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Matthew Floding: Lessons from Friendship House

Western Theological Seminary has learned much from its new student apartments -- the gifts of people with disabilities, new insights about community, and the nature of providence and grace.

by [Matthew Floding](#)



Photo courtesy of Western Theological Seminary

The friendships formed in Western Theological Seminary's Friendship House overcome even the deep loyalties of Big Ten athletics, as reflected in the Halloween-party wear of dean and Minnesota fan Matt Floding; "friend resident" and Michigan fan Rob Sterken; and Western seminarian and Wisconsin alum Paul Towne.

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Earnest conversations happen all the time in church sanctuaries, but I had never had one quite like this.

After Sunday worship at the church I attend, Robert and Deborah drew me aside, wanting to talk about their son, a young adult with Down syndrome: "Rob wants to live independently, and we're not sure what to do."

For a second I was confused. Why would they want to talk with me? I'm the dean of students at Western Theological

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GO

Seminary in Holland, Mich., and I had little to no experience with people with disabilities. Looking back, however, it was a moment that can only be described as providential.

That Sunday morning conversation was the start of what would become [Friendship House](#), an innovative student apartment house at Western where seminarians live in community with people with disabilities.

Six years after our visit, Friendship House is not only a reality but an integral part of campus life at Western. It has affected and even transformed the entire campus, especially the lives of the seminarians who live there and their roommates with disabilities.

It was the beginning of what we hope will become a movement to create similar initiatives at other schools across the country.

All of us at Western have learned much from Friendship House and its residents. We've learned about the gifts of those with disabilities, the ways they can and do enrich the lives of others. We've gained new insights about community. We've rethought and learned anew the mission of our seminary. And, of course, as I indicated earlier, we've learned much more about the nature of providence and of grace.

In hindsight, it's a little unnerving to think how easily Friendship House might not have happened. Some of the most important lessons, for us here and for our colleagues in other institutions, can be seen most clearly in the development of Friendship House -- in the story of how it came to be, and of how our greatest assets can often be found in our greatest needs.

When Robert and Deborah approached me that morning in the spring of 2005, I had just begun planning for new student housing to meet the needs of the seminary's expanding enrollment. Knowing of my work, their neighbor -- a friend of mine and fellow faculty member -- had suggested they talk with me. He had told them about a professor at his own alma mater years earlier who had a child with a disability and had invited students to live in their home to help provide support.

Needs produce assets

As we talked, a key premise of asset-based community development -- which I had been reading about for a course I was teaching -- kept echoing in my mind: *Needs produce assets*. As Robert and Deborah told me more, I began to see that they and their son had a need and Western Seminary had a need. Without thinking, I responded naively, "Let's put your need together with our need and see what can happen."

What happened was everything. And it happened at a whirlwind pace. As we ended our conversation, I asked Robert and Deborah to find four other families in similar situations who might be interested in exploring our shared need for housing.

They had no problem finding others. As I soon learned, parents who have a child with a disability are already networked. From the time of their child's birth, they have connected with other parents in similar situations for mutual support. They are also powerful advocates who have had to fight on behalf of their son or daughter from birth, sometimes fiercely so. In other words, this was a committee with commitment and passion.

For weeks, we met and talked about our respective needs for housing and the many overlapping areas we had in common. Student housing has long been a part of campus life at Western, but with this project we were hoping to do something more, something different that would further enrich the lives of students. For their part, the parents told me about the challenges their adult children faced in finding housing and employment.

Later, Elise McMillan, co-director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at Vanderbilt University, explained to me the situation that these young adults and their families faced. What was once a national vision of better lives for people with disabilities -- a vision dating back to the Kennedy administration -- had never become reality, she said.

As a survey by The Arc had found, despite gains in many areas, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are still not accepted and included in our society and lack the support they

need to live to their full potential in the community.

Clearly, some kind of shared housing could be an asset that met both our needs. As we arrived at a common vision, we visited several existing properties in town -- condos, apartment houses and a building that once served as Holland's first hospital -- thinking that we could adapt and remodel one. We wanted a place with access to public transportation, employment opportunities, nearby recreational and social opportunities, and proximity to campus. But for one reason or another, no property met all our criteria.

How about we start from scratch?

After one too many frustrating real-estate tours, I told the group I had an idea that I would bring to our next meeting. I sketched out a pod-concept apartment on a piece of paper and brought it with me. How about we start from scratch and build a whole new building based on this concept?

Did I mention that this group was committed and passionate? Before long, only a few months after we had first met, we got approval from the seminary's board of trustees. Had we thought about it back on that first Sunday morning, board approval might have seemed a formidable obstacle. But it wasn't now.

Basically, the board wanted to know, "Is this initiative consistent with our mission?"

For us, the answer was clear. More than 40 million Americans currently live with a disability, and we need to do more to prepare our students to work with these individuals and their families. In other words, Friendship House would directly support the school's mission of "preparing men and women called by God to lead the church in mission." The motion to build Friendship House carried unanimously.

After an intense development campaign -- capped off with a special naming gift by Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus -- construction began in the summer of 2006, and a year later, in the fall of 2007, Friendship House opened.

In each of six apartment pods, three seminary students live with one "friend resident" -- a young adult with disabilities who previously lived at home with his or her parents. Friend residents are expected to be employed, care for themselves, be a friend to seminarians and keep growing in independent living skills. With only 18 seminarians and six friend residents, Friendship House accounts for only a small part of student housing at Western, but its impact has been felt far beyond numbers alone.

In four years of operation, we have learned that our residents with disabilities can grow further and faster than even family members imagined. When we selected the friend residents, we used a psychological/development instrument to help assess their readiness for independent living in several areas. But today, that instrument is no longer applicable. Our friends have literally outgrown it. As one parent exclaimed, "My child has just blossomed."

The friends, however, are not the only ones who've benefited from Friendship House. They have clearly contributed to and enriched the lives of seminarians. Students who live in Friendship House report a deeper appreciation for all people and a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

Breaking down prejudices

"Living in Friendship House will break down any prejudices, any preconceived notions that you have about persons with disabilities," one student said.

Parents agree, saying they have witnessed the changes in their offspring's seminarian roommates. "You can see the change in the student's face when she realizes that your daughter is a person in her own right and not just a diagnosis," one parent said.

But the changes that our seminarians have experienced go far deeper than just a greater appreciation for those with disabilities. Students tell me that the friend residents have opened their eyes to deeper insights into the nature of love and of God. One student told me he had experienced unconditional love and acceptance from his friend roommate. It was something he had never experienced before in the performance-oriented home in which he was raised. "I now understand God's love in a whole new way," he said.

Other students report similar insights, insisting that a deeper sense of community is fostered through living in Friendship House. One student told me that Christianity is about community first and individuals second. "Friendship House is helping us open our minds to a deeper sense of community and diminishes the tendency to discriminate against those who are different," he said.

Perhaps the most important of the many lessons we've learned, though, is that the housing opportunity that Friendship House provides is urgently needed throughout our country. Building on the success of our efforts at Western, we've formed a nonprofit organization, Friendship House Partners, to work alongside people with intellectual disabilities and their families to secure safe, affordable, community-oriented housing. This new organization is, of course, a matter of justice for people with disabilities. But it is also about empowering people with disabilities to offer a life-changing experience to seminary and divinity school students in a residential setting.

We at Western Seminary would be diminished without the presence of our Friendship House friends. In only a few years, they have made contributions to our seminary community that we never could have imagined. We discern the body of Christ more deeply when we participate in the Lord's Supper together. Worship is enriched by the offering of liturgical dance. Michigan football wins are celebrated, losses grieved. Laughter abounds.

I can barely remember Western Seminary before Friendship House. I cannot imagine the school now without it.