>> Ashley Nyaley: Welcome everybody, welcome to "Building Disability Inclusion Together: How To Increase Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion In Your Faith Community." To start off, we'll do some introductions, and I will introduce myself first. My name is Ashley Nyaley. I'm the Senior Director of Marketing and Communications here at RespectAbility. And I'm a black middle-aged woman with long braids and a brown shirt. Next I will hand the introduction off to Shelly Christensen. Hello everyone, I am Shelly Christensen, the Senior Director of Faith Inclusion and Belonging here at RespectAbility. I am a white, beyond middle-aged woman, and I'm wearing blue glasses, and I have curly brown hair. Behind me is the RespectAbility background honoring our 10th anniversary as an organization this year. And I'm wearing a yellow and black top. I'm gonna hand this off to Ben.

>> Ben Bond: Thanks Shelly, hey everybody. My name is Ben Bond. I use he/they pronouns. I am the Faith Inclusion and Belonging Associate, and I am a white person with brown hair, a beard, and a red shirt that's masculine presenting. And I will hand it off to Dr. Hannah Roussel.

>> Hannah Roussel: Oh, thank you Ben. I'm Hannah Roussel. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Fellow in the Faith Inclusion and Belonging program this year. I'm a white woman in my mid-30s. I have reddish brown hair that's curly, but you can't tell because it's an a braid today. I'm wearing a black blouse and green glasses, and my background is the gray background with RespectAbility's 10th anniversary logo in the top right corner. Last but not least, I'll hand this over to Bill Gaventa. Oh Bill, you're muted.

>> Bill Gaventa: I'm Bill Gaventa, it's great to be here. I am a gradually getting older white guy, who has a gradually graying and whiting beard -- and hair, wearing a blue jacket and a blue shirt and a pair of glasses. And if you're seeing me, you're seeing some earphones coming out to help not everybody in this house hear the webinar unless they want to.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Thank you all for your introductions. So a couple of housekeeping rules. This is being recorded, and we will have a question and answer round at the end of the session. We also have an ASL interpreter -- her name is Darcy -- on the screen with a blue background. And we have a live captioner. So before we jump into it, we just wanted to say that RespectAbility does want to take a moment to acknowledge many events that are taking place all over the world. We understand that times are tough, and as we reflect on the past year and the upcoming new year, we just want to say how grateful we are that everybody is here to join us. We really truly are grateful. So to get us started, we have our Senior Director of Faith Inclusion and Belonging, Shelly Christensen. So she's worked in the field of spirituality and faith and disability for over 22 years, and is an author of "From Longing To Belonging: A Practical Guide To Including People With Disabilities And Mental Health Conditions In Your Faith Community." Shelly co-founded JDAIM with colleagues in the Jewish Special Education Consortium in February 2009. Their goal was to unite Jewish communities to raise awareness and adopt policies and practices to support people with disabilities in communal life. In 2009, eight North American Jewish communities participated. Now, 15 years later, JDAIM is recognized in Jewish communities and organizations around the world. February 2024 marks 15 years since JDAIM was created. Shelly has created the JDAIM -- programming guide annually, including books and author selections, film recommendations, accessibility information, and program ideas. When Shelly joined RespectAbility in 2022, JDAIM became a part of the Faith Inclusion and Belonging portfolio. Shelly and her team at RespectAbility worked hard in preparing this for 2024. So we have a question for you Shelly. It is notable that JDAIM has always had a grassroots initiative. Why has it resonated so much with the Jewish community, and what impact do you think JDAIM has had?

>> Shelly Christensen: You know Ashley, thank you for that question. I also want to frame this in the context of a nascent movement, so that any other faith organization can -- realize that this started very very small and it's certainly achieveable to raise awareness and to come together in collaboration for a month, and that's exactly how JDAIM got started. The Jewish Special Education Consortium just made a decision one day that we as a group of people from federations primarily around the country, we realized we were planning all these conferences and mostly related to special education. My work was centered in Minneapolis with the Jewish Community inclusion program for people with disabilities on inclusion -- I would like to say from birth to Earth, lifelong in all parts of Jewish life. And that really resonated with the members of the Consortium, so much so that we had a conversation about choosing a month where we could really amplify the work of inclusion in communities. And at the time most communities were either not engaged at all in disability inclusion, or they were -- they had programs for what was known as Special Ed, now known as inclusive education. And maybe they had separate or segregated programs. So for example, seders, monthly get togethers, doing -- for people with disabilities, there's very little involvement in community life. And that was the work that I was -- I had been doing at that point for eight years. So we said let's just choose a month to amplify -- to amplify the voices of disabled people and those who love them. Why February, you might ask. And that's a really important question. February was the one month out of the year that we all felt that we didn't have holidays before, no holidays after -- immediately after, which gave us time for planning. And that's a really important thing too. So what did that first year look like? We featured a film that all the -- the eight communities that were participating in JDAIM, we showed Praying with Lior, and had talkbacks with the filmmaker, and that film really kind of brought people into this notion that, wait a minute, people with disabilities want what everybody else wants, which is to belong to community. So first year, eight communities. And I started thinking -- by that time I was -- had volunteered to create resources and so forth, which I've been doing ever since, and now it's at RespectAbility which is fabulous. I thought -- there's got to be something to unify everyone -- it's a marketing thing. And so we created the logo, which I -- will be up on the screen in a moment. The logo has been used ever since. And here it comes -- it's on a white background. The artwork is a star of David, and it's comprised of ribbons of blue and gold. And it says JDAIM, February, Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion Month. So -- that star of David has really become iconic. It unites, really is a unifier. The other key to that is that those ribbons are woven together. And you can take that in so many different ways, but the fact is that belonging and disability and mental health inclusion are woven into everyday practice in organizations. It's resonated so much, because a lot of attention was starting to rise in Jewish communal life. A lot of the different movements, different organizations were focused on inclusion at their annual conferences. There were inclusion committees in different organizations, national organizations, and so there was a lot of promotional things going on then. Jewish Federations of North America in 2010 held the first Jewish Disability Advocacy Day in February as part of JDAIM, in which people from Jewish agencies across the United States met on Capitol Hill, learned about key policy issues and concerns and legislation, and then went to meet with their Representatives' and Senators' staff. So there's just been a ton of things. It's resonated around the world, and the impact is that it has raised not just awareness, but has issued -- it has really issued forth a demand -- a demand to stop the stigma, stop seeing people with disabilities as the other, and to recognize that there needn't be an other. It is all of us. And that's been the most important thing. So it's just really resonated. One more thing I want to say as an organizer is that it really helps to have friendly competitions to raise awareness. So if one congregation is participating, maybe, in a community-wide program, well doesn't it make sense, all the other ones should be able to communicate to that organization. The grassroots part of it -- people ask how many organizations are involved, I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea. Every single community -- and I see there are people on the webinar here today who have been organizing their community or their individual institutions JDAIM activities, and so it's been great. What we provide are resources, suggestions. And again, that is something any faith community can do, whether you do it on a national level, and -- or a local level, or within a congregation, or a school, or an organization. The point is people with disabilities want to participate like anyone else, and instead of stigma and instead of ableist tropes, we need to get beyond that. People are people, and I think that we can all agree that one of the strengths of this movement is that it is based on our values, that we're all created in the image of God.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Awesome, thank you Shelly. It's really great to hear that you saw a gap in your own community and you tried to be a part of the solution with creating this program. And it's something that really can be replicated across many different Faith communities. I think that's so important. We know creating certain programs sometimes can present its levels of challenges, which I'm sure JDAIM did as well. So our question would be, what are some of the challenges you faced along the way, and what advice would you give others who are interested in creating a movement modeled on the JDAIM in their faith community?

>> Shelly Christensen: I think some of the biggest challenges are getting people on board. And that doesn't mean it can't happen, but most organizations -- whether you're a volunteer or you're paid staff at an organization, there really needs to be some kind of coordination at a community level or within an organization. And what does that mean? I think Bill's going to talk about that actually in his presentation on The Institute On Theology And Disability, where people come together, so -- but I think where things fall short is where people start thinking, well I should do this, I should do that. Stop the shoulds. That's what I want to say. It's -- this is not about perfection. That said, there's one thing that must happen, that must be part of this and I think it's the biggest challenge initially was ensuring that people with disabilities were involved in every aspect, not only of JDAIM planning and programming, but in every aspect of a faith community. I think that's exactly it. We need to step away from that tokenism completely, and ensure that -- when I say we, also, communities are comprised of a lot of we's, including people with disabilities -- and belong there -- and I think that's been one of the biggest challenges that we've faced along the way. Getting the guide out every year can be challenging, especially if you're the only one working on it. And so when you -- produce materials -- and the guide is just really basic -- but when you produce materials, I would say run them by other people so that they make sense, that they're easy, don't over complicate. You have a book club, here's the book, figure out how -- you in your organization or community want to -- handle it. There's nothing -- that says that -- you need to be part of a greater movement, but again, I do think that the power comes from being in a movement. I would say my other advice would be don't keep it a secret. Don't fear that because you're -- saying, okay we're going to -- this Sunday or this Friday or this Saturday, we're going to have a sermon, or we're going to have guest speakers who are going to talk about faith, disability, theology, whatever -- you deem as important, don't hide the fact that there are people with disabilities in your congregation or your community. That's just -- so wrong. And I want to say also -- one of the more common objections -- we'll just call them objections -- that I've heard throughout time -- if we host an event or if we let one person in, it's going to open the floodgates. Now -- I see Bill's kind of laughing -- there are no floodgates, but there are gatekeepers. So raising awareness in such a way through programming says to your community -- there are no gatekeepers here. There are no gatekeepers. We are accessible, this building is accessible, our programming is accessible, and we have a hand out that Hannah has created that will go through a lot of those accessibility features that are low hanging fruit, and not -- don't cost money. So I want to also say this. Please. We have -- expertise on our staff here. And please reach out, because we are here. We are here to support efforts, to answer questions, and finally -- the JDAIM guide and the new logo recognizing 15 years of JDAIM will all be available after the first of the year -- right after the first of the year. So head over to our website, and I'm sure we'll get that in the chat too, signup for our newsletter, because that's where all the great news comes from.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Thank you so much Shelly. Before we move on, we do acknowledge that there are questions in the chat, and we will address them at the end of everybody's presentation. But if you don't want to lose your train of thought, and you still want to drop your question in the chat, please feel free to do that at any point throughout the presentation. Up next, we have Bill Gaventa, who's a clergyman, an educator and author, and a consultant, primarily in the arena of faith and disability. He's the founder [ringtone plays] -- sorry -- he's the Founder and Director Emeritus of the Summer Institute of Theology and Disability. The Institute of Theology and Disability's, ITD for short -- mission is to foster diverse and authentic Interfaith conversations at the intersection of theology and disability. ITD works to achieve this vision through collaboratively hosting an accessible and inclusive 4-day Institute that gathers leaders, scholars, writers, faith leaders, advocates, and other people who are committed to advancing inclusive ministries and faith supports. So we'll ask Bill, as a member of RespectAbility Board specifically working with faith and inclusion advisory council -- our first question to you would be could you talk us through how ITD was formed and how it has grown since its inception?

>> Bill Gaventa: Yes. Let me get to ITD in a minute, and that's because I've been thinking about the title of this webinar about Building Awareness and Inclusion in Faith Communities. It -- the Institute was an attempt to do something on a more global scale or national scale that really mirrored, I think, some of the strategies that one can use locally in terms of areas where people live or states or regions or within particular organizations. And -- because I've been at trying to help build awareness for a long time. And some of it -- as I was thinking about -- there -- a lot of people who think this is an important thing, either people with disabilities and their family members, or clergy folks, or others -- you're not the only ones who think it's important. You just might not know the others. So one of the things to be open to is to recognize that there are lots of people in different kinds of roles: teachers, educators, maybe health care professionals, neighbors, friends, whatever --people with disabilities and families have circles of friends around them, or people that they know. And so a number of people might have a stake in trying to help a faith community become more inclusive. And by thinking about not just particular roles, whether it's you got to have the pastor, you got to have this, you got to have the Sunday School teachers -- get -- invite as many people who have a passion around that dream of our being inclusive and meeting, in fact, our own vision of who we are as a worshiping and welcoming community, because you'll need lots of different skills and so on. And the second thing is, as you start working on this, build that network. And the key is I think slow and steady. Don't try to do one big flashy event in awareness and inclusion, and expect that it's going to be the be all and end all. You're talking about lifetimes here and at people's lives -- disability is not something that's, quote, "fixed," in in the way we think some things can be. And people's lives are ongoing. So the -- around inclusion is really a journey in terms of walking with people as you continue to learn. And that's walking with people who are in congregational leadership, and other congregational members, but also walking with people with disabilities and their families, and providing times for people to reflect on that journey, to look at mistakes, and to think about significant successes or questions or whatever. The Institute arose out of -- out of a grant project that I had when I was working at the Bog Center in New Jersey. We had a grant in Pennsylvania, done by the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council, to try to help build the capacity of younger faith leaders in inclusion and awareness. And we tried several things, and a couple of them didn't work, to tell you the truth. So one of the things we did was think let's get the best people around that we know who are now writing some really significant new books -- and this was 2010, around then -- get some people together who people are reading, and finally seeing some really good literature in this. Let's get them together as a faculty and invite other people to come and be able to be with people who were doing some of the theory and theology thinking, and bring them together with people who are out there practicing and ministering and providing services every day. And so that was the theory in that, and we sponsored the first Institute, which in fact -- the phrase about life is what happens when you're making other plans, I didn't in fact not go because I got sick, but some of the other faculty took the lead, and we started -- that started that year with 35, and then the next year it was 85, and then some other organizations stepped in to say, "we'd be willing to be the key sponsor for a few--" so we had another organization sponsor it for four years. And it's moved around the country either to seminaries or universities that have said we'd like to host you. What's happened with the Institute in the sense that it is -- a movement, is that it's not been something that's been funded with a lot of dollars. There's not been some big grant that says "run the Institute." We essentially had to raise money as we went along from registrations and from sponsorships and others. And -- but the success of it, I think it really helped people who are coming from many different faith backgrounds realize that people in other faith traditions are dealing with the same issues, maybe using different language, maybe have found different ways of doing something that could be very easily adapted from one faith community to another, and also came together with people where they knew that they didn't have to apologize or -- beg, or to explain why they were interested in this. Everybody saw this as the kind of key mission and role. And I think people began to feed off of that networking between people who were doing practice stuff, who said it really helps to have me -- chance to reflect more deeply about some of the -- scriptural foundations and theology and theories, and people who were doing the theological work and writing and some of the speaking said it's really helpful to us to hear from people who are doing this every day, and from people with disabilities, and so on. So -- I think it was a recognition that there's a wide number of people from different backgrounds and roles and parts of the community who have an interest in this, and like to come together. And in some ways it struggled with the same kind of thing. Some -- we've had people from different faith traditions who never had talked with each other before. We had some people when we had the institute in Atlanta who had -- we had a community visit that had the option of going to visit a mosque, and several people came and went to visit that mosque, and that was the first mosque they'd ever set a foot in. And so it's -- it's about -- we talk about welcoming the other in terms of disability, but the other can also be somebody of different beliefs or different traditions or cultures as well. So I think that's been the kind of growth of the Institute over the the years. We got back -- we got to the point where before COVID, it was averaging about 150 people a year. Not huge, but if it got much bigger than that, it would be a different kind of conference, and we'd need different kinds of structures to help run it. And it gave people I think -- people who were doing practical work at the grassroots chance to lead workshops, and people who we invited to do plenaries who were writers or leaders, gave people a chance to network with them and talk to them -- and get to know them as friends. And I think one of the things it really did was build a sense of community. People used -- some people like Shelly and some others began to call the Institute "summer camp." So that was one of the ways in which you felt like this is something that people look forward to, and it provided a different place where people came together that stretched them, but also reinforced them all at the same time every year.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Thank you Bill. We love the fact that you emphasized the need for flexibility, and that -- slow and steady wins the race when it comes to building a program where you really want to build a community. So I definitely appreciate your perspective on that. The second question that we'll ask you: what are some of the things that you learned from organizing ITD over the years, and what are some of the things you would do differently if given the chance to start all over again?

>> Bill Gaventa: Well, I've thought about that a lot in the last year, since I'm no longer the coordinator -- coordinator of it. But it started with it being my responsibility, as because of a grant. It was part of my job. And before -- and then as another organization took over, it was still part of my job. So I spent on paper a fifth of my time, but it was more than that, kind of helping to organize this every year. What I would do differently -- and we had a faculty or staff -- that came -- not all of them came every year, that recognized names, men, women, people with disabilities, Christians, Jews, who came every year. What I would do differently would be to begin earlier to start recruiting some -- and people of all kinds, but especially people with disabilities, if they want to do that -- start recruiting people into giving them jobs in terms of helping to run the Institute. So you can have great people talking about theory and theology. You can have great people talking about inclusive programming in faith communities. But you've also got to have great people who know how to run a conference, and to put -- an event together. And that's a skill that takes experience to build, and I think I've done it so much over the course of my life that I sort of don't -- fail to think about it, I think sometimes, oh, other people know already know how to do this. Well that's not necessarily the case. So what I wish I had done was to build some -- like what -- you all used to have the Fellow -- you have the fellowship program at RespectAbility. People used to -- it was called at one point Apprentices. Well we should have had some Institute Apprentices who began to learn and pick up various things, and so that-- that when the transition came, when I decided it was time for some younger people to come into the leadership of this, that there were people who were more prepared to pick up the baton with a kind of -- with a definite plan about how to go forward. So planning for the future is crucial, and -- not only welcoming younger leadership but providing ways for them to gain the skills.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Thank you so much Bill, and I think it's so important that you emphasized stewarding and younger people who are also interested. It kind of breaks down the myth that younger people are not interested in faith and building community in their faith, and really stewarding them to be the next leaders of specific movements, as well as having the operational skills to have programs, building in those key event planning roles as you put it, and learning personal skills that can help them build community in their faith and show that -- it's not just about the old guard, that they really care and are invested about the next generation of people. So thank you so much.

>> Bill Gaventa: Yeah, you're welcome. I think one of the things we've gradually seen too, over the 12 years now, is that more and more of the voices speaking are people with disabilities, and -- which is really terrific, because there are so many more -- so many younger people there. We had a number of PhD students who kind of grew up during the institute in their PhD programs, because where they were maybe the only ones in their university working in this area, but they got to know other people and got mentoring and build a network. And now some of those younger people are taking over things and people with disabilities, and so on. So it's -- that's gratifying to see.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Fantastic, thank you so much. Up next we will have a quick conversation with Reverend Ben Bond. As the disability belonging and justice -- sorry, Disability Belonging and Justice is the new organization in the process of being formed by clergy and laity at the national level within the Disciples of Christ denomination. So its main mission -- through education, consulting, and direct support, they will increase access for fellow disabled participation in every aspect of life of the Christian Church, while furthering practical justice for the disabled community. Their work began because members of the community with one another at the Institute on Theology and Disability, founded by the fellow panelist Bill Gaventa -- so Ben works along with this movement. So the first question that we have for you is what has the journey of starting a new disability initiative within your faith community entailed?

>> Ben Bond: Thanks Ashley. Yeah no this is -- it's just really heartwarming to hear Shelly and Bill speak. I'll talk a little bit more about how we've leaned on their wisdom through this process. But I mean, we would not exist as an organization without their work, and that is literally the case. It's really exciting to hear Bill talk about passing on the baton to up and coming -- up and coming leaders in the disability and faith community. I know that we have benefited from that. I myself feel I benefited from that as a younger clergy person who is also disabled. And it's been really -- I could say on a personal note as well. I have been a part of a lot of offshoot groups of disabled folks that are supporting each other from ITD, so yeah, so we --the journey of starting a new disability initiative in our faith community began as a result of a number of us disciples folks realizing that we were either on the coordinating council for the Institute or were supporting it, and we're like, wow -- we're a small denomination, one of the smaller Protestant denominations, but we're like wow, we're really punching above our weight, we're really contributing in this way. And we started to realize that we were all part of the same denomination after working on the Institute together. And there were a number of concerns around our upcoming General Assembly, which is kind of the nationwide gathering of our denomination. And realizing that we're a fairly progressive denomination on a lot of issues, but disability was one of the issues that we were realizing as the group at ITD that that was something that there was a lot of room for improvement at General Assembly. There were -- issues like -- kind of logistical access issues not being addressed. And we realized -- rarely are those things done maliciously. Often it is done -- people don't know what they don't know, as Shelly always says. And we realized there's a huge gap in education around disability within just kind of the general society, but also disability within our faith tradition. And we're -- we -- kind of turned to each other at the end of the Institute and went, we need to do something about that! We need to -- if no one else has started it, we need to be those people that begin this movement. So we're a very very young organization, and really at the beginning stages of even developing what we plan to do, and really thinking through how we want to have this organization function within the denomination. And I think it was essential to have movements that were related to what we wanted to focus on, like ITD and JDAIM, in order for us to feel empowered to do this. So I say that because if you're feeling that you want to part -- create a movement within your faith community, as Bill said, you're not alone. There are probably a lot of other folks that are really wanting to do that. And if it hasn't already happened, you may be the person that needs to start that. You and your colleagues so yeah. And I don't want to get into the next question without giving you a chance to ask it, Ashley. [laughs]

>> Ashley Nyaley: No worries Ben, thank you. So just to slide into the next question, what are you currently working on as an organization?

>> Ben Bond: Yeah, so it's been a really interesting journey, as at the national level, the disciples have not had a disabilities ministry of any kind. We have ministries around environmental justice, racial justice, LGBTQ inclusion, and we -- initially were kind of trying to brainstorm -- what would be the most beneficial for our denomination? And it was really rooted in that education piece, realizing, like, folks at General Assembly -- there was no even awareness that [laughs] disabled folks -- that we needed to be accommodated to be able to fully participate. And often a lot of disability theology and ministry stuff is kind of left out of the theological education folks receive at Seminary. So we -- and this was really led by my wonderful colleague, Reverend Dr. Topher Endress, who has kind of taken the lead for our organization, which I'm so grateful for -- he's got a lot of connections at the national level with the National Benevolence Association through the disciples, as well as Disciples Home Missions, and had some really excellent conversations where we got to be in the room with folks at the national level who had funding and access to institutional knowledge on how to create these sort of initiatives, such as the Ecological Justice Initiatives and etcetera. And we really had a frank conversation about that, the fact that -- the disciples denomination has really been lacking in disability -- on disability issues. And there was kind of a -- to use a very kind of Christian term, a confessional element -- that this is something that we want to reconcile. And so there's been some really excellent conversation about -- is this something we want to have a full-time paid staff member at the national level? Is this something where there is an educational element for continuing education credits for clergy? Is this something where we want to have an evaluative body of disciples, clergy, and laity who can assess how accessible congregations are at the local level? And it's been really exciting, sometimes daunting, but mostly empowering process to have those conversations about how we want to proceed. And we have created a business plan, which is kind of a surreal thing to do in a Ministry context, but where we've really kind of laid out what our goals are, and the different approaches we want to take for -- achieving those goals. So yeah, it's really exciting, it's really new, and we are very grateful for those who have come before us, so --

>> Ashley Nyaley: That's awesome Ben. And I think that -- creating a business plan, while it seems a little unorthodox, no pun intended -- as things change and as things evolve, you guys are really trying to meet the needs in a way that you think is most beneficial to the community that you're trying to build. So I think that is amazing. So we just have one more question for you, if you don't mind. How have you learned from the wisdom of those who have deep experience in the disability and faith inclusion work?

>> Ben Bond: Absolutely. And I think I've been trying to allude to this the whole -- my whole entire -- responses so far, but we really have leaned heavily on the work of JDAIM and the Institute of Theology and Disability, and other denominations who've done this work, and have established disability networks or organizations within their denominations or faith communities that differ from ours. And I think to Bill's point, what we've learned is it's important to -- shoot for the stars, but -- you hopefully end up on the moon, that it's it's important to to not over -- to try to eat -- the entire -- I'm a vegetarian, I was gonna say eat the entire elephant -- but eat the whole block of tofu at once. It's one bite at a time, you really have to be slow and steady. And it's really -- we've learned to like lean into momentum while it's there. We have a lot of folks that are engaged in this. And knowing that it won't be perfect, but something is better than nothing, and what -- it's been really helpful to hear -- that it started out as -- generally small group of really invested people in this work and then it grew to something larger. So the wisdom we've leaned on is knowing that this work will grow, and it'll live on past us, and what we're doing is planting the seeds and -- for the future generations to sow, and that it's really important for us to be quite future thinking so that it lives on beyond us, so -- that's what we're leaning into. And it's been really meaningful, even as a panelist to hear Bill and Shelly's perspectives, so thanks for letting me share. Thanks Ashley!

>> Ashley Nyaley: Of course, and thank you for sharing with us not just about what we have to look towards for the future, and I'm sure you'll be proud of where this will be when you are passing down your wisdom to the next generation of activists. So lastly, we want to have a conversation with Dr. Hannah Roussel who is a Faith Inclusion and Belonging Fellow here at RespectAbility, as part of our National Leadership Program. She is neurodiverse, immunosuppressed person, who is passionate about religion, community, and inclusivity. She earned her doctorate from the University of Michigan in history, with a focus in disability and mad studies. Hannah is now pursuing a career in disability advocacy and community building. One of Hannah's Fellowship projects is creating a resource for faith-based organizations in different aspects of accessibility and in including communication. So Hannah, our question to you is: what are important accessible considerations for the faith space?

>> Hannah Roussel: Thank you Ashley. Yeah, I think this is such an important question. For my project, I put together a checklist of what Shelly actually calls the low hanging fruit of -- accessibility. And that checklist will be available as a resource for you. But those like -- we said those are the low hanging fruit, and we also need to think about how -- what are the unique aspects of accessibility, inclusion, and belonging in our faith communities? And -- some of that is expanding on those practical things. If you're in a -- synagogue, do you have a ramp to the Bimah? The Bimah is a raised platform in the synagogue that you have to -- step onto to read from the Torah scroll. Is there a way for a person who uses a wheelchair to access that? What about how a Christian community does communion? Are people expected to leave their seats? Are people expected to kneel? These are things to like think about accessibility in your own space that's unique to your faith and also your own practices. And I think going broader than that, what's really important is not just addressing the physical space, or the virtual space if you're in a Zoom call, making sure that's accessible, but making sure that we're also addressing the attitude and flexibility of the community, because a faith community is not just a physical or virtual space or a combination thereof. It's also a community. And so we need to make sure that we're treating every person with respect, and making sure that they're not only included, but that they fully belong. That's a key -- key component of accessibility. If someone doesn't feel like they're treated with respect or if they can fully belong -- then that's an inaccessible space to them. And so -- educate your community on ableist terms and concepts, emphasize that everyone brings value to the community, and that we should treat everyone as a whole person, and not just as an identity marker -- not just as someone with chronic pain, but as a whole person who has other -- wants and interests and goals and talents. And along with that comes flexibility, because access needs change, and sometimes the accommodation itself is having a flexible schedule or a flexible space. Me, as a person with ADHD, I need grace from my faith community when I run late [laughs] or when I forget to send an email. But there's also the flexibility of space -- making sure that your chairs in your fellowship hall or your sanctuary can be moved around, so that people who are wheelchair users aren't limited to one place of sitting every week. I'm just looking at my notes again -- and -- also a flexibility in our traditional ways of doing things. This I say lightly, because every congregation has their own relationship with theology and tradition and practice, but we need to rethink -- is this tradition exclusionary to someone, and how can we update it? An example of this: many communities will include a phrase of "please rise." And how can we rephrase that to be more inclusive? There's "please rise in body -- in body or in spirit," or "please rise in the ways that are meaningful for you." This an example of things to think about to increase accessibility in your faith community. And lastly, I think we need to be conscientious of the ways that we're preaching and teaching in our communities. When you're preparing a lesson or a sermon, ask yourself: is this interpretation of scripture or religious text informed by an ableist lens? And really keep that aware in -- not just when you're doing a sermon for disability week, but all year round, in all your teachings and all your educational material

>> Ashley Nyaley: Thank you Hannah for giving us that thought. It's super important to remember how flexible we need to be as far as the space that we practice in, but really that term of belonging, and making sure that all members of your faith body can feel a sense of belonging and connection to the community. We just have one more question for you, and then we will get into a quick question and answer. And the checklist that Dr. Hannah mentioned will also be included in the follow-up email after this. So our question to you, Dr. Hannah, is: what do you as a younger leader and activist coming into the disability and faith area need from people who have been around for a while?

>> Hannah Roussel: Yeah, thank you Ashley. My answer to this one is much shorter, because I think the answer really just is mentorship, and also jobs. I mean, not everyone wants to -- make their work in this field a career, but if they do, we need to make sure there are opportunities for them. And I also think -- in the field of disability -- inclusion and belonging in faith communities, there's no clear set route of how to become active in this field. And so that's really where one-on-one mentorship becomes very important -- it's not like you go to engineering -- you get your engineering degree and then apply for jobs as an engineer -- there isn't that clear-cut how do you go about doing this. So it really needs to be tailored one-on-one. And I think really taking the time to look around and say who are -- who are or can be the up and coming leaders, and how can we mentor them and talk with them and lift them up and welcome them in? I think something that along the lines of what Bill said earlier about giving people seats at the table earlier on. I'm not at a spot where I can lead a committee, but I would like to be on one so I can learn how to do that one day. Yeah, that's my answer.

>> Ashley Nyaley: Thank you Dr. Hannah. We appreciate you sharing your experience and your thoughts on that. Just to jump in quickly while we have a remaining eight minutes, this kind of rolls into one of the questions that's in our chat -- and any panelist, feel free to jump in and give an answer. So the question is: how do we -- so speaking as part of the disability community -- get that seat at the table?

>> Shelly Christensen: I think Hannah -- made a really good point about -- what's -- I would say what's important to you? What activity or what program or what committee or what is important to you? And from that point -- ensure that your wishes are known, and -- it's really incumbent upon the organization to listen. That said, I want to bring this question, is: if you feel -- if you feel that you are a member or have been going to a particular congregation and you're not feeling that -- you will be able to talk to somebody, will be able to join something, the seat at the table -- taking that seat at the table whatever that looks like -- if that's -- if you're just not feeling that, I would say there are many different types of congregations and communities, and to find one where -- that really feels like your home. And I think that's a really important thing I want to put out there.

>> Bill Gaventa: Yeah, I would add to that, that if you want to seat at the table, come prepared to dig in and work, that I -- over the years of running the Institute, I can tell you the people who came to the Institute for the first time and immediately said to me almost after -- what can we do to help this week? And-- that gets you noticed and -- and the same thing within congregations, I think, is -- don't just go, figure out -- talk to leadership and figure out some way where you can do something that shows you contributing to the life of the congregation, and doing some of the nitty-gritty work that needs to be done or the -- the stuff behind the scenes -- stuffing packets, that's not very -- doesn't get a lot of headlines, but those kinds of things, but people will then learn that you are -- you're willing to put your work into it as well.

>> Ben Bond: I would also say, to extend the metaphor, sometimes it's great to have a seat at the table. Sometimes I also encourage folks to ask, is this a table you want to be sitting at? Is this the -- if this table doesn't want you in the first place, do you feel responsible for shifting around the chairs at that table, or is it time to build a new table together as a community? And yeah it's -- I think it gets really challenging as disabled folks to have to regularly kind of advocate for our own humanity and explain to people why we deserve a seat at the table, and I think really sometimes it's important to lean into knowing already that -- that table should be prepared for us, and it's okay to make a new table if need be. That's my metaphor extension, clearly I am a pastor. [laughs]

>> Ashley Nyaley: Oh I thought it was great, Reverend Bond. We just want to thank everybody for being here. The other questions that were posed in the chat, our panelists have answered, so if you want to check out the answers that they provided there to your questions. And if you have any questions after this webinar or something comes to your mind, or any thoughts, you can always email us at info@RespectAbility.org. So thank you so much for being with us here today, thank you so much to our ASL interpreter Darcy, and our captioner, as well as to our panelists. We really appreciate the conversation. This will also be released to everybody with captions on it, as well as the recorded session, and the materials that Dr. Hannah referenced -- a checklist and how to make things a bit more accessible in your faith community, both virtually and physically. So thank you guys so much for being with -- us here today, and we look forward to seeing you the next time. Thank you so much!