

Southeast Michigan Synod ELCA

How To Start A Disability Ministry



Ken Bluhm

Throughout life, Ken decided he wouldn't allow himself or others to place limits on what he could do or accomplish. While he has lived life on his own terms, his cerebral palsy diagnosis has influenced both who he is and how he thinks. Prior to retiring in December of 2024, Ken was a senior director at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan. Ken is very engaged in the community and a strong advocate for the disabled. He began his advocacy efforts early in life. At the age of three, he was fundraising for United Way at local auto assembly plants in Michigan as the poster child for their campaign. He is a Licensed Lay Minister currently serving at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Livonia Michigan helping coordinate Emmanuel's long running Open Arms Ministry program. He has served on the board of directors of Michigan United Cerebral Palsy (MI-UCP) and currently holds the position of Treasurer on UCP's National board. Since 2005, Ken has also served on the board of the Accounting Aid Society, a nonprofit which provides free income tax preparation, financial management coaching and IRS assistance to middle and low-income households.



Disability in the Bible is Often Misunderstood

- Disability is often linked to sin, which in turn, promotes discrimination, ableism and misunderstanding (even in the church).

A few examples:

- *Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” John 5:14*
- *As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. John 9:2-3*
- *“If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.” Ex 15:26*
- *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. James 5:14*
- *Then the Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Ex 4:11*

Being an Inclusive Church Means Full Participation

- Being an inclusive church means intentionally welcoming and discipling children, teens, and adults impacted by disability, mental health, and trauma, ensuring they have full access to worship, community, and spiritual growth. It involves equipping church leaders and congregations with the knowledge and tools to remove barriers that prevent individuals and families from fully participating in the life of the church. At its core, inclusivity reflects the heart of the gospel—demonstrating Christ’s love by creating a church where everyone belongs and is valued.
- Full participation in church life means more than just attending; it’s about having opportunities to connect, contribute, and grow in faith alongside others. A fully engaged church experience allows everyone, regardless of ability, to use their gifts, deepen their relationships, and find a true sense of belonging within the body of Christ.

Disability is a Challenging Ministry

The greatest source of suffering is not the handicap itself, but the accompanying feelings of being useless, worthless, unappreciated and unloved. It is much easier to accept the inability to speak, walk or feed oneself than it is to accept the inability to be of special value to another person.

Henri Nouwen

Most churches are not struggling to be more disability inclusive because they are unloving or even unwilling. It has been my experience that most churches struggle with this because they are unaware of how to make the change.

Lamar Hardwick

Among Christians, disability is commonly represented as something to be healed or gotten rid of-a fault, a lesson in lack of faith, a helpless object of pity for the non-disabled faithful to display their charity, a vehicle of redemptive suffering, a cross to bear, or fuel for the inspiration of others.

Thomas E. Reynolds- Vulnerable Communion

What's in it for the Church

John 13:34–35

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The disabled will demonstrate, and help the church experience, the love of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:22

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor...

A Disability ministry helps a congregation complete the body of Christ.

Some Things to Think About

- In the US, about 56.7 million people — 19 percent of the population or 1 in 5 people have a disability
- Worldwide, over one billion people or 15% of the world's population live with some form of disability, and of these, between 110 and 190 million have significant difficulties in functioning.
- Estimates are that 80 percent to 85 percent of churches don't have any level of special needs ministry.
- Only 5 to 10% of the world's disabled are effectively reached with the gospel, making the disability community one of the largest unreached — some say under-reached — or hidden people groups in the world
- Almost 1/3 (32.3%) of special needs families said they had left at least one church because their child was not included or welcomed.
- Nearly 50% (46.6%) of special needs parents said they refrained from participating in a religious activity because their child was not included or welcomed.



Evolution of Disability Language: **Deficit Model**



Through 1940

**Deficit
Model**

1940s – 1960s

**Medical
Model**

1960s – 1980s

**Identity
Model**

1980s – 2010s

**Social
Model**

2010s - Present

**Justice
Model**

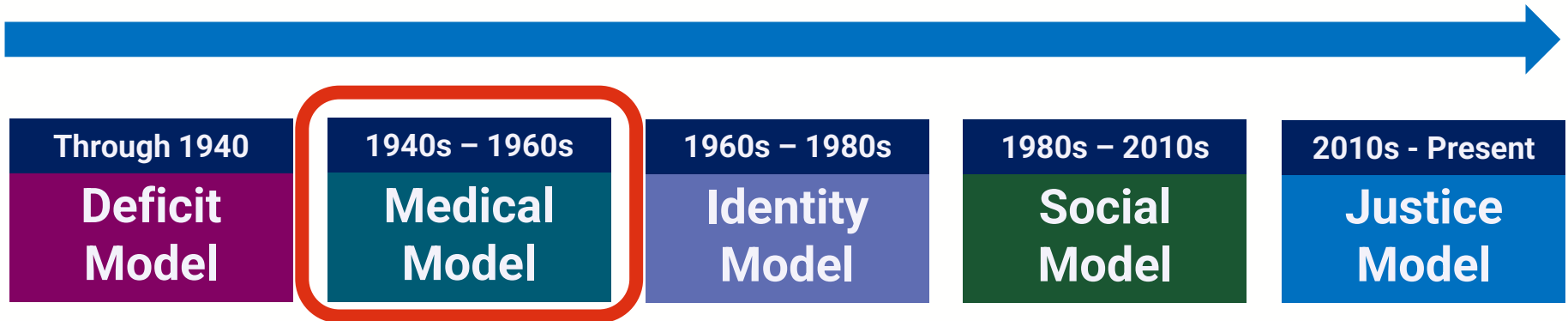
- Religion, superstition
- Moral failure, punishment
- Eugenics movement
- Should not reproduce
- Language was dehumanizing

- **Crippled**
- **Invalid**
- **Feeble-minded**
- **Unfit**
- **Defective**

Evolution of Disability slides provided by Relay Resources
<https://www.relayresources.org/>



Evolution of Disability Language: **Medical Model**



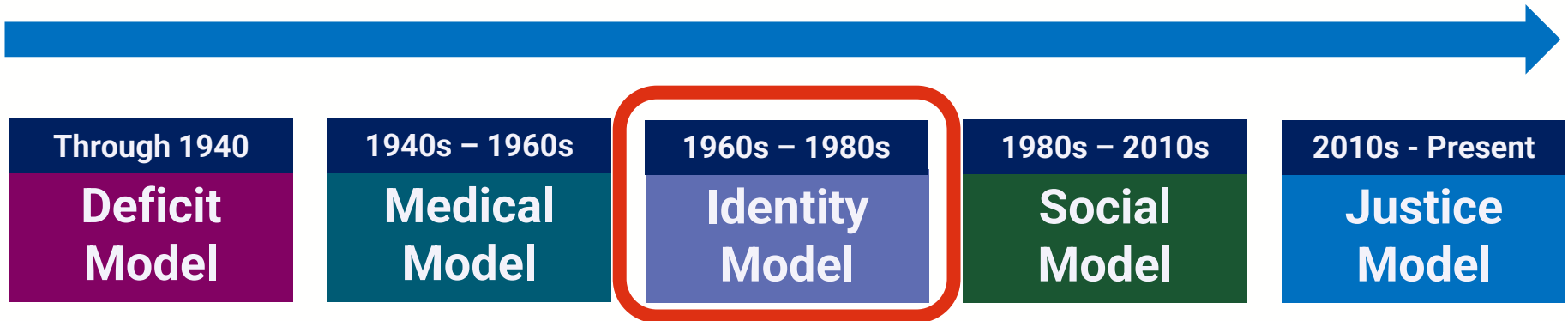
- After World War II, return of injured veterans that needed to be treated
- Focus: diagnosing, treating, “fixing”

- **Rehabilitation**
- **Mentally retarded**
- **Handicapped**
- **Suffers from...**
- **Wheelchair-bound**

Evolution of Disability slides provided by Relay Resources
<https://www.relayresources.org/>



Evolution of Disability Language: **Identity Model**



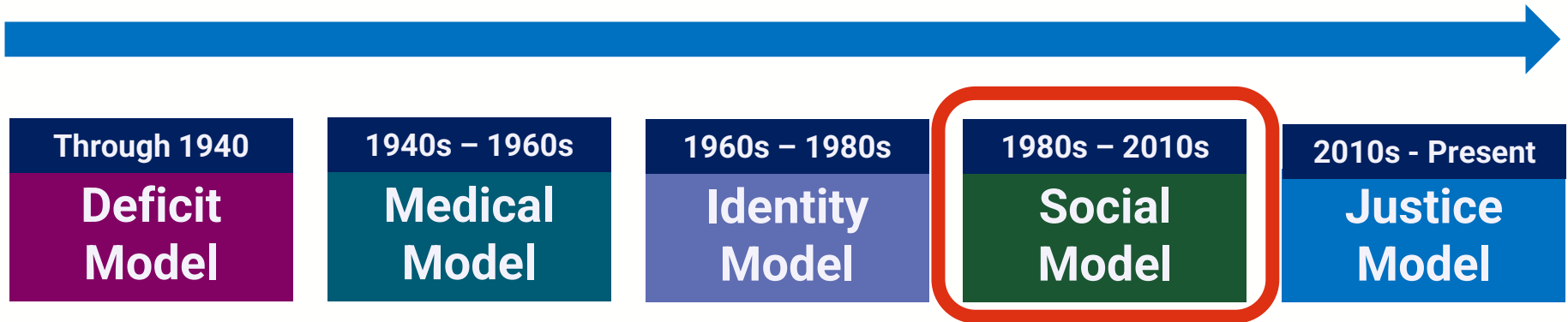
- Focus: Civil Rights, Individual Rights, and Personhood
- 504 Sit In (April 1977) → Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)

- Rise of **person-first** language
- The **person comes *before* the disability**
- **Accommodations**

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Evolution of Disability Language: **Social Model**



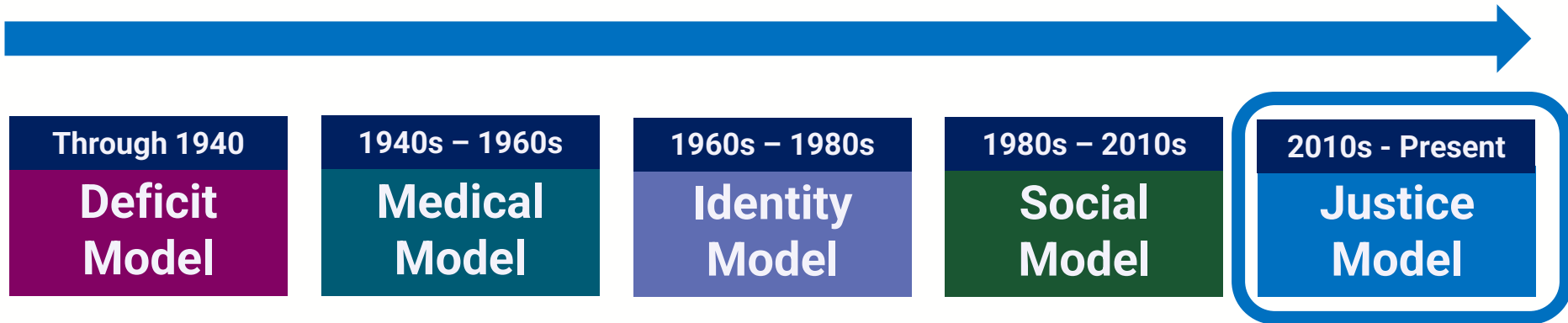
- Disabled by barriers rather than by the body or mind
- Disability is part of the human condition
- What **can** a person do

- **Person-first language**
- **Special needs (SNTs 1993)**
- **Abilities (not disabilities)**
- **Differently-abled, handicapped, unique abilities**

Evolution of Disability slides provided by Relay Resources
<https://www.relayresources.org/>



Evolution of Disability Language: **Justice Model**



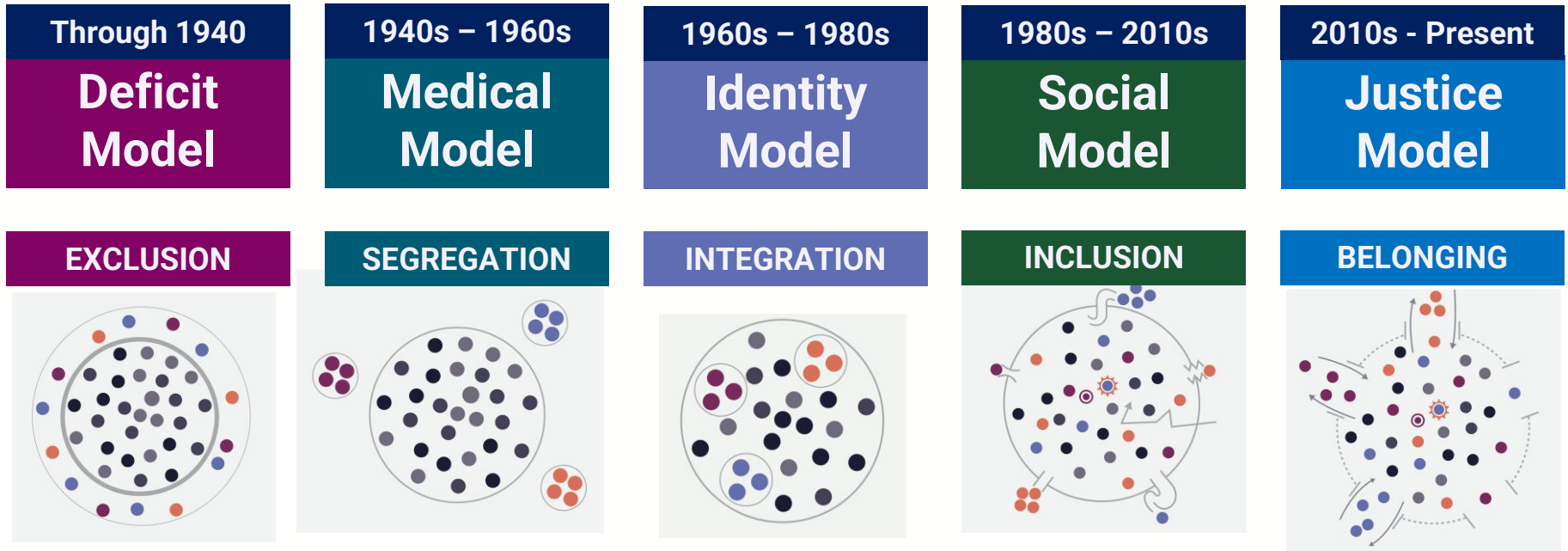
- Focus on systemic barriers; introduce intersectionality
- Pushback on euphemisms
- Rise of identity-first language; community preferences

- **Clear, direct, honest, neutral, respectful language**
- **Blind, Deaf/deaf, autistic, wheelchair user, disabled**
- **Nondisabled vs. able-bodied**

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Disability Language | From Exclusion to Belonging



Evolution of Disability slides provided by Relay Resources

<https://www.relayresources.org/>

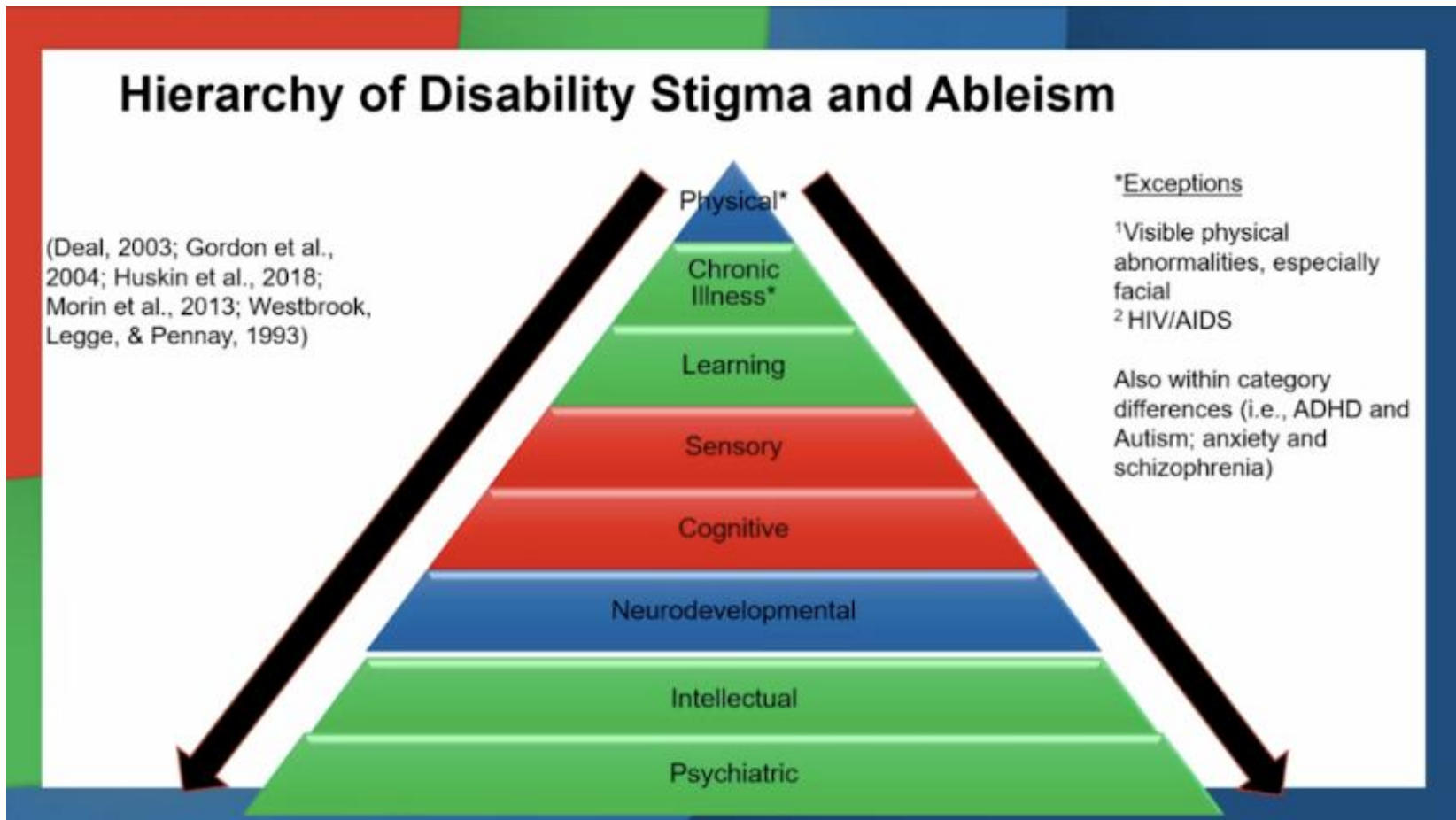
“Exclusion to Belonging” graphs as “Inspired by the work of Dr. Erik Carter, professor and Luther Sweet Endowed Chair on Disabilities, Baylor University.”

Erik Carter's 10 Dimensions of Belonging



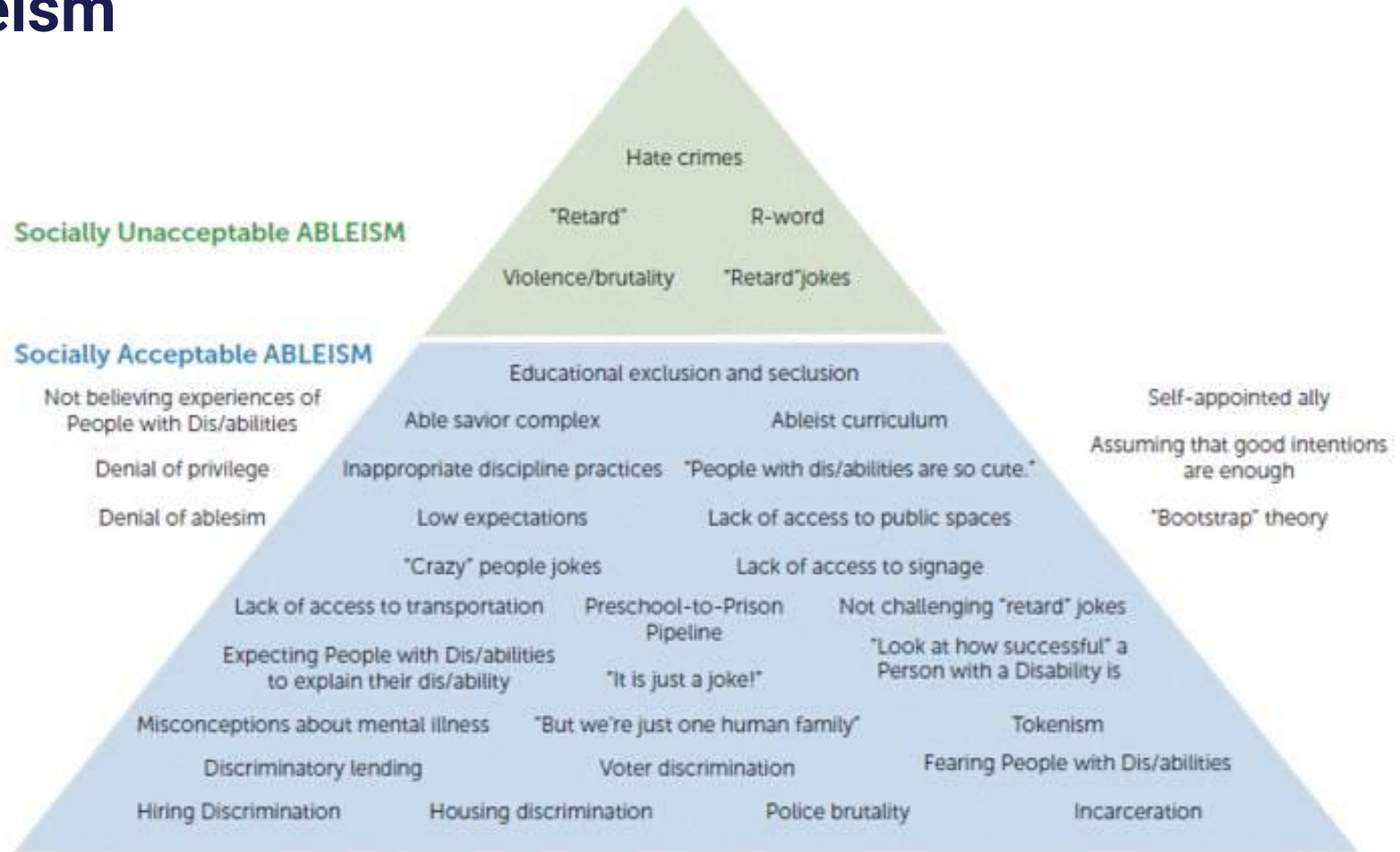
Dr. Erik Carter is the professor and Luther Sweet Endowed Chair on Disabilities, Baylor University

Hierarchy of Disabilities





Ableism



The Beginning of The Open Arms Ministry

- Over 25 years ago a woman came to the Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Livonia and asked Pastor Walt Dickinson if 5 men with special needs from the Holy Family group home would be welcome to worship at Emmanuel.
- Along with Sunday worship, bible study soon began at the Holy Family home
- Over the years the Open Arms ministry has flourished and grown to include 4 regularly attending group homes and other non-group IDD/DD individuals.
- Today, the Open Arms monthly bible study includes approximately 25 participants, and our special events have hosted up to 90 people.
- Knowing that everyone, regardless of ability or disability, is created in God's image, Emmanuel's disability ministry continues to be an open and inviting community to individuals living with disabilities.



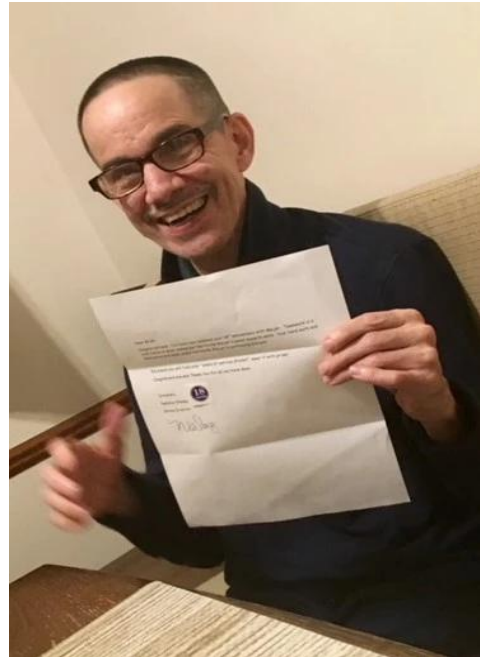
Our People at Holy Family



James has been part of our ministry since it's beginning. In 1956, James was born at Hutzel Hospital in Detroit. He was developmentally disabled, legally blind, and was given away at birth without even a name on his birth certificate. He was introduced to Holy Family in 2000 and after nearly two decades, James continues his journey to live more independently.

At Emmanuel, James regularly attends worship, sings enthusiastically with the Praise Band and dismisses the congregation after worship with a resounding "I Did IT!"

Our People at Holy Family



Brian was born on 4/26/1960 and is mostly nonverbal. Brian is a longtime resident of the Holy Family residence. He loves spending time with his roommates. Brian is a gentle and kind person who loves to give great big hugs. He enjoys time in his room watching old TV shows like Little House on the Prairie, Happy Days, and I love Lucy. He plays baseball for AP's Miracle League Baseball and is a Bowler for AP's Bowling League.

At Emmanuel, Brian regularly attends worship and has a reputation within the church as “Giving the Best Hugs.”

Our People at Holy Family



Lennie was born on 9/26/1958 and lives with cerebral palsy. Lennie started his journey with Angel's Place in 1999 and resides at the Holy Family Home. Lennie loves spending time with his roommates and as the "senior statesman" regularly dispenses wisdom and advice. He is a man of God and loves going to church. Lennie's interests are sports, music, arts and crafts. He is a leader who is always willing to speak at events. He coaches for Miracle League Baseball and enjoys bowling with the AP's league.

At Emmanuel, Lenny regularly attends worship and serves as an usher passing out bulletins before worship service.

Our People at Holy Family



Marcus was born on 4/27/1976. Marcus started his journey with Angel's Place in 2001 and resides at the Holy Family Home. He is always willing to help his roommates when needed, and he loves spending time with them. Marcus' interests include working out and shopping. He has a volunteer job at St. Vincent de Paul and enjoys bowling and playing baseball for the Miracle League. Marcus is a family guy who truly loves his mom, siblings, niece, and nephew. He enjoys spending as much time with them as he can.

At Emmanuel, Marcus regularly attends worship, and like most good Lutheran's, prefers to sit in the back row and is always looking forward to going out to lunch after the worship service.

The Open Arms Model

- The Open Arms ministry focus is on men and women with IDD/DD conditions living in group home settings.
- There are 4,234 licensed adult foster care facilities in the state of Michigan. This figure includes adult foster care family homes (6 or fewer residents) to large group homes (13–20 residents) and congregate facilities (over 20 residents).
- The Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) has a group home search tool on its website.

[Statewide Search For Adult Foster Care / Homes for the Aged Facilities](#)

- The City of Troy for example has 46 group homes:

License/Exemption Number	Facility/Camp Name	Facility/Camp License Type	Facility Address	City	County	Phone	Zip Code	Capacity
AS630418349	The Troy-Modern Assisted Living	ADULT SMALL GROUP HOME (CAPACITY 1-6)	1052 Byron Dr.	Troy	OAKLAND	(248) 986-4546	48098	6
AS630406615	The Tutbury Residence	ADULT SMALL GROUP HOME (CAPACITY 1-6)	6496 Tutbury Ln	Troy	OAKLAND	(248) 331-7444	48098	5
AS630411027	The Winchester Residence	ADULT SMALL GROUP HOME (CAPACITY 1-6)	5522 Winchester Drive	Troy	OAKLAND	(248) 480-4162	48085	4
AS630089164	Three Lakes	ADULT SMALL GROUP HOME (CAPACITY 1-6)	1462 Three Lakes	Troy	OAKLAND	(248) 828-3910	48085	4
AS630370904	Touch of Care, LLC	ADULT SMALL GROUP HOME (CAPACITY 1-6)	2671 Windsor Drive	Troy	OAKLAND	(248) 495-0493	48085	6
AF630415822	Troy Gentle Care Home	ADULT FAMILY HOME (CAPACITY 1-6)	2718 Lovington Ave.	Troy	OAKLAND	(248) 602-6706	48083	3

Open Arms Bible Study

- Bible study meets on the 4th Monday of the month from September through May.
- There are several bible curriculums tailored for adults with cognitive and developmental disabilities.
- At Open Arms we are currently using the Together curriculum from *With Ministries Home - With Ministries*.
[Home - With Ministries](#).
- Our Unit this year is titled Jesus Face to Face
- Each bible lesson contains a detailed lesson plan with videos, songs, dramas and other visual aids to help reinforce the essential points of the lesson. (Demo)
- Each bible study runs for 1 hour from 7:00-8:00. The time spent on the actual lesson is about 30 minutes. The rest of the time is spent on gathering and welcome, singing praise songs (with instruments), snack time and prayer.
- Other bible study curriculum include:
 - Access by Lifeway
 - Awe and Wonder
 - Open Hearts Ministry

Open Arms Bible Study

- Focus on inclusion and participation
- The participants are a very social group
- Most have a strong faith in Jesus Christ and know the gospel stories.
- Their attention span is short. Each lesson should stand on its own.



Open Arms Friendsgiving



- Thanksgiving dinner
- Charlie Brown Thanksgiving movie with a snack of popcorn jellybeans and cinnamon toast crunch cereal (just like dinner in the movie).
- This event takes a lot of volunteers and coordination.



Open Arms Bingo

- Lots of prizes!
- We take advantage of Thrivent gift cards
- Everybody wins (eventually)
- This event has the best overall attendance
- Don't forget the snacks!



Open Arms Sing and Ring



- We tell the Christmas story
- Decorate a Christmas tree
- Participants enjoy Christmas carols participating in an extremely enthusiastic bell choir.
- With a whole bunch of Christmas cookies!



Open Arms Worship Service

- The participants usher and pass out bulletins
- Read scripture
- Sing the Lord's prayer
- Act out a bible study drama for the sermon



Keys to Success

- Embrace the challenge and the chaos!
- Get to know the participants
- Don't worry about the agenda or lesson plan
- Let folks participate. **Everyone likes to sing, laugh and act in dramas**
- **Assume competence**, even if someone seems uninterested
- Snacks are extremely important!
- Communication and coordination with the group homes (flyers, emails follow up and outreach).
- Identify a specific demographic or disability and start small.



A Disability Ministry has Unique Challenges

- Transportation
- Building and bathroom access
- Understanding the capabilities of participants
- Having sufficient volunteers
- Funding for activities and programs
- Scheduling events around group home activities and staff shift changes
- Be mindful of the weather



We are Here to Help!

- We are happy to come to your congregation and discuss how to start a disability ministry.
- Contact Information:

Ken Bluhm

Cell: 313 550-7318

Email: bluhmken@gmail.com

- ***A special thank you to Julie Ripple for providing the pictures and her many years of dedicated service to Open Arm Ministry!***

*We choose to go to the Moon in this decade
and do the other things, not because they are
easy, but because they are hard;*

President John F. Kennedy, Speech at Rice University September 12, 1962