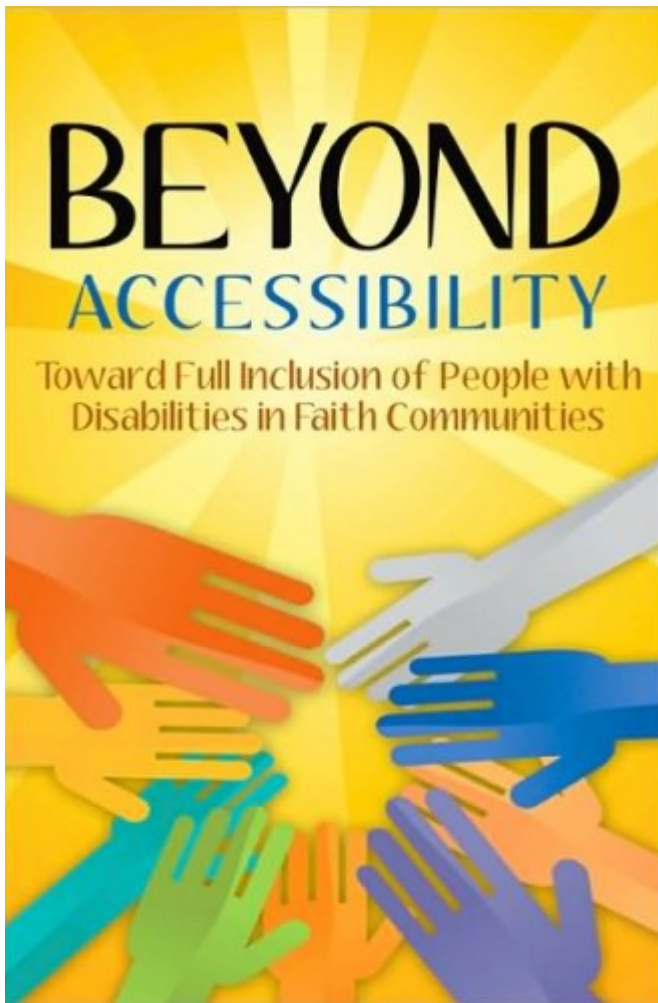


Beyond Accessibility, by Brett Webb-Mitchell

reviewed by [Shawnthea Monroe](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Beyond Accessibility

By Brett Webb-Mitchell
Church Publishing

My former congregation prided itself on being warm and friendly. Then one Sunday Michael came to worship, and we discovered the limits of our welcome. Michael had Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder characterized by involuntary physical and vocal tics. At first, there were no signs of our visitor's disability; Michael seemed rather quiet. The real trouble started when I began to preach. Throughout the sermon, Michael screeched, chirped, shouted and cursed, much to the discomfort of the congregation—and the preacher.

After the service, there was an emotional debate about the visitor and his disruptive behavior. With a mixture of pity, fear and frustration, the church leaders wrestled with the question, "How can we welcome this man without ruining worship?" We couldn't agree on a workable solution, but in the end the question was moot: Michael never returned, much to our guilty relief.

Every congregation I've served has a Michael story, which is why Brett Webb-Mitchell's book *Beyond Accessibility* seems so promising. Webb-Mitchell's goal is to provide "a theological and practical approach for congregations, with clear, targeted strategies for full inclusion of all members" regardless of disability. For congregations striving to welcome all people—including the Michaels—such a resource would be a boon.

The book is divided into two parts: the theoretical and the practical. Webb-Mitchell begins by tracing in broad brushstrokes the sad history of the treatment of people with disabilities, a history that includes institutional isolation, awkward integration and separate accommodation—even in the church. Turning his attention to scripture and theology, Webb-Mitchell then invites us to reimagine what it means to be the church, using Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ—which makes inclusion a necessity, not a choice. For if the church really is the body of Christ, then we all have to find ways to build up the body using whatever gifts or talents God has given each of us, regardless of ability. This is what it means to be an inclusive community.

In part two, Webb-Mitchell sets out to chart a practical course toward this inclusive community, a journey that begins with basic Christian hospitality and moves from mere accessibility to true acceptance. He argues that we who are members of faith communities need to rethink our approach to everything from worship to Christian education if we are going to do more than merely accommodate those with disabilities. We need to move beyond accommodation to cocreation in order to learn

the gestures and practices that make us Christian.

Webb-Mitchell, a Presbyterian minister who has worked for and with people with disabilities, brings a great deal of passion and energy to this subject. His book contains some wonderful stories, and the last chapter offers a provocative description of what a church might look like if a faith community achieved full inclusion. The problem is that while Webb-Mitchell accurately describes many of the challenges of welcoming people with disabilities, he's less sure of the solutions.

Although part two is subtitled "The Practices," the reader will find few practical suggestions. Instead, Webb-Mitchell uses this section to make the case for Christian hospitality and full inclusion. I doubt that any congregation is against extending hospitality to people with disabilities. The truth is we want to welcome and include the Michaels of the world; we just don't know how to do it.

Perhaps Webb-Mitchell would have offered more practical suggestions if he had brought people with disabilities into the conversation. The absence of their voice in the book is surprising since Webb-Mitchell is a strong advocate for including people with disabilities in every aspect of church life and community transformation. Of course, there is no question that Webb-Mitchell champions the cause of people with disabilities, but when it comes to nuance and specificity, there is no substitute for hearing from people who have had firsthand experience.

There are other notable absences. Webb-Mitchell doesn't refer to the work of well-known scholars like Nancy L. Eiesland and Thomas E. Reynolds, both of whom have written extensively in the field. Furthermore, the book needed to be more carefully edited; grammatical errors and typos abound and make for difficult reading.

Beyond Accessibility fails to live up to its promise. Webb-Mitchell gets this much right: communities of faith should strive to move beyond large-print bulletins and wheelchair ramps and toward full inclusion of people with disabilities. But if we're seeking specific, practical suggestions for incorporating all God's children—able and disabled—into the body of Christ, we'll need to look beyond this book.