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Access and Disability Justice in Theological Education

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ABSTRACT

As more students, staff, faculty, and administrators with disabilities participate in theological education, practices that promote accessibility and inclusive learning environments are essential. Though the topics of access and universal design for learning have surged in popularity among educational scholars and within popular lay sources over the past years, reflection on accessibility among theological schools remains largely under-explored. In this essay, I offer a case study describing the holistic evaluation of accessibility in a seminary. I suggest that pursuits of access and inclusive learning within institutions theological education can and should reflect a praxis of justice. To explore this justice-based approach to accessibility, I introduce one contemporary framework for “disability justice” and reflect on how the principles within this framework might help guide, encourage, and challenge those in the world of theological education toward a more accessible future.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility; disability; inclusion; justice; theological education

Introduction

With an increasing number of students with disabilities in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), paralleled by a heightened commitment to fostering communities of belonging across disability identities within many Christian faith communities (Carter, 2016; Carter et al., 2017), accessibility proves a pressing area of needed investigation and intervention. In the current literature, few scholars and practitioners reflect on inclusive learning practices within theological schools, underscoring the need for this special issue that explores the contours of disability in the context of theological education.¹ Existing literature in theological education that examines topics like student accommodations and access strategies suggests that there remains much work to be done (Anderson, 2003a; Anderson, 2003b; Annandale & Carter, 2014; Barton, 2021; Creamer, 2015; Gilbert, 2001; Wilke, 1978/2003).

In this essay, I offer an extended case study reflection on the process of conducting an accessibility audit at a theological school. Beyond the “what”

and “how” of this audit, I also reflect on how exploring access needs among diverse constituents in theological education, including students, staff, and faculty, aligns with a Christian theological framework of justice. I conclude by exploring how the principles from a specific “disability justice” framework might support those who are concerned with cultivating spaces marked by accessibility, inclusive learning, and belonging in the context of theological education.

The where, what, when, and how: an accessibility audit in theological context

During the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years, I served as a Henri Nouwen Fellow at Western Theological Seminary (WTS) in Holland, Michigan. Thanks to a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation entitled “Enabling Theological Education: Preparing the Next Generation of Christian Leaders,” WTS developed a cadre of activities and programs at the intersection of disability and theological education, including the Nouwen Faculty Fellowship. With the grant’s support, as well as the support of the administration and faculty at WTS, I spent the summer and fall semesters of 2019 in a series of immersive learning activities related to accessibility, universal design for learning, and inclusive pedagogy in contexts of higher education.² During this time period, I was also commissioned to develop and conduct a holistic audit of accessibility and inclusive learning practices at WTS.

Background and context for the audit

The seminary’s commissioning and support of a holistic accessibility audit emerged from its unique background of leadership in relationship to ministry, education, and community engagement alongside people experiencing disability. In 2007, WTS opened the Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House. This Friendship House provided a first of its kind residential option among North American seminaries and theological schools. Since its opening, The Friendship House has housed WTS students and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities as housemates, providing opportunities for community life together and participation in educational and formational activities at the seminary, as well as work, volunteer, and leisure engagement in the local community. Since 2014, WTS has offered the Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry, a unique, credit-bearing set of distance learning courses to prepare Christians across a diversity of vocations to serve as leaders who are inclusive of people of all abilities. Additionally, WTS founded the Center for Disability and Ministry (CDM) in October 2019. The CDM serves as an institutional

home for diverse offerings related to disability and accessibility already in existence at WTS, as well as expanding resources including educational opportunities, consultations, and a publishing partnership with InterVarsity Press Academic. Finally, in 2020, under the leadership of Dr. Ben Conner, WTS began a Doctor of Ministry cohort focused on the intersections of disability and ministry.

In addition to these programmatic offerings related to disability, WTS benefits from existing strengths related to accessibility in its campus facilities, shared life of worship, curriculum and pedagogical commitments, as well as staff expertise in educational technology, virtual presence, and student support. Recent building renovations (2018-2019), including flexible seating arrangements, elevators, automatic door openers, and an open floor plan, support the creation of maximally accessible spaces across the seminary. The WTS chapel program exemplifies opportunities for multi-modal participation across weekday gatherings for worship. The seminary's long-standing distance learning program, with multiple certificate and degree program offerings, provides high-quality and accessible online education to students across the globe. In addition, faculty at WTS have consistently practiced syllabi sharing and pedagogical consultation to support best practices related to inclusive education and accessibility.

While affirming the strong position of the seminary in relationship to accessibility concerns, many WTS staff and faculty note barriers related to financial resources as well as the implementation of accessibility offerings and best practices at the seminary. In addition, WTS had not previously conducted a systematic evaluation of priorities, practices, and needs specifically surrounding accessibility and disability.

The audit framework

While many accessibility audits are related primarily to access of web content by users with disabilities, the audit I conducted at WTS encompassed categories beyond virtual resources alone, such as exploring the institution's culture, curriculum, worship life, and the seminary's publicly facing work related to disability and access. As an occupational therapy practitioner for nearly a decade, I drew upon a strong foundation of program evaluation and assessment skills in planning and implementing the accessibility audit. In addition, I thoroughly engaged the rich resources provided by The United Methodist Church's Disability Ministries Committee to help refine my approach to the audit's content and process (<https://umcdmc.org/resources/accessibility-and-united-methodist-churches/>).

Additionally, with the support of the seminary's Luce Grant, I coordinated a multi-day campus visit with Dr. Jay Dolmage from the University of Waterloo. Dolmage facilitated multiple workshops for faculty and staff

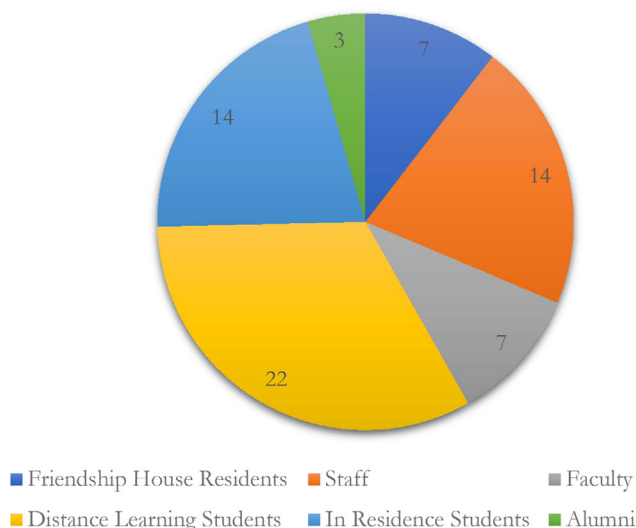


Figure 1. Accessibility audit participants by constituency.

on inclusive pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning, gave a public lecture on academic ableism, met with students to discuss their concerns related to access and institutional culture, and provided support for my development and analysis of the accessibility audit. Notably, Dolmage encouraged me to orient the audit around institutional strengths and the institution’s historical context with regard to disability and access, as well as current best practices of accessibility. This consultation with Dolmage spurred my adoption of a “strengths-based approach” to the accessibility audit, with roots in contemporary evidence-based practice in a number of fields including psychology, education, community health, and research methodology, as well as my own experience as an occupational therapy clinician (representative literature sources include Braun, et al., 2017; Rubin, et al., 2012; Simmons & Lehmann, 2013; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015).

The audit process

Activities associated with my accessibility audit at WTS took place between August 2019 and March 2020. Modalities for evaluation included individual interviews, focus group meetings (with follow-up gatherings as needed), and skilled observation across the seminary’s various environments. 67 unique individuals from the WTS community participated in the accessibility audit, from the constituencies of in-residence students, distance learning students, alumni, staff, Friendship House residents, and faculty members (see Figure 1).

Participants in the audit were recruited through a variety of invitations, including a reoccurring announcement in the seminary’s weekly electronic

newsletter, verbal announcements given during the seminary's daily post-chapel "community time" gathering, verbal and written announcements provided in faculty meetings, as well as during select in-residence and distance learning courses, and individual email invitations.

Interviews, focus group meetings, and observations were focused on discerning current institutional strengths and resources, discussing previous efforts related to increasing accessibility (noting both past successes and shortcomings), as well as identifying current needs. Through these various modalities, the audit participants and I also explored prioritizing the seminary's current needs related to accessibility and discussing how funding might be allocated to address access needs and further develop areas of strength.

Throughout the audit process, I kept detailed notes of all conversations, anonymizing any details at the request of participants. Whenever possible, I provided the typed notes from individual and focus group conversations to the corresponding participants, requesting checks for accuracy. Following the conclusion of all interview, focus group, and observation activities, I evaluated the data to determine the community's most frequently identified areas of need, especially when these areas of prioritized need were expressed across diverse constituencies.

In a spirit of brevity and access, I provided the community with an accessible PDF document outlining the audit's findings, totaling twelve pages. The report covered the following categories: the audit's background (including the historical strengths of WTS in relationship to disability), the rationale for the audit, information about myself as the auditor and the audit's process, the audit's findings (both strengths and areas for growth), recommended priorities for "best practices," priorities for financial investment related to accessibility, existing best practices to streamline, and finally, a list of free resources related to accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, and universal design for learning. In addition to the final report, I provided the administration at WTS with a three-page addendum document, in order to offer further details regarding the priority areas the audit identified for financial investment.

The audit's findings

The audit identified institutional strengths related to accessibility in the following categories: institutional culture, facilities, learning and technological resources, library services, personnel, public presence, and worship life. Specific examples of these strengths included the maximal flexibility of the seminary's worship space, the seminary's active "Accessibility Team,"³ and widespread demonstration of compassion and flexibility among the faculty in response to student learning needs.

The audit identified institutional areas of growth in the following categories: course materials and curriculum, institutional culture, facilities, learning and technological resources, library services, personnel, public presence, and worship life. Specific examples of these growth areas included inconsistencies in accessible formatting of course readings and documents on the seminary's website, the need for more robust training activities for faculty and staff with regard to inclusive pedagogy, accessibility, and universal design for learning, as well as the need for low-sensory environments on the seminary's campus.

For WTS, some top priorities for best practices included working toward 100% compliance with providing all course materials in accessible formats, conducting an updated library usage survey with a focus on accessibility, and developing a student success/care committee. The seminary's top priorities for financial investment included an enhancement tool for the existing learning management system to support advanced accessibility features (such as automatic captioning of audio and video content), an investment to maximize the accessibility of the seminary's website, and installing automatic soap and paper towel dispensers throughout the campus.

The why: a justice approach to access in theological education

Why might theological schools allocate their limited resources to address accessibility? Common responses to this question might include situations of pragmatic need, such as when a school needs to discern and address access needs for a particular student. Other schools, in the face of impending or completed legal challenges, have a legal obligation to evaluate and change their practices around accessibility.

In this section, I want to explore how attending to access needs in contexts of theological education aligns with a Christian praxis of justice. In other words, instead of conceptualizing accessibility as something that ought only be addressed in light of overwhelming pragmatic or legal pressure, I want to broadly draw upon Christian theological accounts of justice to affirm with theologian Rebecca Spurrier that "access is sacred and essential, not just something that would be good to have if possible and feasible" (2019, p. 210).

A broad framework of justice from Christian theology

Christian theological frameworks for justice are first and foremost rooted in the Triune God's just nature, as well as God's ongoing work in the world that is oriented toward justice (Burch, 2017, p. 454-455; La Poorta, 2008; O'Collins & Farrugia, 1991, p. 115). Many theologians characterize

God's justice by notions of covenant – a steadfast faithfulness in relationship with the whole of creation and with human creatures, especially those who are socially, politically, or economically marginalized (Burch, 2017, p. 455; Rae, 2016, p. 778; Wolterstorff, 1995, p. 21).

God's just nature and God's actions of justice call forth a particular Christian praxis: prophetically witnessing to new ways of life in the face of injustices suffered by neighbors (Burch, 2017, p. 455; O'Collins & Farrugia, 1991, p. 115). Nicholas Wolterstorff (1995) argues, "as God is just, so are we to be just. We are to be icons of God, imaging God's justice in our justice" (p. 19). For Wolterstorff, Christian discipleship marked by justice reveals respect for the image of God in every human being and at the same time, constitutes each Christian's active participation in imaging the Triune God (Wolterstorff, 1995, p. 19).

Christian Scripture offers an expansive witness to the just nature of God as well as the call upon God's people to be those who pursue right relationships marked by justice, equity, and flourishing (McKim, 2014, p. 174; Wolterstorff, 1995, p. 21). God's love of justice, as well as examples of covenant communities living into God's vision of justice and flourishing, are found in both Old and New Testament texts, including the Psalms, Micah 7:8-20, Isaiah 11:3-5, Acts 7:52, and the many stories of Jesus' healings in the canonical gospels. Because God deals justly with God's people, God's people seek justice for their neighbors – an orientation to the world that seeks right relationship, enables access, and understands faithful participation in God's ongoing work as the basis for just action – rather than primarily legal, pragmatic, or pity-oriented perspectives on the plights of those impacted by injustice.

Access as justice from a theological perspective on disability

Theologians of disability often reflect on access concerns as an important matter of justice. Attending to the needs of people with disabilities, as well as anyone with experiencing barriers to full participation in a community, disability theologians highlight the connections between justice and acts of hospitality, liberation, and inclusion. For example, in Tom Reynolds's reflections on accessibility and the healing stories in the Gospels, he accentuates healings not as "the curing of bodies gone wrong, of individual blemishes, but rather, [announcements of] the Spirit-filled social reality of liberation from enslavement and captivity" (2012, p. 217). These announcements of liberation and freedom raise "possibilities for an alternative social ordering" – an ordering with a deep commitment to access that resists widespread allegiances to normalcy (Reynolds, 2012, p. 217).

In an article on providing accommodations to students with disabilities in theological schools, Christian ethicist Bethany McKinney Fox (2019) considers justice and communally-rooted practices of hospitality as an alternative to access changes that are driven by pity, legal, or purely individualistic rationale. For Fox, these alternative rationales end up creating “inaccessible” and “inhospitable” environments for learning. Fox’s approach understands accessibility as a natural “aspect of hospitality, welcome, and following in the way of Jesus.” Paralleling Reynolds’ claims about “deep access,” Fox argues,

Beyond logistical modifications for accessibility of physical and pedagogical structures, creating real access means being a community that recognizes the theological importance of accessibility, and values the presence, experience, and God-given gifts of our students and other community members with disabilities and diagnoses of all kinds. Without reframing how we think about disability and access, we might incorrectly believe that accessibility simply benefits the students who directly need it, when in reality it benefits our whole community.

Fox’s emphasis on how attending to accessibility shapes the whole of a community returns us to Christian definitions of justice – actions that mirror God’s covenant work to draw those who experience disenfranchisement and exclusion into spaces where their lives are marked by flourishing with and alongside their neighbors.

In her book about accessibility and inclusion within communities of faith, Jennie Weiss Block (2002) identifies Scripture’s calls for justice as the motivating center for Christian communities as they confront injustices related to access and disability. Block understands a Christian praxis of justice as not only rooted in Scripture and God’s ongoing work of justice in the world, but also in the promises Christians make to each other in baptism – to care for one another and to uphold one another as indispensable parts of Jesus’ body (p. 22).

Learnings and challenges from a framework for disability justice

Enacting justice by attending to and expanding access in contexts of theological education is not a matter of reinventing the wheel. Administrators, staff, faculty, and students can draw upon existing work in church communities as well as scholarly literature from a wide variety of fields to provide guidance, wisdom, and resources. Embracing accessibility as a Christian praxis of justice takes seriously the central call of disability communities over the past decades: “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998). Frameworks for “disability justice” from scholars in disability studies as well as disabled people and their allies can help guide processes of addressing accessibility and inclusive learning within theological schools.

In this section, we will explore one recent framework for disability justice (2018) offered by Patricia Berne, Aurora Levins Morales, and David Langstaff, guided by the commitments of the disability justice performance project “Sins Invalid” (<https://www.sinsinvalid.org>). Led by disabled people of color, Sins Invalid “incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities,” with a vision of commitment “to social and economic justice for all people with disabilities – in lockdowns, in shelters, on the streets, visibly disabled, invisibly disabled, sensory minority, environmentally injured, psychiatric survivors – moving beyond individual legal rights to collective human rights” (<https://www.sinsinvalid.org/about-us>).

Berne, et al.’s framework for disability justice offers ten principles that open up new opportunities for “movement builders” – those concerned with embracing disability justice within their particular contexts (2018, p. 227). The authors admit that disability justice “is not yet a broad-based popular movement” but rather “a vision and practice of a *yet-to-be*... a movement toward a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful” (Berne et al., 2018, p. 229). This notion of disability justice as practices that affirm “every body and mind... as beautiful” resonates strongly with theological frameworks for justice that seek the flourishing of all neighbors as a way of honoring God’s image in each of our human companions on the journey.

The following ten principles ground Berne et al.’s vision of disability justice: leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist politic, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation. In what follows, I will briefly explore each of these ten principles from the vantage point of conducting an accessibility audit in a theological school. I will illustrate how my efforts to address access concerns and promote an environment of inclusive learning at Western Theological Seminary were supported, but also challenged by these ten principles of disability justice, inviting readers to receive these principles as a guide for enacting access in their own contexts.

Intersectionality

The principle of intersectionality in disability justice acknowledges that the multiple identities carried by each individual manifest as sites of privilege or oppression. There is no singular profile for a “disabled learner” or an “inclusive learning environment” within theological education. Attending to the principle of intersectionality in discerning access needs and prioritizing best practices reveals the need to resist stereotyping or prematurely presuming the particular needs of unique individuals and communities. In my

accessibility audit at WTS, I strove for disability justice by implementing an open recruitment process, welcoming audit participants across a wide variety of identities and roles.

Leadership of those most impacted

Berne et al. emphasize that learning barriers associated with ableism are entangled “in the context of other historical systemic oppressions,” including but not limited to racism, sexism, and classism (2018, p. 227). Therefore, when building partnerships and practices for access, a disability justice framework suggests embracing the leadership of individuals and groups “who know the most about these systems and how they work” (2008, p. 227). As a faculty member with a disabling chronic health condition, I brought my lived experience of dismantling ableist systems, especially those intertwined with systemic sexism, to the accessibility audit at WTS. In reflecting on my process of auditing access, this principle of disability justice challenges me to envision a team of leaders who represent greater diversity in regard to race, ethnicity, disability identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Theological schools might consider commissioning a small group of leaders to guide a community in evaluating their access strengths and needs. This group of leaders could include disabled students, staff, faculty, administrators, and community members, as well as nondisabled allies with experience addressing systemic oppressions in the context of theological education.

Reynolds affirms the need for disabled leadership in his writings on access, warning that “efforts by non-disabled people to care for people with disabilities via welcoming and incorporating them in community life can—even with good intentions—be deceptively marginalizing, functioning implicitly as forms of exclusion” (p. 213). This principle of disability justice – the prioritizing of leadership among those most impacted – can help theological schools avoid perpetuations of latent ableism in their efforts to improve access.

Anti-Capitalist politic

This principle of disability justice rejects notions of human belovedness rooted within an individual’s capacity for production, labor, and efficiency (Berne et al., 2018, p. 227), aligning closely with Christian theological frameworks for economic justice (Burch, 2017, p. 455; Rae, 2016, p. 778; Wolterstorff, 1995, p. 21). Embracing an anti-capitalist politic invites theological schools into evaluative and transformational practices marked by curiosity about creative possibilities for access. This disability justice

principle warns that cultivating spaces of access and inclusive learning ought not be oriented toward an end of increased student productivity. Assessing access from a strengths-based foundation, as well as encouraging the cultivation of best practices already championed by community members to support maximal learning and participation (vs. maximal productivity and efficiency) were some anti-capitalist practices I sought to embrace during the accessibility audit process at WTS. Other theological schools seeking to address access might embrace this principle of disability justice to frame community conversations around inclusive learning, interrogate institutional motivations related to addressing access, and analyze priorities for action to ensure their alignment with a trajectory of justice.

Cross-Movement solidarity

Disability justice as a practice of solidarity helps to shift how other movements, groups, and causes perceive disability and the effects of ableism, supporting movement “toward a unified front politic” (Berne et al., 2018, p. 228). This principle offers a challenge to my audit process at WTS, which was situated within a historical trajectory of the institution’s ethos but did not seek active collaborations with other justice-oriented initiatives at the institution. At the same time, it highlights an opportunity for other theological schools seeking to enact best practices for accessibility through collaborative solidarity. For example, theological educators might partner with existing initiatives, programs, and committees committed to particular justice causes (like diversity) in order to form a more robust and unified approach to an accessibility audit.

Recognizing wholeness

People who experience access and learning barriers are whole people. This principle of disability justice frames each individual, whether disabled or nondisabled, as “full of history and life experience ... composed of their own thoughts, sensations, emotions, fantasies, perceptions, and idiosyncrasies” (Berne et al., 2018, p. 228). My process of facilitating an accessibility audit at WTS honored this wholeness in multiple ways. First, as outlined above, my process focused on strengths – including the seminary’s existing strengths with regard to resources, personnel, and practices, as well as promoting the strength and creativity that can emerge from inclusive and justice-oriented paradigms to accessibility, such as Universal Design for Learning. Moving from a deficit to a strengths approach allows for what theologian Deborah Creamer names as disability performing an “accessibility audit” on religious communities – not just to reveal barriers

and shortcomings, but as “a constructive element that offers new options for theological reflection” and practice (2006).

Many participants in the accessibility audit at WTS presented with initial hesitancy to share their thoughts, practices, and perspectives. For example, after I offered individual invitations to several staff members and alumni to participate in the audit, several wrote back or said to me “I don’t have anything to offer because I don’t have any disabilities.” Reframing the work of access in a communal and holistic framework offers space at the table for the valuable insights of people across a range of disabled and nondisabled experiences, providing space for surprising perspectives from individuals that may have not previously connected their life experiences with access.

Sustainability

In disability justice, sustainability is framed in terms of resilience and longevity for justice work. While many institutions of theological education may automatically think of financial sustainability concerns, a framework of disability justice highlights how improving access and inclusive learning can help sustain the diverse learning styles, embodiments, and life circumstances of students, faculty, and staff. Building a future marked by access, equity, and justice is not a sprint – it involves the slow work of conversation and coalition building, in order to sustain both individuals and communities. In relationship to sustainability, one critical aspect of the accessibility audit at WTS was the nature and prioritization of future actions. I listened carefully to people’s experiences of previous attempts to improve accessibility at the seminary, learning from both the components marked by success as well as those marked by burnout. These lived realities guided my recommendations - seeking to honor and do sustainable justice for the people and resources related to the seminary.

Commitment to Cross-Disability solidarity

A commitment to cross-disability solidarity is a central mark of the WTS community, cultivated long before the accessibility audit occurred. During the course of the audit, participants almost uniformly noted the strength of the seminary’s robust support of those with mental health problems, chronic health conditions, physical and sensory disabilities, as well as people in the community with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This foundation made it easy to take up this hallmark of disability justice in the audit process by committing to valuing and honoring “the insights and participation of all of our community members” (Berne et al., 2018, p. 228).

The commitment to solidarity provides a challenge to contexts of theological education that envision themselves as exempt from attending to access needs because “no one here is disabled.” Expanding our perspective on who might benefit from a commitment to access and inclusive learning, as well as cultivating spaces where people might disclose barriers to their learning, creates a space for increased belonging. As Reynolds argues, opening to greater differences in perspective and experiences allows communities to multiply “forms of bodily flourishing” (2012, p. 214).

Interdependence

This principle of disability justice embraces that communal interdependence, rather than individual independence, is fundamental for the flourishing of human communities and the non-human creation they inhabit. This area of disability justice also underscores practices of care for those in our communities. Auditing access in institutions of theological education is an important first step in offering community care and underscoring the deep interdependence that marks our lives as human creatures. Audits oriented toward disability justice should strive to honor the roles, perspectives, and gifts that each member of a theological school bring to the community. These processes of auditing accessibility can also raise important questions about existing policies and practices that do not fully support interdependence.

Collective access

“Access needs aren’t shameful – we all have various capacities which function differently in various environments” (Berne et al., 2018, p. 228-229). Meeting access needs is the work of a community. In this work of identifying and creatively meeting the access needs in our midst, a collective sense of justice work must be centered in order to resist narratives of disability as deficit. Reynolds writes, “disability’s difference is not a problem to solve, but rather a powerful presence that judges by problematizing relational structures caught up in the cult of normalcy... an invocation into a new frame of relation that begins with difference and comes to negotiate imaginative ways of sharing life” (2012, p. 217). At WTS, supplementing audit activities with workshops on universal design for learning, public lectures on disability, reading groups on inclusive learning, and informal conversations about inclusive pedagogy, began to shift some communally held assumptions about the nature of access and disability. Multiple staff, students, and faculty began to envision access practices and the lived experiences of community members with disabilities as rich sources for creative

reimagining, rather than negative difference. At WTS, discerning access needs from a framework of strengths helped to cultivate collective orientation toward access as an important site of justice in theological education – not just something that we should do when it becomes pragmatically necessary or legally obligated.

Collective liberation

This final principle of disability justice commits to leaving no one, no body, and no mind behind in the creative work of communally embracing access (Berne et al., 2018, p. 229). Cultivating contexts of theological education marked by accessibility also cultivates communities marked by liberation. When access needs are understood as a part of joining in God's ongoing justice work in the world, we begin to see how barriers to access not only systemically discriminate against disabled and nondisabled learners, but how allegiance to the status quo ignores the freedom that comes from communities where neighbors are cared for in ways that affirm freedom and flourishing. Auditing accessibility in the context of theological schools provides an opportunity to embrace access as a pathway for the collective liberation of not only disabled students, but all community members. At WTS, the audit process provided the first steps of envisioning this kind of collective liberation as a result of attending to matters of disability justice.

Conclusion: “the future is accessible”

In January of 2017, following the Women's March in Washington D.C., disability activist Annie Segarra created a new social movement entitled #TheFutureIsAccessible (<https://blog.bonfire.com/interview-annie-segarra-future-accessible/>). Responding to the dearth of accessibility practices at the Women's March, Segarra's #TheFutureIsAccessible focuses on elevating the representation and visibility of disabled people, centering their narratives, and embracing tangible practices that prioritize access and inclusion.

Segarra's vision of an accessible future provides a salient challenge for institutions of theological education. From a theological framework of justice, theological schools are well equipped for trajectories that embrace principles of disability justice and respond faithfully to the emerging and pressing needs of students, faculty, staff, and administrators with and without disabilities. Holistic practices of auditing accessibility, like those described in this essay, provide theological schools with one place to begin embracing this kind of accessible future, marked by an embrace of disability justice.

Notes

1. Notable contributions in the existing literature include Robert C. Anderson's 2003 edited volume *Graduate Theological Education and the Experience of Disability* (Philadelphia, PA: Haworth Pastoral Press); The Association of Theological Schools' 2008 policy document "Disability and Theological Education" (<https://www.ats.edu/uploads/about-ats/documents/policy-guideline-disability-and-theological-education.pdf>); Sarah Jean Barton's forthcoming 2021 article in the *Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* "Expanding the Theological Classroom: People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities as Theological Learners;" Benjamin T. Conner's 2020 article in *Theology Today* "How Do You Think You Are Going to be a Pastor? Vocation and Disability;" and Catherine E. Webb's 2020 dissertation "Who is Preaching to the Choir? Disability Content in Mainline Protestant Master of Divinity Curriculum."
2. These activities included online course completion (such as Colorado State University's MOOC "Basics of Inclusive Design for Online Education"), conference attendance (including The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) "Accessing Higher Ground: Accessible Media, Web, & Technology" Conference), self-study of resources (select titles included: Evans, N.J., et al. (Eds.). (2017). *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach* and Kim, E. & K.C. Aquino (Eds.) (2017). *Disability as Diversity in Higher Education: Policies and Practices to Enhance Student Success*), and participation in small reading groups for discussion of salient resources such as Dolmage (2017) *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* and Tobin, T.J. and K.T. Behling. (2018) *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education*.
3. All in-residence and distance learning students across degree programs at Western Theological Seminary are welcomed to contact or meet with the "Accessibility Team" at any time throughout their student tenure, in order to discuss learning needs, possible accommodations, and/or tips for communicating with faculty members. Contact information and team membership (the current staff and faculty members who comprise the team) are provided in all seminary syllabi (in the "Disabilities, Accessibility, and Inclusive Learning" section). This team is separate from the seminary's ADA Coordinator position and is open to all students, regardless of disability status. Additionally, as a result of the accessibility audit recommendations, WTS has now appointed faculty member Professor L.S. Carlos A. Thompson as the "Student Accessibility Coordinator" to provide additional support to students with any kind of barriers to learning.

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