

ITD Presentation: A Seat at the Table

I. Opening remarks:

- a. Good afternoon, and thank you. It's a deep honor to present this year at the Institute for Theology and Disability among some of the most prominent scholars of the field.
- b. My name is Lindsey Gibson and the title of my paper is: "A Seat at the Table: Aquinas, Calvin, and UDL for Eucharistic Participation."
 1. I am a white woman of moderately tall height wearing a red flowered dress. I have light brown hair with some grey streaks beginning to show—my hair dresser calls it "tinsel" my husband calls it "stress". Both are likely right.
 2. My PowerPoint has green, yellow and blue geometric shapes—I will try to describe any images, but most slides have just text, which I'll describe.
 3. I would like to spend just a moment talking about the picture on my first slide. It is a green chalice repaired with gold on an altar with a white table cloth. It is the chalice my husband and I used at our wedding over 12 years ago. It was made by a man with a disability. Over the years with moves and kids, it was broken. A friend of mine is a potter and I gave it to her with very low expectations to fix it as a birthday present for my husband. She surprised both of us with this and remade it using the Japanese art of kintsugi (Kin-soo-gui). My friend used gold and lacquer to repair the chalice into something more beautiful than it was before. I've held this image in my mind as think about how the Eucharist has been a site of pain for many with disabilities—excluded from table fellowship. But, as we

will see, it can also be the site of healing for the Kingdom of God.

4. I hold Masters degrees from Duke Divinity School and Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. I am currently in the application process to begin a PhD at the University of Aberdeen.
 - i. More importantly, I am the mom of two wonderful, autistic daughters with two completely different experiences of autism. Today I am going to talk about my oldest daughter's experience because we simply know more about it! We have had a diagnosis for her for about 3 years whereas my youngest daughter was just diagnosed this February. We are still learning with both girls.
 - ii. And just so you know, all of these slides, the manuscript and the full paper are available for download on my website. I printed a few copies of the paper, and I also have handouts—and large print available for anyone who would like that. I have provided a QR code if you'd rather download to access it.

A. Introduction:

- A. Let me tell you more about my oldest daughter, who I will call for the sake of her privacy, Junia.
 - a. Junia is now 5 years old: she is all joy, and everyone who meets her—loves her. She communicates best through her AAC device.

- b. Another way she communicates is that she often leads me to the things she wants—and one Sunday, she led me to the altar at our church. By her gentle leading, I met a God who loves my daughter and those like her—exactly how they were created to be.
- c. My work with this paper and in disability theology began as I asked: **who belongs at this Table?**
 - i. As I read, I found the theological and historical barriers that have excluded people like her. And as I was led deeper into the research, I found these exclusions were actually quite new (to a Church history nerd) and how the Christian tradition affirms her, and others with intellectual and developmental disabilities, belonging.
 - ii. Today, I want to offer a historically and theologically grounded way to show how this table is for all of Christ's kingdom to come and feast. In this paper, I suggest that employing universal design for learning is not just an accommodation—but a way we can continue and remain faithful to the Christian witness.

C. Framework:

- A. First let's set the table by introducing the framework of the paper: I integrate three leges by which this ancient rite stands: *lex orandi* (prayer and rite), *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi*. These three laws operate in balance like the purple triangle you see here. Daniel Handschy in his book *Eucharist Shaped Church* explains this balance well:
- iii. On this side, *lex orandi*—how the church prays. On the other, *lex credendi*: the church's faith and practice. And grounding the bottom is *lex vivendi*. *Lex vivendi* transforms doctrine and worship into lived practice.

- iv. Our worship should not only be beautiful and compelling—but accessible to all God’s people. Worship (lex orandi) that fails to communicate the core of our Christian belief (lex credendi) ultimately fails to enliven the Church to establish Christ’s Kingdom in the world (lex vivendi).
- v. Barring access to the Eucharistic Table to God’s people who have intellectual disabilities prevents the Church from accomplishing its mission to the world. Thus, how we might make the Eucharist accessible to all God’s people is vital to balancing all sides of the triangle by strengthening our worship, lex orandi.
- vi. First, I am going to explain UDL, what it is and how it relates to liturgy. Then, I will show how two theological traditions: Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin employ the principles of UDL. And lastly, I’m going to show how I used both UDL principles and these theologies to help my daughter receive the Eucharist.

II. Lex orandi and UDL: Designing Worship for Participation

A. What is UDL?

- a. UDL stands for Universal Design for Learning. It was originally conceived of as an architectural term in the 1980s lead by the efforts of Ronald Mace.
 - i. As an architectural term, the idea was to design buildings with people with disabilities in mind from the outset, rather than making accommodations later.

- ii. This was then applied to education by scholars at Harvard at CAST, the Center for Applied Special Technology.
 - b. UDL is guided by three principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression.
 - c. In what will follow, I will demonstrate how theological frameworks create avenues for belonging: cultivating spiritual desire, honoring diverse modes of communication, and celebrating embodied responses to God's grace.
- B. The first principle **engagement** seeks to motivate, support, and inspire by "optimizes choice and autonomy" by nurturing "joy and play."
- a. Through their research, scholars at CAST found that:
 - i. by cultivating joy and curiosity, learners persist longer, engage deeper, and develop a passion for learning.
 - ii. In short: principle of engagement draws learners into a world of curiosity and discovery.
 - b. The nature of my daughter's diagnosis can often mean that she is simply enraptured in the beauty of the world that she has created for herself.
 - i. Yet this is precisely the nature of the Eucharist, isn't it? This meal draws believers into the new world of the Kingdom of God.

- ii. Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmen writes that this meal invites all of us "to touch other worlds"
 - iii. And I contend that UDL functions in the liturgy the same way here-that it opens a space where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can enter this transformed reality.
- C. This moves us to the second UDL principle: **representation** that seeks to present information in various ways: touch, sound, and sight.
 - a. Researchers at CAST found that:
 - i. This allows learners to "customize the way information is presented."
 - ii. It teaches that there is no "correct" way to communicate by presenting all communication as neutral
 - iii. In short: representation honors all to communicate in their preferred way to "create space for multiple ways of knowing." To value knowledge beyond facts, like experience and stories.
 - b. With bread and wine, the Eucharist also communicates through our senses.
 - i. Liturgical theologian Romano Guardini writes, *"Liturgy speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures; it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life. Such is the wonderful fact which the liturgy*

demonstrates: it unites act and reality in a supernatural childhood before God."

- ii. As both sensory seeking and sensory sensitive, Junia is deeply aware of all the sensory input the Eucharist has to offer.
- iii. Again, UDL functions in the liturgy the same way here. The sight, sound, movement and even taste sound, become a new language of divine encounter.

D. And moving to our last principle: **action and expression**. This principle seeks to "building fluency by setting goals and anticipating challenges" by honoring how learners occupy and move in space by "physically embodying learning (singing, walking, standing up).

a. Experts at CAST found that:

- i. Learners with ample room and time to explore tools and use them in the way that best suits their individual needs use this creativity to set goals, plan for challenges, and monitor their progress.
- ii. It is through this Eucharistic liturgy we are formed to be: people of praise.
 - 1. Alexander Schmemmann argues that humanity, while called, "homo sapien"--properly we should be called, "homo adorans."
 - 2. This praise, this Eucharist, is our end and fulfillment. The end of all of humanity's hunger finds itself in praise and thanksgiving of our Creator-εύχαριστία.

3. Faith required for this Eucharistic meal does not come at the end of careful intellectual deliberation. It comes out of a life and community in praise and adoration of this witness. And so, we come together as one Body to praise and rejoice that we have been invited to God's Table.

III. Lex credendi: Aquinas and Calvin on Sacramental Access

- A. Careful theological and historical examination helps us as Daniel Handschy writes: "clarify what we intend to say and how we hope to form the body of our belief through our corporate prayer."
 - a. The tension between Aquinas' theological system and Calvin's pastoral insight, though often oppositional, is both essential and complementary to disability theology.
 - b. A way forward:
 - i. First, we'll investigate Aquinas' sacramental theology as a transformative power of grace available to all of God's people, regardless of ability.
 - ii. Then, we will explore Calvin's theology of accommodation that brings a pastoral lens that emphasizes belonging in practice.

B. Aquinas:

- a. Thomas Aquinas, a towering theological figure of the 13th century, offers a highly developed yet surprisingly inclusive perspective on the sacrament of the Eucharist:
 - i. First, we will explore "what" a sacrament is for Aquinas—its efficacy and causality
 - ii. Secondly, we will explore "who" the sacrament is for and who may receive the sacraments, particularly those whom Aquinas writes "lack reason" (amentia).

- iii. Lastly, we explore the "how" and apply UDL principles to Aquinas' thought
- iv. Understanding what the sacrament is, who it is for, and how we apply it will give us deeper theological insight into how we might invite all of God's people to His Table.

b. What:

- i. Principal causes vs. instrumental causes:
 - 1. God is the prime actor, or principal cause, in these sacraments:
 - 2. The Eucharist—the bread and wine—serves as an instrumental cause of grace, similar to how a sculptor uses marble to create a masterpiece.
- ii. Aquinas concludes, "The instrumental cause works not by the power of its form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent: so that the effect is not likened to the instrument but to the principal agent."
- iii. Sacraments are ordinary elements, like bread and wine, through which God gives grace to humanity.
 - 1. God thus uses the sacraments to dispense grace to humanity. God acts as the principal cause upon ordinary elements as instruments for His purpose.
- iv. Sacraments are not a reward for our faith. Our intellectual understanding does not bring about grace. We are but recipients, instruments to God's power shown through the sacraments.

c. Who: For whom is the Table set? The Sacrament is for all God's people, including *amens*:

- i. Humanity is the recipient of grace in the sacraments. Aquinas understands humanity as rational animals; thus, it follows that reason is necessary to receive the Eucharist.
- ii. But what about Aquinas' term, *amens*, or those who lack reason? Should they be allowed to receive the Eucharist
- iii. Aquinas poses these questions in Part III, Question 80, Article 9 of the *Summa Theologica*.
- iv. A note about *amentia*: Aquinas' 13th-century use of *amentia* is difficult to translate to 21st-century psychological terms.
 1. Miguel Romero admits that what Aquinas describes is similar to intellectual disability:
 - a. he is careful to acknowledge the severity of what *amentia* implies: profound cognitive impairment.
 - b. Although *amentia* describes a narrower understanding of cognitive impairment, the term "intellectual disability" is valuable because it describes a broader spectrum of contemporary experiences.
 2. It shows that all, even those with profound cognitive impairment, are welcome at God's Table.

- v. For Aquinas, devotion to the sacrament is crucial for receiving the Eucharist.
 - 1. However, this devotion is a spiritual, not an intellectual act.
 - 2. Romero adds that for Aquinas:
 - a. at baptism, all, including people with intellectual disabilities, are "supernaturally capacitated."
 - b. As amentia (those who lack reason) are baptized, God "moves them by contemplation to form an inner word, from which they are free to burst forth in spiritual acts of love."
- vi. Thus, as God counts us among His people at baptism, so too, we are all invited to His Table. God infuses baptized believers with the grace and knowledge of God that empower us to flourish in spiritual life and virtue. This meal is our inheritance, our birthright, disabled or not.

d. How: Aquinas' theology of the Eucharist reiterates the UDL principle of action and expression.

- i. Through varied means, believers communicate their devotion to the sacrament.
- ii. Action and expression help us see our bias toward intellectual and verbal communication in the liturgy:
- iii. UDL principles show, as Sailers writes, that our liturgy is not simply about using the right words.
 - 1. Liturgy creates a world through "what we see, the silence, what we taste, how we are especially related, how we move, and above all, who is present. For we need one another to learn this non-verbal symbolic language."

- iv. If love needs no words, neither does faith. The Table is not just a place for those who can explain it verbally but for all who desire it. AAC, PECS, and non-verbal gestures are welcome in the Kingdom of God. The liturgy creates windows into a Kingdom where all faith is honored.

C. Calvin:

- a. Three hundred years after Aquinas, John Calvin, a 16th-century French theologian and Genevan Reformer, wrote his monumental work *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, where he offers a pastoral view of the Eucharist. We will continue with same structure we used for Aquinas: asking what is a sacrament for Calvin? Who is it for? And how might we apply Calvin's thought to UDL principles?
 - i. **What:** He begins by defining the sacrament as an external sign of God's promise to His people.
 - ii. **Who:** After defining the sacrament, Calvin moves to a theology of accommodation, writing that the Eucharist is for all people who receive it in faith.
 - iii. **How:** After establishing what the sacrament is and who receives it, I will show how Calvin's theology of the Eucharist, coupled with UDL principles, invites all believers to God's Table.
- b. **What:** While Aquinas is trying to answer the question—what makes the sacrament work as far as causality and metaphysics, Calvin asks, different question—what does the sacrament do, what effect does it have in the life of the believer?
 - i. Calvin: "The Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word; secondly, he confirms it by his sacraments.

Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in."

1. Like the Word of God--the Eucharist communicates who God is to His people.

c. Who is this revelation for? For us.

- i. Calvin writes, "By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness." And for this weakness, Calvin continues, God "tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements."
- ii. For Calvin, God made flesh is God made accessible to His people. God desires to be known by us despite our weaknesses.
- iii. Because we were made to be embodied and sensory creatures, God uses our bodies—our senses of taste and touch to communicate himself to us. We have not ascended to God—he has come down to us.

d. How? Calvin's theology of accommodation shows us most clearly the UDL principle of engagement:

- i. Calvin writes: Calvin writes, "It is no small honor that God for our sake has so magnificently adorned the world, so that we may not be spectators of this beauteous theater, but also enjoy the multiplied abundance and variety of good things which are presented to us in it."
 1. God, through the Eucharist has, as Alexander Schmemmann noted earlier created this world for

our delight so that we might be engaged—to develop a passion and love for its Creator

- ii. Calvin instructs us not to merely gloss over creation—but to "ponder them at length, turn them over in our mind faithfully and recollect them repeatedly."
 - 1. God enjoys His creation in its varied and beautiful abundance; why shouldn't we?
 - 2. The Eucharist invites all of God's people to participate fully, reflecting the diverse ways in which God's creation is celebrated. God created the world.
- iii. The depths of the oceans and birds of the air teem with life and diversity. Why should we expect God to make humanity, with the variety of neurological and behavioral experiences, to be any different?
- iv. If God's creation shows its beauty in varied ways, it is only right to respond with our own diverse and joyful expressions: vocal and physical movements of delight. Our joy in God's creation calls for a richer, deeper liturgy.

D. A Critical Assessment: Aquinas and Calvin Offer Complementary Frameworks on Sacramental Access

- a. Calvin's doctrine of creation supports Eucharistic belonging. Yet, Calvin's requirement that children recite the catechism before receiving the sacraments excludes people with intellectual disabilities.
- b. Disability theologian Deborah Creamer notes that this effectively limits "access to the sacraments to those who are 'smart enough' or who have particular capacities for memorization and recall."

- c. In this, we see a tension in Calvin's thought. On the one hand, he advocates for the Christian community to “bind ourselves to all the duties of love” at the Eucharist. Yet on the other hand, with Calvin’s requirements, we functionally only invite those with the intellectual capacities to participate.
- d. In this way, Aquinas' understanding of instrumental causality pushes at the tension in Calvin's sacramental theology:
 - i. As I have argued, Aquinas' emphasis on God’s initiative on the effectiveness of the sacrament.
 - ii. Aquinas’s assertion that people with intellectual disabilities are "supernaturally capacitated" through baptism challenges Calvin's intellectual gatekeeping of the Eucharist.
 - iii. Aquinas’ framework allows all of God's people to participate as full members of His body.
- e. Whereas Aquinas gives us a metaphysical framework—Calvin's doctrine of accommodation follows in the footsteps of the Fathers:
 - i. Calvin emphasizes God's desire for nearness-- a God who desires to be known through the senses, through creation, and ultimately through the sacraments

IV. Practical Application: Integrating UDL Principles into Eucharistic Rite:

A. I have now explored two sides of the liturgical triangle, from *lex credendi*, to *lex orandi*, but these sides must be balanced by *lex vivendi* lived experience. *Lex vivendi* bridges the gap between doctrine and practice:

- a. In this next and final section, I will demonstrate how theology is not only understood in theory but also embodied in Eucharistic belonging for people with intellectual disabilities.
- b. To do this I will explore this case study by showing how it applies both the sacramental theologies of Aquinas and Calvin and the UDL principles of engagement, representation and action and expression.

B. First, the UDL principle of **engagement**.

- a. Aquinas expressed pastoral concerns about people with amentia receiving the Eucharist:
 - i. Specifically, he worried about the risk of spitting out or vomiting the sacrament (profaning the sacrament) or offering it to someone who may not desire it.
 - ii. I addressed these concerns, offering Junia options to express her spiritual desire.
- b. I gave my daughter visual cards, pictured on this slide, representing two options—"pray for me" and "Eucharist and"

- c. Then set the Table for her, pictured on this slide:
 - i. Because we were in Ordinary Time, I covered a small doll table with a green altar cloth and white communion linen.
 - ii. I set the Table as it was in the sanctuary, play-sized: two altar candles, a chalice, and a paten. With unconsecrated elements, I set the Table with a wafer, wine, and Junia's cards.
- d. Through these cards, I provided her with options to express her devotion. In her choices, a life that has “burst forth in spiritual acts of love” is nourished by the Eucharist.
- e. As Calvin demonstrated, God takes ordinary elements in Junia's life, like doll tables, to communicate Himself to her.

C. Next, the UDL principle of **representation**:

- a. God invites Junia to His Table through play:
 - i. She was able to touch the altar cloth and communion linen.
 - ii. She smelled the wine. Junia beheld the wafer, turning it over and over in the light.
- b. As Calvin encouraged us, she did not merely gloss over these elements—but as Calvin wrote, “pondered them at length, turned them over in her mind faithfully, and recollected them repeatedly.”

- c. These visual aids provided Junia with concrete representations of spiritual realities.
 - i. The visual cards and play Eucharistic Table were bridges. They made complex theology tangible.
 - ii. These bridges helped Junia to participate as a full member of Christ's body.

D. Action and expression:

- a. Junia responded to the Eucharist in diverse and beautiful ways of delight, with vocal and physical expressions of joy.
- b. I honored the ways that Junia occupied and moved in space. When she received the Eucharist, she danced and shrieked with joy.
- c. As W. David Taylor argued, "Because our pleasure in creation is grounded in God's pleasure," God invites us to respond in varied acts of joy and praise.
- d. I then offered Junia a first-then board to clarify her choices:
 - i. The board showed a sequence of events. The priest would bless her if she chose the "pray for me" card. If she picked the "Eucharist" card, she would get the wafer.
 - ii. This structured approach helped Junia understand the significance of her choices. It provided her with immediate, concrete outcomes that reinforced her agency in worship
 - iii. By using the first-then board alongside the visual cards and playing at the Eucharist table, people of all abilities can interact with the liturgy through tangible, structured elements.

III. Conclusion:

- a. The liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) beautifully integrates Thomas Aquinas' and John Calvin's theology to UDL's goals:
 - i. "O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord."
 - ii. Aquinas shows us that God as the principal cause of grace in the sacraments is also the One who wonderfully created humanity in His image.
 - iii. Calvin shows us that God has sacrificed Himself by His blood so that our nature may be restored.
 - iv. Aquinas' sacramental framework reveals that God desires to share His divine life through the Eucharist with His Church, regardless of intellectual capacity.
 - v. Calvin shows us through his sacramental theology that God has humbled Himself and became like us to dignify and restore our humanity.
- b. Prayer book Anglicans proclaim *lex orandi, lex credendi* and *lex vivendi* –we pray what we believe. Yet, Universal Design for Learning has shown us how to become a Church that not only believes and prays for inclusion but practices it.

- i. My hope and prayer for the Church is that when someone like my daughter reaches out her hand to lead us—may we learn to follow.
- ii. May we become a Church that is not only built on orthodoxy, following the tradition of our Church fathers, but that we may be a place of orthopraxy—welcoming, loving, and inviting all of God’s people to His Table.
- c. Thank you so much for your time and I would love to take any questions if we have the time.