



Creating Places of Belonging

NEC Leadership training, Staverton

16 November 2025

Creating places of Belonging

- Belonging examined
- My church and belonging with reference to people with special needs
- Barriers to belonging
- Actionable steps towards creating belonging

Belonging?

What comes to your mind when you think about belonging?

“What does it mean to
be a community
marked by belonging.”

Community of believers marked by belonging

Belonging

- We have a sense of belonging when we are missed
- 'Belonging is rooted in relationships. Having people in our lives who know us, like us, accept us, need us, miss us, and love us is at the heart of our well-being" – Erik Carter



10 Markers of Belonging

1. Present
2. Invited
3. Welcome
4. Known
5. Accepted
6. Supported
7. Cared for
8. Befriended
9. Needed
10. Loved



Dr. Erik Carter,
Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair and
Professor of Special Education
at Vanderbilt University

10 DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING: ERIK CARTER



Present

Invited

Welcomed

Known

Accepted

Supported

Cared for

Befriended

Needed

Loved



10 dimensions into five steps to relationships where everyone can flourish and thrive.

Choosing

Healthy relationships must be built by choice; they cannot be forced or mandated. The first step toward belonging is simply when a person with disability is present at an event or in a community. However, true belonging goes beyond mere presence—it begins when that person is intentionally invited to be present and participate. An invitation extends hospitality and fosters a deeper sense of connection and inclusion. When two or more people willingly choose to engage in a relationship, a healthy seed is planted. This choice creates space for authentic, mutual relationships to grow and thrive, building the foundation for genuine belonging.



10 dimensions into five steps to relationships where everyone can flourish and thrive.

Investing

Once individuals have chosen to be in a relationship, they must invest time and energy to help it grow. When a person with disability is intentionally welcomed into a space or community, this act of hospitality nurtures the relationship. Welcoming someone affirms their dignity and value, paving the way for them to be truly known and appreciated. Just as sunlight and water are essential to a budding plant, intentional welcoming and reciprocal knowing are crucial to healthy relationships. As people actively engage and invest in the connections, the relationship can grow in beautiful, life-giving ways.



10 dimensions into five steps to relationships where everyone can flourish and thrive.

Yielding

People often fear that if they were truly known, they would be rejected. However, when someone is deeply known and still accepted, the relationship is able to grow and deepen. By sensitively yielding in response to the needs of another person—and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit—our words and actions can create a powerful sense of someone feeling supported. Acceptance and support are the nutrients that sustain a healthy relationship and allow it to grow. As these elements nurture the bond, the relationship reaches what can be described as relational depth—a profound sense of connection rooted in trust and mutual care.



10 dimensions into five steps to relationships where everyone can flourish and thrive.

Committing

When people commit to a relationship, trust naturally builds, and appropriate relational intimacy grows. For example, individuals tend to share personal thoughts and experiences with a trusted few—things they might not share with casual acquaintances. In moments of deep sharing, it is crucial that the person feels seen, heard, and valued. As relational depth takes root, true friendship emerges. Being befriended is a fundamental human need, contributing to a sense of belonging for most people. In relationships involving people with disabilities, a deepening connection both requires—and in turn fosters—a sense of safety and mutual respect. For relationships to thrive, individuals need to feel—and actually be—safe and secure.



10 dimensions into five steps to relationships where everyone can flourish and thrive.

Flourishing

Individuals with disabilities don't simply have needs to be met; they also possess unique gifts and talents to share. True flourishing within a community happens when these gifts are not only shared but also received by others in meaningful and valued ways. You know you are truly needed when your absence is felt, and your contributions are missed. The greatest commandments, along with the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians, elevate and honor love as supreme. The goal of becoming a community of belonging is to embody and express love—for the glory of God and the good of all people. When people are loved well, the law of Christ is fulfilled. Deep and meaningful relationships within such a community produce transformation, growth, peace, and wholeness.



HALLMARKS OF A TRUE COMMUNITY OF BELONGING

These outcomes are the hallmarks of a true community of belonging, where every person is valued, and love prevails.



Theology of Belonging

Genesis 1:27

Made in His Image

John 15: 16,17

Chosen by God!

**Commanded to love one another
unconditionally as God Loves us**



A BURDEN TO SOCIETY?

'If you are demented, you are wasting people's lives, your family's lives, and you are wasting the resources of the National Health Service.'

.....the elderly and sick should die rather than becoming a burden.

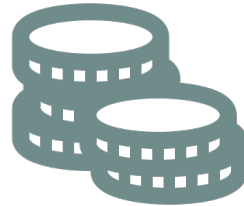
Baroness Mary Warnock



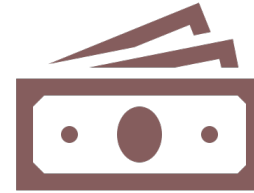
WESTERN BELIEF OF HUMAN VALUE



Give back when
they receive



Create wealth
for themselves




Create wealth
for others





HUMAN BEINGS VS DOING



What value do we
place on people
with intellectual
disability?

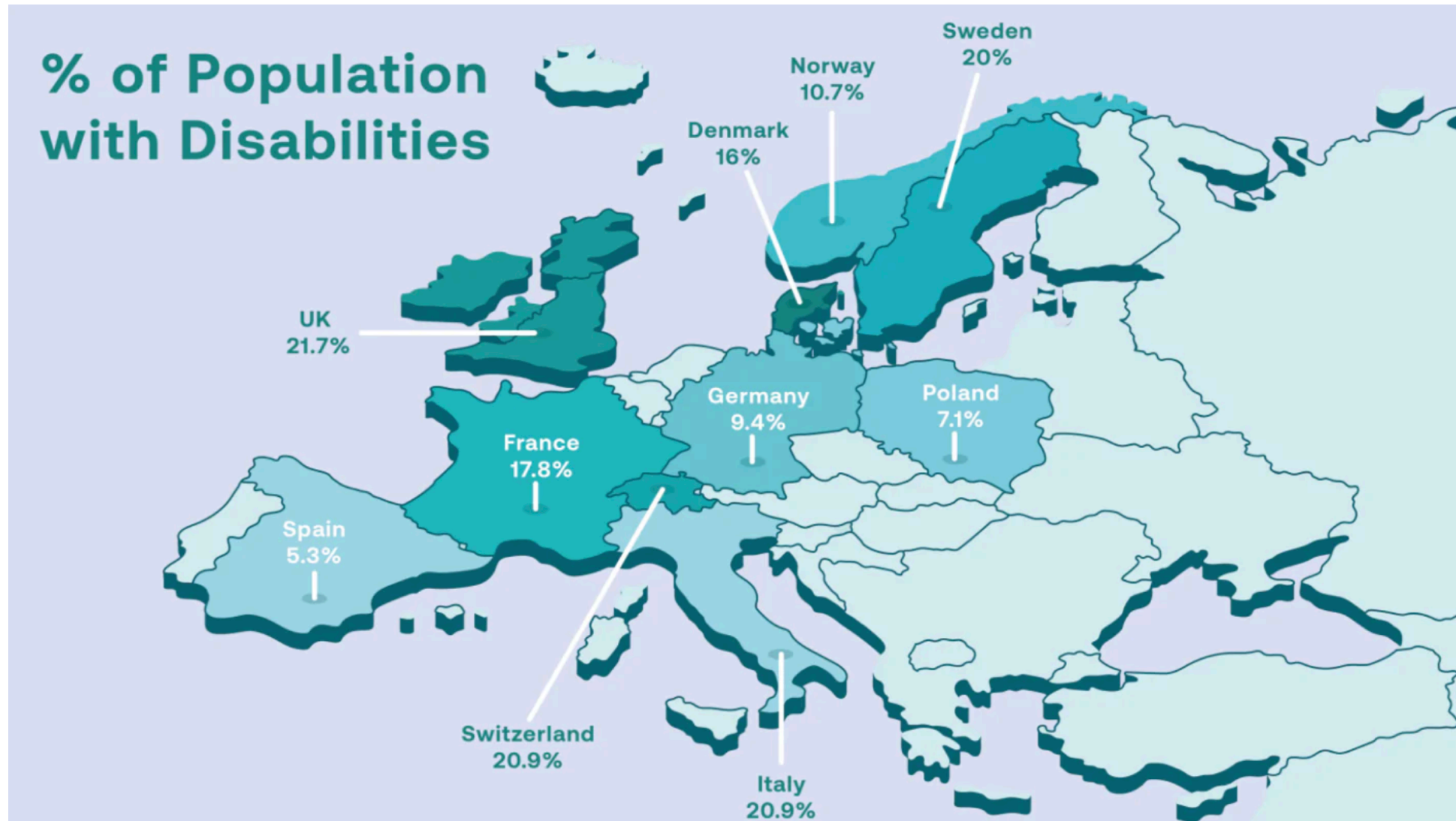
Do we value others
just for who they
are or for what
they can do?

**NUMBER
OF PEOPLE
WITH
DISABILITIES IN
EUROPE**

**101 million
people
1 in 4 adults
have a disability
in the EU**



DISABILITY IN EUROPE. AN OPPORTUNITY?



What are some of the barriers to belonging ?

How does understanding these barriers help to break them down?



Barriers to
connecting with
people living
with disabilities /
neurodiversity



Fear

Lack of knowledge

Lack of care

Limited Resources

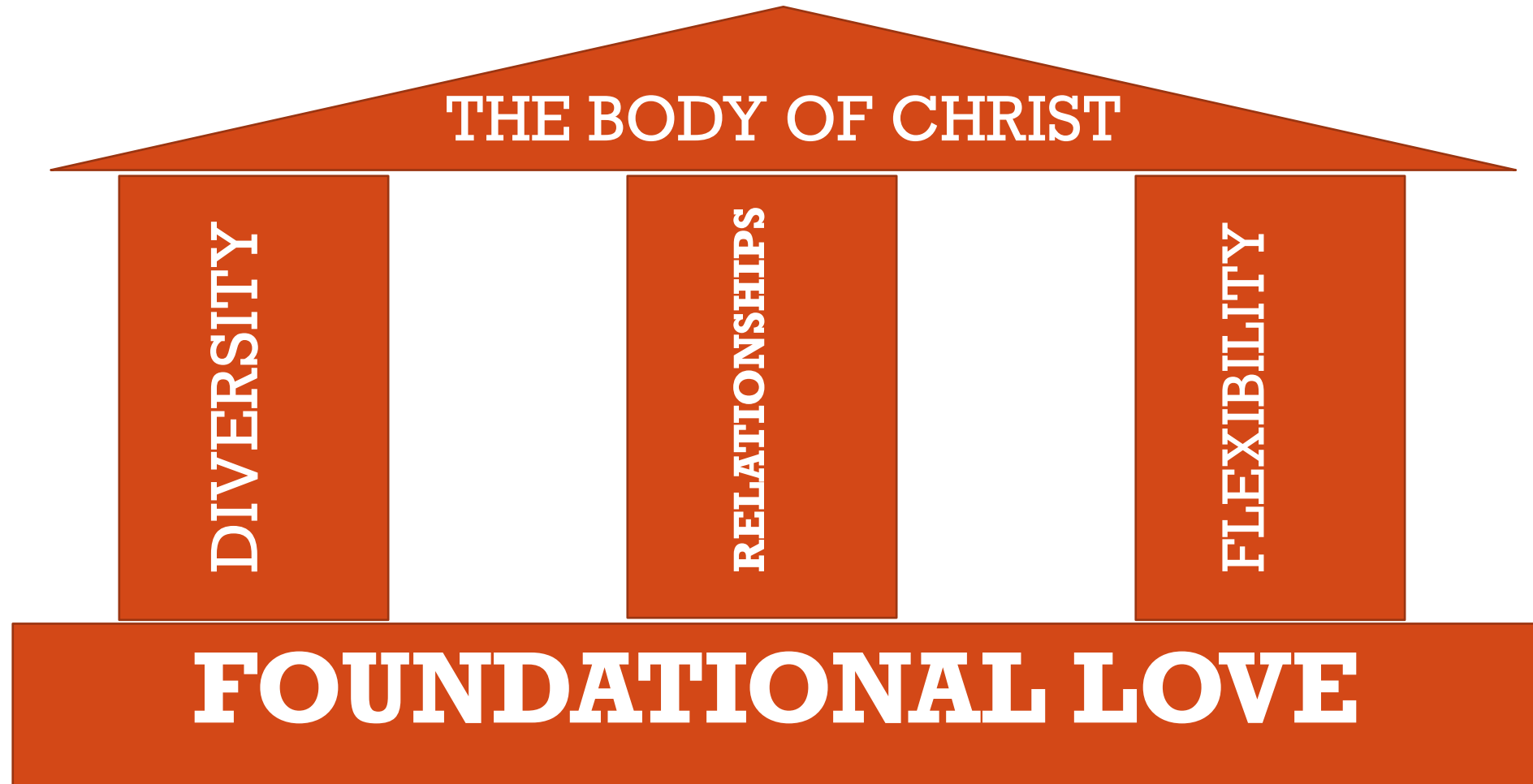
Ignorance

Culture

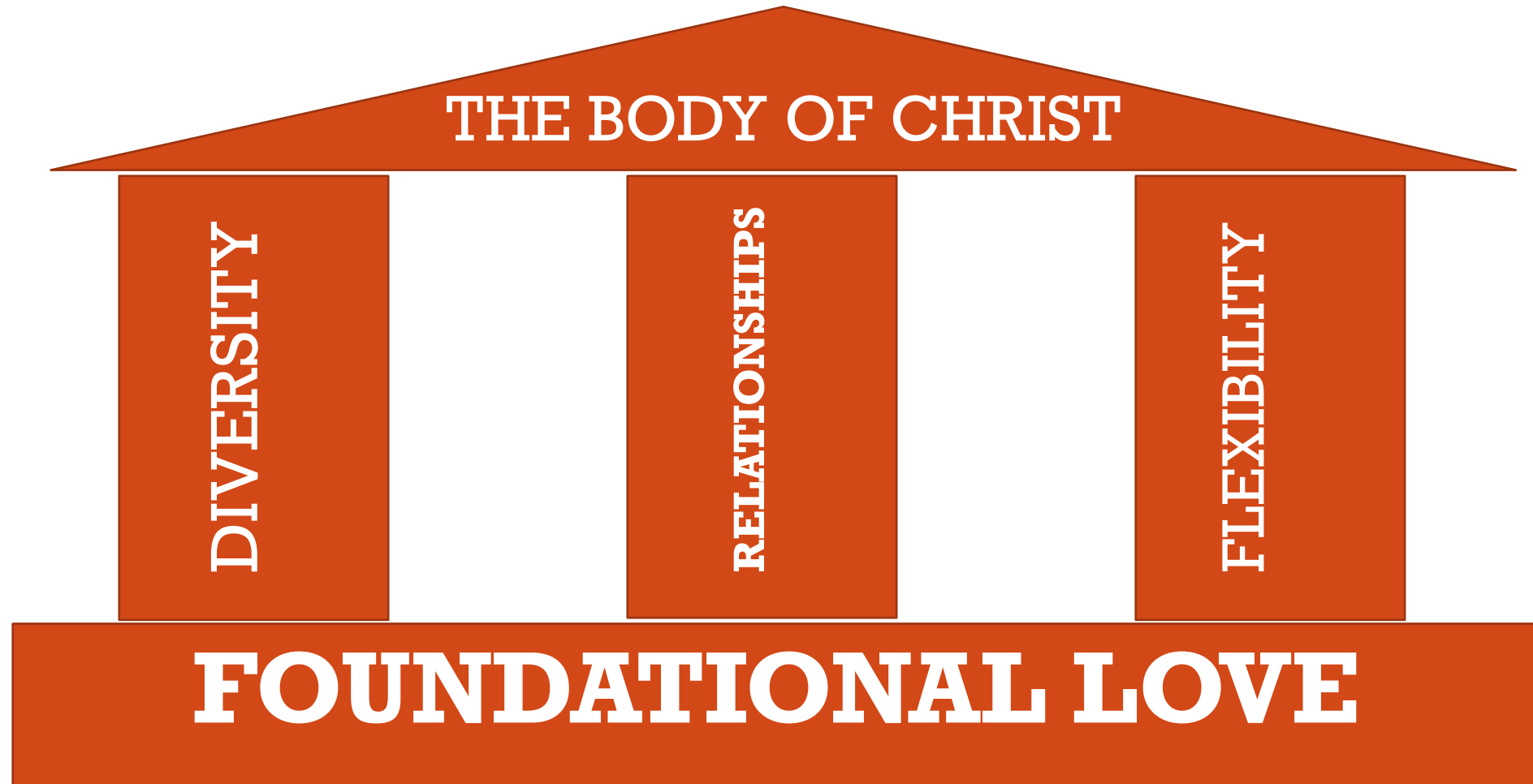
Ableism

Barrier Breaking: 3 Pillars of Engaging with families living with special needs and disabilities

3 PILLARS FOR SUCCESS IN ENGAGEMENT DIVERSITY



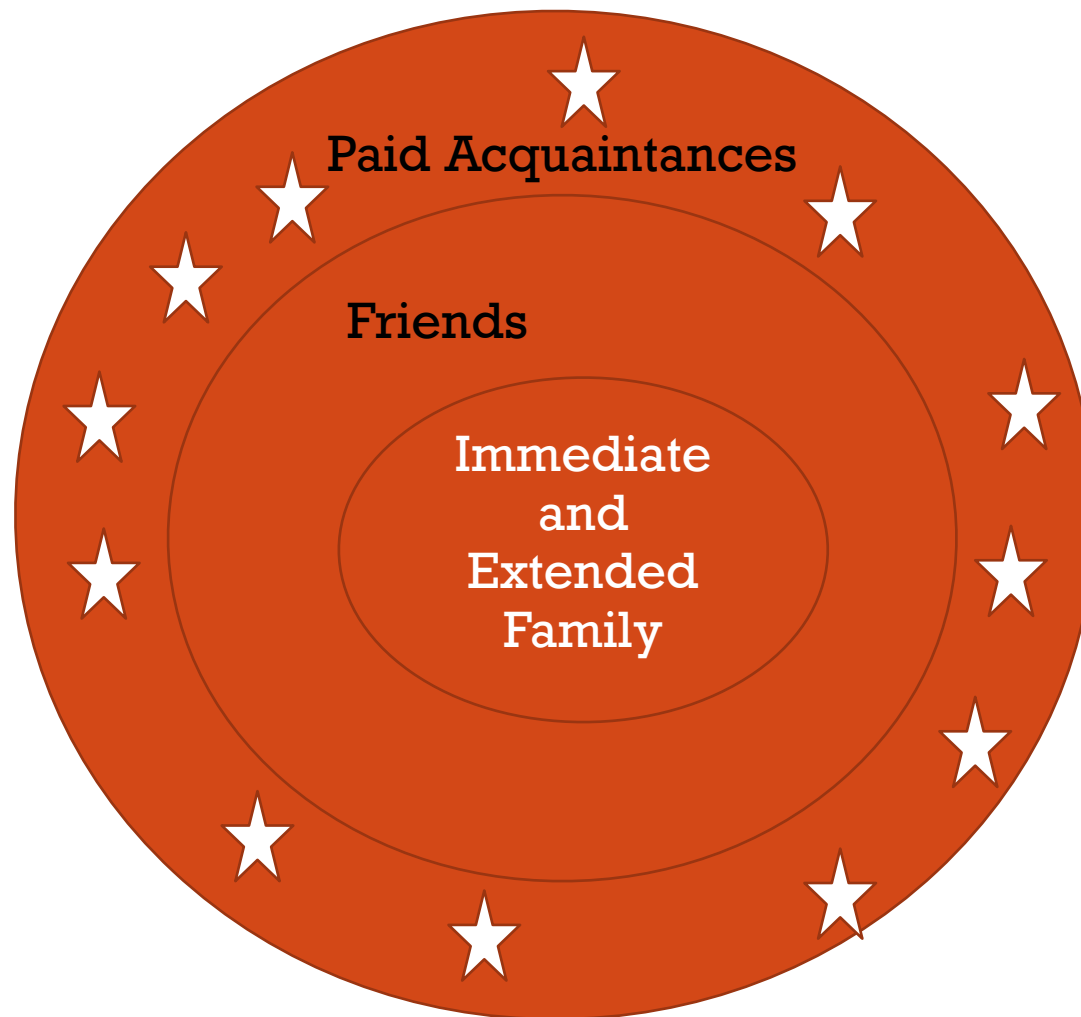
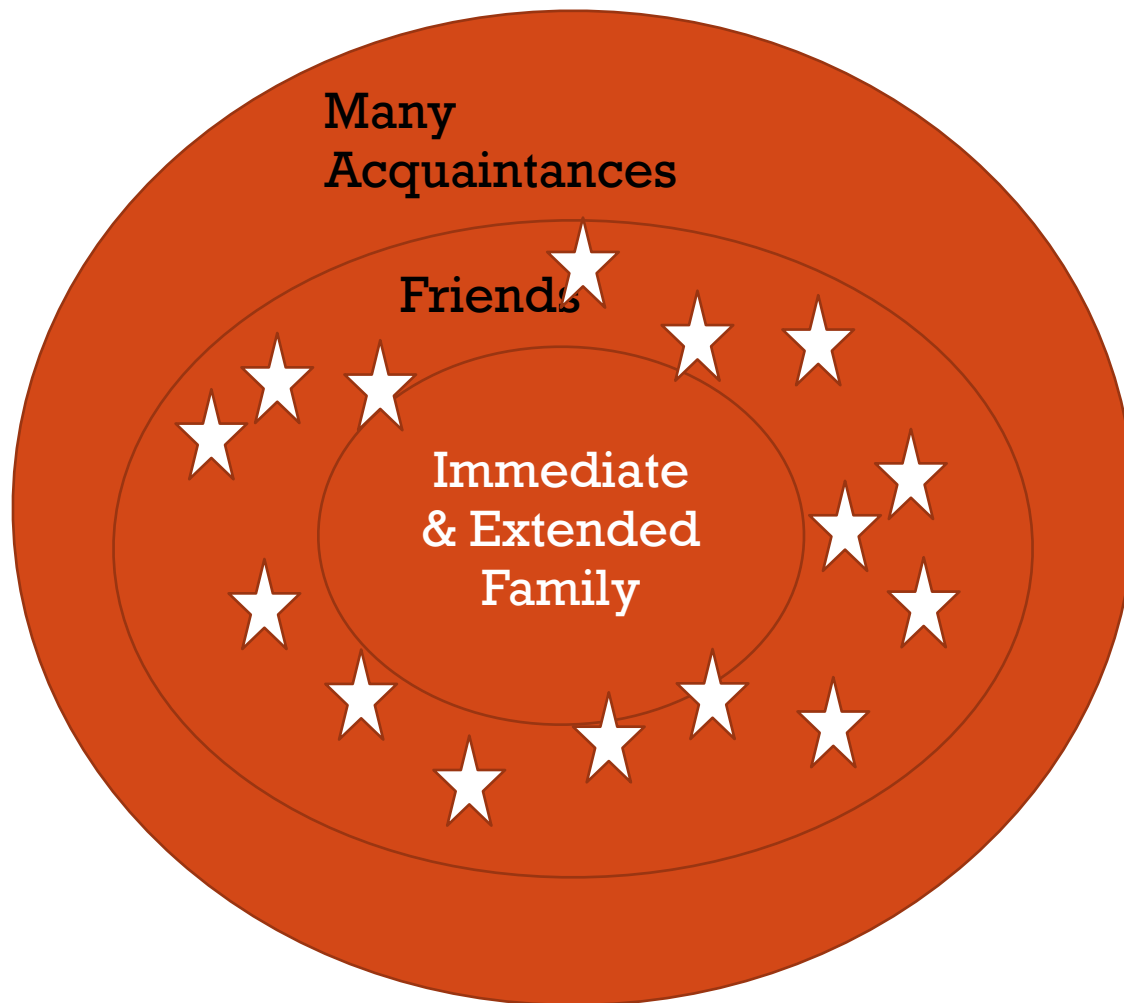
3 PILLARS FOR SUCCESS IN ENGAGEMENT RELATIONSHIPS



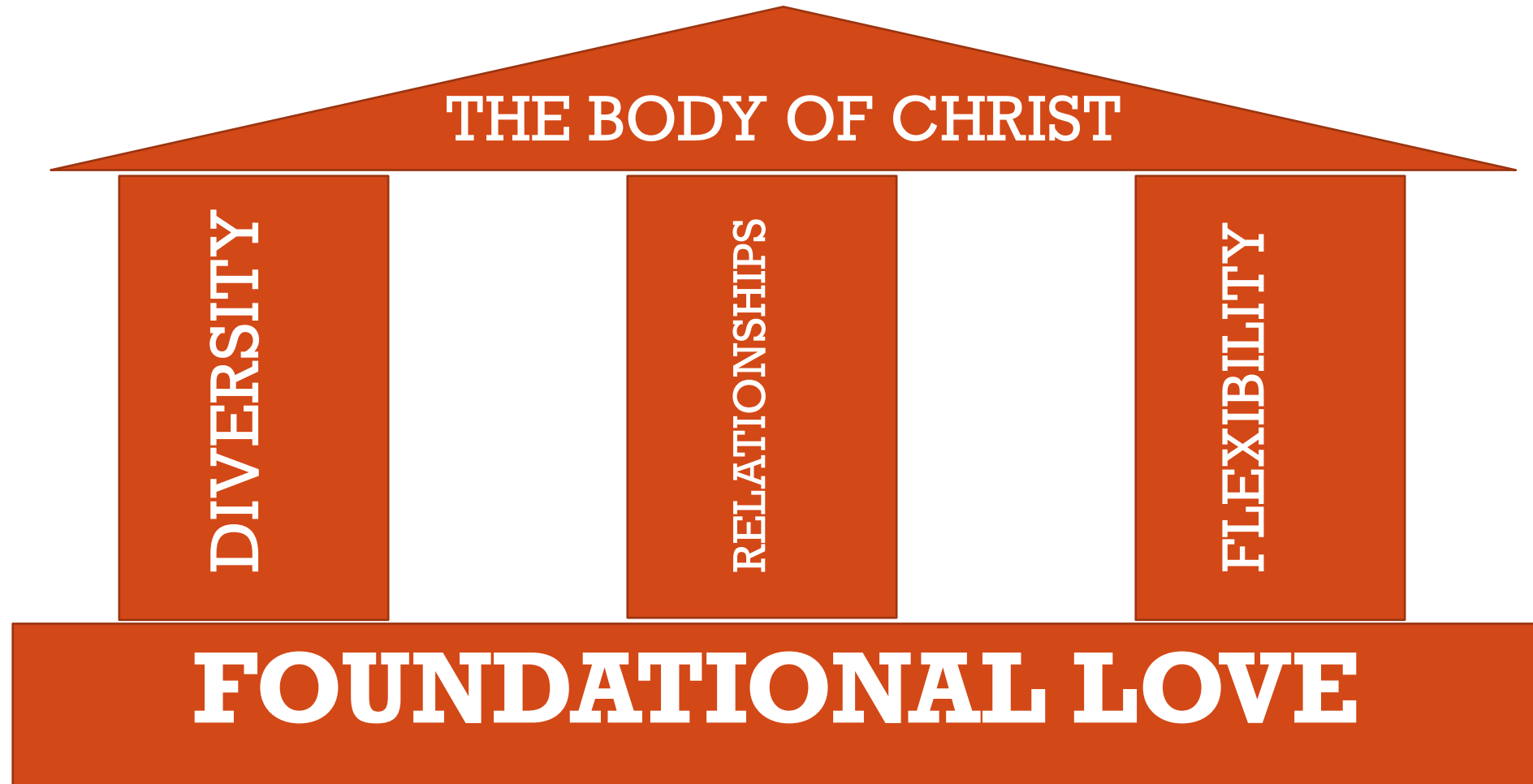
CIRCLE OF FAMILY, FRIENDS, ACQUAINTANCES

- Matthew's Brother, CJ

Matthew



3 PILLARS FOR SUCCESS IN ENGAGEMENT FLEXIBILITY



WHAT IS LOVE?



‘Adopting an attitude wherein you look at other people, position them positively, value their existence and show that you are genuinely glad that they are with you’.

John Swinton



What is Love?

Love is saying to the other person, its good that you exist and I am glad that you are here.

John Peiper





THE BEATITUDES OF THE LEARNING DISABLED

- Blessed are you who take time to listen to difficult speech, for you help us to know that if we persevere we can be understood.
- Blessed are you who walk with us in public places, and ignore the stares of strangers, for in your companionship we find havens of relaxation.





BEATTITUDES OF THE LEARNING DISABLED

Blessed are you who never bid us to 'hurry up' and more blessed are you who do not snatch our task from our hands to do them for us, for often we need time instead of help.

Blessed are you who ask for our help, for our greatest need is to be needed.





BEATITUDES OF THE LEARNING DISABLED

- Blessed are you when, by all ways, you assure us that the things that make us individuals are not our peculiar muscles, nor our wounded nervous systems, nor our difficulties in learning, but the God- given self which no infirmities can confine.



BEATITUDES OF THE LEARNING DISABLED



- Rejoice and be exceeding glad, and know that you give us reassurances that could never be spoken in words, for you deal with us as Christ dealt with His children.

Author Unknown





MATTHEW TODAY

- Living independently / dependently in community
- Perfect pitch and loves, makes and appreciates music
- Baptised member of the Oxford SDA church UK
- Attends church regularly
- Witness to those who support him
- Carers attend church with Matthew and have shown an interest in faith
- Others have a renewed faith
- Matthew is lovable and loved



