

ABCs of Equity, Part 2

52 Devotions on Experiences of Persons with Disabilities

by Rev. Dr. Sharon Ballantyne

This booklet offers a reference to a scripture verse and works alphabetically from A through Z to provide 52 reflections.

Following each verse is a short quote drawn from the pages of the September 2013 report of the Permanent Committee on Programs for Ministry and Mission, [“Gathering Together: Toward a Culture of Mutuality and Full Participation for Persons with Disabilities and Their Allies”](#), as prepared and submitted by Adele Halliday, Team Leader for Discipleship & Witness, Church in Mission, The United Church of Canada. The report was written following a Consultation for Persons with Disabilities and Their Allies held in July 2013. This report reflected the work of the consultation and made recommendations to The United Church of Canada, inviting us all to embrace equity, with its particular focus on experiences with persons with disabilities and their allies.

After each quote from the report is a brief reflection, and at the end of each reflection are a few brief words quoting people who have shared their experiences of marginalization as compiled from interviews done by Sharon Ballantyne in 2019 for research that is part of the generous award of a McGeachy Senior Scholar research project (2018) from the United Church Foundation, on the topic of equity, granted to the Rev. Dr. Sharon Ballantyne.

Each entry concludes with “We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.”

This resource can be used as a personal devotional, be shared in small group meetings, or be integrated into use in worship similar to the way a Minute for Mission might be shared.

May we all embrace what God reveals for our own reflection, learning and living into being equitable and being church together.

God of all love, breathe on us your spirit of compassion.
Open us to receive you, communicating through us.
Open us to find you in the face of each person.
Open our hearts and minds to experience your presence.
Guide and direct us with your wisdom.
Help us discern how to live into creating an equitable
and just world, embracing all creation.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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A

“Ask, and it will be given you.” Luke 11:9

From the United Church report: “experienced barriers in society and in other parts of the church...local congregation was a refuge.”

We all need to be each other’s equity monitors! If we build each other up instead of tearing down, exercising non-harmful judgments, we can create space for everyone at the table. We don’t want to just sing “there is room for all,” “draw the circle wider,” or “let us build a house where all are welcome.” We really need everyone to “come in, come in and sit down, we are part of the family!” and mean it! Are we ensuring everyone can come in?

For those who say:

“Ask if you can do anything to facilitate the process.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

B

“I am the bread of life.” John 6:35

From the United Church report: “add stories of hope and encouragement”

As people of faith, we need to be walking and talking our faith, which requires advocacy for full participation in all areas of life. The United Church of Canada identifies as an intercultural church, an identity some communities of faith are just beginning to explore while others have done more intentional work, but all of us have much work to do to understand and live into this identity. We must constantly inquire, confront, challenge, assess, and evaluate. We need to ensure we use our mirror. How does our mirror reflect us? We need to learn new things or learn differently and take action.

For those who say:

“I feel pitied.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

C

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28

From the United Church report: “people shared [their] stories.”

As an intercultural church, The United Church of Canada asks us to use an intercultural lens tool. The intercultural lens invites us to aim for equity, live out our commitments, question biases, challenge assumptions, notice who is missing, and value all voices. As we invite stories and actively listen, we engage different lenses of perception, opening us up to infinite possibilities. How are we using our tools?

For those who say
“It just feels like I don’t get to be real.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

D

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Luke 6:31

From the United Church report: “‘disability’ is only one identity that people hold.”

We are very organic, learning as we go. Our equity focus includes focus on all the ways people might experience being on the margins: Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQIA and Two Spirit of any sexual orientation and gender identity, those with visible and the often more complex disabilities, and all the ways they intersect. Over time this has come to include so much more than the accessibility of buildings, though that is still a real need. Keep thinking and working outside the box—let it be organic! Are we organic?

For those who say:
“Come on, can’t I just be accepted and seen for the human I am?”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

E

You have established equity. Psalm 99:4

From the United Church report: “practise full belonging”

Ideally, our volunteer equity monitors across our region are asked to help explore equity, but it is everyone’s responsibility. Think equity when planning events, during and after. Equity monitors are introduced at the beginning of meetings, often wearing multiple hats as participants or leaders, but are the equity go-to people. Equity monitors can provide safe listening ears and observation to advocate for people, assuring space is accessible, people identify themselves when speaking, microphones are used, PowerPoint slides use a minimum 40-point font or greater, materials are sent out 48 hours in advance, a gender-neutral washroom is named even if only for that meeting, inclusive language is used, a quiet space is available for those who might need that, dietary considerations are met, foods are labelled or ingredients known by volunteers serving, a scent-free policy is followed, and people are informed about service animal protocols. We are learning to live into all these practices. Who are our designated equity monitors?

For those who say:

“What would it take for you to understand what it is that I truly need?”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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F

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted. Ephesians 4:32

From the United Church report: We need “practical ideas of what people can do.”

We constantly discover that inclusive design benefits everyone. When something is close-captioned, for example, it supports those who don’t hear well, visual learners, those with learning and attention challenges, and those for whom the speaker is not speaking in their first language. Offering a quiet space may offer some respite for those who need a space to address physical comfort needs, those with mental health concerns who need a less busy or anxious environment, those for whom sensory stimuli can become too much, and a less confronting place to participate in. It is often not about willingness or attitude but simply not having thought about the need, not identifying with it, and obviously not anticipating the consideration. Having someone to brainstorm ideas with helps to open doors and widens the welcome. What needs are we addressing?

For those who say:

“No one asked.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

G

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. Psalm 145:3

From the United Church report: “my little local church knew me and welcomed me.”

It is amazing how creative we can be as problem solvers! This often becomes an opportunity to discuss accessibility audits and how to grow the conversations about equity and inclusion. Equity monitors can provide support as navigators, and when we fall short in meeting needs, as we often do, we all take part in the learning and have better information going forward. As people are becoming more aware of equity concerns, we continue to draw the circle wider and open tables, that all will know they belong and are included, valued, and needed. Do we all experience belonging?

For those who say:

“On one occasion the minister flatly refused.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

H

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Psalm 51:10

From the United Church report: “a disability is not an individual ‘problem’ that one person ‘has’; instead, it is a community concern.”

How many times have the scriptures been manipulated in ways that are harmful, judgmental, and non-inclusive? Really look at the texts that are misused and seek to understand, get varied perspectives, and provide informed knowledge instead of myths that perpetuate messages of inequity. Texts that are used in ways that exclude people are damaging and destructive. Manipulating historical text is damaging and hurtful. Broaden viewpoints to become informed. Engage in education. How do we live the Bible texts?

For those who say

“I just can’t keep pretending I am feeling okay.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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I

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is in God.
Psalm 62:5

From the United Church report: “needing some accommodations to enable them to do that work effectively.”

Everyone is welcoming, right? This is a wish, a hope, a dream but rarely evidenced in our day to day and within communities of faith. Consider inviting a visitor to come and be a “mystery shopper.” Perhaps work in cooperation with another local community of faith, inviting visitors to come and experience your community of faith and give feedback. We need to know what people really think. How do visitors experience us?

For those who say:
“I get comments which mostly fall off my back, but...”

We are hopeful. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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J

“Do not judge.” Matthew 7:1

From the United Church report: “considering the ableist system that causes exclusion”

We can so often perpetuate ableist attitudes and practices. A person who has a disability can be perceived as disabled, in the way a vehicle is disabled and not working; something dangerous is disabled, being dismantled or taken apart. These are not helpful images, and the language we have never quite fits. We are challenged by what is politically correct. We often label people who are marginalized as having a disability, further demonstrating our struggle with language. What if we all embrace that we are temporarily able-bodied? What labels are we using?

For those who say:
“So why do you think I am doing so well?”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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K

“Knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Luke 11:9

From the United Church report: “if they could really become an ordered minister when they had a disability”

Risking taking up a new interest, relationship, life adventure, career, or vocation is a big deal! For people who are marginalized, undertaking something new usually means having to prepare for obstacles, challenges, and pushback, leaving one facing so many disadvantages. Being qualified, of good character, and having strong ethics, skills, strengths, and gifts can get dismissed if you are a person who is marginalized. Who will give me a chance rather than making harmful judgments? We cannot assume equity, acceptance, or opportunities. Do we embrace all people?

For those who say:

“I most certainly don’t feel cared for and nurtured at this moment.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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L

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Mark 12:31

From the United Church report: “few role models of people with disabilities actively engaged in ministry.”

People we lift up as role models are usually seen as mentors for the qualities and characteristics they have. These attributes make others want to emulate their attitudes, their behaviours, and the love they share. People who are marginalized struggle when they are lifted up as inspirational or put on a pedestal. Real inspiration is in loving people for who they are and being in relationships.

If the focus is on how a person is marginalized, the person and who they are is missed. People are not heroes based on the ways they are marginalized. Who are our role models?

For those who say:

“That’s not what I signed up for.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

M

Build yourselves up on your most holy faith. Jude 1:20

From the United Church report: “Creating a matching process between students with disabilities and ministry personnel with disabilities.”

We all need people in our lives we feel we can trust, who truly get us and can relate. It does not mean they necessarily have similar experiences, but sometimes they do. It’s not because we share the same form of marginalization; it is that we engage in deepening relationships of trust and seek to receive each other’s story. In sharing stories, trust and knowing are developed and the deepening of relationship continues. Do we share stories?

For those who say:
“Now I can’t be honest with you.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

N

Do not neglect the gift that is in you. 1 Timothy 4:14

From the United Church report: “because of their deep sense of call continued to persevere”

Sometimes despite the odds we have to persevere, to follow our heart, the dream, what God is calling us to do! It is not easy, but persistence and determination can continue to light the path forward. If we have the support and encouragement of our community of faith, we are taking faithful footsteps together. Honouring what we are called to do and be is not a singular effort. It is the support of our “village” that encourages and supports us. How do we respond to being called?

For those who say:
“God doesn’t put this desire on my heart for no reason.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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O

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.
Revelation 21:6

From the United Church report: “We need to get rid of the concept that there is a normal.”

Experience teaches there is no “normal” and there is no going back. The resurrected Jesus did not return to who he was before his crucifixion. We are forever changed by significant events and experiences. Accepting change moving forward is a continual life lesson. As a community in relationship, we go through it together. Do we accept what is new?

For those who say:
“I truly feel alone, like no one wants this for me.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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P

Love is patient. I Corinthians 13:4

From the United Church report: “We struggle with being good enough for God.”

People who are marginalized often take longer to accomplish a goal, not because of lack of ability or determination or skill, but largely because the world does not treat all people equitably. Competition for the job, housing, and life partner opportunities often continues to be binary, with people treated as part of an in-group or out-group, or among the haves and have nots. Opening doors is never as easy as it sounds. How do we break binary habits?

For those who say:
“I may not be given another chance at something because the world assumes I’m not capable.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

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Q

Be quick to listen. James 1:19

From the United Church report: “challenging the cult of ‘normalcy’”

The pandemic of COVID-19 that began in the spring of 2020 called everyone to confronting their sense of normal. The world was turned upside down, and everyone was in it together, realizing a deeper connection with people everywhere. We thought the mould was broken and that we finally understood there was no going back, that normal as we understood it was a myth. But have we retained this? What do we need to remember and recommit to living into in our attitude and practice?

For those who say:

“I keep everything inside because that’s just what everyone needs.”

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We will do better together.

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R

“Do this in remembrance of me.” 1 Corinthians 11:24

From the United Church report: “Breaking the silence”

There is so much that we do not talk about. A known matter within a family, a workplace, a community of faith, where we live—we think about it, feel it, know it needs to be addressed, but we stay silent. We hope the burden of the silence will lead someone else to speak, start the conversations, dare to discuss it. If “it” is on our heart, shouldn’t that be enough to make us do something? We have all asked why God did not do something, and we know the response is that God did. God created you, me, us! So do something! What is “it” that we need to talk about?

For those who say:

“This is the time to advocate.”

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We will do better together.

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S

The glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Isaiah 60:2

From the United Church report: “resists being reduced”

Think of a time when you were bullied or made fun of, or a hurtful comment was made. These experiences become etched into our experiences, so strong that it is hard to receive the positives and efforts of others to build up and undo those words, those hurtful actions. We find it hard to let go of the hurt. Gossip, ridicule, and lack of holy manners add up to bad behaviours that we can redirect to let Jesus shine. Pause in prayer, think before you speak, and transform a negative thought into a positive action. How are we living holy manners?

For those who say:

“I have no idea if others pray for me.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

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T

Let your heart take courage. Psalm 27:14

From the United Church report: “What if God were a quadriplegic?”

We or our parents and grandparents may have grown up with an image of God in a very human form: perhaps a wise elder, maybe with a long beard, maybe twinkling eyes of compassion, or maybe a fierce judge. Through the centuries, the God image has been patriarchal, male, a father, a king, and a son. These are very difficult images for many in the inequity that is evoked, the boxing in and labelling of the holy that may not fit our sense of the divine. Because the images have long been a part of our rituals, scripture, prayers, and hymn lyrics, we can fail to assure that our practices are inclusive and honouring. We need to understand, appreciate, and respect each other’s images of God without harmful judgment. How do we share images of God?

For those who say:

“I’ll never trust you.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

U

Wisdom is a fountain of life to one who has it.
Proverbs 16:22

From the United Church report: “where anyone can belong.”

Everyone is received for who they are. Their gifts are nurtured, and people strive to support one another, exercising patience and caring as people discover, explore, and develop their gifts. Leadership is expected and accepted by all. We all function as ministers with personal ministries, small group ministries, and outreach. We are one body, all of us Christ’s body. We are Jesus’ hands, feet, heart, and voice in the world. Is this our community of faith?

For those who say:
“Everyone finds different things helpful.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

V

He loves those who speak what is right. Proverbs 16:13

From the United Church report: “What if we, therefore, are God’s able-bodied personal assistants in the world?”

Can we conceive that as beloved children of God our abilities, whether influenced by a visible or invisible disability or any other factor, gives us the job title of personal assistant to God? Our words, actions, attitudes, and choices are all embraced as serving God. How might our ministries, our personal way of being, be experienced? Truly serving, living into an identity of everything we do, is our way of being personal assistants to God. How are we living as God’s personal assistants?

For those who say:
“Don’t assume you have to do all the things you read about in terms of how to help.”

We are sorry. We are trying.
We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

W

Wonderful are your works. Psalm 139:14

From the United Church report: “change our image of God.”

What images of God are most meaningful to you? In what ways do the images of God we hold individually influence our collective behaviour as a community of faith? Do we discuss and know what images people find helpful and hurtful, or do we just assume them? Images of God are very diverse, and reflecting diversity creates a greater opportunity to understand equity. What images might need to be added to reflect a broader sense of the divine?

For those who say:

“Nothing has nurtured me spiritually.”

We are sorry. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

X

Strive to excel. 1 Corinthians 14:12

From the United Church report: “change our image of ourselves.”

We so often hold ourselves back from what we think we can do. We cannot imagine ourselves in certain roles or taking on certain responsibilities. Yet, if we look back, we realize that life has required us to do and be more than we could have imagined. Can we look toward the next steps of our personal faith journey, and as a community of faith, with an openness to possibilities and not letting fear or negativity take hold? Reimagine and live into new possibilities. What are we reimagining?

For those who say:

“Ask if you’re curious.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

Y

My soul yearns for you. Isaiah 26:9

From the United Church report: “talk more about mental health.”

To be truthful and honest is such a challenge, and this does not just apply to tough conversations. Sometimes it is hard to be honest with ourselves and with each other. When we open up in conversations we often find that people can relate and are so grateful. Talking about challenges invites people to really know each other and deepen relationships. The stigma is broken and people learn it’s okay to talk about our challenges. Are we talking?

For those who say:

“I deserve the dignity.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.

Z

It is good to be made much of for a good purpose. Galatians 4:18

From the United Church report: “network with one another”

We are invited to connect with scripture, with song, with prayers that draw us deeper into relationship with God. As a community of faith we gather in worship, in person and virtually, to build community, a community that models loving God and one another and treats others the way we want to be treated. We are mentored by Jesus, our true equity monitor, and model full acceptance, equity, and belonging. What kind of community are we?

For those who say:

“I’m not your next project to be helped.”

We are hopeful. We are trying.

We will do better together.

We pray for justice and equity. We seek to love God and love people as Jesus teaches.