

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

OK. We're not as inclusive as we want or need to be. I got a call after our last newsletter complaining that the statement on inclusivity adopted by the Bluestone Committee didn't include any mention of people with disabilities. Fair enough. It doesn't. I think we intended to include everyone. That's what we want to do and what we were trying to do. But we fell short. Although that was unintentional, that doesn't diminish the impact, especially on those who may already feel overlooked or ignored.

So we'll look at the statement again. And, probably more importantly, we'll think about how we can better include children and youth with disabilities in our camping program. That's not necessarily going to be easy. But it will be the right thing to do.

To a certain extent, we already include children/youth with mental disabilities. Some can fit in, and we can accommodate them. It may take some extra work – or more patience – but that's worth it. Physical disabilities pose a more difficult problem. Bluestone is not the most accessible facility. Part of that reflects the time when it was built. The planners didn't intend to exclude anyone; they just didn't see accessibility as an issue or something that needed to be addressed. While we can make some adjustments, the cost of making the camp completely accessible is probably prohibitive. At least it seems prohibitive. But that's something we need to look at.

For some children and youth, camp becomes a possibility if they have a helper accompanying them. That person can assist with dressing, bathing and meals, as well as other needs. But do you charge the helper the same weekly rate? They're eating the same number of meals and taking up a bunk space, so you could say they should pay the same rate as any other camper. But without their presence and help, the camper they're working with wouldn't be able to attend. We probably can't afford to completely subsidize every helper, but it doesn't seem fair to have a family pay for their camper and a helper. That gets pricey, and for some, camp seems too expensive already, even with the subsidies and scholarships available.

At some point, the needs of the camper also probably exceed the ability of our counselors. The reality is that these are college kids. They have good hearts and are caring and compassionate individuals, but they don't have the experience and training they would need to assure the safety and meet the needs of all our campers. We can provide additional training, but how much is enough? To be honest, I don't know.

It's easy to make excuses. It's easy to say that taking these steps are going to cost too much money that we don't really have. It's easy to be satisfied with what we're already doing and just ignore these issues if what we have meets our needs and the needs of our children. But that doesn't make it right.

While we can focus on Bluestone, the same issues exist in our churches. Most of them have accessibility issues. Some, of course, are worse than others. Perhaps to be fair we should say some are better than others. And how do we deal with people who have mental health issues? Perhaps we can accommodate people who are dealing with depression. But how do we deal with people who freely and perhaps frequently express anger?

Following Jesus isn't easy, and to be honest, we don't always know what Jesus would do. If we have to err, I'd rather see us err on the side of grace. So we will keep trying and hopefully we will make some progress to be as inclusive and as loving as Jesus.