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Disabling Leadership
A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ

December 12, 2023 | \$24, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0335-0

Churches must both consider the theology of disability and also become places where people with disabilities *lead*. Moving beyond paternalistic views of disability, this book encompasses cutting-edge theological ethics as well as practical examples of how church leaders and congregants can foster genuinely inclusive leadership teams.

A Practical Theology of Leading for the Body of Christ

The pastor led the church leaders through a tour of the historic building into which the congregation would be moving. Everyone commented on the beauty of the early twentieth-century building and discussed the ways God had led them to this place. Everyone except for her. The pastor had assured her the building was wheelchair accessible. The moment she realized she could not operate the wheelchair lift on her own, her hopes were dashed. As the tour began, feelings of despair crept up on her. The narrow doorways, the steep and dangerous downstairs hallways that led to meeting rooms, and the lack of accessible restrooms made her feel unseen.

How could the pastor have thought this place would be welcoming to people with disabilities? She felt the tears, hurt, and anger well up in her. She prayed she would remain calm and composed until she got home. However, her guard crumbled when the tour ended in the sanctuary. As she steered to the back of the sanctuary, the pastor asked her opinion about the wheelchair seating. She stared at the section where the church had removed several pews to provide a section for people with wheelchairs. As the sobs came, any hope of fruitful conversation was gone. Unable to keep the hurt and anger buried any longer, she explained that they would have to discuss it another time.

A few days later, the two siblings in Christ had an open discussion about the need to remember they were on the same team. She called the pastor into the sanctuary to show him what she had been saying about segregated seating. He walked behind her as they moved to the back of the sanctuary. She explained that having a segregated disability section was like being forced to sit in the back of the bus. The pastor mentioned that he appreciated her concern but thought there were differences between Jim Crow segregation and a lack of accessibility for people with disabilities, particularly in regard to the financial outlay necessary to make a space fully accessible. She grew angrier, countering that there had also been plenty of financial excuses for maintaining racial segregation.

She had his attention. She explained that the hurt she was experiencing was because she knew he cared about disability issues and yet still didn't get it. She had been a part of the young congregation for several years and yet she had not been consulted about accessibility before the church had settled on a permanent building. In the space they had previously rented, the congregation had used movable chairs for worship, which had allowed her to choose where and with whom she sat. She explained that removing a few pews was insufficient because it took options away from people with disabilities. It meant that if people with disabilities desired to sit beside able-bodied family or friends, they could not. Additionally, it forced all people with certain mobility limitations into a separate area. She moved to the front of the sanctuary and demonstrated that if she wanted to be closer to the pulpit, there was nowhere for her to sit.

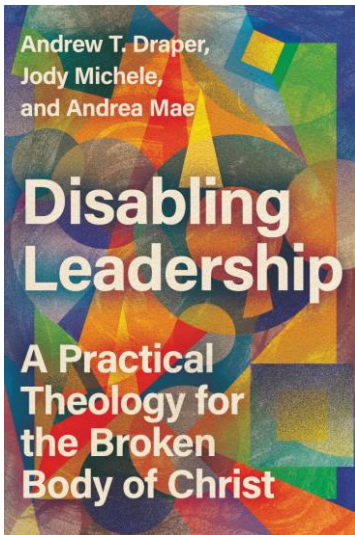
This interchange happened between Jody and Andrew, two of the authors of this book. Along with Andrea, we worship together in a local congregation committed to a ministry of reconciliation. The leadership of our church is passionate about justice. Yet some of us had missed the ways in which our physical space was enacting an ecclesial disruption—the ways in which the priorities we communicated in our building layout also communicated the limitations of our beliefs about inclusion.



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We had made sure that the old building that was new to us had a wheelchair lift. But we had not thought much further. Nor had we considered whether the wheelchair lift was user-friendly. This inability to fully consider disability stemmed from the reality that, at that time, people with physical disabilities were not in leadership. Leaders caring about people with disabilities is not the same as people with disabilities leading.

We open this book on disability and leadership with this brief story to demonstrate that, while church leaders will not always get it right, being the church means being committed to listening, learning, and working to better embody the diversity of Christ's body. We will utilize stories throughout the book, including revisiting this one, to show that reconciliation is a work in progress. "Getting it right" means sometimes first "getting it wrong" while learning and growing from our mistakes. Confession of sin and spiritual disciplines aimed at growth have always been core components of Christian faithfulness. As we experiment with how to live more fully in the diversity of Christ's body, we confess when we fall short and we engage in practices to help us grow.

This book is a practical theology of leading for the body of Christ. It is "practical" in that it is meant to be lived. It is "theological" in that it is rooted in Christian doctrine, Scripture, and ethics. As a discipline, practical theology "is dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God" (John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*). Practical theology recognizes that faith is always necessarily performed and enacted. Practical theology is not best understood as putting belief into practice, but as the mutually articulating relationship of divine life and human life. As John Swinton and Harriet Mowat explain: "Human experience is a 'place' where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted, and lived out."

Practical theology reflects on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world. This interaction is oriented toward "ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world" (*Practical Theology*). A practical theology of disability and leading will articulate faithful Christian practice that is open to, and receptive of, God's manifold wisdom revealed in the world, in human bodies and minds, and in communities of people, especially congregations. This book is a practical theology born out of the relationships, joys, and struggles of working toward reconciliation between people of diverse abilities. Its lessons are grounded in a particular worshiping community, but it is written for the broader body of Christ, including local churches in many different contexts. It is also written in a posture of reception to the many positive aspects of the work of inclusion in society, thereby describing this work in a theological register.

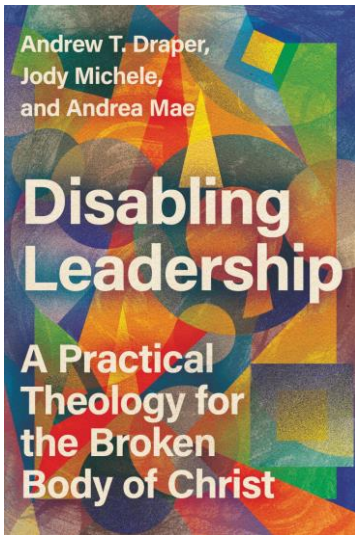
People with disabilities are often excluded from full participation in church communities in both explicit and implicit ways. Similarly, people with disabilities are often excluded from full access to many places and many systems in society. Increasing accessibility is a key component of the ministry of reconciliation, both for the sake of the church and the sake of the world. And yet, as we will see, increasing accessibility is only the beginning of considering the implications of disability for the body of Christ. Reconciliation is costly work that requires concrete action. Yet action without a deep understanding of what it means to be human and what Christian leading entails is both insufficient and harmful. This is where practical theology is a helpful guide.



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In this book, we will contend that local churches must be communities in which people with disabilities lead. If people with disabilities and their advocates are not at the leadership table, then the decisions that are made will exclude and hurt people, whether intentionally or not. Disability perspectives will not be heard, the gifts and experiences of people with disabilities will not benefit the church, the implications of church practices on people with disabilities will not be considered, and ministries aimed at inclusion will be paternalistic. This will result in a truncated vision of what it means to be the church for the world (Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World*).

People with disabilities leading in the church is a matter of experiencing the whole body of Christ. It is not a matter of including a few folks with disabilities as tokens. We are taking the radical step of claiming, with the apostle Paul, that if all the body parts are not present and honored, then the body of Christ is not present (1 Corinthians 12:14-25). The church is the one group in society that is necessarily constituted by the diversity of its members, especially those deemed by society as weaker, less productive, or more disposable. More than any other community, the church is recognized by the ways people who are marginalized, especially people with disabilities, are included and honored in her midst. In a homily on Matthew 25, early church father John Chrysostom noted that the way Christ desires to be honored is through the adorning of the marginalized members of his body before the adorning of the sanctuary (Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Gospel of Matthew*).

The authors of this book worship and lead together in a local church. We are writing from the center of our shared experiences, from our life together. We will include stories and examples where appropriate. Each of us has engaged in study, education, and vocation driven by our experiences with disability and inclusion. In other words, our personal experiences along with our academic study and vocations inform one another and in turn inform and are informed by our shared life together. We are not claiming to have all the answers but that the interchange of our work, studies, and experiences positions us to speak a word to the church regarding disability and leadership. If this book motivates faith communities to dream together about how they can increase access and inclusion on the path toward reconciliation and justice, we will have met our mark.

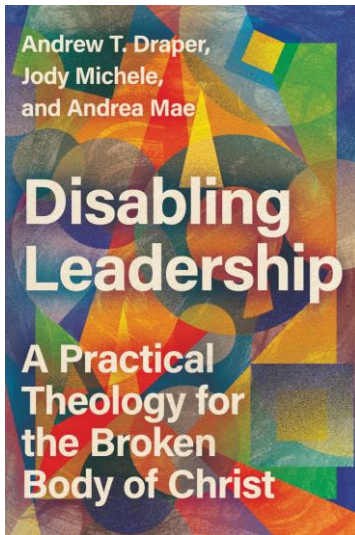
—Taken from the introduction, “Disabling Leadership”



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ENDORSEMENTS



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A Practical Theology for Leaders and Congregants

“To what degree has the church in North America been disabling leadership due to its presumptions that people with disabilities are more followers rather than given gifts of leading? Draper, Michele, and Mae here pull back the curtain on their own experiences navigating these questions as such persons called to ministry with other temporarily enabled individuals, and they invite the rest of us into a more welcoming community that envisions and embodies more inclusive ways of following in the footsteps of Jesus the Messiah in the present time.”

—**Amos Yong**, professor of theology and mission at Fuller Seminary

“While many books on disability and church focus on welcoming people with disabilities as participants, *Disabling Leadership* articulates a crucial and distinctively theological framework for welcoming their leadership as well. Helpfully included is concrete guidance for communities who seek to live out the richness of the diversity of the body of Christ—including diversity of abilities and disabilities—in every facet of their communal life. A welcome addition to the disability theology conversation.”

—**Bethany McKinney Fox**, author of *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*

“I have had the genuine privilege of seeing the team ministry described in this book in action. For Draper, Michele, and Mae the ministry of the differently abled is not aspiration but reality, and in *Disabling Leadership* they accessibly show how theologically rich and interpersonally rewarding such ministry can be. This book shifts the goalpost: mere inclusion of disabled people is not what the church needs. What it needs—and needs desperately—is the leadership of differently abled members of Christ’s broken and gloriously resurrected body.”

—**Brian Brock**, professor of moral and practical theology at the University of Aberdeen

“In a post-ADA world, the church should be asking, Where is the disability community and more importantly where are the leaders among them? Sadly the church at large has missed this. Andrew Draper, Jody Michele, and Andrea Mae do a superb job of *together* explaining why shared leadership is vital to the whole church community. Being in relationship with these three over years has been an encouragement to me as a cerebral palsy man, to be able to reimagine what is possible in my own home church. I’m so grateful that now this story and these insights are offered in this book!”

—**Daniel Aaron Harris**, DMin, founder of Fallen Walls and Bobby Blue Books



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