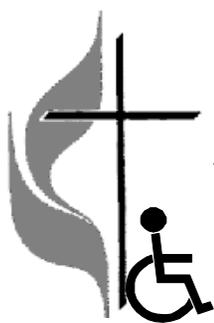


Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:31 [nrsv]



Wings

A FAITHLETTER FOR, BY AND ABOUT
UNITED METHODISTS WITH DISABILITIES

Fall 1999—Vol. 10 Issue 2 No. 38

de jour.) Probably true if your definition of disability is general enough and broadly applicable to all areas of human functioning—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. And, yes, it can be comforting to know that we are all the same in our glorious imperfection as human beings. Still, there are disabilities, and then there are *disabilities*. It does little justice to people with major disabilities to gloss over real distinctions and thus diminish their daily struggles to lead a livable life. Anyway, you wouldn't really trade your eyeglasses for my wheelchair, would you?

"We must care for (pray for, minister unto) those less fortunate than ourselves." Fine, but why do you always look at me when you say things like that? How do you know that I am "less fortunate" than you are? I experience God's blessings the same as you do. On one of my "bad" days I could be doing a lot better than you are on one of your "good" days. And does it ever occur to you "more fortunate" ones that I might be here to care for, pray for, and minister unto you as well?

"When I look at you, I know I can't complain." This and its variants (*"There but for the grace of God..."* and *"I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet"*) can help one to keep things in perspective and perhaps be more grateful and less whiny. But please don't let me know how much better it makes you feel about your life by comparing it with the imagined wretchedness of my life. Such condescension only irritates me. It makes me want to pivot on my wheels and peel off towards the nearest exit... Except that I'd fall off my pedestal.



FROM WHERE I SIT By Jo D'Archangelis

There are things that able-bodied people say in church (and elsewhere) which, if they don't make us people with disabilities actually cringe, they at least make us mentally shake our heads and roll our eyes at what they imply. They are often uttered with the most well-meaning of intentions and with the least awareness of their actual effect. Herewith a few of these memorable phrases and what I'm *really* thinking when I hear them:

"I don't think of you as disabled." Why not? I mean, it's not as though I had one of those "invisible disabilities," is it? I realize you're trying to compliment me by somehow separating the "real" me from my disability. But if you don't think of me as disabled, what do you think of me as? Able-bodied? Normal? This is like someone of the masculine persuasion saying to me, "I don't think of you as a woman; I think of you as much of a man as I am." But I don't regard either my gender or my disability as something disreputable. I'm not ashamed of having to use a wheelchair or of being physically weak or anatomically...different; these are simply facts of my life. Although my disability does not by any means constitute the whole of my identity, it has played and still plays an important part in making me who I am. And acknowledging who and what I am is okay.

"You are so inspiring." Puh-leeze.

Saints and great leaders are inspiring. Such people motivate you to go beyond your limitations, to attain to something higher or greater than yourself. I am neither a Mother Theresa nor a Martin Luther King Jr. Maybe what you mean by "inspiring"

Words I'd Like To Hear More Often In The Church:

"We don't care what you look like or what you can or cannot do. Welcome."

"You are made whole (made new, healed, saved, transformed, reconciled) just as you are in Christ."

"How can we help you?"

"How can you help us?"

is that once in a while you find me a bit admirable for one reason or another. (Even I occasionally amaze myself at what I can manage to do — e.g., maneuver my powerchair into its space on the floor of the sanctuary like an agitated crab backing into a conch-shell.) And I don't mind being thought of as a "roll model," even if a highly flawed one, for someone perhaps trying to cope with a disability. But, please—no pedestals. Perching me on a pedestal only accentuates the distance that already lies between you and me. I need friends more than admirers.

"All of us are handicapped (disabled, challenged, or the PC term

"IF ONLY YOU HAVE FAITH, YOU WILL BE HEALED"

I wish I could get people to understand that it takes a lot more faith to continue through life with a disability than it does to simply be healed. A healing is a one-time event. I need to believe in God for the grace to get through each day. I wonder if the Christians who pray for my healing would have the faith to press on despite living with a disability.

—Charles Nichols—
(legally blind and manic-depressive)

From *And He Will Give You Rest* Newsletter,
Rest Ministries, Inc. [December 1998]



QUESTION: DOES LADY BOUNTIFUL LIVE IN OUR CHURCH?

"We don't want you here," many in the church say to people who are different from them. A Lady Bountiful attitude which assumes that the ministry of the church is *to* "unfortunate individuals"—rather than *with* them—misses the whole point of the gospel.

—Harold H. Wilke in *Responding to Persons With Handicaps*—

A RESPONSE FROM A UNITED METHODIST WITH A DISABILITY:

The Lady Bountiful attitude appears to be the norm in most churches. Although the United Methodist Church expressed its concern in the 1976 General Conference, the general membership still has this attitude. The Church is working to correct this attitude, but the progress is slow.

Most churches are providing some physical needs such as ramps and handicap accessible restrooms. A few churches are providing more extended programs such as hearing aids in the seats, sign interpretation, and special classes and activities. These churches are probably more sensitive to the needs of persons with disabilities and are letting us be ourselves without treating us differently from other people.

There are several things the Church could do to help correct the Lady Bountiful attitude:

First, publish articles in church newsletters, bulletins, and conference newspapers about the challenges and feelings of people with disabilities. It would be even better to publish interviews with persons with disabilities or articles written by persons with disabilities. It is important to make people aware of who we are. We are teachers, parents, and peers.

Second, arrange to have learning and informational seminars for churches and conferences to educate people about disability issues, concerns, and problems.

Third, make it a point to involve people with disabilities in church services. One of the best ways to educate others about the abilities of people with disabilities is to make us visible in normal activities.

—Judy Smith, Member of the United Methodist Church of Arlington, Texas—

CHURCHES MEETING NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Westcliff United Methodist Church (Westcliff, Texas) has developed a **van ministry** in response to those members who cannot drive or have no transportation to and from Sunday school and worship services. A volunteer coordinator recruits drivers on a monthly rotation basis to drive the church's vans and transport members requesting the service. Other volunteers help persons with physical difficulties in and out of the van, but no wheelchair lift is currently available. The vans are also used for senior citizen and children's programs.

Based on *A Sunday Morning Van Ministry* by the Rev. Ron Albertson, from *Sonshine Enterprises Newsletter* [Winter 1995]

The First United Methodist Church (Escondido, Calif.) has announced the installation of two items that will help members of the congregation who have difficulties getting into and out of the office area and sanctuary. The first is a **chair-lift** to the pastors' offices and general office area. The second is a button-operated **automatically opening door** now offering easy access to the sanctuary from the patio. Both assistive devices were provided by the generosity of two members of the congregation.

Based on *Special Things For Special People* by Don Armstrong, from *Escondido [Calif.] First United Methodist Church Newsletter* [February 1998]

For four years the United Methodist Men at First United Methodist Church (Newark, Ohio) have designed and built **accessibility ramps** for families in the community. Prior to construction, members meet with the family to determine exact needs and then do a computer-generated design. Twice a month volunteer workers construct ramps that conform to guidelines established by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Materials are usually supplied by a supporting agency. Any group interested in learning to build ramps is urged to call First Church at [740] 349-7020 for more information.

Based on *Group Builds Ramps For Physically Challenged*, from *The Advocate* [Newark, Ohio]



A non-official, non-profit quarterly newsletter published for, by and about United Methodist adults with disabling conditions

Founder/Editor

Computer Layout/Graphic Design
Jo D'Archangelis

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Jo D'Archangelis, Editor, Wings

Editor's Mailing Address

592 West Ammunition Road, Apt. 1
Fallbrook, CA 92028-3191

Editor's Telephone/Fax

[760] 723-2668 (please call before faxing)

Editor's E-Mail Address

JODARLIS@aol.com

Wings Website

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A STATEMENT OF BELIEF

We believe that God is a creating and loving God. We believe that all persons are made in the image of God and that all Christians are members incorporate of the Body of Christ. The wholeness of the Body is dependent upon the participation of all its members.

We give testimony that God calls us as persons with disabilities and sends us into all capacities of leadership in the total ministry of the Church. Our bodies are the earthen vessels which God has chosen as the medium for the fulfilling of this ministry.

Jesus explicitly separated sin and disability. We proclaim this biblical truth that disability has no relation to sin. Further, because we are all made new in Christ, we proclaim that disability has no relationship to imperfection.

Human touch can be sacred and sacramental, part of the Mystery of Grace. We who have been touched with tenderness and handled with harshness have felt the comforting caress of God's Spirit.

We believe that our spiritual journeys, made in bodies with disabilities, have given us insights which are important to the vitality of the Church. All persons share the bond of pain and suffering; all persons have some form of disability: physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. The quality of shared pain and joy is central to what it means to be a human being. We affirm that cure and healing are separate and distinct and that wholeness is the deepest need we all share.

In the name of Christ we are hosts and agents of hospitality. We are the Church. We claim our place with others in reconstructing the table of Christ so that all may approach it together as brothers and sisters in Christ, one Body, united and whole.

**The Association of
Physically Challenged
Ministers of the United
Methodist Church
[October 1994]**



PRECIOUS CHILD OF GOD

By Janet Wolf

Fayette was an African-American woman living on the streets, struggling with mental illness and lupus. She came to sit on the steps of the church, refusing to come in, just listening from outside. It was hot, we had the door open, and I guess she heard the singing. She kept coming, arriving late and leaving early and for weeks never coming in the door. But eventually she did—come in the door, sit at the table, and even joined our new-member class.

In new-member class we talked about baptism, about what it means to be named by God's grace. I told them baptism was a holy moment, a moment when we could hear God saying: "You are beloved, a precious child of God and beautiful to behold!" Fayette liked that part. No matter what else we were talking about, she would bring us back to baptism. "When I'm baptized, I am?" And we soon learned to respond: "You are beloved, a precious child of God and beautiful to behold." "Oh, yes!" she'd exclaim and we'd go on until she brought it up again.

The day came. The choir was gathered around the pool, singing "Wade in the Water." Fayette went under, came spluttering up out of the icy cold water, drew in a new breath,

looked all around and asked: "And now I am?" And we replied: "You are beloved, a precious child of God and beautiful to behold." "Yes!" and she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later I got a call at 2 a.m. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So I went. I could hear her long before I saw her. I wasn't sure what she was saying, but I knew it was Fayette's voice. As I got closer to her room, I saw her pacing back and forth, her hair sticking up everywhere, blood and tears marking her face, bruises already starting, her dress torn and dirty and buttoned all wrong. And she was saying: "I am..."

When I got to the door, she saw me, looked straight at me and declared: "I am beloved, a precious child of God and..." At that moment, she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, turned back to me and said: "I am beloved, a precious child of God and..." Again she looked in the mirror, "And God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!"

Have you ever been baptized in the waters of amazing grace, named by God in such a way that in the worst of times you know who you are and the One to whom you belong?

From *Alive Now* [September/October 1997]

WITH THANKFUL HEART AND VOICE

Dear Lord, I come with thankful heart and voice
To sing a song of praise and thankfulness--
A gift, a blessing mine of your good choice.
Can I in love and joy and praise do less?
Creator of the vast domain of space,
The one who holds the earth within his palm,
Your power and might I understand by grace
And seek to find in life your promised calm.
I thank you that your handiwork abounds,
That fin and feather, twig and leaf you know,
That in my weakness Christlike love surrounds
In kindred spirits made divinely so.

You know when lowly sparrows fall to earth;
Then how much more you know my simple
worth.

—Marie Lovell Perrot—

Perrot, who is visually disabled,
makes her home in La Mesa, Calif.

THE TREE OUTSIDE THE CHANCEL WINDOW

By Jack Strout

There was a large evergreen tree among the shrubs and bushes just outside and a bit to the right as you looked out the chancel window behind the altar of the Claremont United Methodist Church. Sometimes during worship services as I observed it, I thought, "What an ugly tree!"

It was misshapen, its branches of varying—not tapering—lengths, irregularly spaced with conspicuous gaps and protruding at different angles. It was far from the ideal balanced and tapering Christmas tree, yet that was what it once was: a Christmas tree.

It was in the early eighties that our then associate pastor arranged for the securing and later planting of the tree. Boy Scouts did both jobs. First, using a borrowed truck, they went to the Chino area where they selected the tree, dug it out of the ground, roots and all, placed it in a tub, and brought it to the church

patio where, once decorated, it served as the Christmas tree for our first Alternate Christmas.



In other years it served as our "Mitten Tree." On Sundays prior to Christmas, children and others brought mittens which they hung up on the tree to be donated to one of our missions.

Eventually the tree, five or six feet tall, outgrew its tub, and the Scouts transplanted it to its outside location. That was no mean feat considering the size of the hole that had to be dug and the quantity of rocks that had to be removed.

I remember noting from the beginning how oddly and irregularly this tree was shaped. One could well imagine why this was so. It must have grown originally where other trees and foliage crowded it, denying it adequate space and light so that it reached out wherever it could to

secure these necessities.

While it grew into a large and imposing tree, it still retained its odd shape. Yet it stood there among the abundant, living greenery that enhanced our worship as our altar's *reredos*—a living backdrop to the altar.

That tree bore a striking resemblance in various ways to all of us. Everyone at numerous points in life has experienced deprivation or conflict of some sort and has reached out to compensate, often resulting in physical or personality "irregularities" that become a part of our characters.

Paralysis in all extremities has had profound effects upon my body and upon my spirit and personality as well. Others have had various "negative" family, educational, social, spiritual, as well as physical experiences which have affected their personalities as they sought to deal with them or overcome them.

But all of us, no matter how we "look," are privileged to stand in God's garden—just like that "ugly" tree—offering our testimony of praise and thanksgiving at God's altar.

Adapted from Beneath the Rainbow, a publication of the United Methodist Church of Claremont, Calif. Strout, a post-polio survivor, was a longtime member of the church and Minister of Education. Now retired, he resides in Whittier, Calif.

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Be like the bird that
pausing in her flight awhile
on boughs too slight,
feels them give way
beneath her
and yet sings,
knowing she has wings.

—Victor Hugo—



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