerque, New Mexico, built their fully accessible new church building in the early 1990s, families with members who needed wheelchairs were overjoyed. Grandmothers and grandfathers who had been unable to enter their 1950s church building because of stairs suddenly could roll into the commodious gathering space, swing around the ambulatory to visit statues of their favorite santos, and go down the gently sloped aisles to sit with their families in assembly spaces open and large enough for their wheelchairs. At communion, they could move to the center of the worship space along with everyone else. Disabled veterans and other people whose mobility was limited because of degenerative neuromuscular or other conditions could bring food for the hungry and deliver it themselves to the baskets near the baptismal pool and font. Wheelchair-assisted participants in the RCIA process and the children’s Liturgy of the Word could navigate with all the others in their groups to the center of the worship space to receive a blessing before their dismissal to other equally accessible spaces in the building (*We Shall Go Up With Joy*). Before their new church building, all of these people would have been counted among The Missing. As Pohl explains:

> When we have opportunities to design settings and physical environments, an important consideration should be to identify the types of architecture and arrangements that communicate a sense of welcome and enable hospitality to occur. Inviting entrances and accessible facilities, comfortable furnishings and adequate lighting are important. Designing layouts that are somewhat public yet encourage personal conversation can foster easier interactions among strangers. (153)
To create such spaces, parishes need to call upon people living with disabilities to participate in an audit of the existing hospitality hurdles. People who rely on walkers, wheelchairs, canes, or guide dogs—or who are just a bit unsteady on their feet—can be our parish “canaries in the coal mine.” They can alert us to accessibility problems many of us have yet to recognize. At the very least, they can point to where we have trip hazards or where we need to install hand railings. Principle number 3 of the Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities points out: “Pastoral ministers should not presume to know the needs of persons with disabilities, but rather they should consult with them or their advocates before making determinations about the accessibility of a parish’s facilities and the availability of its programs, policies, and ministries” (USCCB 1995, 218).

People with low vision can enlighten us to the problems of poor ambient light that makes difficult their reading of any hymn or prayer. The NCPD reports that the majority of the 4 percent of Catholics who are blind or visually impaired do not read braille. They may prefer printed information to be presented in large print, audiotapes, or computer-generated formats. For some, having the visual elements of worship and religious programs described aloud is a welcome solution.

People who are hard of hearing can tell us where the audio “dead spots” exist. They sit where the speakers actually work. By sharing that knowledge with ushers and other ministers of hospitality, ministers can help steer other hearing-impaired people to those auditory sweet spots. Knowing their needs, we can modify our sound amplification systems. We can realize the importance of adding enhanced hearing systems. Deaf members who use American Sign Language (ASL) and late-onset deafened adults need access to the verbal aspects of liturgy through ASL signers, real-time captioning, or enhanced hearing systems (NCPD 2002b, 2–3). So much of our worship consists of words, words, words.

**Attitudinal Hospitality Hurdles**

*Guidelines for Sacramental Access* recommends that “parishes should encourage persons with disabilities to participate in all levels of pastoral ministry” (USCCB 1995, principle 6). Consequently, that means that all worship spaces need to be accessible, including portals, pathways, and platforms that contain the altar, ambo, presider’s chair, and baptismal font and pool. In churches constructed before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 that have not undergone renovation, architectural changes are no doubt required, so that people with disabilities—ordained and lay alike—may serve as ministers of hospitality, ushers, lectors, altar-servers, choir members and cantors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, leaders of prayer, and preachers. Throughout *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*, the U.S. bishops provide principles and explicit guide-
lines regarding accessibility of renovated and new worship and other church spaces (USCCB 2002).

Despite the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letters and guidelines published over the last thirty years, pastoral leaders and parishioners still may need an attitude adjustment in order to realize that persons with disabilities might serve in liturgical ministries. A person who is blind may have the gifts required to be a fine lector; he may only need to make a braille copy of the lectionary text and, if he requests it, receive some guidance to and from the ambo. An outgoing, friendly parish member who has developmental disabilities may be an invaluable minister of hospitality. What attitudinal hospitality hurdles in your parish exclude people living with disabilities from serving the Body of Christ at worship?

Elsewhere I have written of other ways that people living with disabilities can contribute to a new liturgical ministry (Crowley 2006 and 2007). Where parishioners create their own liturgical media art through my recommended communal co-creation process, a group of them gathers months ahead to reflect upon a liturgy’s or liturgical season’s scripture, prayers, symbols, and songs and to make connections to their daily lives. Their conversation and creative brainstorming provide the basis and the inspiration for parish people skilled in the media, visual, and graphic arts to create liturgical media art for their community’s liturgies. People living with disabilities should be invited to participate in this process at every stage. Even people who have limited mobility and who cannot attend meetings can still participate via phone conferencing or video calls and can contribute to the process of spiritual reflection that is the foundation to the communal co-creation of this liturgical art form. They may bring to the process their skills as video editors and computer techies. They may well be able to contribute their own art for possible inclusion in worship.

To assist pastoral staff and parishioners to identify their own hospitality hurdles—architectural and attitudinal—and to offer potential solutions, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability makes available for sale the two-volume resource, *Opening Doors to People with Disabilities* (2002b). The National Organization on Disability publishes *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities*. Despite all the ideas in these and other resources, though, for medical and other reasons some of the baptized cannot leave their homes,
nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, or other institutions of care. How might we overcome this hurdle?

Making Present Those Who Cannot Be Present

Although the typical “TV Mass” literally provides a service, one upon which many infirm and elderly Catholics depend, these broadcasts do not connect viewers to their local parishes. Studio masses lack any discernible local context and may be shot months or days ahead. Other liturgies may be broadcast live from a church that is unknown to viewers. What if those baptized who were confined, for whatever reasons, could instead participate virtually with their own worship communities on Sunday? It is now possible. New communication technologies can potentially unbind the home- and institution bound. If used imaginatively, unobtrusively, and sensibly in ways sensitive to all involved, these technologies could allow the baptized who cannot be physically present to be virtually connected in real time with the rest of their faith community at prayer. Parishes might experiment with various combinations of today’s latest generation of cell phones, laptops, webcams, and wireless technologies. To stimulate our imaginations to explore how to extend hospitality to those baptized who are geographically confined, let us consider these hypothetical scenarios.

• Before a liturgy begins, a worshiper could locate herself near a speaker in church. Using her cell phone, she could dial a home-bound family member, friend, or parishioner who likewise has a phone or speaker phone at the other end. By keeping the phone on throughout the service, the person who could not otherwise be present could at least hear the entire liturgy as it happens in his or her own parish. Perhaps they could even exchange the greeting of peace at the appropriate time, if they can speak.

• What if a parish worship space were a free Wi-Fi spot? Imagine the case of a “regular” who suddenly could no longer attend worship. A volunteer could sit where that now-absent “regular” usually preferred to sit at Mass and using a webcam could send the video feed to the absent member. Before liturgy, the volunteer in church could log on to Skype™ (software that permits free video calls around the world) to connect to the absent worshiper who, at the other end, likewise had a netbook or laptop with webcam capability and an Internet connection. That netbook or laptop could even be connected by a video monitor cable to a large TV monitor to permit the video call to be seen even more easily by one or more worshipers. Thus connected by both video and audio, the worshiper who could not be physically present at a liturgy could be virtually present.
While these two scenarios are what individuals in concert with parish leaders could accomplish to make present those who are not present at Sunday worship, the parish could also invest in video streaming their worship on their parish websites. Anyone with an Internet-connected computer could then view the local service live. What is most exciting in these scenarios is the possibility that these technologies, when used in collaboration with church volunteers, could bridge the distance between the public church at prayer and the isolated worshiper confined elsewhere.

Human technology and human touch could combine to bring about new dimensions of the meaning of communion. Ideally, local worship services would close the communion rite with a public ritual dismissal of home communion ministers. After a blessing at the altar, the communion ministers carrying their pyx would walk directly down the aisle and head immediately to those unavoidably absent. This simple rite already exists and is used in some churches, Catholic and Protestant. If worshipers-at-a-distance were listening to or viewing the liturgy transmitted live, they would know that within a matter of minutes after that dismissal a communion minister would be at their door with the Body of Christ brought directly from the celebration in which they had virtually participated. Bringing communion to those who cannot be present with the assembly on Sunday is not a new idea, of course. Justin Martyr in the mid-second century attests to this custom (Apologia 1:67 in Deiss, 94). What is new is the braiding of another strand onto the liturgical lifeline that connects the local church to members at a distance. Besides bringing communion, the minister might also distribute, before Easter, some holy water that the person can use to bless him or herself along with the assembly during the opening sprinkling rite often used in parishes during the Easter season. Local churches could most likely think of other tangible ways to help those at a distance to participate more fully in the liturgy, including providing them with worship aids or hymnals.

Now, let us think in the opposite direction. How might someone confined to a home or institution contribute to the liturgy and life of the community? Imagine these possibilities. . . . In churches equipped with media projection or display technologies, via a Skype-enabled video call a person at home might read one of the day’s lectionary passages or offer the Prayer of the Faithful. As happens in some Protestant churches, short, edited, video interviews with the physically absent could be integrated into a time of reflection in a variety of liturgical circumstances, whether on Sunday, during a healing service, a penitential rite, a parish
mission, or a retreat. People confined could contribute in other ways to the life of
the church. From a distance, via conference phone or video calls, they could tran-
scend their geographical limits and engage in conversation with catechumens and
catechists who gather on Sunday for reflection after the Liturgy of the Word or
they could join neophytes in mystagogical reflections during the Easter season
and beyond.

**Tearing Down Hospitality Hurdles**

The practice of hospitality almost always includes eating meals together,”
writes Christine Pohl (12). Parishes need to find a way—in fact, multiple ways
and times—for those already present and those who are missing simply to eat
together. Over shared food and drink, conversations about needs and hopes may
lead to shared creative solutions. Obviously, these meals need to occur in acces-
sible spaces!

The parishioners and pastor of the parish described in the opening of this essay
are working toward making their community even more inclusive than it already
is. Soon to come are monthly “Pasta with the Pastor” dinners for ten people from
diverse segments of the parish. To make those dinners—and other events held in
the ministry center and rectory—accessible for parishioners with physical dis-
abilities, plans are underway for a new, ramped entry to that building. By nurtur-
ing an expansive vision of shared life together, ministers can foster practices of
hospitality that ensure that all are welcome in worship.

**References**


