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Spring 2026
WR 3147

Strategies for Inclusion of Cognitive Disability through Church Music

Patricia Thel and Martin Tel, instructors
Fridays, 2-4:50 PM, Gambrell Room, Scheide Hall
(Six meetings)

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I. Course Description

An exploration of the ways in which church music ministries (e.g., musical ensembles, drama, composition) can accommodate the needs of persons with cognitive disabilities and foster their unique contributions. Learners will explore best practices of inclusion in churches, schools, community centers, and communal residences, and discuss strategies of adaptation with professionals in the field. In addition to readings, presentations, and journaling, learners will take part in site visits and engage with persons in the cognitive disability community. To accommodate site visits, the class will meet six times over the course of the semester, allowing three hours for each meeting.

II. Course Objectives

The goal of the course is to give students an understanding of the challenges people with disabilities and their families might face in church participation, but more importantly to give students a vision for the gifts that people with disabilities can bring to the life of the church. Through journaling, reading, discussion, listening to the stories of others, and through a practicum experience with young students with developmental disabilities, the students will develop practical approaches to using church musical experiences to create an inclusive congregational environment.

III. Student Learning Outcomes

At the conclusion of the course the students will:

1. Have a deeper understanding of the needs of children, young people and adults who are disabled
2. Have a deeper understanding of the needs of people who may feel disenfranchised from formal instruction and worship
3. Participate in musical experiences that involve easy access to meaningful worship
4. Explore the spiritual needs and expressions of people who are disabled
5. Explore the prejudices that may inhibit real community from developing
6. Develop strategies that a church community could use to widen participation in worship and education.
7. Journal discoveries from having heard from and having contact with people with disabilities

IV. Schedule of Meetings

1/30 Singing, Telling Stories, and Productive Discomfort

Visiting clinician via Zoom: Dr. Lindsey Oakes, Dept. of Recreational Therapy, East Carolina University

We will be discussing together and in small groups the preconceived notions or prejudices we might have toward people who have different cognitive abilities and begin a journal and assessment of how each of us are open to new relationships and experiences. We will also explore what criteria might be used to select hymns and choruses that make worship more accessible. We will sing!

Required Reading:

Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities, chapters 1 and 2
Disability and the Way of Jesus, pp.13-15, 61-62, 161-162 (Brightspace)

Optional Reading:

Thel memoir, Chapters 1-8 (Brightspace)

2/13 Listening to the Church Stories of Young People with Disabilities

Visiting clinicians via Zoom: Dr. Stuart Schlein and Ginger Walton, Co-Founders of InFocus Advocacy, Greensboro, NC

Ginger Walton and Stuart Schlein will lead a small group of young people with disabilities via Zoom to discuss experiences in the life of their churches. We will listen and ask questions. We will close the class in song, and discuss the criteria for selection of hymns that might foster inclusion.

Required Reading:

Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities, chapter 3

2/27 Creating Accessible Content for Worship, Study, and Participation in Church Programs

Visiting clinician via Zoom, Evelyn McMullen, author of inclusive church curriculum, DEdMin, Columbia

Evelyn McMullen is publishing a six-week series on Psalm 23. We will explore its creation and how it could be used. Evelyn will also help us explore the design of other inclusive worship or Bible study materials.

Required Reading:

Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities, chapter 4

3/6 Creating Space for Inclusion in Rehearsal and Performance: Preparation for our Practicum

Visiting clinicians via Zoom, Wendy Wood and Meredith Carson, directors of "Theatre for All," Greensboro, NC

We will focus on ways to create communication and collaboration in a performing arts setting which can be adapted for church music and worship settings. We will explore theatrical and musical warm-ups, strategies for listening, and strategies for collaboration. We will strategize our approach to the practicum part of the class. We will end the class with sharing parts of journals, discussing the synthesis of what we have read and heard, and singing and performing hymns selected for the assignment.

4/10 Field trip: Collaborative Practicum with The College of New Jersey's Career and Community Studies Program on-site at TCNJ Music Department

We will partner with TCNJ Career and Community Studies students to create a musical/theatrical presentation with skits and songs that portray words that facilitate inclusion – kindness, joy, listening, friendship, love, hope, respect, or any other words that you might decide to portray in a small group of four students (two seminary, two TCNJ).

4/17 Field trip: Collaborative practicum TCNJ – rehearsal/performance

We will perform a “dress rehearsal” of the previous skits and songs, and then a “performance”!

V. Assignments

1. Prior to the first class, introduce yourself to your instructors and one another via the Brightspace discussions page. What would be helpful for us to know about you? (E.g., Do you have a disability? Do you have experience working with the disability community? Or, is this all new to you?) This should be very brief. (Truly! Say what you feel or want us to know, but we're truly looking for around 100 words or so.) Upload your response as a thread to the discussion topic before our first class on January 30. *(5 points)*
2. Create a journal and upload your entries prior to each class meeting, beginning with the meeting on February 13. Journal entries should be uploaded on the Brightspace assignments page as electronic entries or as uploaded pictures of handwritten entries. Due by 2 PM on 2/13, 2/27, 3/6, 4/10 and 4/17. *(5 x 3 points; 15 points total)*
3. Midterm project: Select four hymns or choruses and suggest ways to make them more accessible (e.g., editing, using just the chorus from a hymn, finding ways to accompany with small percussion instruments or chimes, chanting *acapella*, etc.). Submit via Brightspace assignments page by end of day, 3/17 (Friday of Reading Week). *(10 points)*

4. Final project: Using the templates that Evelyn McMullen discusses in her session or that Meredith Carson or Wendy Wood inspire, [1] create a bible study with songs, or [2] a worship service with opportunities for inclusive participation, or [3] a short theatrical work. Submit via Brightspace assignments page by end of day, 4/27. (25 points)

VI. Final Examination

In lieu of a formal Final Examination or Paper, each student will take part in a 30-minute exit interview with the instructors. Interviews will be scheduled during Finals Week (May 4-8). In these interviews we will discuss your previously submitted assignments, your journaling, the required readings, lectures, as well as your experiences in the practicum. These interviews run on two-way streets! You can also use some of this time to ask the instructors clarifying questions and explore the implications of your learning for your future ministry. (20 points)

VII. Textbooks

Required Text

Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities, Erik Carter

Suggested Supplemental Texts

Disability and the Way of Jesus, Barbara McKinney Fox

Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship, Barbara J. Newman

VIII. Grading Criteria and Calculation of Grades

By default, the course is graded as P/D/Fail. If you wish to take the course for a letter grade, communicate with the Registrar before week 2.

Grading will be based on the following criteria:

Assignments: 55%
Participation: 25%
Final (Exit Interview): 20%

A+	98-100
A	94-7
A-	90-3
B+	87-9
B	84-6
B-	80-3
C+	77-9
C	74-6
C-	70-3
D+	67-9
D	64-6
D-	60-3
F	0-59

IX. Princeton Seminary Guidelines and Disclaimer

PTS Academic Integrity Policy

As the *Seminary Handbook* states: “Freedom of inquiry can flourish only in a community that recognizes that intellectual integrity in one’s academic work lies at the heart of its mission” (7.1). All students are expected to maintain integrity in all their academic submissions and oral presentations and abide by the academic integrity policy. Plagiarism includes but is not limited to unattributed quotations, unattributed paraphrasing, unauthorized multiple submissions, false citations, and false submissions. Please refer to the *Seminary Handbook* for specific terms, definitions, and institutional policies related to the norms of academic integrity.

Academic Support

The Office of Academic Support offers individualized instruction and workshops to guide PTS students towards more efficient and effective academic study skills and strategies. Professional staff provides free and confidential instruction in areas such as time/project management, academic reading and writing, exam preparation and test-taking strategies, and study strategies. To schedule an appointment, contact the office at academic.support@ptsem.edu or visit in person at Stuart Hall, B-16.

Accessibility Accommodations

PTS provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified through the Office of Academic Support. Students must register with the office (Stuart Hall, B-16 academic.support@ptsem.edu) for disability verification and determination of eligibility for reasonable academic accommodations. Requests need to be made at the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible for newly approved students.

Food in the Classroom

In keeping with the seminary's policy, no food will be allowed in the classroom. Beverages (i.e., water, soda, juice, tea, coffee) with lids are permitted (*Seminary Handbook*, 9.4).

Disclaimer

The course syllabus should not be understood as an inflexible contract with the members of the class, but the terms will be honored to the greatest extent possible (*Faculty Manual* 13.3.1).