



# ESSAY

## Broader Vision: Fully Embracing People with Disabilities in Christian Higher Education

by Kevin Timpe

I wrote a short piece in Calvin College's *Academic Bulletin* about Calvin's Ready for Life Academy. The RFLA is a program that provides educational experiences for college-aged people with cognitive, learning or social disabilities. At the time of publication, I was finishing up a study on disability and inclusive communities, a central theme of which was that our communities often fail to be inclusive because they don't have a broad enough vision.

I then taught an interim course focused on disability. The class looked at the history of exclusion that people with disabilities have faced. For instance, it wasn't until the 1974 *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* decision in the United States that the legal right to a public education was first extended to children with disabilities.

At the same time, I also was waiting for the final interview with college trustees about my application for tenure, a process that prompted me to think carefully about Calvin and its mission. That mission resonates deeply with me. As Calvin's vision statement puts it, "we welcome all who are compelled by God's work of renewal to join us in the formative pursuits of lifelong learning, teaching, scholarship, worship, and service." As I pondered these experiences, I increasingly realized how much the current Ready for Life Academy fails to live into the fullness of Calvin's mission. So I want to make the case that making the RFLA a full Calvin program would help us to live out our mission with more integrity.

### NOT FULLY INCLUDED

Ready for Life Academy students, unlike the students in the Calvin Prison Initiative at Handlon Correction Facility in nearby Ionia, Michigan, are not official Calvin students. Because they are not, there are several resources at the college to which they do not have access. Among these are the health and counseling centers (even though a number of mental-health challenges are more common among people with disabilities than the general public; for instance, the prevalence of depression among autistic adults is nearly three times the rate for the general public). Because they're not official Calvin students, RFLA students do not have access to

on-campus employment. Ready for Life Academy students begin their time at Calvin without being able to participate in welcome-week activities and end their time at Calvin being excluded from commencement. They don't have access to faculty academic advising and, unlike traditional Calvin students, can only enroll in a course with permission from the instructional faculty of record.

Furthermore, neither on-campus housing nor regular meal-plan options are available to them. The former means that families who would otherwise enroll their students in the program often cannot,

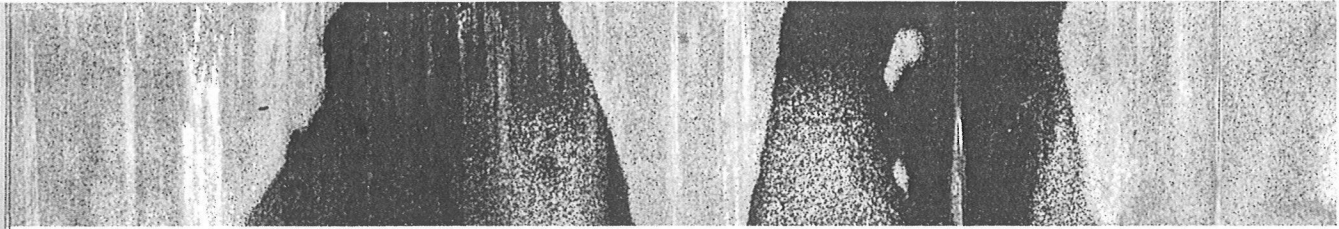
especially if they live outside of West Michigan, given the difficulties of arranging private, off-campus housing. Because of these restrictions, students who do enroll in RFLA miss out on many of the social interactions available to traditional students.

Calvin deems these experiences

so important for the overall college learning experience that it requires two years of on-campus residency for traditional-age students. Yet it denies those same experiences to all RFLA students. It is clear from these policies that the college thinks of RFLA students more as guests than as full members of the Calvin community.

Maintaining this current arrangement rather than folding RFLA into the college as an official program is at odds with Calvin's mission and its commitment to diversity. Calvin's mission is to equip students "to think deeply, to act justly, and to live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in the world." This goal is not just for the college as a whole but for every student. That mission is supposed to shape everything Calvin does. There is no part of this mission that RFLA students can't participate in, and any temptation to think otherwise is rooted in the long history of ableist exclusion that has too regularly marked the history of our country and the church. As theologian Benjamin Conner writes in *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness*, "we must expose the ways in which we inhere biases against people with disabilities in every aspect of our life together." Unfortunately, the exclusion of those with disabilities from Calvin's community exposes a functional exclusion from its mission.

**The positive vision of shalom from Revelation 7:9 is incomplete if it excludes those with disabilities.**



## TIME TO IMPROVE

RFLA students face barriers to full participation in the Calvin community, a reality that stands at odds with the college's vision. Calvin aspires to be a global leader in inclusive community, so we need to recognize places where we can improve our efforts. We deprive our students, many of whom attended inclusive private Christian schools, of learning with and from students whose lives are shaped by disability culture and experiences.

Without such inclusion, we testify, even if unintentionally, that people with cognitive, learning or social disabilities have no central role to play in the academy, the church and the world. By relegating people with intellectual disabilities to the periphery of our community, we fail to promote the welfare of all. Our mission calls us to work toward the healing of the centuries of exclusion, institutionalization, oppression and degradation that many people with disabilities have faced. The work of renewal and formation that characterizes the Kuyperian spirit is limited when not every square inch is accessible.

Calvin's strategic plan contains an initiative for diversity and inclusion. In light of this, I call the college to expand its vision of what kinds of diversity and inclusion are required. In my piece in the *Academic Bulletin*, I mentioned a parallel between 2004's *From Every Nation: Revised Comprehensive Plan for Racial Justice, Reconciliation, and Cross-cultural Engagement at Calvin College* and the case for making RFLA an official Calvin program. A fuller exploration of the parallels with *From Every Nation* illustrates the need to broaden those parameters. Concerned with a history of perhaps unintentional racial and cultural exclusion, *From Every Nation* seeks to promote racial and cultural reconciliation by promoting a diverse community. Reconciliation and restoration are laudable goals. But we need to work toward them not just with people from different races and cultures but also with those who have been harmed or marginalized on the basis of disability. As *From Every Nation* notes, the "commitment to racial justice and reconciliation cannot be pursued in isolation from other justice areas." The positive vision of shalom

from Revelation 7:9, described as the ultimate goal of *From Every Nation*, is incomplete if it excludes those with disabilities. As Nicholas Wolterstorff, who helped shaped the college's vision and educational philosophy, puts it in his recent memoir *In This World of Wonders*,

The best English translation of "shalom" is not "peace" but "flourishing." Shalom is flourishing in all one's relationships: with God, with one's fellow human beings and their creations; with the natural world, with oneself. The reason the prophets so often connected justice with shalom is that shalom incorporates justice; injustice is the impairment of flourishing.

## COMMITTING TO JUSTICE

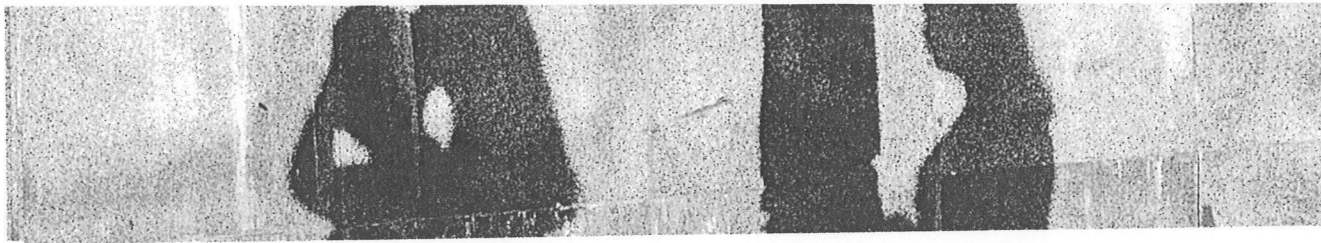
The disability-rights movement, intentionally structured on the civil-rights movement, is based on a commitment to justice. But unfortunately, churches have often resisted that commitment to justice, as when they lobbied successfully to be exempt from the protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Churches' continued resistance is reflected in how adults with disabilities in the United States are approximately 40 percent more likely than the general adult population to never attend a place of worship. To again quote Conner:

Unless people with disabilities are present in religious institutions ... they will continue to be objectified and marginalized ... and the issues raised by the experience of disability will be quarantined as an aspect of disability concerns rather than acknowledged as an essentially human concern.

Disability is a part of the human experience, and failing to address it not only undermines shalom but also directly contributes to the social invisibility of people with disabilities. Research shows educational settings that don't include students with disabilities reinforce and perpetuate negative attitudes toward disability, a reason motivating inclusive education elsewhere already. We must increase the presence of

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people with disabilities in our various communities if we want our collective prejudices to change. As a Christian community, we are required by justice to end ableism just as we are required to end racism and sexism. The current system perpetuates an ableist paradigm of education in which the goods not only of a college education but also of the spiritual formation at the heart of our mission are systematically denied to people simply because they have certain disabilities.

### IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

In his excellent book *Becoming a Great Inclusive Educator*, Scot Danforth outlines four challenges that must be addressed in order to push an educational context toward inclusion:

Begin with a deep humility that honestly confronts the biases against individuals with disabilities that many of us, both individually and institutionally, hold.

Understand that the purpose of inclusion is connected with the larger push for justice and equality.

Cultivate ethical commitments that see inclusion as a central component to the flourishing of an educational community.

Steep ourselves in the tradition of inclusive pedagogical practices.

Admittedly, the adoption of the Ready for Life Academy as an official Calvin program would involve challenges. It will be hard. But the struggle for justice always is. As Wolterstorff noted in *In This World of Wonders* about the struggle for racial justice in response to apartheid: "that [suffering] could not be avoided; a great good never comes without some pain." Among these challenges are the following, though others would certainly surface along the way:

The college will need to figure out what certificates or degrees to make available for RFLA students.

Making our classes accessible to those with intellectual disability. We'll have to undertake a robust faculty-development commitment to inclusive pedagogical practices such as differentiated instruction and universal design for learning.

Training staff in additional methods of support for students with intellectual disabilities.

The benefits of these changes would not be limited just to RFLA students. Many of our nondisabled students would also benefit from them (as when

differentiated instruction, which we already do upwards in some classes, benefits honors students). This shouldn't be surprising, given that research shows that inclusive education benefits all students.

Our commitment to students with intellectual disabilities should not be the add-on program that it currently is. Rather, it should be an integral part of our overall orientation and approach to education and justice for all. In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published the Salamanca Statement, which laid the foundation for all future reflection on the moral imperative to make educational environments inclusive to students with disabilities. The statement asserts that "all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have."

It's time Calvin worked toward this goal. We are already committed to the vision; we just need to more fully live it out. By withholding full participation in our community from those who have disabilities, we restrict our mission. Just as the church lacks fullness of community and gifts when it sees disability ministry simply as an outreach rather than

a part of the internal working of the body of Christ, so, too, Calvin College lacks fullness of community by not fully integrating RFLA students. If we really seek, as the college's vision statement claims, to "welcome all who are compelled by God's work of renewal," then RFLA students should be given an equal opportunity to be a part of Calvin's community and vision in the same way Calvin Prison Initiative students are. Becoming more inclusive contributes to the flourishing of our whole community and aids in our efforts toward shalom.

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