Shalom Made Strange: A Peace Church Theology For and With People With Intellectual Disabilities

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> *[T]he members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect. . . . God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member . . . .*
>
> (1 Corinthians 12:22-24)

The Apostle Paul wrote these words to a community deeply divided and struggling for unity. For him, placing the weakest members of the fellowship at the center was essential for the community's peace and well-being. No *shalom* existed if the most marginalized members experienced neglect and dishonor, something that emulated the false "wisdom" of the world that saw in Christ's death only foolishness and folly (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Traditionally the historic peace churches have been drawn to this same desire for *shalom* and unity both within their fellowships and in the world. By persistently advocating and proclaiming the *shalom* vision of Jesus, ecclesial traditions dedicated to nonviolence have transformed the ecumenical and international debate on what truly makes for peace. The influence of this witness to the nonviolent life of Christ cannot be denied.

However, too often the "weakest" and "least honorable" members, such as those with intellectual disabilities, remain absent or hidden in this ecclesial vision. In their advocacy for *shalom*, peace churches have been exemplary at loving the (often larger and more dominant) enemy. But what about the despised and rejected, and those who undergo less overt means of violence? Some Mennonites have begun to expand peace ecclesiology to include less traditional subjects of oppression,[1] but most of the discussion

[1] See Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), and Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann Riggs, eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace: A Peace Church Conversation* (Telford, PA:

The Conrad Grebel Review 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 24-43.

concerns traditional forms of "conflict" between equal actors; the violence that comes from exclusion and radically asymmetric relationships rarely arises. Yet these are some of the prime targets of Paul's criticism of the Corinthian church in its failure to embody Christ's *shalom*.

This essay attempts to place people with intellectual disabilities at the center of an ecclesial vision and peace witness. I look first at two competing visions of peace, one given by western, late modern culture and another offered by the church, and then consider L'Arche and the thought of Jean Vanier as a potential embodiment of this peace for the church. I conclude by exploring a potential strategy for becoming a peace church for and with people with intellectual disabilities. What will be discovered in this exploration is that the *shalom* of God begins to appear very "strange" next to that of the world, and that it offers a bold counter-narrative to a culture that disdains those with intellectual disabilities. The "shalom made strange" that a church for and with people with disabilities proclaims is potentially more faithful to the gospel than the dangerous peace of western liberal society.

The *Pax Pernicioso*

In 2010, British embryologist Robert Edwards received a Nobel Prize for his ground-breaking work on in vitro fertilization (IVF) technology. After more than four million IVF births, ethical concerns about IVF seemed to have become passé, with Edwards proclaimed as a great humanitarian for granting thousands of people the "gift of a child." However, in all the proceedings no one mentioned that in 1999 he had made grand claims about the need for advanced technology around reproduction, not just to make people happy but also for human progress. "Soon it will be a sin for parents to have a child

Cascadia, 2004). For how peace theology relates to women in particular, see Elizabeth Yoder, ed., *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992). Surprisingly, LGBT people have not shown much interest in connecting their struggle with the church's peace tradition. For other discussions of inclusion and hospitality, see Ted Grimsrud, "Toward a Theology of Welcome: Developing a Perspective on the 'Homosexuality' Issue," in *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation and Ted Grimsrud (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008); Roberta Showalter Kreider, ed., *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been* (Sellersville, PA: Roberta Showalter Kreider, 2004), especially ch. 31; and Karl S. Shelly and Heidi J. Siemens-Rhodes, eds., *None Can Stop the Spirit: Pastors and Leaders Express Hope for a More LGBT Inclusive Mennonite Church* (Goshen, IN: K.S. Shelly, 2009).

that carries the heavy burden of genetic disease," he said. "We are entering a world where we have to consider the quality of our children."[2] This is the bioethical "peace" of late modern western democracy, whose ultimate values of rationality and autonomy mean that anyone lacking these attributes is inherently lacking in value. Thus the prevention of those lives, writes Hans Reinders, "often appears as the only rational thing to do."[3] While western culture claims to provide equal access to every person no matter their ability, at the same time it invests huge resources in detecting and eliminating pregnancies with genetic abnormalities. This has led geneticist Brian Skotko to ask whether, with new prenatal testing, babies with Down syndrome might slowly disappear altogether.[4] With the percentage of pregnancies terminated after testing positively for this syndrome now between 60 and 90,[5] this can only be a *pax pernicioso*, a dangerous peace, for people with

[2] Quoted in Ellen Painter Dollar, *No Easy Choice: A Story of Disability, Parenthood, and Faith in an Age of Advanced Reproduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 8.

[3] Hans S. Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society: An Ethical Analysis* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 4.

[4] Brian G. Skotko, "With New Prenatal Testing, Will Babies with Down Syndrome Slowly Disappear?," *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 94, no. 11 (November 2009): 823-26.

[5] The most cited source is Caroline Mansfield, Suellen Hopfer, and Theresa M. Marteau, "Termination Rates After Prenatal Diagnosis of Down Syndrome, Spina Bifida, Anencephaly, and Turner and Klinefelter Syndromes: A Systematic Literature Review" *Prenatal Diagnosis* 19[9] (1999): 808-12. But see also L.D. Bryant, J.M. Green, and J. Hewison, "Prenatal Screening for Down's Syndrome: Some Psychosocial Implications of a 'Screening for All' Policy," *Public Health (Nature)* 115, no. 5 (2001): 356, and David Mutton and Roy G. Ide, "Trends in Prenatal Screening for and Diagnosis of Down's Syndrome: England and Wales, 1989-97," *BMJ: British Medical Journal (International Edition)* 317, no. 7163 (1998): 922-23. affected pregnancies in younger women will account for the majority of any increased overall detection rate. Therefore, while a 'screening for all' policy will offer wider reproductive choices to more women, it is likely to specifically increase the number of young women experiencing termination of pregnancy for abnormality. A number of inter-dependent factors predispose some women to high levels of psychological distress following termination, and a combination of these factors is most likely to be found in the very young. In addition, very young women often have little knowledge of prenatal testing and may be more likely to accept screening presented as 'routine' without considering the consequences. At the point where decisions about diagnostic testing or termination are made, more specialised support may be indicated for some very young women. If the UK National Screening Committee's recommendations are taken forward therefore, service providers should ensure suitable support is available for some of their more vulnerable clients. The 80-90 percent termination rate comes mostly from

intellectual disabilities.

The *pax pernicioso* is grounded in a larger cultural narrative of agency and productivity. In late modernity, choice and ability are the essential requirements for human flourishing, with strength manifesting itself in rationality, efficiency, and autonomous decision-making. Authentic citizenship demands a highly reflexive individual possessed of the robust subjectivity needed to enter into contractual and economic relations with others. Being at peace requires the ability to be responsible for one's life by choosing one's destiny and productively contributing to society. Success and accomplishment define worth, with speed their primary mode of operation.[6]

Under this narrative of agency and achievement, society views the lives of people with intellectual disabilities as profoundly defective. Those with cognitive impairments present lives totally counter to what society deems worthy: weak, dependent, slow, inefficient, and unproductive. These persons display a difference too disturbing and "strange" for society to countenance. Their radically different embodiment disrupts what Thomas Reynolds calls the "cult of normalcy," the "normal" body marking one as a legitimate person in consumer society.[7] In the larger cultural narrative, the sufferer who obstinately contradicts the imperative of "healing" and "well-being" must be eliminated in order to maintain the *pax pernicioso*.

While peace churches would generally be uncomfortable with eliminating the weak from society, the emphasis on "action" and "doing" in their ecclesiologies sits uneasily with a narrative based on "achievement" and "agency." Thus Thomas Finger claims that believers' baptism must be an expression of "ethical determination."[8] Joe Jones concurs, saying that faith "involves decisions and actions, and in that sense . . . is intentional action. . . . A faith that did not dispose one to particular sorts of actions and the actual

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developed countries.

[6] On efficiency and effectiveness as the two greatest values in post-Enlightenment thought, see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[7] See Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), especially Chap. 2-3.

[8] Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 2:347.

enactment of those actions is not faith in the Christian sense."[9] What does this mean for someone with limited human agency? Could someone with a profound intellectual and physical disability be truly a Christian in this conception of faith?[10]

Too often the faith expressed in a peace church can appear as, and be presented as, a faith for the strong and able. The overwhelming emphasis on action and doing can look much like a cult of normalcy, where identity is completely wrapped up with will and achievement. While an attempt may be made to include people with intellectual disabilities as exceptions whom the church generously accommodates, this inclusion never questions the cult of normalcy and tends to disqualify from moral significance those not "ethically determined" enough. People with cognitive impairments thus reside in a liminal space, vulnerable to patronizing platitudes at best, congregational neglect and disappearance at worst.

If the peace theology and witness of the church cannot include the weakest, most vulnerable members, one can legitimately question its *shalomic* character. Without a robust theology of grace and receptivity integrated into Christian discipleship, the Gospel stands as less than good news for people with intellectual disabilities. It might even come to resemble the *pax pernicioso* that sees them as only passive recipients of "care" from the able-bodied "strong."

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[9] Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 94.

[10] Once can see in a Mennonite theology of baptism how the emphasis on agency can possibly exclude those in states of radical dependency. Jodi Nisly Hertzler's explanation of why the church baptizes adults relies exclusively on the agency and decision of the candidate; any sense of the prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit or the church's role as subject in the process is entirely absent. See her *Ask Third Way Café: 50 Common and Quirky Questions About Mennonites* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2009), 22-3. How those with an intellectual disability could be baptized, if they are significantly limited in the cognitive abilities required to achieve this high level of subjectivity, stands as a fundamental question under this theology and practice. "High church Mennonite" Stanley Hauerwas has the same reservations when such an emphasis is placed upon the individual candidate: "Absolutely crucial for me is [the] claim that the primary subject of baptism is not the individual who is baptized but the church itself. I have always thought this is the crucial move if we are to understand why we rightly baptize the mentally handicapped." *On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium, 2001-2002*, ed. Gerald Schlabach (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 101.

Shalom Made Strange

Shalom Church

A potential way forward lies in Lutheran theologian Craig L. Nessan's articulation of a "shalom church."[11] Nessan does not include people with cognitive impairments specifically in his text, but his vision of the body of Christ shows much room for a peace ecclesiology that can account for society's most vulnerable members. With a broader, more holistic peace theology, the shalom church could take seriously the lives of people with cognitive impairments in its peace witness. Nessan places *shalom* within the context of the Jewish notion of *tikkun olam*, God's mission to mend the torn fabric of creation. Far more than denoting the absence of conflict, God's peace manifests itself in right relationships of flourishing and goodness: "Shalom involves all members of God's creation living in harmonious and life-giving relationships one with another."[12]

In addition to an appropriate orientation of respect towards God and the created order, God's *shalom* demands welcoming every person as a sacramental sign of God's presence in the world. Those outside the boundaries of "normal" cannot be "othered" into a special outlier status, for human flourishing requires a dynamic solidarity that hosts the stranger and searches for the lost. As exemplified in Jesus' life and mission to inaugurate God's reign on earth by eating with sinners and identifying with innocent sufferers, the church must act as refuge for those most forgotten and neglected. As creatures made for networks of life-giving mutuality and friendship, Christians know that conceptualizing others as objects rather than persons violates the sacramental nature of their being. Embodying God's *shalom* means being committed to what John Swinton calls the "rehumanization of the nonperson" that hears their cry for friendship and offers a Spirit-permeated space of liberation and flourishing.[13]

For Nessan, the Pauline notion of the "body of Christ" is the key metaphor in articulating the church's participation in *tikkun olam*. This

[11] Craig L. Nessan, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

[12] Ibid., 10.

[13] John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 17-18.

image has not only mystical or spiritual significance but ethical significance. Steeped in the Christian narrative, the church's *telos* is *shalom*, embodied in Jesus' proclaiming and inaugurating the Kingdom of God.[14] Nessan fleshes out the character of the church's social ministry through the traditional marks articulated in the Niceno-Constantinoplitan Creed. Each mark includes accompanying virtues and practices in which the *shalom* church participates as Christ's body.

Nessan includes traditional peace practices like reconciliation – including repudiation of violence and advocacy of nonviolent resistance – justice, and creation care in his ecclesiology. But it is his inclusion of an apostolic identity grounded in affirming the inherent dignity of each person that is a major contribution to what the peace witness should look like. The ethical character of the church's apostolic mission must be

> grounded in the vital affirmation that every human person has been created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and for that reason alone is deserving of infinite respect. . . . To avow that every person is created in God's image is to claim that when we encounter another human being (as a kind of sign), we are to be immediately reminded of the God who created her or him and to relate to that person with sacred respect.[15]

In this vision, the church must pay particular attention to the weakest, most vulnerable members of society, and enter into risky solidarity with them, not because it is the right thing to do but because it is where Jesus chooses to reveal himself: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). For Jesus, the strange places that liberal culture attempts to deny or demolish are the center of God's saving activity. Faithfulness to the gospel means being led by the Spirit to society's forgotten and abandoned spaces.

This vision can act as a powerful counter-narrative to that offered by the cult of normalcy. Rather than human flourishing demanding individual achievement and self-definition, the "good life" of the gospel means learning how to receive the gift of friendship from Christ present through the

[14] Nessan, *Shalom Church*, 51.
[15] Ibid., 143.

strange/r and how to pass it on to others. The wholly different orientation toward being human inherent in this risky solidarity can enhance faithful discipleship and act as a missional witness to a watching world.

Paul's "Weakness Theology"

Another place where a peace ecclesiology for and with the intellectually disabled might be discerned is in the work of Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong.[16] Yong detects in Paul's Corinthian letters a "theology of weakness" that can open up the way to a "disability-inclusive theology of the church,"[17] and contends that "the power of Paul's rhetoric of weakness is accentuated precisely against the normate assumptions of the Corinthian congregation and the false apostles. Whereas the latter operated according to worldly conventions that emphasized self-pride and self-assertiveness, personal exploits, eloquent rhetoric, powerful speech, and so on, Paul's approach was in accordance with the way of Christ and his cross."[18] By understanding divine revelation as coming through weakness and vulnerability, we can see the intellectually disabled not only as those whose rights need protection but as ministers of God's *shalom*.

In 1 Cor. 12, Paul employs his familiar ecclesial metaphor of the body to bolster the unity of the congregation. Located within this metaphor is a bold claim that the weaker members are essential to that unity: "[T]he members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect. . . . God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member . . ." (22-24). The Greek word translated as "weaker," *asthenestera*, could refer to those with some kind of sickness, but it could also correlate with our modern term "disabled."[19] Paul's mentioning of the weaker members' place in the body

[16] Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). See also his *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2007), Chap. 7.

[17] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 82.

[18] Ibid., 89.

[19] See Martin Albl, "'For Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong': Disability in Paul's Epistles," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies,* ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 146.

is thus surprising, for it assumes they have not been pushed out but have a home in the fellowship. Not only do they have a place, they have one of "greater honor." Yong sees in this claim that they are "embraced as central and essential to a fully healthy and functioning congregation in particular, and to the ecclesial body in general."[20]

This becomes understandable in light of Paul's writing about the wisdom of God in chapter one of the same letter: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (27-28). God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world" (20), not through the most rational and muscular means but through society's most vulnerable and despised members. This seems consistent with God's ultimate means of salvation and wisdom: Christ crucified (23). "If, in the world's view, ability, capability, and self-accomplishment are normate expectations, then the disability, inability, and utter helplessness of the symbol of the cross now represent God's power and wisdom."[21] In Paul's theology of weakness, disabilities "become the measure of God's means of salvation, and it is those who would insist on their own capability, power, and intelligence who are in turn excluded."[22]

For the Apostle, the intellectually disabled can move from the margins of the church to its very center. In this ecclesial vision, God's *shalom* will be accomplished not by the self-confident ethical rigorist but by the "poor in spirit" who know their limitations and need for God's grace. Thus the intellectually disabled can be seen as integral members who potentially embody, in an especially powerful way, the Holy Spirit's peacemaking presence. Christ has reconciled the world not through efficient dominion but through the cross (Ephesians 2:16), and manifests this continuing mission of peace through lives that late modernity deems unproductive. In the body, weakness becomes not an exception but a characteristic of Christ's subversive nonviolent *shalom*.

[20] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 95.
[21] Ibid., 101.
[22] Ibid., 102–103.

A Peace Not as the World Gives

Nessan and Yong articulate an alternative story with which to fashion a peace ecclesiology. For both, *shalom* begins by paying attention to right relations with the weakest and seeing them as powerful embodiments of God's activity. By cultivating this narrative, the church offers what John Swinton terms a "narrative of resistance" to a society that views these persons with fear and loathing.[23] By re-positioning the cognitively impaired from the margins to the center, the church can start to see them not as people who disturb the peace but as those who become ministers of *shalom*.

To a culture where rationality and autonomous agency comprise the basic attributes of human flourishing, this story can only appear as "strange." Jesus says this should come as no surprise: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. *I do not give to you as the world gives*" (John 14:27, emphasis added). Jesus' *shalom* story confronts the *pax pernicioso* and unmasks it as an illusion. The church's task is to be faithful to God's strange story and, by doing so, to become strange itself. As it becomes "conformed to Christ's strange image," it will, we can hope, begin to think again about people it previously thought "abnormal." Perhaps they will seem more normal and sane than the rest of us. They might even become leaders and teachers of what Christ's *shalom* looks like.

L'Arche: Seeing *Shalom* Made Strange

According to Stanley Hauerwas, "Christianity, like peace, is not an idea. Rather it is a bodily faith that must be seen to be believed."[24] One place where Hauerwas finds Christian *shalom* expressed is in the communities of L'Arche, which offer a visible counter-narrative to the *pax pernicioso* and its norm of violence. While L'Arche has never claimed to be an official church or denomination, its self-proclaimed mission to be a sign in the world

[23] "Counternarratives do the work of repairing broken or misleading narratives and as such become a place of rupture and change. Counternarratives offer a point of resistance." John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, and Susannah Baines, "Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15, no. 1 (March 2011): 7.

[24] Stanley Hauerwas, "Seeing Peace: L'Arche as a Peace Movement," in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 309.

speaks to its sacramentality and embodied bearing of the gospel message. "L'Arche shows, as the church is called to show, that Christianity is true by demonstrating what community would look like if the gospel were true."[25] If L'Arche embodies the strange story of God's *shalom*, then the church would do well to pay attention to it and to consider how it might inform peace ecclesiology. An articulation of this potential ecclesial vision lies in the writings of L'Arche founder Jean Vanier, who has shaped the organization's ability to be a sign of Christ's peace.

Christ is Our Peace

Vanier's vision of *shalom* begins with a great peace text: "For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross . . . " (Eph. 2:14-16). Vanier has seen firsthand how people with intellectual disabilities have become outliers, pushed beyond the boundaries of the human, and recognizes there can be no liberation for them without tearing down the walls that violently exclude them: "There can be no peace unless we are all convinced that every person, whatever his or her abilities or disabilities, whatever his or her ethnic origins, culture or religion, is precious to God."[26] As long as there are "walls of fear" inside human hearts and human groups, they will continue to practice the "othering" that demonizes difference and leads to perpetual warfare. This fear represents the hostility and enmity that Jesus came to destroy through his life, death, and resurrection.

> Jesus' work is to destroy the barriers, prejudices and fear that separate people with handicaps from 'normal' people, so as to unite them in a single body. It is the complete reversal of a hierarchal society in which the powerful, the influential and the privileged are elevated, and the weak and poor are put down. Those who are weakest form the heart of the body instituted by

[25] John Swinton, "Introduction: Living Gently in a Violent World," in Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 18.

[26] Jean Vanier, *Encountering the Other* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 43.

> Jesus, in which competition no longer exists. Here each person has a place; no one is superior to anyone else. Each person is unique and essential.[27]

Vanier's view coincides with Paul's: a unified body where the most vulnerable lie at the center of the community. Drawing inspiration from 1 Corinthians 12, Vanier puts forward a vision of a peace church that revolves around Jesus' nonviolent ethic and Paul's reflections on the body of Christ. Those reflections imply that "people who are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the church. I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church. Do we really believe that the weakest, the least presentable, those we hide away – that they are indispensable? If that was our vision of the church, it would change many things."[28]

The prophetic nature of L'Arche's community life is seen in its relation to time. In a world of speed and efficiency, time is the enemy to be conquered and dominated. Technology becomes a means to exercise violence over time, which in turn becomes one of the "powers" that enslave us. But the disabled at L'Arche continually train the nondisabled to slow down and live at a more human pace, to become "friends of time."[29] By doing so, those with cognitive impairments become teachers of the virtues of patience and listening, virtues so often neglected in the *pax pernicioso* but fundamental for persons of God's *shalom*.

As the intellectually disabled form the heart of this community of peace and reconciliation, L'Arche bears out the Pauline insight that weakness, not power or strength, represents the means of God's *shalom*. Humility towards others, not superiority, marks the way of peace. Only when people acknowledge their human contingency and creatureliness can they be secure enough to welcome the "other" in true friendship and mutuality: "Followers of Jesus are called to believe that non-violence, poverty, openness

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[27] Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day* (Toronto: Novalis, 1995), 56.
[28] Jean Vanier, "The Vision of Jesus: Living Peaceably in a Wounded World," in Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 74.
[29] Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 125. See also the reflections of Stanley Hauerwas on L'Arche as a community of "timeful friends" in his *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), Chap. 8.

and forgiveness are the surest ways for them and their communities to receive life from God and to give life, peace and unity to the world. It is in our weakness that the power of God is manifested through the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit."[30]Vanier's coherence with Paul's "weakness theology" could not be clearer: recall "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Vanier recognizes that enacting *shalom* is ultimately God's business, not ours. The call to be peacemakers must be grounded and inspired by the life of the Trinity; only when the divine life operates within people can they perform the radical acts of letting go and forgiveness necessary for lives of *shalom*. Abiding close to Christ, who forgives seventy times seven, becomes the only way to flee the desire to bind another in hatred and to point the way to solidarity.

The Oddness of L'Arche

In the cult of normalcy's narrative, the disruptive abnormal must be eliminated for society's good and their own. Without the assets of rationality and autonomy, no human flourishing is possible and thus no real peace. However, L'Arche confronts this narrative by showing that the "strange" lives of people with intellectual disabilities not only have an inherent human dignity but can be paradigmatic for what it means to be a person. Thus Vanier comments that "[c]ommunity life with men and women who have intellectual disabilities has taught me a great deal about what it means to be human. . . . [I]t is the weak, and those who have been excluded from society, who have been my teachers."[31]

In this way of speaking about the intellectually disabled, "L'Arche is truly odd—it refuses to do what society thinks it should."[32] Rather than either deny or demonize the disruptive difference of people with cognitive impairments, L'Arche instead offers "*a place where disabilities exist, but don't really matter*." Disabilities are not problems to be solved but "particular ways

[30] Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 37.
[31] Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 6.
[32] Swinton, "Introduction," in Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 17.

of being human which need to be understood, valued and supported."[33] This narrative of resistance directly confronts the *pax pernicioso* that envisions only an embodiment suitable for a hyper-individualistic consumer society. In Vanier and L'Arche's vision, peace and unity require the solidarity of vastly different embodiments, for all have been preciously created by God.

L'Arche thus acts as an embodiment of the "strange" *shalom* of God, who loves each one and is revealed by weakness and vulnerability. This *shalom* becomes marked by patience, not speed; mutuality over competition; relationship, not alienation; and grace as the font of all action. The strange peace of L'Arche functions as a counter-narrative not just for those with intellectual disabilities but for the entire church and human community.

Toward a Peace Church Theology for and with People with Intellectual Disabilities

With the example of L'Arche in sight, we can now move towards articulating a peace church ecclesiology for and with people with intellectual disabilities. First, the church will need to open its doors wide to welcome those whom the *pax pernicioso* cannot envision as persons. This entails becoming more inclusive. Second, the church must become a place of belonging where the intellectually disabled move from being strangers to becoming friends. When church members truly enter into relationships of mutuality with those with cognitive impairments, they cannot help but be transformed into more faithful disciples of Christ through their solidarity with the "strange" ones whom Jesus continually chose (and chooses) to befriend.

Inclusion: Boundary-breaking Hospitality

A significant reason for the church succumbing to the narrative of the cult of normalcy, or at least not offering a robust counter-narrative, is that it has not often had people with intellectual disabilities within its fellowship. The church must repent of how it has excluded them from its community life in physical ways as well as in its theology and worldview. While doing so, it also has to begin opening its doors in a radical welcome. The community's

[33] John Swinton, "The Body of Christ Has Down's Syndrome: Theological Reflections on Vulnerability, Disability, and Graceful Communities," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 68.

conversion must (and will) be accompanied by drawing the oppressed and marginalized into its social and worship life.

Biblical scholar Donald Senior sees radical inclusion inherent in Jesus' life and mission as described in the gospels.[34] Jesus' "boundary breaking" mission reached out to the outcast and drew them into the community in a "wide embrace." The number of stories that present Jesus either engaging directly with the "impure" or using them as protagonists in his teaching reveals the amplitude of his mission. It is to these strange persons and places that he continually chooses to go. Senior argues that this same mission must not be optional but essential to the church's life. He cites numerous examples of Jesus practicing inclusion of the outlier (Mark 5:1-20; 10:46-52; Luke 13:10-17), and contends that this welcome became a foundational orientation to the early Christian community's view of its own mission (Acts 3:1-10; chap. 10). Potent exemplars of this hospitality are the plethora of meal scenes in the gospels.[35] In the Mediterranean world of Jesus' time, to eat with someone was to include them in one's most intimate circle. The early Christian community saw these meals of Jesus, along with their own practice of table fellowship, as the gathering of the nations in Jerusalem proclaimed by Isaiah: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines. . . . And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over *all peoples*, the sheet that is spread over *all nations*" (25:6,7, emphasis added).

Senior sees the same mission evident in Paul's life and writings. From being an agent of exclusion persecuting the "strange" Jesus followers of Palestine, Paul became the champion of an inclusive God (Rom. 3:21-4:25) and an inclusive community (1 Cor. 12:14-26). All could become children of God due to Christ, the God who revealed himself to the world as a crucified

[34] Donald Senior, "Access and Inclusion: The Biblical Vision," paper presented at the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, July 17, 2012.

[35] Citations that Senior provides include Mark 2:13-17, 6:36-44 (and its parallels); Luke 5:27-39, 11:37-54, 14:1-24, 19:1-10; Matt. 8:11, 22:1-14, 25:1-13; John 2:1-11, 21:9-14 (among many others). Jean Vanier finds the same dynamic occurring around the dining table in L'Arche communities. He discovered that sharing life with people with intellectual disabilities was re-living the radicality of Jesus' table fellowship, bringing him to a deeper realization of the connection between the Eucharistic meal and the "ordinary" meal of daily life. See Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 29, and Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 204.

and "weak" Messiah. By finding the glory of Yahweh not in the Holy of Holies but in a crucified Christ, Paul rethought and reconsidered the heart of his tradition and opened a way into the people of God previously inconceivable.

If the mission of inclusion was not just a "good example" but a "pattern of reality," as Senior maintains, the church must adopt this orientation in its social ministry. *Shalom* can no longer mean merely advocating nonviolent resistance to conflict or denouncing unjust uses of power (although these remain deeply important peace acts). The *shalom* witness must include radical acts of hospitality to outliers and non-persons whom the *pax pernicioso* would discard. The biblical value of hospitality must be recovered in its deepest, thickest sense; welcoming the other means opening up our tables—both at home and at worship—to the "strange" ones considered nothing in society.

A bold initiative would be to intentionally seek out and find those "genetic fugitives" with no place in the *pax pernicioso*. What would happen if a church (or the church) informed hospitals and genetic counselors of its desire to adopt pregnancies or infants with Down syndrome? What kind of witness would this be to a society that discerns only suffering and defect in these lives? Would some people reconsider terminating a pregnancy? The church could have a tremendous influence in transforming the western social imaginary by welcoming lives deemed "unworthy."[36] By intentionally bringing the intellectually disabled into its fellowship and households, the church could show forth a depth of inclusion society is waiting to see. In God's *shalom* all the dividing walls have been broken down between peoples and all "othering" abolished. The strange and disturbing are not pushed outside the community's boundaries but called, hosted, and included.

Beyond Inclusion: Friendship and Belonging

However, inclusion is not enough. The church can invite people with intellectual disabilities into its fellowship and grant them access to all the

[36] Michael Gorman has argued that the early church's attitudes towards condemning infant exposure and abortion, as well as welcoming those children into its social life, contributed to the abolishment of those practices in ancient Rome. See Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1982), 61-2.

sacred mysteries, but without entering into relationships with them no *shalom* occurs. The cult of normalcy narrative proclaims humans flourish when people are "free" (i.e., left alone) to make their own choices and decisions. But God's *shalom* is inherently social and communal; there can be no *shalom* as individuals but only as a body of people in relationship with each other. Our selves are constituted by the other. In the words of Unbuntu, an African theology, "I am because we are."[37]

If inclusion is the first step in the church's *shalom* made strange, then friendship and belonging must be the end goal. Arguably the greatest poverty and suffering for the intellectually disabled has less to do with their particular impairments than with their lack of mutual and chosen relationships.[38] The church has often done a good job offering "care" to those with cognitive disabilities, but extending friendships to them has been another matter. Yet without mutuality, relationships can become patronizing and infantilizing. The strange *shalom* of God requires moving "from generosity to a communion of hearts."[39] As Vanier notes, "communities start in generosity; they must grow in the ability to listen. In the end, the most important thing is not to do things for people who are poor and in distress, but to enter into relationship with them."[40] Inclusion connotes the "to" aspect of being a peace church for the intellectually disabled; doing *shalom* "with" them means becoming friends.

Jesus took this same approach with his disciples. On the night before

[37] For a Christian articulation of Ubuntu, see Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009), and *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu (*Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

[38] Youth minister Benjamin T. Conner mentions this as a sad reality for many youth with developmental disabilities. See his *Amplifying Out Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents and Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 34-73. In a recent study done in Canada on friendships and children with disabilities, a survey found that 53 percent of these children have zero to few friends. See Anne Snowdon, "Strengthening Communities for Canadian Children with Disabilities," January 19, 2012, http://sandboxproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/SandboxProjectDiscussionDocument.pdf (accessed December 18, 2012). For the same phenomenon with adults, see Deborah S. Metzel, "Places of Social Poverty and Service Dependency of People with Intellectual Disabilities: A Case Study in Baltimore, Maryland," *Health & Place* 11, no. 2 (June 2005): 93-105.

[39] Vanier, *Encountering the Other*, 13.

[40] Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 142.

his passion he told them, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). By calling them friends, he revealed that he chose to enter into intimate relationships with people very different from himself. One might think that the different embodiment of a person with a profound intellectual disability would preclude genuine friendship. Yet Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, did this very thing with his obstinate and obtuse disciples! What previously would seem strange indeed—the incarnation of God himself within the broken, limited world of creation—becomes in Christ the key to salvation history.

Part of being a disciple must therefore include engaging in radical acts of friendship making, especially among those the *pax pernicioso* relegates to mere objects of charity. God's strange *shalom* means that the church must let the Holy Spirit lead it to the edges where outliers dwell, ready to choose them as friends despite seemingly gross asymmetries. Jesus clearly chooses his disciples in spite of their vastly different embodiment. The church is called to the same task. As Swinton, Mowat and Baines write,

> God in Jesus enters into friendships with human beings who are radically unlike God's self. In so doing God lays down a principle of grace that forms the pattern for friendships that claim to be genuinely Christian; friendships that reach towards, embrace and are embraced by those whom society considers to be least like "us." In so doing the incarnation is radically lived out and becomes an enduring presence in the lives of the people of God as they live lives that anticipate the coming Kingdom.[41]

If a crucial aspect of *shalom* witness lies in entering into such friendships, a bold way to practice this would be to make it part of the church's initiation process. What if part of the process of becoming church members consisted of relating to people with intellectual disabilities in the congregation? If prospective members treat these persons in a respectful

[41] Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?" 16. See also Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

way, honoring the divine image within them, they could proceed towards baptism, confirmation, or other rites of initiation. But if they do not extend mutuality in their relationship, this would be a sign that they need more time to discover the character of *shalom* relationships. Becoming adequately detached from the cult of normalcy narrative may take time; how candidates relate to the intellectually disabled could indicatethe authenticity of their transformation into God's strange *shalom*.

Such a transformation should be seen not only in candidates for baptism or confirmation, but within the church as a whole if members are practicing authentic hospitality. As the intellectually disabled find sanctuary within the body of Christ, their presence will alter the church's "self-understanding and identity in light of the weakness and foolishness of the cross of Christ."[42] As Nessan argues, becoming a friendly church "entails [a] readiness to be changed by those who are different. Every serious relationship with another person changes everyone involved."[43] A church more "strange" with the intellectually disabled at the center embodies Christ's reconciliation as a movement from xenophobia to philoxenia, from fear of the stranger to love of the stranger. The friend-making mission eventually leads to the church becoming a place of expansive belonging, even for the enemy and the outlier.

In the midst of all the violence and corruption of the world God invites us today to create new places of belonging, places of sharing, of peace, of kindness, places where no one needs to defend himself or herself; places where each one is loved and accepted with one's own fragility, abilities and disabilities. This is my vision for our churches: that they become places of belonging, places of sharing.[44]

The church cannot be whole without every part being present and honored, especially the "weakest and least presentable." Living in God's *shalom* means that when marginalized people are absent something is amiss, for as Swinton remarks, "*To be included you just need to be present. To*

[42] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 115.
[43] Nessan, *Shalom Church*, 105. This is seen in the gospel story of the Canaanite woman and her "talking back" to Jesus (Matt. 15:21-28). Rather than accept her exclusion, she challenges Jesus and appears to change his perception about which people apply to his mission.
[44] Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 12.

belong you need to be missed."[45] When the church truly misses the presence of the intellectually disabled in its congregations and communities, it has become the peace made strange that Jesus came to inaugurate and embody.

Conclusion

God's *shalom* has implications not simply for those with intellectual disabilities but for the whole of humanity. Slowing down to listen and pay attention to their stories and proclaiming narratives of resistance to the *pax pernicioso* has potentially liberating consequences for all God's people. The whole church needs a peace theology founded on grace and vulnerability rather than achievement and strength, if for no other reason than to remain faithful to Jesus and the gospel. Welcoming difference and befriending the strange/r are central to Jesus' gospel of peace. Announcing this peace from the perspective of the intellectually disabled reveals how the *shalom* of God invites us into a wholly new way of embodying God's story.

Certainly the church also needs a theology that can counteract military violence and acrimonious interpersonal and international conflicts. I have tried to show that a deeper, stranger sense of *shalom* is required to expose and heal the often highly subtle violence built into the cult of normalcy. By first bringing people with disabilities into the community of faith and then entering into friendship with them, the church becomes a place of belonging that seeks the outlier's presence and longs for reconciliation. As L'Arche communities show, this vision is not a dream but a reality, one in which people whom the surrounding culture deems expendable can become the teachers and leaders of God's *shalom*. Can we let these messengers of unity guide us into God's strange and joyful future? The church will only be more itself by doing so, and at the same time be a sacrament for a world waiting for a community that welcomes the other in joy and without fear.

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[45] John Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16, no. 2 (June 2012): 184.