

# Walking in Hope: Accompanying Persons with Disabilities



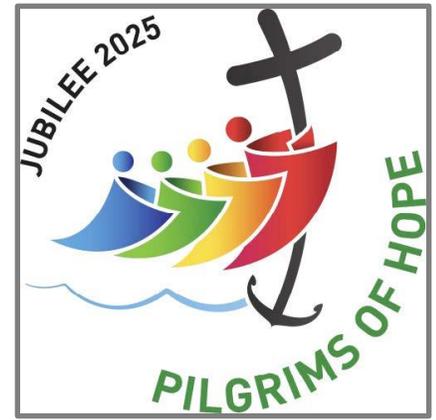
FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH

COMMUNION ● PARTICIPATION ● MISSION

HIS, Diocese of Trenton  
August 8, 2025

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# Pilgrims of Hope—Jubilee 2025



- HOPE is the desire and expectation of good things to come
- despite not knowing what the future may bring.
- All in the Church are called to be tangible signs of hope for people who lack hope
- because of consistently being marginalized through unjust structures.

QUESTION:

What might hope for individuals with disabilities look like

and how can we support this, collectively as Church and individually?

# Will Discuss ...

- Encountering the PwD: experiences of disability, in life and Church, considerations for hope
- What does our faith say? PwD as integral members of the body of Christ.
- Accompanying PwD: Providing and becoming tangible signs for hope

# Spaces Project—Becoming Visible



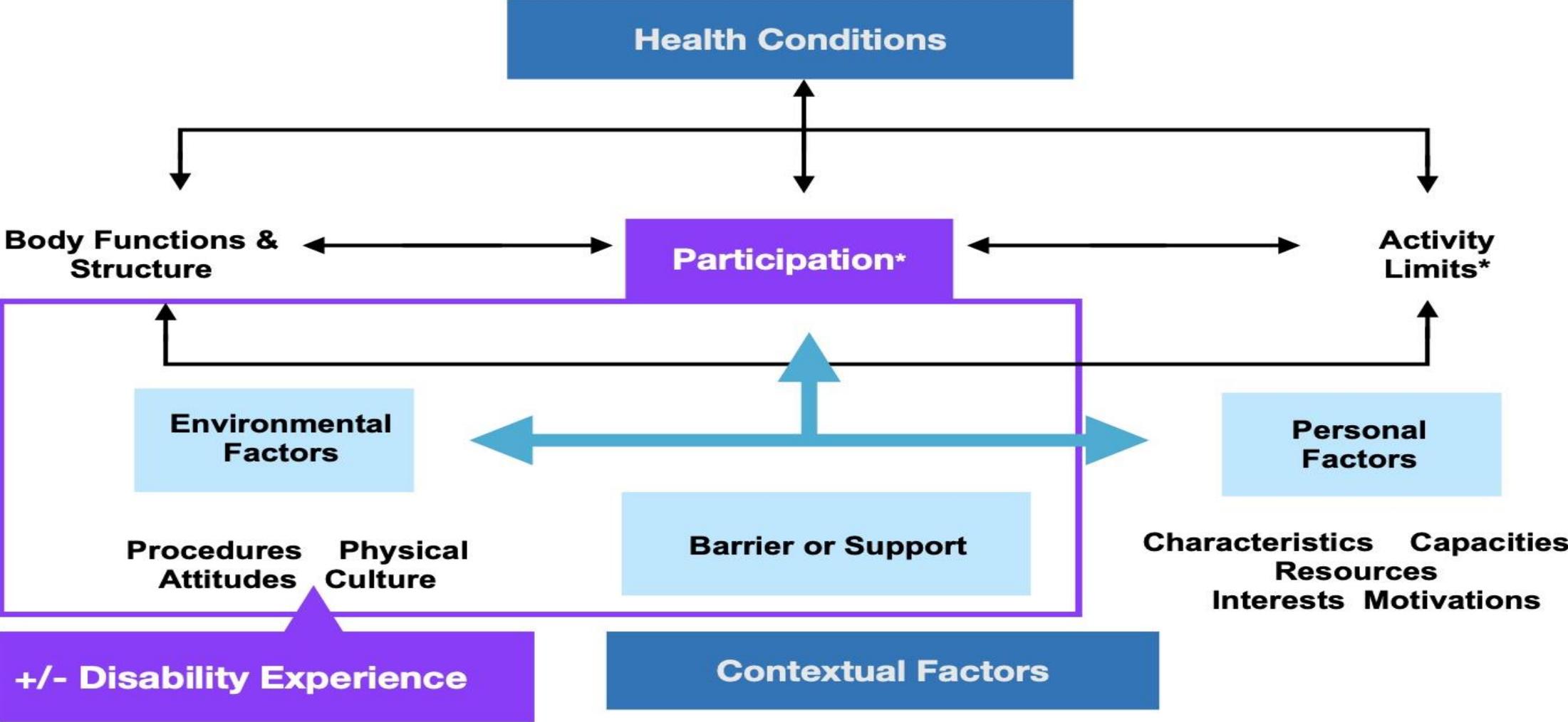
Spaces by James Ian developed with members of the spinal muscular atrophy community (SMA). Watch and listen to [Spaces](#).

# Encountering Experiences of Disability

Current understanding of disability, common experiences of PwD in life and the Church



# Disability – More than a Definition



International Classification of Functioning (ICF) Disability, and Health (WHO, 2001)

\*These variables are reversed to emphasize participation in community and life events is focus of human flourishing.

# Moving Beyond 'Special'

“... we, persons with disabilities, become known specifically for our imagined limitless needs. Our neediness, in particular, is showcased, thereby shaping perceptions of us as receivers rather than contributors. Also, why our needs more 'special' than the needs of our siblings or friends? Sharon Shapier-Lacks,

"My needs are not 'special' just because they're not met in ways identical to the needs of nondisabled people. I need a ramp; you need steps. Not special, just facts ....

The notion that disability requires "special accommodations" reinforces the notion that accessible services are a favor or an act of benevolence rather than a fundamental obligation. People with disabilities do not seek special treatment, but equal access and inclusion in the community.” Emily Ladau

“We are not gifts ~to teach abled people about love~.” Kayla Whaley

# Experiences in the Church of PwD and Families

- Belonging is an empty promise
- Feeling unwanted and unworthy
- Feeling Isolated and alone

# *To Be Respected & Valued*

I have so much to offer; receive it ...



Treat me like you do everyone else ...

I am valuable: Value me ...

Doing things together, with me not for me ...



*Living Fully Charter from Vatican Conference, Living Fully: Disability, Culture and Faith 2016*

# *Experience of 'Hidden Exiles'*



Many persons with disabilities 'feel that they exist without belonging and participating.' ... Our concerns should be not only to care for them but ***to ensure their 'active participation'*** in the civil and ecclesial community. That ...



will gradually contribute to ***the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging*** each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person.

Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), 98

**Many PwD “feel they exist without belonging ...”**

**What is belonging?**

**What does it mean to belong?**

# 10 Dimensions of Belonging

Being Present

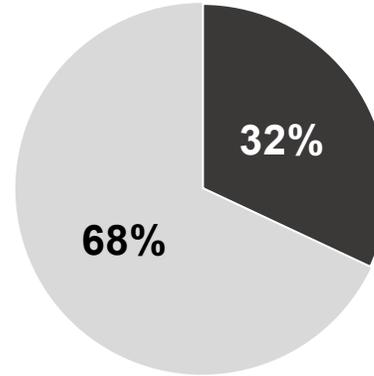
Verses

Having a Presence

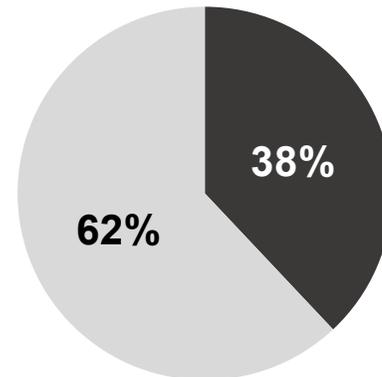


Carter, Biggs, & Boehm, (2016).

# Who Are We Missing?



32% left their congregation because of how their son or daughter with disabilities was not included.



38% considered switching congregations because of how their son/daughter with disability was treated.

Melinda Jones Ault, Belva C Collins, and Erik W Carter, "Congregational Participation and Supports for Children and Adults with Disabilities: Parent Perceptions," *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 51, no. 1 (2013): p. 55 [32%]; Elizabeth E O'Hanlon, "Religion and Disability: The Experiences of Families of Children with Special Needs," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 17, no. 1 (2013): p. 52. [38%]

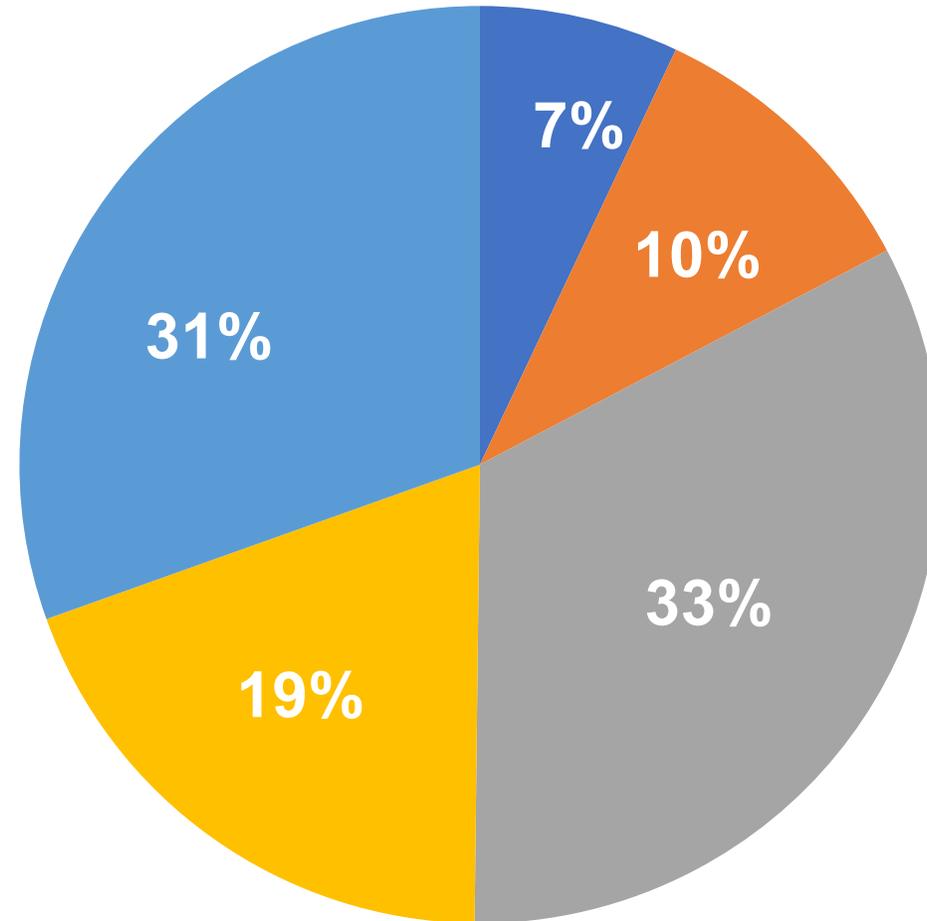
# How Many LwD in Diocese of Trenton?

	General Ed	Catholic Est	Special Ed Services	Catholic Est	Class. Rate Average
Trenton	286,070	117,289	53,215	<b>21,818</b>	18.60
Burlington	68,602	28,127	13,392	<b>5,491</b>	19.52
Mercer	59,122	24,240	9,120	<b>3,739</b>	15.43
Monmouth	91,484	37,508	16,707	<b>6,850</b>	18.26
Ocean	66,862	27,413	13,996	<b>5,738</b>	20.93

Catholic Est: multiplied total numbers by 41%. 10/15/2022 NJ Dept. of Education Special Education enrollment, Ages 3-21, not including charter schools, classification rate does include charter schools. 14



# Disability Throughout Life 2018—2022



Diocese of Trenton  
# PwD by age group  
Cornell Univ. Yan-Tan Institute

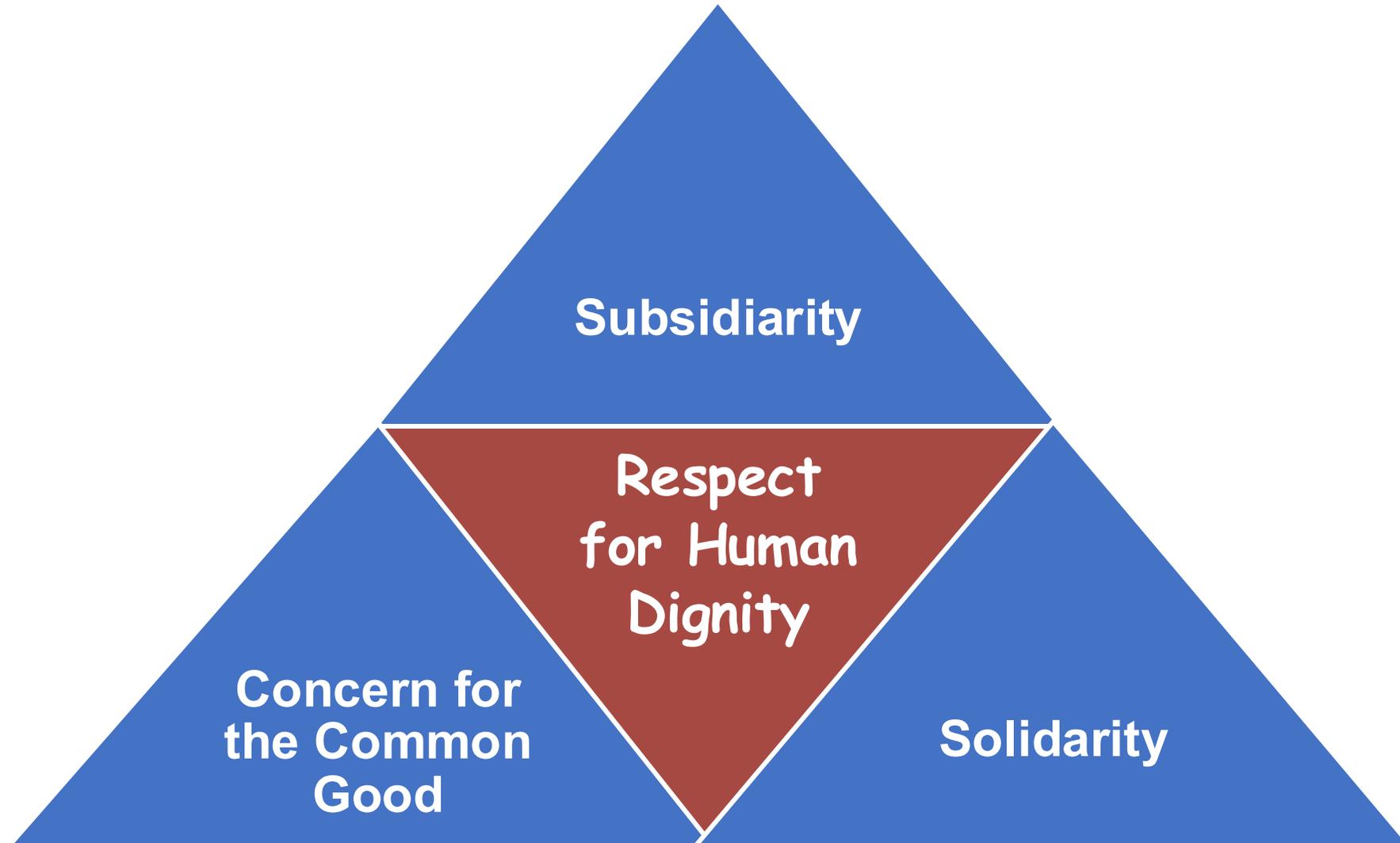
■ 5 - 17    ■ 18 - 34    ■ 35 - 64    ■ 65-74    ■ > 75

# What Do We Believe?

Appreciating PwD as integral members of the body of Christ.

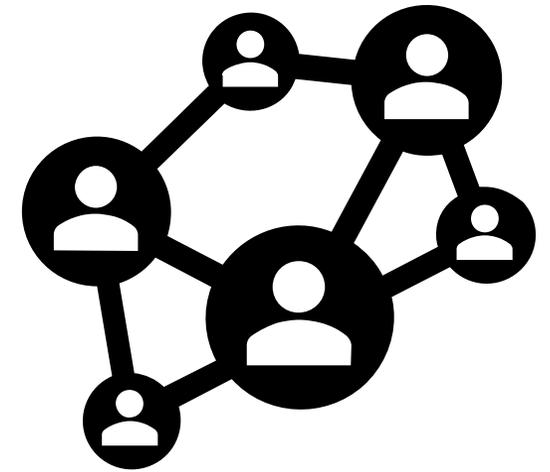


# The Object of Catholic Social Tradition is Human Flourishing



# Living a Fully Human Life

- Are SOCIAL and INTERDEPENDENT.
- Grow through meaningful participation in life and appropriate supportive education—Positive Expectations
- Things of a fully HUMAN LIFE
  - Food, clothing, a home, medical care
  - Education, privacy, respect, love,
  - Friendships & other diverse relationships,
  - Intimacy, practicing one's faith, gainful employment, participating in family, social and political life, exercising one's rights & responsibilities, making decisions in one's life, respect,



# Human Development – Human Vocation Shared Responsibility

... Integral human development is primarily a vocation, and therefore it involves a free assumption of responsibility in solidarity on the part of everyone.



Pope Benedict, XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 11

# Manifestations of the Spirit

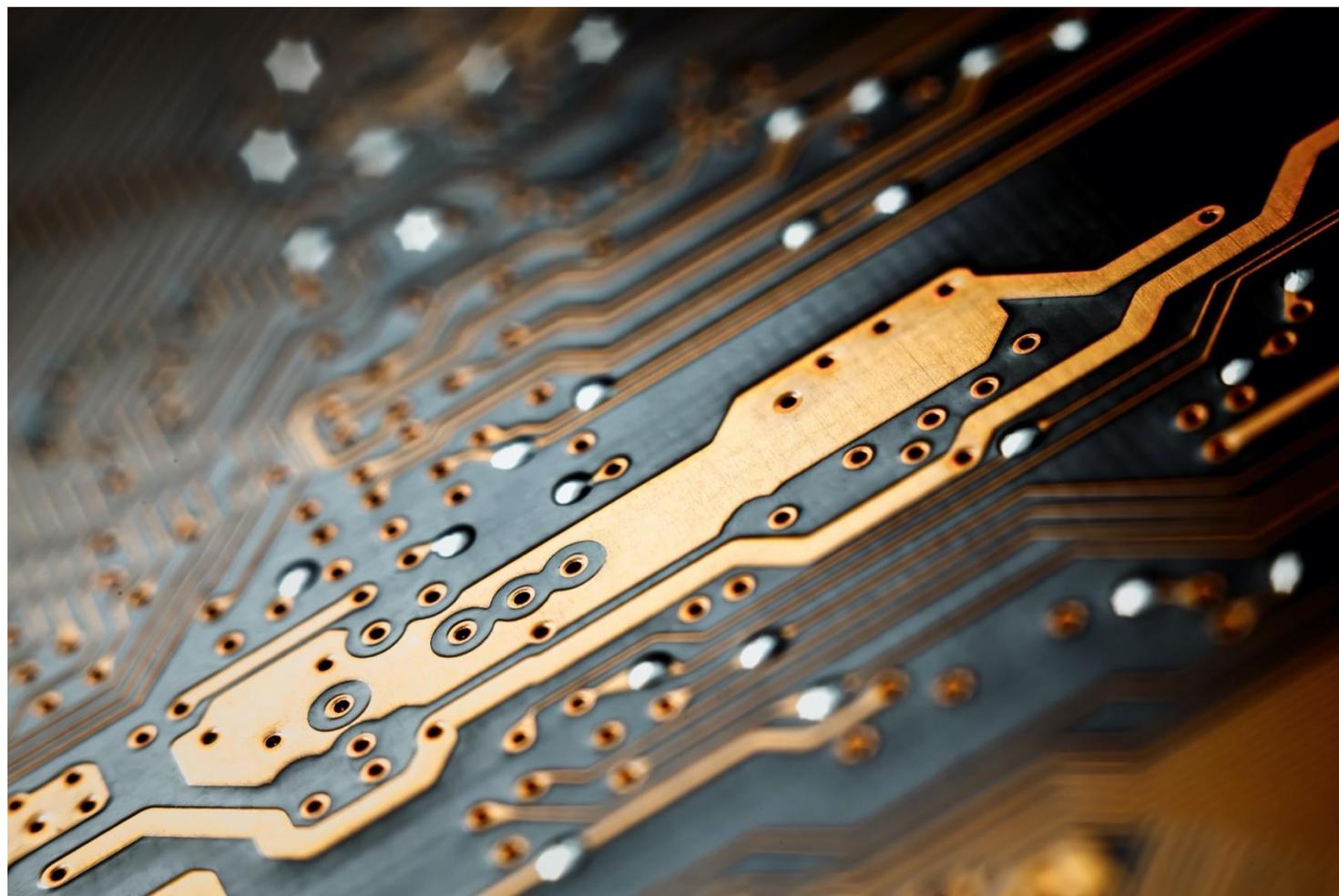


A plethora of manifestations of the Spirit for the good of the community

Not individual gifts – not just seven

Giftedness of the *community* vs giftedness of the *individual*

# Manifestations Within Interpersonal Spaces A Different Perspective



# The Growing End of Human Dignity

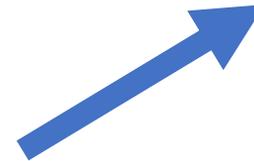
an ever-greater understanding of the meaning of human dignity, along with its demands and consequences, until it arrived at the recognition that the dignity of every human being prevails beyond all circumstances.



Women in the Women's Ward  
Willowbrook State School, New York  
January 1972



Grace, a young woman with Down Syndrome on graduation day at Syracuse University Inclusive U, 2024



Possibilities will continue to develop!



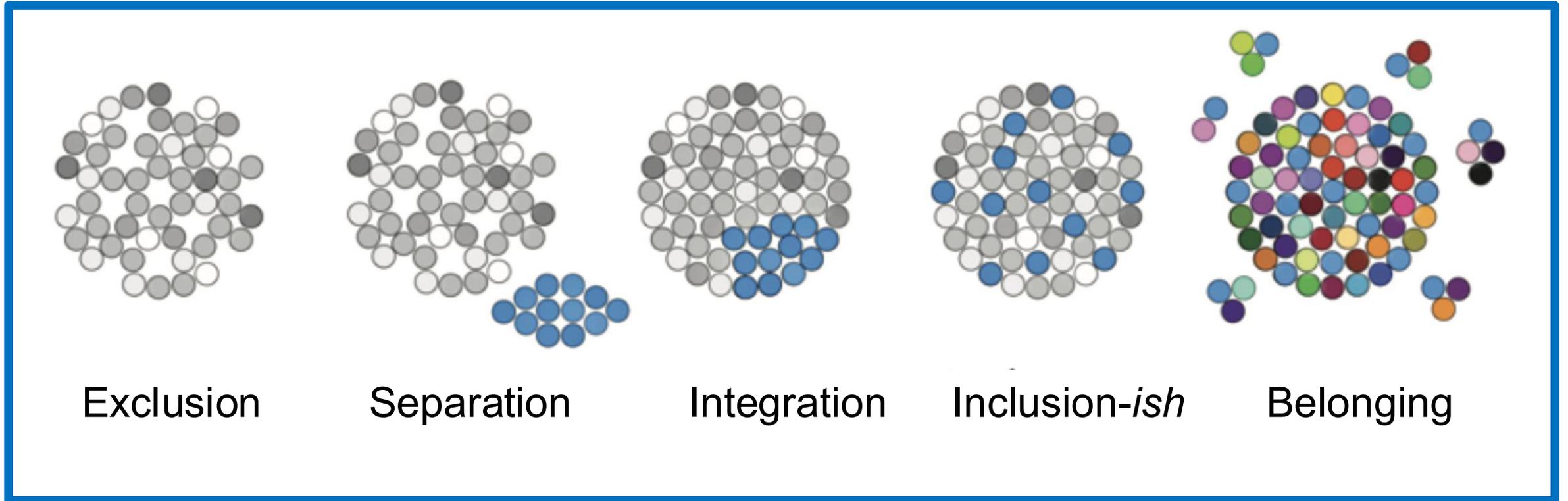
# Concern for Justice for PwD

- ...we call upon people of good will to reexamine their attitudes toward their brothers and sisters with disabilities and promote their well-being, acting with the sense of **justice** and the compassion that the Lord so clearly desires. (1)
- Society's frequent indifference to the plight of citizens with disabilities is a problem that cries aloud for solutions based on **justice** and conscience (9)
- ... **rights** which enable the individual with a disability to achieve **the fullest measure of personal development** of which he or she is capable. (10)
- We must actively work to make them real in the fabric of modern society. ... the Church must become an advocate for and with them. It must work to increase the public's sensitivity toward the needs of people with disabilities and support their rightful demand for **justice**. (11)
- If people with Disabilities are to become equal partners in the Christian community, **injustices** must be eliminated and ignorance and apathy replaced by increased sensitivity and warm acceptance. (13)

# Accompanying PwD

Providing and becoming tangible signs for hope: What we believe in conversation with with evidence-based practices:

# What is Your Vision of Accompanying PwD?



Erik W. Carter, "The Changing Landscape of Disability and Ministry in the Church."  
*Currents in Theology and Mission*. 49:3 (July 2022)

# Accessibility and Disability

- As pastoral ministers, we must consider factors that affect accessibility:
  - Expectations
  - Attitudes
  - Physical environment and architecture
  - Procedures
  - Communication: clarity, expressing and receiving
  - Comprehension
  - Moving into and around spaces

# Subsidiarity: IN and FOR Community Life

- Developing the sense of belonging through interaction, relationships and participation
- A "laboratory" - Small Christian Community (SCC)
- Trust in graced moments.

Pervades the *New Directory*, but esp: 29, 31, 35, 59, 60, 75-89, 139-149, 179, 195, 199, 218



# “Ecological Inventory” for Person AND Community

- Roles and Activities: identify ordinary ones
- PwD participation: observations on strengths and challenges
- Opportunity Barriers (practices, others’ attitudes, behaviors)
- Skill Limits (what is to be learned: skills, behaviors)
- Skills instruction, Adaptation, or Supports
  - PwD
  - Community

# THANK YOU!

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# Appendix

## Some Food for Thought and Forms



# Ecological Inventory for Learning & Participating

Learner: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

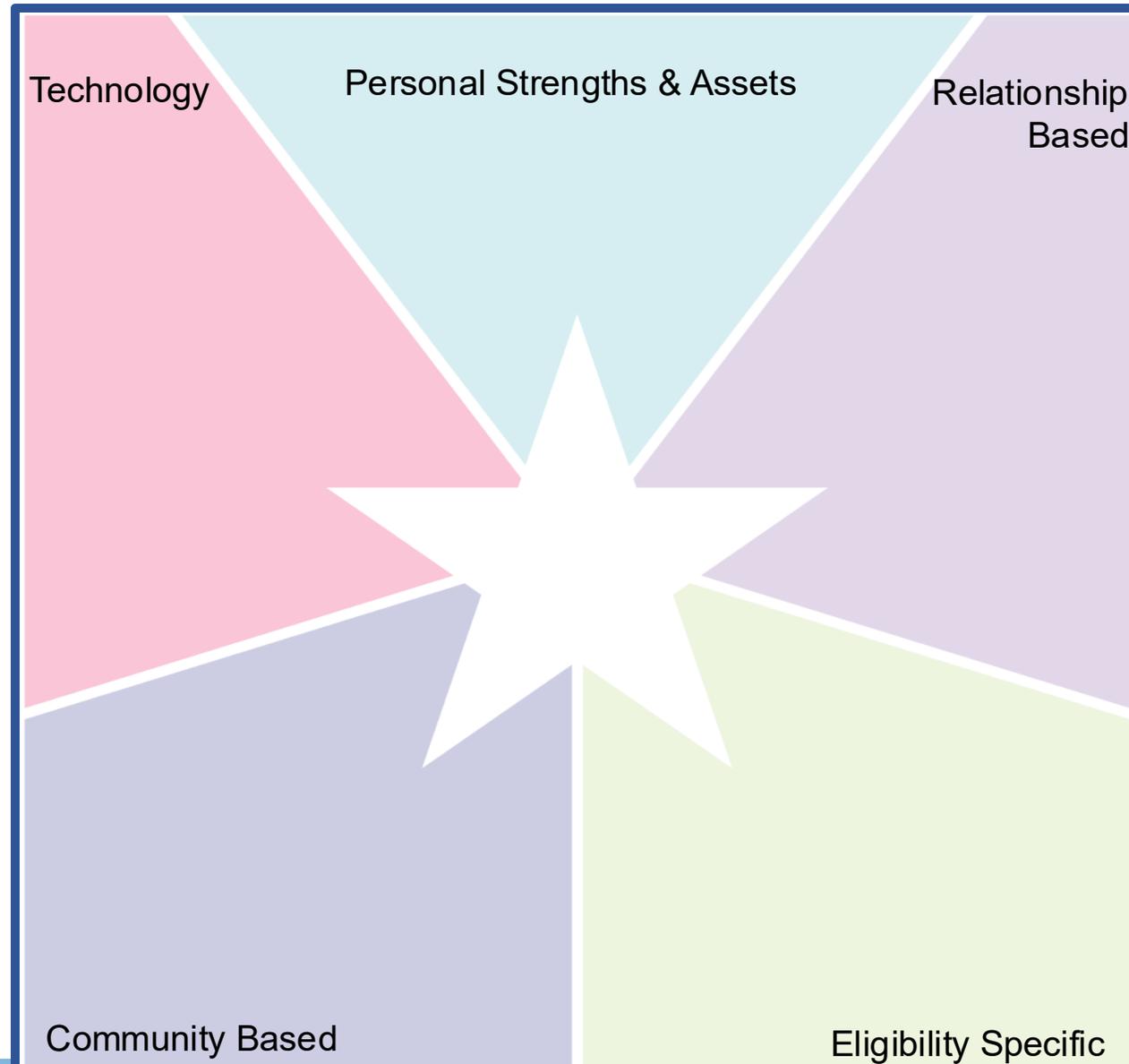
Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

Activity: \_\_\_\_\_

Observe and Describe what is done	Discrepancy—Barrier Analysis	Constructive Support Plans
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Activity Step <i>What do peers do?</i>	Learner Participation or Activity (+ or -)	Describe Opportunity Barriers <i>(e.g., practices, others' attitudes, others' behaviors)</i>	Describe Skills/Strengths- Barriers/Limits <i>(learner's skills or behaviors)</i>	Skills Instruction, Adaptation, or Supportive Strategies

# Integrated Services & Support Star: Supporting a Person's Vision for a Good Life



 My LifeCourse Portfolio

\_\_\_\_\_ 's **ONE-PAGE PROFILE**

What people like & admire about me

What's Important to ME

How to Best Support ME

# Inclusive Education Planning Practices

Objectives should include key knowledge, skills, or attitudes in measurable terms

- All learners will learn to:
- Most learners will learn to
- Some learners will learn to
- Essential Questions

Karen Douglas, Liz Altieri, and Darren Minarik, Radford University Virginia Inclusive Practices Center. “Co-Teaching and Specially-Designed Instruction (SDI) Lesson Plan. Presented at AAIDD Annual Meeting 2021. See references at end for more information.

# Universal Design for Learning Planning Practices

What is your BIG Idea?

Then think about ways to share and engage all.

Representation	Engagement	Expression	Cultural Consider.
Pictures Graphic org Video clips Audio recordings Lecture Other <b>CONTENT</b>	Cooperative Learning Partner Learning Manipulatives Movement Role Plays Other <b>PROCESS</b>	Written Illustrated Photo Voice Oral Technological Model Other <b>PRODUCT</b>	Race, ethnicity, language: Content Vocabulary Other



## References listed by slide number

Slide 4: SPACES music video, watch [here](#).

Slide 12 10 Dimensions of Belonging: Erik W. Carter, Elizabeth Biggs, Thomas Boehm, “Being Present vs. Having a Presence: Dimensions of Belonging for Young People with Disabilities and Their Families,” *Christian Education Journal* 13:1 (2016): 127–146.

Slide 14: 10/15/2022 NJ Dept. of Education Special Education enrollment, Ages 3-21, not including charter schools, classification rate does include charter schools. [here](#).

Slide 15: Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S. (2025). Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute (YTI). Retrieved from Cornell University Disability Statistics website: [www.disabilitystatistics.org](http://www.disabilitystatistics.org) Access report [here](#).

Slide 25: Disability & Ministry Graphic—Erik W. Carter, “The Changing Landscape of Disability and Ministry in the Church.” *Currents in Theology and Mission*. 49:3 (July 2022): 4–9.

Slide 33: Learn about the LifeCourse framework [here](#) and about using the LifeCourse Tools Integrated Supports Star [here](#). The whole website is a great resource for learning about person-centered planning, a support planning framework based on the person.