Literal and Theoretical Constructive Ecclesial Theology: Building a Church on Inherent Inclusion

Abstract
This PhD thesis will construct a new practical ecclesiology for the purpose of improved religious outcomes for people with disabilities. A large discrepancy exists between the religious expression of those with disabilities compared to those without, and the modern Church has failed to address the structural, programmatic, and theological barriers to participation.¹ Using modern disability theology, current church practices, and architectural theories, I will construct an inclusive ecclesiology with higher regard for theological anthropology. This research will be primarily qualitative in nature. Ultimately, a cohesive ecclesiology and its practical applications can modify church practice to better reflect a theology which accounts for a wider diversity of human expression. This theology and its resultant programmatic/structural implications will greatly impact the work of current and future churches, leading to higher rates of engagement for individuals with disabilities.

Introduction
From soaring arches, historic wooden pews, and intricate stained glass to folding chairs, rented gymnasiums, and a worship band on a stage, Christian churches in the Western world have a great deal of built-in structural diversity. Modern churches contain within their physical structure intersections of theology, logistics, and culture, highlighting various aspects of communally-held faith. A church built in the 1100’s will inherently expose Christian history, while a nontraditional rented facility may remind churchgoers that their faith remains applicable in their day-to-day experiences. The interplay between the form and function of various spaces will inform, both consciously and unconsciously, the unique understanding of one’s faithful identity.

Space can educate, a principle which holds major promise for the exploration of disability theology. Disability theology, at its core, asks the Christian community to revisit the fundamental premises of what it means to be human, what the natures of God and Christ must mean for us, and how we then engage faith through the specifics of religion. All worship reflects both named and unnamed theological principles, and the space chosen for that expression therefore holds implicit beliefs about embodiment, theological anthropology, community, and ecclesiology. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk states that architecture is “the original form in which the immersion of humans in artificial environments has been developed into a culturally controlled process.”² The ways in which we construct the space around us both derives from and speaks to our theological commitments.

The theological questions which most concern the practical outcomes for those with disabilities are being revisited by modern scholars, though “disabilities have never been religiously neutral.”

Nor has space, as Sloterdijk continues: “When one builds a house for oneself, one creates, as it were, the space-demon by which one will subsequently be possessed.” Have our historic theological commitments led us to worship in the house of a demon called ‘self-interest?’ Can the conversation between disability theology and architectural theory reshape our theology in ways more inclusive of persons with disabilities?

The society in which the Western Christian exists is largely disinterested in the full inclusion of people with disabilities. As Erik Carter details, data confirms that disabilities significantly impede religious engagement - our churches are upholding the broader culture of ostracization. Disability theology provides meaning for otherwise ignored experiences and a practical way forward. The house we are building is not our own, it is God’s; we have no claim on the space in which we are immersed. This proposal is designed reflect the growing need for both meaning and guidance for a worship experience which prophesies against the current culture of exclusion and the historic refusal to welcome all of God’s children - reconstructing the walls of the Church to be wide enough for all to fit.

I come to this work carrying a call to bridge the experience of those around me with disabilities into the life of the Church, and to in turn translate the work of the Church for those with disabilities. I learned Biblical Hebrew from professor Stuart Robertson at Purdue University, helping me to see translation as both an art form and a means of education; my future projects have been informed by this concept, and my work within Vanderbilt Divinity School was shaped by the understanding that faith itself requires translation across cultures. My final project was a thesis on reorganizing ecclesial commitments based on rereading Scripture with a disability hermeneutic. Working at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center under Dr. Erik Carter taught me that the Church must speak prophetically to all areas of life, including housing, transportation, employment, and friendships - especially for those with disabilities.

Research Questions
The following questions inform the fundamental question of, ‘how ought we worship,’ given the specific lens of disability inclusion.

1) How can a change in practice, built on theological grounds, maintain unity across the past, present, and future Church?

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4 Sloterdijk. P. 106.
5 Carter, E. 6-8.
Practically speaking, how can modern theologians maintain a cohesion with the historic Body while honoring a future sense of ethical organization? Do we condemn our by-gone Christian leaders by changing our faith practices?

Churches are currently worshipping in ways which would ostensibly fail the theologies constructed within this research. How might their current practice shape and inform this proposal’s outcomes?

2) Does a disabled ecclesiology work in realized contexts?

Can a cohesive theology of ecclesial structure be ideal in its aims while remaining practical enough for lived experience? Can an embodied worship space perform its function as a means of access? What if it fails to account for even one person’s experience and needs? Can a space be physically structured in a way that allows for both a communally-derived sense of shared meaning and still accept the width of religious individual freedoms?

How does technology shape modern church experience? How has our ecclesial understanding changed as a result of interconnectivity and the degradation of isolation (which intimately informs the concept of sanctuary)? How might technology be useful and/or necessary in a modern disabled ecclesiology?

3) Is there a measurable reaction to worshipping in a new structure?

What demographics are most impacted by these practical changes? How do changes to liturgy complicate these emotional responses? How can one measure the level of engagement within a religious context, and how does one provide metrics for comparing different faith structures?

Positioning
Work on the intersection between ecclesiology and disability has begun with the writings of Hauerwas, Nouwen, Vanier, and Yong, each detailing a path for the Church to broaden its commitments in light of a widen perspective on theological anthropology. Additionally, the work of Carter on education and friendship and Conner on missiology gives pragmatic guidance to the work of the church. Disability hermeneutics have been explored by Eiesland, Hull, Reinders, and Betcher, establishing the framework for this thesis. Additionally, with a modern emphasis on communal living and the increased capability for interaction via technology, cultural studies and critiques of the church can offer insight into how a person with disabilities might live within their own social group (thus impacting how one engages with a religious community).
This work rests in between the already aforementioned works of disabled ecclesiology and interdisciplinary studies of disability. This includes disabled feminism/tech (Kafer, Chen, Passanate Elman), architectural pedagogy (Sloterdijk, Orr), hospitality (Volf), and environmental ecclesiology (Bratton, Gorringe). Further, I will build constructively by placing into conversation Catholic architecture theology (Schillebeeckx, Belluschi) and modern Evangelical architectural practice (Kilde), moving the conversation into previously-unexplored territory.

Current research has pointed back to the church structure in comparatively minimal ways; the bulk of modern disability theology is focused in the areas of methodology, ethics, ontology, social justice, and liberative effects. Ecclesiology has been relegated to the field of “best practices” for inclusion and “how-to” guides for special needs ministries. These are important to the families and individuals they serve, but are reliant on retrofitting existing structures. The works of Hauerwas and Yoder are united in seeking an embodied expression of faith as the focal point of ecclesiological communiting (or in the case of Watts-Belser, embodied liberation from politicized violence) building on Zwingli’s assertion that the presence of Christ was not in the eucharist, but rather in the church itself. I will push that conversation into its next logical focal point: what are the organizational practices and physical structures of a church which remains allied not to tradition (as in the case of retrofitting) but to the anti-ableist work of Christ?

The University of Aberdeen’s focus on practical theology and the human experience of disabilities will help this research to remain effectively rooted in practice. Additionally, their commitment to fostering new theological concepts which utilize modern understandings and contemporary forms of human diversity is a necessity for a new exploration in this field.

**Research Design**

This thesis will begin with a comprehensive review of modern ecclesiology, drawn primarily from the work of Hauerwas, Nouwen, Vanier, Yong, Bratton, and Gorringe, and secondarily from the sources named in the Positioning section. The resulting conceptual framework will inform theologically-inclusive church practices. This process will take approximately 12 months. For the following 24 months, I will study both theoretical and practical disability theologies, interdisciplinary disability studies, radically inclusive buildings, architectural theories, and modern church building practices (following Schillebeeckx and Belluschi). New options for practical faith expression will then be hypothesized based on this collected data. These updated practices will then be applied to didactic and immersive architecture theories to determine a practical ecclesiology that is structurally and inherently inclusive. This research will be defended after 36 months of full-time work.

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Significance
Though only an estimated 37% of Americans and 10% of UK citizens attend church services weekly, with ~2.2 billion Christians and over 1 billion people with disabilities worldwide it is imperative to address the implicit and explicit beliefs in the theological nature of disabilities. An inherently inclusive ecclesiology also drastically impacts areas of evangelism, theological training/education, church polity, and communality. Any person engaging with the Christian experience will necessarily encounter the very structural, programmatic, and theological commitments that this thesis seeks to modify. Therefore, this research holds significance for a substantial number of individuals and communities, both with and without disabilities.

Parameters
This research challenges the underlying theology which directs the organization, structure, and form of the individual congregations which form the universal Christian Church. It is unrealistic to expect that all church bodies would read and engage with this particular work, though it is within the design of this study to ask questions critical of any given congregation. Primarily, given my personal context and ministry, my resultant theology would be most useful to Protestant congregations in North American and Western European countries.

Conclusion
I am the product of a context which normalized inclusion. My desire to research the spirituality of those with disabilities, and to increase the ability of the Church to include them has been bolstered by my work in inclusive ministries and fine-tuned by my academic training. I seek to continue this pattern, allowing the practical and theoretical to remain in conversation in my scholarly and ministerial endeavors while applying the highest levels of study possible. Thus, my career goals involve fulfilling the requirements of a PhD in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen - a place where the ministerial, theological, philosophical, and practical converge.