

BOOK REVIEW

BOOK IDENTITY

By: Benjamin T. Conner. *Amplifying Our Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012). 105 pages. 12.97 USD

Benjamin T. Conner, who worked with adolescents with developmental disabilities in Williamsburg, wrote *Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*. The most surprising idea of this book is people with disabilities contributing to plurality in the church by bearing witness to God's ongoing redemptive works and enhancing our understanding of God. Their witnesses are too often neglected; therefore, Conner wrote this book to raise the church's awareness of people with disabilities' contributions and give them space and settings to share their gifts through their unique ways. By participating together with them in the practice-centered Christian approach to ministry through friendship, forgiveness, prayer, honoring the body, etc., we open up spaces where our community faith will be grown and strengthened beyond the cognitive capacities.

After explaining this book's bigger picture in chapter one, Conner describes the issues at stake in adolescents with developmental disabilities' daily experience in chapter two. The point is not about their impairment. The problem is what society perceives about them. They live in an "ableist" culture that rarely gives space for their gifts and contribution to society. People commonly label, dehumanize, isolate adolescents with developmental disabilities, and ignore the value of choosing them as friends because people consider them unfit into the dominant standard of useful life. As an impact, they become strangers and feel lonely and empty. Their family will also feel the same and become spiritual nomads. Notably, the church has to grapple with the normality inside the church body and structure. Therefore, our calling is

to be with them, destigmatize [what?], and give them a new label as a friend. In this sense, we will find a mutual friendship with them, and their parents feel the support in their spiritual struggle.

In chapter three, Conner argues adolescents with developmental disabilities reveal something of the image of God because *Imago Dei* is more about relationality rather than rationality. The relational God reveals Godself through genuine friendship and election without expecting some reciprocal benefit. Therefore, we open ourselves to follow God's call in electing the other, particularly people with developmental disabilities, as our friends and allow room for their response, including the rejection. This relationship cannot be instrumentalized and measured by the success of programs, personal feelings, or satisfaction. Moreover, we learn to feel the pleasure and the beauty of God from their perspectives when we create space to encounter each other with the Living God in this sacramental spiritual friendship. We are responsible for creating an inclusive environment and culture to build connectedness between adolescents and adolescents with disabilities because peer-to-peer friendship matters.

In chapter four, *Missio Dei*'s concept will lead us to discuss how adolescents with developmental disabilities witness God. *Missio Dei* affirms God as the author of the redemptive mission. *Missio Dei* confronts the ableist culture because we cannot control the mystery of divine revelation through people with special needs who articulate faith in unique and distinct ways. The core of *Missio Dei* is a friendship that becomes the missional Christian praxis. Our job is to open the friendship space for them to challenge ourselves because they have a particular evocative witness to awaken our understanding of interdependence as human beings and renewed our sense of faith, friendship, discipleship, and evangelism. Sometimes, communicating trust with them is challenging, yet God always provides resources and gifts to ministry. God teaches them to trust in unpredictable ways through many things, including nature and animals.

The fifth chapter describes six steps of Conner's practical theology for ministry with adolescents and adolescents with developmental disabilities. In

step one, we have to be professional. We commit to learning, reading everything regarding disability, and building a network with the people and institutions in our surrounding community concerned with this ministry. In step two, develop peer buddies who will share life with them. The church has a responsibility to facilitate the training for the buddies and volunteers. In step three, make hospitality the context of all the church programs. In step four, take part in gesture practices as an essential component of Christian traditions because we are passing the Christ's. Nonetheless, we must respect people with developmental disabilities who find the language of gestures confusing. In step five, develop a proclamatory program by involving feeling faith, smelling sanctification, and heavenly host(ing), and participating in baptism and holy communion. In step six, challenge the church structure to move beyond our culture of normalcy. Finally, in the epilogue, the author reemphasizes his experiences with people with disabilities bring a new understanding of God's work and love.

In a nutshell, this book gives two concretely helpful insights for the readers. First, the overview written above provides us with a glimpse of hope from God's works surpass human impairment categorized. As Conner said, God's image is found in relationships, not merely in rationality. It means we see God in our in-depth relation to people with disabilities. They can reveal the mystery of God's image. They have beautiful gifts to reveal God's will for the sake of the reign of God and to transform others' perspectives. Finally, this book review reminds every family who lives with adolescents with a disability that they are not alone in their spiritual journey because there are always people who amplify their's witnesses through genuine friendship.

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