

Beloved Everybody, an ability-inclusive church that embodies the beloved community

At this church, people with and without disabilities both worship and lead.

by [Andrea Perrett](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue



(Illustration © smartboy10 / Getty)

“God loves you so much. No matter what you have done or not done. God loves everybody else too, including the people who make you mad. God’s love is unconditional.” As a hand-drawn picture of a heart flashed up on the computer screen, I realized that these were the words I needed to hear. The speaker reminded the 25 people gathered online that we all have gifts to share and that “we just are gifts to each other, just as we are.” As the picture of a wrapped present faded away and a picture of a butterfly appeared, the speaker continued, “but we remember God’s power of transformation, that us and our world are all being transformed just like a butterfly does, so no matter where we find ourselves now, we know God is still with us and making us and all things new.”

Each week at Beloved Everybody Church, these three symbols—a heart, a gift, and a butterfly—are used at the beginning of the service to remind the congregation of the community’s values. The Los Angeles church is intentionally ability inclusive: people with and without intellectual, developmental, or other disabilities worship there together. When I joined an online service from my home in Vancouver, British Columbia, 1,200 miles away, I expected to be there as an observer. Instead I was generously ministered to.

Bethany McKinney Fox, the church’s organizing pastor, stands out for her inclusive and integrated approach to worship. Bethany, who does not have a disability, has long had a passion for the inclusion of those who do. In high school, she formed a meaningful friendship with a student with physical and intellectual disabilities. She served as a longtime volunteer in a L’Arche community, a home in which people with and without disabilities share life together. She was a special education teacher. She has a PhD in Christian ethics, focusing on disability, healing, and the Gospels; she also worked for Fuller Theological Seminary as director of its disability services office. She and her spouse, Michael, are preparing to open their home to a person with an intellectual disability.

For all her credentials and achievements, Bethany says she “just really likes being friends with people with diverse abilities and disabilities.” It shows. She is clearly loved by those who participate in Beloved Everybody’s activities, and she joins them in many areas of their lives, not just for Sunday worship.

Everything at the church—from the style of worship to the way leadership functions—is designed for people with and without disabilities to join together in community. This structure presents an alternative view of the body of Christ, one that is perhaps closer to Paul’s original description, in which “the 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” (1 Cor. 12:21-23).

Started in 2017, Beloved Everybody is still growing into its rhythms and rituals. After a time of meeting monthly for worship, it began meeting weekly in March 2020—just in time for the pandemic. Bethany has had to reimagine what an ability-inclusive church looks like right now while also continuing the work of starting a church from scratch. Beloved Everybody does not have the benefit of a previously gathered group of people with deep pockets and long-term support.

However, Bethany sees the church's status as a start-up as a positive thing. "We don't have to push against the way that it has always been," she says. "We have freedom to experiment and to have those experiments sometimes not work out." As a part of both the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s 1001 New Worshiping Communities program and the local church-planting network Cyclical LA, Beloved Everybody has received monetary support to establish themselves—and Bethany has a network of other church starters to learn from.

The church's roots are in accessibility and the idea that people of all abilities can participate in worship alongside one another. While the realities of virtual worship during COVID-19 have restricted this goal, Beloved Everybody's worship services still emphasize feelings, bodies, movements, and rituals in an inclusive way. By participating together, congregants interact with one another both verbally and nonverbally as a way to connect to God.

When someone is speaking, words or pictures are also displayed (as with the three symbols at the beginning of the service). The songs Beloved Everybody sings include actions and multiple sensory modes. While scripture is read or acted out each week, there is never a traditional sermon. Instead there are a variety of ways to respond to God's word, such as drawing, movement, discussion, or even silence. Beloved Everybody casts a wide net for active, sensory worship experiences, creating the feeling of an engaging, contemplative service that goes beyond the limits of most traditional worship.

The church also expands on conventional forms of leadership. At Beloved Everybody, leadership has been shaped around the principle of inclusion. Bethany says that they "continue to learn about what leadership can look like when it's embodied by people who have not traditionally been given space to share their leadership gifts." She points specifically to the question of leadership from people with intellectual disabilities, people who are neurodivergent, or those who do not speak. Beloved Everybody makes intentional space for these gifts. Because it welcomes the leadership gifts of people who may not use words to communicate, or who may not have experience with skills like planning or finance, people find some unconventional ways to lead together.

Much of this unconventional leadership happens in the moment, particularly during the worship service. Tina, who has attended Beloved Everybody Church for about a year, says that Bethany provides a space "not just to participate but to engage

ourselves in relationship to this community and to name and identify God among us.” Rather than having one person stand at the front and proclaim the word, God speaks through the voices of everyone in the community.

Michelle and her 30-year-old son Chris have benefited from this invitation to participate and be leaders within a church community. Michelle first met Bethany through community events to support people with disabilities. Now Michelle and Chris attend and provide leadership during the service most weeks. When Chris, who has autism, was younger, Michelle did not attend church. “We didn’t go to church before because it was hard to have Chris with me; he was loud and ran around and people didn’t understand.” Now they have found Beloved Everybody as a place where they are both welcomed and encouraged to participate. Michelle is grateful that everyone has an active role in the church and sees it as a way for each person to “be closer to God.” She is particularly pleased about Chris’s role in giving the blessing at the end of each service. Everyone extends their hands out to receive his words: “May the Lord bless you, may the Lord keep you . . .”

For Bethany, freedom and individual decision making are keys to avoiding tokenism. “Work has to be done to help people feel free to lead in their own voice,” she says, “especially for people with disabilities who have often been trained throughout their lives to be compliant.” Bethany admits that this freedom often disrupts whatever she, as the organizing pastor, has planned. When an individual leading an activity chooses to only say a few words—or to talk about something entirely different—she respects that decision, because the Holy Spirit is present in that person’s contribution.

Christianity has had a complicated relationship with people with disabilities. Churches have often ignored the call to inclusion; some have even questioned the faith of people who have not been healed of their disabilities. Beloved Everybody does not ignore the importance of healing in Christianity, but it does reframe the idea by shifting from a medical model that treats disability as a sickness to a model of healing that embodies the fullest possible integration of people with disabilities within their communities. Bethany goes into great detail about healing in the church in her recent book *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church*.

While it is interesting to read her description of the seven marks of healing in the way of Jesus, what is more interesting is Bethany’s commitment to the action-

reflection cycle she uses with Beloved Everybody to test and refine these practices. One example is how the group navigated the activity of greeting one another. When they were meeting in person, their community included people who liked to give hugs to everyone, but there was also an individual who had some boundaries around physical touch—and could not readily communicate this to others. They came up with a color-coded name tag system (red—no touch; yellow—handshake or high five; green—okay to ask for a hug). That way, everyone could be greeted and welcomed in a way that was comfortable and inclusive. It is one thing to theologize about what it is like to be an inclusive community; it is another to practice transformation and healing in a community of people with and without disabilities.

When other churches attempt to minister to people of varied abilities, the result is often a segregated religious community for people with disabilities. Sometimes the focus is on physical disabilities and physical obstacles to worship services, while intellectual barriers still remain. Beloved Everybody is a rare church in which those with and without disabilities lead and participate together. Bethany is coaching a few other people to start new churches and ministries, but at this point the number of ability-inclusive churches is very small.

It is not just people with disabilities who benefit from a fully inclusive model. However, many Beloved Everybody participants who do not have disabilities find themselves instinctively trying to help those who do. “This beautiful community invites me to be present,” says Tina. “My greatest challenge is the work of retraining the part of me that needs to hold some sense of control through unsolicited fixing or helping. Finding balance, that Holy Spirit sweet spot as I loosen my grasp, engaging everything—that is counterintuitive.” When Tina is able to let go of control and experience the bonds of the community, “the joy of seeing the warmth, the loving embrace of one another is transformative. Such genuine caring and tenderness. There are some in the community who I admire: they love others with such abandon, such vulnerability and authenticity. It regenerates the soil of my soul. It seeds, feeds, and nurtures that love and vulnerability in all of us.”

Another participant, Katy, also finds the community beneficial. “My experience with [Beloved Everybody] is to meet up with new friends and new people, to hang out together,” she says, “to figure out things to help us to get back to reality and community.” At Beloved Everybody, Katy has people that she can rely on.

Bethany and members of the church frequently advocate for accessibility. During worship, however, they do not spend much time talking about disability. Instead, they talk about the many other things that participants face. Beloved Everybody observes Pride Month; it gathers for Black Lives Matter events. This isn't to say that everyone who attends has the same beliefs—the church has deliberately formed a unified community without requiring uniformity of belief.

Even after familiarizing myself with Beloved Everybody and reflecting on its place in Christian ministry, I still sometimes catch myself visualizing the body of Christ in pristine condition, statue-of-David-esque, a highly tuned machine where everything is in working order. And I am not alone. In an age of church decline, leaders have frequently turned to efficiency and productivity as their saving grace. The high value placed on efficiency affects many individual members of church communities, where only certain types of people and certain abilities are considered essential to the functions of the church.

But for a congregation like Beloved Everybody, which values the gifts that each individual has to offer, moving quickly for the sake of efficiency is not an option. It is more important to wait patiently for each individual to speak and share the unique gifts that they bring.

Beloved Everybody Church is a powerful force that expands the image of the body of Christ. It is not particularly efficient. Instead, it is an image where all are welcome and the most vulnerable are clothed with the greatest respect, an image that alters our assumptions about an individual's value, worth, and what type of community they deserve to be a part of. At Beloved Everybody, we are reminded that all are beloved by God.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "One body, many abilities."