

Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.... Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)



A FAITHLETTER FOR UNITED METHODISTS WITH DISABILITIES AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM
WINTER 2005 — Vol. 15 Issue 3 No. 59

FROM WHERE I SIT: COME IN, SIT DOWN, HAVE SOMETHING TO EAT

By Jo D'Archangelis

(In the Fall 2004 issue we considered "Awareness" as one part of the foundation for "Accessibility." Here we consider "Acceptance" as the other part. Again, the following is loosely based on a talk given several years ago to a church group. — Editor)

Now in regard to Acceptance, i.e., the welcoming inclusion of all people in the total life of the Church, the question is: Why should the Church open itself to people with disabilities in the first place?

The traditional view is that acceptance is a matter of Christian charity. The Church sees itself as bending down to the broken peoples of the world and saying in effect: "Come, let us minister to you and take care of you, heal you and restore you." And certainly God calls the Church to care for those in need. Yet if carried too far in the case of people with disabilities, this view can lead to condescension and the inability to see what those of us with disabilities can and do bring to the Church.

Another view is that acceptance is a matter of justice. We people with disabilities are often confronted with attitudinal barriers such as indifference and ignorance as well as physical barriers within the Church. Our response is to demand that our "rights" to acceptance, accessibility, and equality be acknowledged. And certainly this is a valid re-

sponse in terms of civil rights and political or public institutions. But although the Church in its earthly form has its political aspects (as we are sometimes all too well aware), it is not essentially a political or public institution; it is the Body of Christ.

Acceptance then is neither a matter of compassion nor a matter of justice. The simple truth is that God calls everyone, no matter who or what they are, to be accepted into the Body of Christ, and we as Christians must respond to that call.

In 2 Samuel 9:1-13 there is a story about Mephibosheth, a little-known character in the Bible (little-known perhaps because his name is virtually unpronounceable). Meph-bo is the the son of Jonathan, David's closest friend, and grandson of Saul, the first king of Israel. Saul, Jonathan, and nearly all of the royal family have been wiped out in wars, rebellions, assassinations, and executions.

David is now king and one day he asks if there is any remaining member of Saul's family to whom he can show kindness. He is told that there is one re-

maining whose name is Mephibosheth and that he is mobility-impaired (it seems that at the age of five Meph-bo was dropped by his nursemaid while fleeing from enemies severely injuring both feet).

Meph-bo is brought into David's presence, and the king tells him that because of the great love he had for Jonathan his father, he will restore to Meph-bo the land that had been taken from the house of Saul and will provide people to cultivate and harvest it for him. But, most of all, he will give Meph-bo the honor of sitting and eating at the king's table for the rest of his natural life.

In Luke 14:15-24 Jesus tells the story of a man, apparently a wealthy and powerful man, who gives a huge banquet and invites friends, neighbors, business associates, and fellow church members. But one by one they all turn him down with various excuses: one has bought land and has to inspect it, one has bought a yoke of oxen and has to try them out, one just got married, etc. Enraged, the man tells his slaves to go out into the highways and lanes and get "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame," who he knows will gratefully and with no excuses whatsoever accept his invitation to come and eat at his table.

The Bible tells us that we are all God's children and no distinction is to be made between Jew and Greek, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, disabled and non-disabled. No one is permitted to

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 place obstacles in the way of anyone coming into the presence of the King and sitting with him at the banquet table. "Let the children come to me," he says, "and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven..." Matthew 19:13 (NRSV).

May I add that people with disabilities do not come empty-handed to the table? We bring our own gifts to the Church, and what we bring are usually the same as what able-bodied people bring, i.e., the ability to preach or teach or sing or even bake cookies.

But our gifts often have an added dimension. I hate to admit this, but some of us can be awfully inspiring at times—not because we are so saintly (in spite of what you may read, disability does not confer sainthood) but because our God-given capacities for resiliency, determination, and creativity, plus a faith sustained in less than perfect bodies and minds can provide hope and encourage-

ment to others living in difficult circumstances.

Yet more than that, we can be awfully challenging (that's *challenging* not *challenged*). For by our mere presence we challenge the Church to actively live out the core concepts of Christianity—brokenness and healing, forgiveness and grace, love and compassion, humility and tolerance—and not just pay them lip service.

One of the Church's main tasks is to set a place at the King's table for everyone. To change metaphors in mid-paragraph: we people with disabilities are fond of saying that without the full acceptance of us in the total life of the Church, the Church itself is disabled in its mission. Or as Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians (12:14-27), only when all the members, some weak and some strong but each with its own function, are working together can the Body of Christ be whole and what God intends it to be.

BLIND UM DONATES 2000 BOOKS

Mike Johnston, a member at Parkview United Methodist Church in Benton, Ark., who has lost his eyesight due to diabetes and a related stroke, recently donated a collection of 2000 books to the Saline County Public Library, the *Benton Courier* reported. "Reading was such a joy to Mike that he wanted to share his books with others who could enjoy them," said his mother, Genevieve Johnston, who added that the library will provide him with books on tape. Julie Hart, the library director, said the books made up the largest single collection the library has ever received.

From "Faith Watch," compiled by Bill Fentum, *UM Review* (Oct. 22, 2004).

SPIRITUAL WARRIORS

sometimes
the road to God
is full of stairs
this lifetime
I am riding on a
wheelchair
dear God
since you ask of me
to climb higher steps
please
lend me a ramp

— Kirsten Lykke Jensen —
From DAM (Winter 1992)



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UMC COMMITS TO ACCESSIBILITY

First Hollywood United Methodist Church, Los Angeles, Calif., recently committed itself to improving wheelchair accessibility to its facilities. According to senior pastor, Rev. Ed Hansen, the church will be renovating a restroom as well as installing a ramp and a wheelchair lift in the chancel area. If you know of any financial resources available for such accessibility projects, please contact Rev. Hansen at (323) 874-2104 or e-mail ehansen@hollywoodumc.org.

BISHOP COMMISSIONS PASTOR'S FAITHFUL GUIDE **By Woody Woodrick**

Gene has become such a part of the Rev. Eric Pridmore's life that when he was ordained an elder recently in The United Methodist Church, Gene was right there beside him. In fact, Gene was also commissioned into God's service—all the more remarkable considering that Gene, a Golden Retriever, is Pridmore's Seeing Eye dog.

"I'm not really a dog person," Pridmore said. "I'm a Gene person."

Pridmore, along with his wife, the Rev. Lisa Pridmore, serves as pastor of three churches in Mississippi. When Eric Pridmore was ordained at the Mississippi Annual Conference June 3 [2004] in Biloxi, Bishop Kenneth Carder also commissioned Gene, praying for him to "be a faithful servant to your master as he serves The Master."

About a year ago, Pridmore told the Bishop that he had bought a stole for Gene similar to the one the pastor would receive upon becoming an elder. Bishop Carder joked then that he should ordain Gene also, who had gone through the ordination process with his owner.

Since a dog cannot be ordained in The United Methodist Church, Bishop Carder instead commissioned Gene at the annual conference during the ordination service. As soon as Pridmore recited his ordination vows, he placed the stole he had bought for Gene around the dog's neck and then prayed.

Pridmore said that having Gene commissioned meant a great deal. Bishop Carder said he saw theological and personal reasons for acknowledging Gene's role in Pridmore's ministry.

"Gene is a gift from God who enables Eric to fulfill his ministry," Bishop Carder said. "Gene, then, is in ministry as a guide dog, whether or not he is conscious of that calling. Gene's presence in the service, obediently and compassionately fulfilling his role, was a sign of the 'peaceable Kingdom' which God intends for all creation."

Pridmore couldn't have Gene guide him

as he walked into the service with the other pastors in a single file because Gene is trained to help his master avoid other people. Another ordinance guided Pridmore into the service, while Gene walked beside him.

Pridmore admitted he wasn't sure what he was getting into when he first got Gene seven years ago while in graduate school at UMC-related Drew University in Madison, N.J.

But they became inseparable functionally and emotionally. Gene was even in the delivery room when the Pridmores' daughter was born.

But shortly after moving to Mississippi, Gene began losing weight and having skin problems. In 2002, veterinarians detected three tumors on Gene, who

was taken to Auburn University in Alabama, the closest veterinary school with an oncology department. Pridmore had to leave Gene for several days while doctors removed the tumors from three of Gene's legs.

Members of the Pridmores' churches—Goodman Memorial UMC in Cary, Rolling Fork UMC in Rolling Fork, and Clark's Chapel UMC in Vicksburg—raised more than enough money to pay the \$1200 to \$1500 for the surgery and follow-up care.

That kind of church support shone through again at ordination. "We had a wonderful ordination experience," Pridmore said. "It was nice to have the church, which disregards disabled folks at times, willing to acknowledge me as a servant of God just as I am."

**From The UM Review (July 30, 2004).
Woodrick is editor of The Advocate,
the newspaper of the Mississippi
Annual Conference of the UMC.**

WHERE OTHERS STAND: PRESBYTERIANS FOR DISABILITY CONCERNS

MISSION STATEMENT

It is the mission of Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC):

- ..To affirm that all people are created in the image of God
- ..To affirm, support, and advocate the gifts, rights, and responsibilities of persons with disabilities
- ..To affirm and enable the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the total life of the church
- ..To hold the church accountable for its brokenness
- ..To assist the church to fully accept persons with disabilities and to embrace their gifts

THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT

God created all of us in the image of God. *Then God said, Let us make humankind in our image.* (Gen. 1:26) This image is not a measurable characteristic or set of characteristics but is reflected uniquely in each person. God calls all of us to express this divine image through our unique characteristics. All our characteristics, including disabilities, are inseparable and valuable features of our unique indivisible persons. *For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* (Eph. 2:10) *Now there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit.* (1 Cor. 12:4) God gives all of us the unique gifts to obey the divine call. These gifts are needed by all. No one is dispensable or unnecessary. God invites all of us, including us with disabilities, to participate in God's ministry. *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* (1 Cor. 12:7)

**From the website of Presbyterians For Disability Concerns,
Presbyterian Church (USA), www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc.htm.**



SEMAR: HELPING PEOPLE LIVE IN WAYS GOD INTENDS

By Rev. Tom H. Johnson, Jr.

Rick stuck out his better foot to hold open the door of a shoe store, and we gradually maneuvered his wheelchair through the too narrow opening. It was a bright, sunny day, and I had volunteered to be the muscle for a shoe-buying expedition.

Classified as a quadriplegic after a high school swimming/diving accident, my first cousin began re-learning to breathe at a hospital in Tampa, Fla. Later in Warm Springs, Ga., Rick re-learned to clothe himself, cook, and even to drive. He then moved to California, earned an advanced degree, and lived and worked quite independently despite his disabilities.

But on this day the happy task was the purchase of a new pair of shoes. Rick regularly wore out one side of one shoe while pushing or pulling himself around in his wheelchair.

The upscale shoe store was brand-new, complete with a deep, stylish shag floor covering. As we proceeded to the center of the store, the proprietor burst from behind the storeroom curtain carrying an armful of shoe boxes and called, "I'll be with you in a second."

But when the manager turned and saw Rick, he stiffened, dropped most of his armload, and with hand waving in the air

commanded us, "Out! Out! Get out! You are ruining the carpet! I don't allow any of you in here! Your wheels crush the carpet cushion!"

A mere high school student, I was dumbfounded. But Rick, an ancient 21-year-old, firmly said, "I came to buy a

"That accident changed me--inside....It took a long time, but I'm a better person now than I would have been without it."

--Rick--

pair of shoes." Eventually, very eventually, we departed without new shoes, leaving behind several sets of meandering tracks in the deep, sumptuous shag.

The shoe store was my introduction to the often quite hostile world of "special needs" groups. Amazingly, Rick once told me that if he could re-live his life he would not undo the day of his accident, in spite of the deprivation, pain, and petty public humiliations he continued to suffer. "That accident changed me—inside. I really don't think I would be interested in other people like I am now if it hadn't happened. It took a long time, but...I'm a better person than I would have been without it."

SEMAR's entry to the world of "special needs" groups came not, like mine, from experience with traumatic

injury but from experience with developmental disabilities. After a series of personal encounters with the intense struggles of developmentally disabled individuals and their families, a concerned group was formed that would spend the next 20 years headquartered in Atlanta, Ga.

Formally organized in 1969 as an independent agency to meet the needs of mentally retarded people in the Southeast, SEMAR went on to nationally popularize the concept of group homes for the developmentally disabled (in fact, the "R" in SEMAR originally stood for "Retardation"). SEMAR intentionally related itself to the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church from which, until recently, it

received most of its funding.

After a name change in 1989 to the Southeastern United Methodist Agency for Rehabilitation, Inc., SEMAR moved from Georgia to North Carolina. The board of directors decided in the early 1990s to expand SEMAR's mission statement to include all "special needs" groups in keeping with the congressional Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990—persons who are blind, deaf, developmentally impaired, or who use a wheelchair, plus people with a whole range of "invisible" disabilities, e.g., psychological problems, learning disabilities, and chronic health impairments such as epilepsy, arthritis, cancer, cardiac problems, or HIV/AIDS.

My friend and relative Rick was able to receive care, social and rehabilitative services, and education in a timely fashion; he was a member of a close, extended, middle-class family and a very large network of friends. Many "special needs" people are not so fortunate.

Through the years SEMAR has made a significant and enduring difference in the lives of thousands of "special needs" individuals and their families. With your support we can continue to be the "muscle" enabling many people to live their lives in the ways that God intends.

Some projects SEMAR is at present involved in:

- six group home projects for developmentally disabled people
- four potential large senior communities with easy access apartment units
- one transitional housing/group home for persons who are HIV+
- disability easy-access audits for congregations and UM-related educational institutions; resource materials for Disability Awareness Sunday; and large print and braille worship bulletins
- disability sensitivity training during the summer for youth and adult groups

For further information or to send donations, contact:

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Freely adapted from a fund-raising letter (Oct. 5, 2004). Rev. Tom H. Johnson, Jr., is Vice President of Advancement for SEMAR.



KEEPING THE FAITH: TO CLAIM A HEALING

By Josie Byzek

The connection between faith and healing is considered rock-solid to many Pentecostal Christians, which creates considerable conflict for Bob Forte, senior pastor of Hope Ministry Family Fellowship in Allentown, Pa., a church he and his wife, Coleen, founded in 1998. In fact, he's been told to rebuke the demon of cerebral palsy his whole life.

"Many times people who are Pentecostal believe you claim a healing and it's done," says Forte. "Being Pentecostal, I truly believe that if you claim there is a healing it shall be done, but it doesn't necessarily mean the healing you're looking for. When I talk about a healing, I talk about a healing of spirit and a healing of perception."

Forte remembers a conversation he had with a fellow Pentecostal wheelchair-user. He related his belief that Christ has been through every pain known to human beings and she informed him that's impossible, because Christ never rolled in her wheelchair. "I told her Jesus did take a roll in your wheelchair, because when he was on the cross he cried out, 'Father, why have you forsaken me?' He felt forsaken by God, too. ... He knew what it was like to be alienated."

"...Once a man told him he shouldn't be a pastor because pastors must fit a certain mold, be of no blemish and so on. "I said, 'What reality are you from? I have news for you—that's what scripture says, but let me just tell you that all the people God used [in the Bible] were losers!" Look at Moses, Forte told his detractor. "The guy did God's work and he could hardly talk." But Moses was Old Testament and ministered before Pentecost, the man replied. "So then I said, 'What about Paul?' and then he's like, 'Well, his issue isn't really well described.'"

Forte chuckles, recalling the debate. "I've heard every theory of what it [Paul's condition—the 'thorn in the side'] could

be, but obviously he had some kind of issue. It's just too bad he didn't put down what it was. Boy, that could make life so much easier if we just knew."

...Forte's ministry is rooted in the struggles his disability forces on him.

**"...I know what it's like to have people wonder how you can do the things you do...But I tell people, this disability of mine doesn't matter to God because he uses me anyway."
-- Rev. Bob Forte --**

Since his church began as an outreach to people living with HIV, it attracts many people from the gay community, some of whom assume he can't understand how hard their lives are since he is straight and married. But they're mistaken, he tells them. "When someone says to me, 'You don't know what it's like to be prejudiced against, you don't know what it's like to have doors

slammed in your face,' I can say, 'Oh yes I do. I do know what it's like. I deal with it all the time.'"

Growing up with cerebral palsy has given Forte an intimate understanding of the dynamics of oppression. "I know what it's like to have lost jobs, and I know what it's like to have people wonder how you can do the things you do," he says. "But I tell people, this disability of mine doesn't matter to God because he uses me anyway."

In part because of his experience as a person with a disability, Forte believes his church needs to be a place that lifts and builds people up. "In our church [people] are not being torn apart with doctrines and theology and all the 'don'ts.' I tell people when you make a mistake you don't need to know you made the mistake, you're fully aware of it. I don't have to point that out to you, that's not my job. My job is to tell you about the benefits of being a Christian, the benefits of Jesus Christ."

Excerpted by permission from
New Mobility (Dec. 2002),
www.newmobility.com.

ONE PEOPLE

Because of sin
we are a people separated
from God, restored
to relationship
only by God's grace and love
in Jesus Christ,
his sacrifice.

Could we remember
Jesus also calls us to relationship
with each other,
to love one another,
and that separating ourselves
by net worth—worth?—
insulating, isolating ourselves
from those unlike us,
we fail our Lord?

God, help us to see with
your eyes,
that we are one community,
with goods and gifts
to serve,
and may we see that you came
for all—
that you came
for the least.

— Roberta Porter —

From *Alive Now* [March/April 1999]



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SUCCESSFULNESS/FRUITFULNESS

There is a great difference between successfulness and fruitfulness. Success comes from strength, control, and respectability. A successful person has the energy to create something, to keep control over its development, and to make it available in large quantities. Success brings many rewards and often fame. Fruits, however, come from weakness and vulnerability. And fruits are unique. A child is the fruit conceived in vulnerability, community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching one another's wounds. Let's remind one another that what brings us true joy is not successfulness but fruitfulness.

— Henri Nouwen —

From *Bread For The Journey* (Harper: San Francisco, 1997)



I Am Disabled And...

LORD, I hear you say through your prophet, "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth...." You LORD are aware of the shame many of us bear because of our disabilities and yet you honor us openly and completely. May we likewise honor ourselves and each other as you honor us.

Affirmation #1 based upon Zephaniah 3:19-20 (NRSV) by Ken Tittle and Mariposa Ministry and Mariposa Online.

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And Those Who Care About Them”

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