

Keith Dow, Organizational and Spiritual Life

"In my view, disability is not a positive or negative. It just is what it is."

~ Chantal Huinink

In July, Chantal wrote a post on disability pride and disability confidence over at the [Disability and Faith Forum](#). I encourage you to check it out! She shares about her complicated relationship with disability. While Chantal doesn't say she is *proud* of her disability (for her, "Asking if I have disability pride is like asking me if I am proud of my brown hair"), her confidence has grown as a disabled regional councillor, advocate, speaker, chaplain etc.

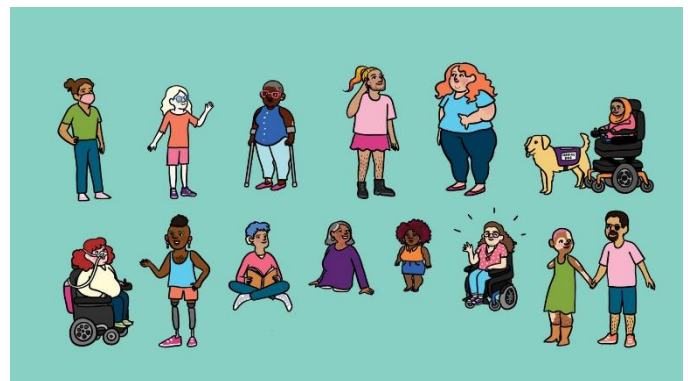
As someone who is (currently) nondisabled, I'm learning to pay attention to the ways people relate to the word "disability." It's often complex! One thing I've learned, though, is that **disability isn't a bad word**. Sure, being disabled can bring with it health difficulties and can reveal barriers and challenges in our society. Yet the people I know who identify as disabled bring diverse and unique gifts to their communities not *in spite* of their disability but often *because* of the unique ways they interact with and perceive the world around them.

You may have taken part in our recent language survey. It turns out that most people who responded don't like the identity-first phrase "disabled person." Out of 318 responses (most of whom were not people who use disability services), only 47 people indicated that they "like" or "love" these words. That's under 15%!

In the world of disability rights and advocacy, though, I'm increasingly hearing advocates push back on the idea that disability is somehow a "dirty word." In her excellent book *Demystifying Disability*, Emily Ladau has a section titled "Just Say it: Disability." She understands the impulse to avoid the word:

"I get it. We've been socialized to think of disability as a negative thing, so your instinct might be to sidestep the word. Personally, I'd rather you say what you actually mean. And that's not just my preference. For so many disabled people, it would be a relief if everyone would just start being straightforward."

Ladau's frustration comes from years of calling herself "disabled" and being told "oh, you shouldn't talk about yourself like that," or "I don't even think of you as disabled." She felt as though a whole facet of her existence was being erased. At the same time, she has come to recognize that many people with disabilities prefer not to be identified by their disabilities.



Images from "Demystifying Disability"

Person-first language is still prominent and is preferred by many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In the coming year we'll be hosting conversations with disabled advocates with a wide range of experiences about how they relate to the word "disability." Even in [the recent podcast series Jasmine Duckworth and I hosted with New Leaf Network](#), we heard vastly different perspectives from disabled leaders from churches across Canada. At the end of the day, then, whether someone uses "identify first" or "person first" language, we need to pay attention to how each person relates to their own experience – whether that includes disability or not! Our hope as an organization is to meet people where they're at, while acknowledging the diverse gifts that disability brings to our lives and communities.

Making the Connection

- How do the people you know (yourself or others) who have a disability talk about it? Are you/they comfortable with that identity? What are some of the different perspectives you have heard on this?
- How might we as teams and as an organization learn about and respond to changing ideas around disability and identity? Hear a great idea? Share it with us at orgculture@christian-horizons.org.

Additional Resources

- [Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally](#) by Emily Ladau
- ["Don't be scared to talk about disabilities. Here's what to know and what to say"](#) (NPR)
- ["Disability Pride: Disability Confidence"](#) by Chantal Huinink
- [Disability and the Canadian Church Podcast](#) with Jasmine Duckworth and Keith Dow