

# What Would Be Better?

## Social Role Valorization and the Development of Ministry to Persons Affected by Disability

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### ABSTRACT

There is much that Christian churches can learn from relevant secular approaches and adapt to support integration and participation within our congregations for adults with impairments. One of these approaches is Social Role Valorization developed by Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger. In this approach, one considers the relevance of image and competency of devalued individuals and how these two areas impact access to “the good things of life.” This article applies these principles to the inclusion of vulnerable congregational members into the life of the Christian church, asking the question, “What would be better?” as a prompt for those in leadership to reflect on their current practices with an eye toward maturity in their practices as they intersect the lives of devalued people.

**Keywords:** *disability ministry, social role valorization, ministry maturity*

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# INTRODUCTION

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28). The Christian church has a heightening sense of awareness of individuals with characteristics that are devalued by society, particularly persons with significant physical and intellectual disabilities. Although there is still much to be done, increasingly, churches are mounting efforts to specifically reach out and include all members of their communities more broadly, helping to build up the kingdom of God. Churches can learn a great deal from relevant secular approaches and make adaptations to support integration and participation of adults with disabilities within their congregations.

## **Social Role Valorization**

### **A Comprehensive Set of Relevant and Potent Tools**

Social Role Valorization (SRV) has potential to help churches in this ongoing critical endeavor. SRV is a set of ideas built on the premise that if we can help people with disabilities to have valued social roles, they will be more likely to have access to the good things of life. Wolfensberger, who formulated SRV in 1983, defined it as:

The application of empirical knowledge to the shaping of the current or potential social roles of a party (i.e., person, group, or class)—primarily by means of enhancement of the party’s competencies and image—so that these are, as much as possible, positively valued in the eyes of the perceivers (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2005).”

In Osburn’s summary of SRV, he states,

Therefore, the major goal of SRV is to create or support socially valued roles for people in their society, because if a person holds valued social roles, that person is highly likely to receive from society those good things in life that are available to that society, and

that can be conveyed by it, or at least the opportunities for obtaining these.... To mention only a few major examples, they include being accorded dignity, respect, acceptance; a sense of belonging; an education, and the development and exercise of one's capacities; a voice in the affairs of one's community and society; opportunities to participate; a decent material standard of living; an at least normative place to live; and opportunities for work and self-support. (Osburn, 2006, p. 4)

Why is this understanding relevant? At least some groups of people in our society (or in any society) cannot take for granted that they will have typical access to the good things of life which many people take for granted, such as family, friends, home, work, belonging, contribution, good health, a transcendent belief system, and so on (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996). Given the predominant values of our contemporary culture, children and adults with significant physical and/or intellectual impairments tend to be societally devalued, negatively perceived and mistreated, cut off from these good things, which we all want (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 7-11). Borrowing from Jean Vanier, Wolfensberger (2000) refers to the all-too-likely harmful consequences of societal devaluation as the 18 wounds.

Osburn (2006) goes on to relate that SRV is descriptive rather than prescriptive (p. 7). That is, in observing social realities such as practices which typically lead to social devaluation, one can describe likely outcomes on the basis of what one does or what one does not do in light of those realities. One's actions can either contribute to or counter devaluation of these individuals. As an example, Osburn states that if one does not emphasize that adults with intellectual disabilities are indeed adults, but rather behaves in such a way as to imply that these adults are really children, then one can expect to observe the likely result of such adults being disrespected and treated as children (p. 8).

Although SRV is not prescriptive, the empirical observations of the outcomes of societal devaluation in the lives of real people begs the question of whether one will do something with the information about the social contingencies described in SRV.

What are individual Christians and churches called to do?

What would be better?

Using an SRV-based approach, the goal is to help devalued people have access to the good things of life. For Christians this means supporting an

adult with physical and/or intellectual impairments to get and keep valued roles within a congregation as friend, member, minister, prayer group participant, elder, pastor, deacon, lector, teacher, usher, committee member, chaplain, steward, preacher, Bible study group member, worship leader, greeter, etc.... Some of these roles are complementary—such as pastor and parishioner, lector and worshipper/‘hearer’—and can therefore more easily be built upon within existing congregational practices.

Wolfensberger (1998) states:

Competency and social image form a very powerful feedback loop that can be either positive or negative ... As the competencies of a person increase, the person’s image improves; in turn, a person who is positively imaged is more likely to receive positive expectancies, positive models, opportunities for skill improvement, etc., all of which contribute to greater competency (p. 74).

Therefore, goals for church ministry for adults with disabilities might take into account both image and competency enhancement considerations (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007). We will consider each of these avenues below.

### **Image Considerations**

Image in this context relates to the mental pictures we hold in our minds about other people (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 63). All kinds of images can send messages about vulnerable people to others and to the individuals themselves. Probabilistically, and particularly in combination, these images will have an effect on whether vulnerable people are treated positively or negatively by others. Positive images and messages will invite others to see vulnerable people in a more positive light, and thus predicate the extension of Christian fellowship, in addition to all the other good things that can come with belonging to a church.

According to Wolfensberger (1998), images can also impact the devalued person’s internal understanding of their own perceived value to the community, to the church and even to God (pp. 22-24). Positive images developed by persons about themselves can reinforce their own perceived intrinsic value; in a sense communicating to people who have been wounded that although they may be devalued by their society, they are of inestimable worth to God. These notions grow out of a biblical

understanding of human beings, of the Body of Christ (as a metaphor for the Church) and of God.

Such image considerations include questions related to setting, relationships, roles and activities, and miscellaneous imagery (cf. Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 64-69). Let us consider each of these briefly. The reader is encouraged to reflect on the current expression of each variable in their own church congregation. With that in mind, they are then encouraged to ask themselves, “What would be better?”

**Setting:** Wolfensberger (1998) states about settings:

A setting can convey images about the people who use it. For instance, a setting will cast its users in a positive light if it is nicely decorated, comfortable, has a history of being used for positively valued purposes, and is next to other places that people view positively. On the other hand, settings will cast a negative image on their users if they are decrepit, ugly, in undesirable neighborhoods and next or near to other places that people do not want to be next or near to (p. 64).

The following are questions to provide initial guidance relative to the intersection of image and setting.

- Do the settings where vulnerable church members spend *most* of their time look like typical church settings? In making this determination, one should consider design, furnishings, decorations, etc. Imagine a naive observer looking at these settings and guessing who spends time in them. Would they be likely to think positively of the people who use these settings? What would be better?
- Do the settings where vulnerable adult church members spend *most* of their time look like places where adults spend time? Consider design, furnishings, decorations, etc. Imagine a naive observer looking at these settings and guessing the age of the people who spend time in them. Would they guess “adults”? What would be better?
- Is the time of assembly when vulnerable church members spend *most* of their time at church the same time that typical church members assemble at church? If the main worship time is on Sunday morning, are the vulnerable church members present at the same time and place? What would be better?

**Relationships:** Wolfensberger (1998) states that image will also be profoundly affected by the people with whom that party is associated, as captured in the folk phrase that people are “judged by the company they keep” (p. 64). The following questions can guide us in considering the intersection of image and relationships.

- Do vulnerable church members spend *most* of their church time mixing in and participating with a broad spectrum of other church members, across all ages and abilities? Are we avoiding (even unintentionally) or reinforcing negative stereotypes, such as that “those people only belong with their own kind” or “those people are happier with their own kind”? Are vulnerable church members being chosen as friends to the same degree as other church members? What would be better?

**Roles and activities:** Wolfensberger (1998) indicates that “people will also be imaged by the activities, schedules and other routines in which they are engaged” (p. 65). Because a significant component of church structures include the activities developed by the congregation (e.g., worship, Bible study, outreach, formation and education, etc.) as well as the roles people take on within those activities (choir member, Bible study leader, teacher, student, etc.), the following questions are provided to guide in facilitating desirable roles and activities.

- Are the roles and activities in which vulnerable church members spend *most* of their time the same kinds of roles and activities in which most church members engage? Do the vulnerable church members engage in these roles and activities at the same time, in the same places and with a broad range of other people, particularly people close to their own age? What would be better?

### **Miscellaneous Imagery**

Wolfensberger (1998) also cautions that,

Images are also conveyed by the names of services, of service settings, of various services practices such as its programs and activities, and of its servers. A service which has a culturally valued and otherwise positively-imaging name will be more enhancing

for its recipients than one which has a peculiar or even stigmatizing name” (p. 66).

Questions about language and naming can guide us in the characterization of vulnerable people and the manner in which they are included and served.

- In our spoken and written language, our conversations, our correspondence, our church bulletins, sermons, etc., do we use fairly typical, respectful, age-appropriate language to and about vulnerable church members? Are we being truthful as well as loving in our language use? Are we emphasizing what we all share in common? How would I feel if I were spoken to or referred to in these ways? What would be better?

### **Competency Considerations**

By competency considerations, we broadly include physical, social and intellectual abilities as well as related skills, habits, motivations, and disciplines (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 70). Do our church practices reflect that we believe all people can learn, and that learning and competency enhancement are a natural part of life? This is part of how God made human beings. Lesser competency in one area can frequently be compensated for in another area, often with help from other people. Greater competency can open the door to increased social status, more opportunities, more valued social roles and an enhanced image, possibly even leading to greater satisfaction in life. Our aim is to help adults with disabilities grow in various competencies, particularly those related to church membership and participation.

This begs the question of competency across the larger Body of Christ. Using the body metaphor, a toe may be competent as a toe; however, it is not competent as an ear. One therefore has a purpose within oneself which may appear quite limited in comparison to the combined purpose of the entire body. Yet, the toe and ear are critical elements of the body. As 1 Corinthians 12:1 states, “The body is a unit.” Parts of the body when considered separately may “seem weaker but are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:22). “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Competence should be considered on a macro level in relation to a whole body and the whole body’s purpose. My role as a “toe” or “ear”

may not appear particularly worthy of special attention; however, if I am seeing the toe in relation to the whole body, my perspective changes. The intersection of competency and image is critical for the church to reflect in its interactions with adults who have impairments. This macro/whole body notion also has potential to deepen the Judeo-Christian notion of being created in the image of God, within congregations.

As above, these competency considerations include questions related to setting, relationships, roles and activities, and miscellaneous competency. Let us consider each of these briefly. The reader is once again encouraged to reflect upon the current expression of each variable in their church, consider the specific variable provided in the questions that intersects with competency, and to ask themselves, “What would be better?”

## Setting

- Are the church settings physically comfortable, easily accessible, welcoming and useable by people of all ages and abilities? What would be better?
- What do church settings reflect about the body’s competency as a unit? Is mutual dependency reflected in church structures and settings? What would be better?
- Does the church setting’s “structures” (sound, materials, strategies, seating, programs, sight lines and visibility, access, etc.) enhance the competency of vulnerable church members? What would be better?

## Relationships

- What does our shared vision of Christian community look like? Who is present in our biblical vision of community? How can the inclusion of vulnerable people better reflect the Gospel vision and therefore strengthen our church community? How can we more closely approach this vision here and now within our church? Given the actual makeup of our membership, might we unintentionally or unconsciously be putting some groups of people outside of this vision? What would be better?
- The Christian walk is a communal walk—with family, fellow disciples, and our brothers- and sisters-in-Christ. We are not meant

to face our joys or our struggles alone. In what ways are we supporting families and small groups to come together around and with vulnerable church members: in prayer, worship, fellowship, celebration and mutual aid/support? What would be better?

- When vulnerable church members spend time with other church members, are they in groups that are of a comfortable and welcoming size? Does anyone feel overwhelmed? Does everyone have a chance to contribute, and feel comfortable in contributing? What would be better?
- Are vulnerable church members forming genuine and mutually enjoyable relationships as well as friendships with other church members of all ages and abilities? Are such relationships welcomed and nurtured? How so? What signs will we look for to know this is happening? What would be better?
- What are some of the ways that our church members typically spend time with each other outside of the formal church setting (e.g., visiting one another's homes, Bible study, prayer, socializing, etc.)? How are vulnerable church members supported to engage in these roles and activities outside the church setting with a broad range of other church members, including people close to their own age? Once again, are vulnerable church members being chosen as friends by typical members? What would be better?

### **Roles and activities**

- Do vulnerable church members perceive themselves as “second-class” or “lesser” church members? In what ways do existing roles and activities communicate to vulnerable members that they are something other than typical members? Is there a reason for the roles and activities as currently designed to continue? What would be better?
- What is entailed in becoming a member of this church? Are there any Christian forms of initiation used? What is expected of a (new) church member? Do any of these expectations create unreasonable barriers to membership for those with physical and/or intellectual impairments? How can we be even more welcoming as we remain true to our faith?

- How do church structures and practices acknowledge and utilize the gifts of all church members, including those members with physical and intellectual impairments? Do our structures reinforce notions of independence or that we are members of an interdependent body? Do our structures, schedules, practices, worship, prayer, leadership, membership, etc., welcome and nourish people with physical and intellectual disabilities even in cases where it can be physically, emotionally and/or intellectually challenging? If exclusions, exceptions or compromises are made, why are they made and where? How long will such exclusions, exceptions and/or compromises continue? How will we move closer toward our shared vision of Christian community? How can we come together to support one another through these challenges: the vulnerable person, their family and friends, other church members?
- What signs of growth in faith do we see among church members? Does the presence of devalued people impact the understanding of how faith development is carried out for all congregants? How is our church community supporting all members in their Christian life? What would be better?
- What are the typical elements of adult faith formation within our church? What impact does the presence of devalued people have on the way faith development is understood in our church? Who leads these efforts? Who participates in them? What learning and growth opportunities do we make available? Where do they take place? What learning materials are used? Is anyone not participating solely or primarily because of an impairment? What can we do about that?
- Over time, are vulnerable church members taking on new valued roles (e.g., member, minister, prayer group member, elder, pastor, deacon, lector, teacher, usher, committee member, chaplain, steward, preacher, Bible study group member, worship leader, greeter, etc.) within the church? How are they contributing to the life of their church community? What would be better?
- Does the church's core values and mission adequately reflect the change required for the church to more fully include members whom society has devalued? Does the church engage in reflection and self-evaluation regarding the participation of devalued

people in the life and ministry of the church? What evidence can the church collect for itself to gauge progress towards its mission of including devalued people? What would be better?

### **Summary from a Christian Perspective**

Certain roles within a church or congregation can be assigned, attributed or ascribed (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 31), even when the person in the role has done (and can do nothing) to warrant the role or to carry it out. Examples include: bearer of the Image of God (Genesis 1:21), member of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), one for whom Christ died (John 3:16), and so on. Such church and congregation roles go beyond even the secular roles of member or citizen. Being seen and perceived as a fellow member of the Body of Christ reflects an inherent dignity and interconnectedness with other Christians that lies at the heart of what it means to be a church. Perceived competence and similarity to others may therefore also come from an understanding of the biblical narrative as a social/cultural replacement narrative, simply with the attribution of the above mentioned roles. Whether other church members embrace and act upon these ascribed or attributed roles in a valorizing fashion in no way diminishes the reality of these roles. However, there is much that can be done to help Christians and congregations genuinely extend these roles to the adults and children that society has devalued. There is also much that can be done to help adults with impairments themselves to take on these roles. The practice of baptism for example seems (super) naturally fitted for these roles. We recognize of course that the nature of one's identity as a bearer of the Image of God goes far beyond the human reality of social roles; nevertheless, we are focused in this article largely on what a church congregation can do to extend and deepen its mission to and with adults with impairments.

## CONCLUSION

Image and competency enhancement are by no means the only foci to be considered when attempting to influence church practices in regards to adults with impairments. However, the application of these SRV criteria provides an empirically based starting point from which to proceed. With the help of God's Spirit, genuine reflection on, "What would be better?" can help move individual Christians and congregations in a positive direction

in a non-threatening manner. The assumption of phenomenological reflection dispels the notion of a process with an endpoint, implying instead that there is only ongoing movement through a process of mutual growth. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. “For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor. 12:12-14).

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