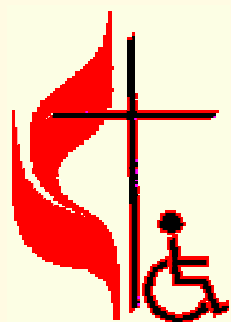


Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles....Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)



Wings

A FAITHLETTER FOR UNITED METHODISTS WITH
DISABILITIES AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM
Fall 2008 — Vol. 19 Issue 2 No. 74



FROM WHERE I SIT: HOW TO WIN FRIENDS, INFLUENCE PEOPLE, AND BE A HAND-CYCLING CHAMPION By Jo D'Archangelis

The following is a highly expanded and modified excerpt from a talk originally given at First United Methodist Church in El Cajon, Calif., in July of 2001.

One other thing I learned, or re-learned, from my experience with Mariposa Ministry and the California-Pacific Conference disability retreats was: **Just because you're disabled doesn't mean you can't be interesting and attractive.** More than that, you can be interesting and attractive not *in spite of* your disability but, at least partially, *because of* your disability.

Hel-lo!?! Now that's a truly radical idea—we can see our disabilities as helping to make us more attractive and interesting? I must admit this was one of the most difficult things I've had to learn (and still, frankly, have occasional trouble with). We—especially those of us with obvious mobility impairments and weird-looking bods—tend to believe that our disabilities distance us from other people rather than draw people to us, that we have to hide or downplay our disabilities before we can engage in meaningful social interactions.

But, really, when you think about it,

it's often the person who catches us off-guard, who confounds our negative expectations, who pleasantly surprises us by not acting or reacting the way we've been led to believe he or she will—that is the kind of person who catches our attention in a new, positive way.

To be that kind of person many of us have to look at ourselves in a new, positive way and bring our *total* disability experience—our limitations; our wheelchairs, crutches, braces, and other paraphernalia; our odd, unconventional bodies, movements, and speech—into play with other people.

This, first of all, requires imagination and creativity. We have to learn to think outside that little box (with wheels) that society often puts us into. After all, we are often forced to use “different” ways to achieve goals that both disabled and non-disabled people have—e.g., winning an athletic medal on a hand-cycle rather than on a bicycle. This unorthodox approach to daily

life already sets us apart, and there's no good reason why this “different-ness” can't be turned into something positive.

It also requires honesty and humor. We have to be open and honest with ourselves and with others about who we are and what we are without shame or apology. And we have to be able to laugh at ourselves, disabilities and all, while at the same time poking holes in the stereotypes society imposes on us. People who don't take themselves too seriously are easy to like.

Most of all, this new, positive way of looking at ourselves requires self-confidence, something that too many of us with disabilities unfortunately have in short supply. But the sad truth is, others aren't going to find us attractive or interesting if we don't find ourselves attractive or interesting.

Sometimes confidence-building needs a little external stimulus—from changing the color of our hair (or just covering up all that gray) to wearing something that looks really cool. I know, this sounds shallow and superficial, but we live in a shallow and superficial society and, anyway, my motto is: if it makes you feel better about yourself, do it.

Basically, of course, the source of our self-confidence has to be internal, that inner sense of our own self-worth and worthiness fostered by family, friends, teachers, mentors, and for us as Christians by our faith. We believe in God, yes, but perhaps equally as important is God believes in us.

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BEING, NOT DOING

By Stacey Patrick

It was as if God replied to me through my mother's love: "That's the point. That's the point, my precious child. And finally you are beginning to learn how helpless you are—and how my love has nothing to do with what you do for me. I love you just as much when you are lying on a sickbed as when you are ministering to others."

Soon after this the words of a book by Henri Nouwen confirmed this truth to me:

First of all our life itself is the greatest gift to give—something we constantly forget. When we think about being given to each other,

what comes immediately to mind are our unique talents....However, when focusing on talents we tend to forget that our real gift is not so much what we can do but who we are.... As I grow older I realize that the greatest gift I have to offer is my own joy of living, my own inner peace, my own silence and solitude, my own sense of well-being.

That's it, I realized. That's exactly why God is breaking and pruning me. And this is what he has been whisper-

ing in my ear ever since I became sick: "It's not your activities, skills, and abilities I want, it's you."

The lie of society—even Western Christian culture—had fooled me into believing that what we do is more important than who we are. Thus I had come before God, my outstretched hands filled with plans, accomplishments, and abilities to offer him. Yet as I presented him the good things I thought made me more acceptable in his sight, he wanted only my empty hands—ready to receive what he chose to give and to do in my life. Only when I relinquished all I had been offering him to earn his love were my hands finally freed to receive his grace.

Recognizing our struggle with weakness, Craig Barnes writes, "Our needs always provide the opportunity to renew our dependency on the grace of God. What we call need or a 'defect' can become our greatest altar for true worship." As I give him my "defects" and my limitations, I allow his power to be perfected through me. I no longer need to curse my physical limitations but can accept and even glory in them, for when I am weak, then I am truly strong. Then God uses my weakness to transform me into a vessel for his use, not my own.

Who I am becoming is God's primary concern, not what I can or can't do, as I had so often believed. He loves me not because of what I do, but because he loves me—he chose me. As I learn to rely solely upon his love and grace, I learn to be still, to cease striving, and to know that he is God (Psalm 46:10). When I embrace my weakness, I find that his grace truly is sufficient.

Excerpted from *Living With Mystery: Finding God in the Midst of Unanswered Questions* (Bethany House Publishers: June, 2001)

After Patrick was diagnosed with systemic lupus at age 27, God led her to begin writing. Both lupus and writing are areas in which she's seen God's "power perfected through weakness." She has been frequently published in *Discipleship Journal* and other Christian magazines. Patrick lives near San Francisco.



A non-profit, non-official quarterly newsletter for United Methodists with disabling conditions and all others interested in the issues of disability, accessibility, and the church

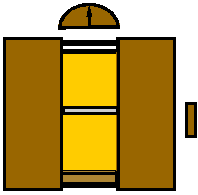
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Jo D'Archangelis

CORRESPONDENCE Send all correspondence—including feedback, original writings, items from other sources, and changes of address—to Jo D'Archangelis, Editor, at: **Mailing Address** 592 West Ammunition Road, Apt. 1 Fallbrook, CA 92028 **Telephone/Fax** 760-723-2668 (please call before faxing) **E-Mail** jodarlis@aol.com

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CHRIST IN THE ELEVATOR

By Lynna Nicholas

Nicholas has Charcot-Marie-Tooth, a genetic neuromuscular disease, and uses crutches and a wheelchair for mobility.

For the first 35 years of her life, she was relatively asymptomatic and lived a fairly "normal" life as a chemist, wife, and middle-class soccer mom. As her disease began progressing, however, she began a journey of spiritual growth and healing that led her back to church after a 20-year absence. Ironically, her disability was the catalyst that enabled her to begin the journey towards self-acceptance. She has a passion for churches to be more inclusive and honoring of people on the margins in our society and is employed at her church—Kern Memorial United Methodist Church in Oak Ridge, Tenn.—as Director of Compassion Ministry. Nicholas gave the following presentation to members of her church's Administrative Council who were discussing a costly proposal to install an elevator in the church facilities.

Recently, I was blessed to purchase a house here in Oak Ridge. I renovated the bathroom before moving in and am in the process of building a new porch deck.

Now what does that have to do with building renovations at Kern Memorial? Let me explain: Before I moved, I rented a house. It was becoming increasingly difficult for me to live in that house. There were days, my weaker days, when I would fear that I wouldn't be able to get off the toilet. It was a struggle full of danger. Imagine—just standing up from the toilet!

Showering was also becoming dangerous. Swinging my legs over the side of the bathtub was becoming an athletic feat. I feared falling in the shower and remaining there for a long time, injured, cold, naked, and alone. (And when my fears would really run amok, I would picture the whole Oak Ridge Fire Department coming onto the scene to rescue me!)

What unspeakable joy it was to move into my new house with its freshly renovated bathroom! I easily stand up from the toilet using strategically placed grab bars. I sit on a built-in bench in my walk-in shower. I luxuriate in the ease and am filled with gratitude for my new-found safety.

The new porch will be constructed on the same level as my house, and I am so excited at the prospect of being able to go out into my backyard, soak up

some sunshine, throw a ball for my black Lab, maybe even nurture a container garden! For me, it's like coming back to life again after deprivation, fear, and struggle.

Before I became disabled, I would never have imagined that a regular-height toilet or a few stairs could have so much potential to impair quality of life. Surely, most if not all the people in this church have been confronted by stairs, and I bet that many of them didn't give them a second thought. Some of us, however, have stood at the top or bottom of a long flight of scary, challenging stairs and had to dig deep to make it to a Sunday School class—or even to worship, if we wanted to enter through the "real" entrance to the sanctuary. Some of us have experienced heartache at finding ourselves marginalized or excluded because of architectural barriers that have prevented us from encountering Christ

through community with other believers as freely or as fully as we desire.

We are here today to talk about installing an elevator to make our church more accessible to people who struggle with those architectural barriers. I know that every single person in this room feels compassion for those who find stairs difficult or even impossible. And you're probably thinking, "OK, we do have a few crippled people in our congregation..." (and you're probably counting them on the fingers of one hand), "...and we do have some people who aren't as spry as they used to be..." (and maybe you've started counting them on the fingers of your other hand). And if you are the logical type, you might be thinking, "Hmm...maybe we do have enough of a need to justify the expense, but I will reserve judgment until I hear the actual cost. If it's not too much, maybe we could do this for those people."

Actually, of course, each of you in this room will eventually become one of "those people" if you live long enough. However, I am going to ask you to clear those thoughts from your mind and imagine with me a different way of looking at this. What if we suspended human need and cost justification for just a moment? Instead I want us to stop and listen for the voice of the one who came to honor the least, the last, and the lost: "*Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.*" And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been

(ELEVATOR continued on page 4)

LIGHT, WARM, FILL, HEAL By John Winn

O God,
Light the dark corners of our minds.
Warm the cold places in our hearts.
Fill the empty chambers of our spirits.
Heal the brokenness in our lives.
Amen.

From *Alive Now* (Nov./Oct. 2006). Winn originated the Center for Pastoral Effectiveness for the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church.

(ELEVATOR continued from page 3)



done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.'" [Luke 14:21-23 NRSV] This passage and so many others reveal God's heart for the marginalized: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" [Luke 15:4 NRSV] And: "And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" [Matt. 25:40 NRSV]

What if we viewed the installation of an elevator as a gift to God? What better gift could we give God than to recognize who he is and what he desires? Could it be that God could delight in an elevator as much as a pipe organ? As much as a stained glass window?

If we really want to stretch our thinking about this elevator—what if it came to be for us a sign of hope? Hope that

we can never be too weak, too useless, too old, too disabled, too sinful, too...whatever, because the King of Kings symbolically stands in the door of that elevator and beckons, "Come all of you who are weary. I have prepared room for you. I desire abundant life for you. You, my beloved, my heart's delight!"

Yes, this elevator is about much more than providing a practical way for people to get from place A to place B. It is really about recognizing and honoring God's heart, a heart that prioritizes so much differently from our human hearts. It is about recognizing that each of us is the blind, the lame, the poor, the one sheep for whom Christ died. We are all weak. And we are all loved beyond our wildest dreams. I can't wait to meet Christ on that elevator. What about you?

(Editor's Note: Nicholas' church is now embarking on a pledge drive to finance the elevator project.)

Nicholas' e-mail address is: lynnanicholas@hotmail.com.



MINISTRY AIDS HOMEBOUND RESIDENTS By Amy Green

Jane Hart gave up a 12-year job with ConAgra Foods to start Hart Felt Ministries in 2004 with one volunteer and one client. Today the ministry in Jacksonville, Fla., nurtures 156 homebound elderly and disabled clients with more than 100 volunteers from area churches who perform such chores as cleaning, shopping for groceries, and lawn mowing.

Hart is the only full-time paid employee of the ministry, which is supported by donations and grants. City leaders honored two volunteers for their work in 2006, but Hart doesn't take credit for the ministry's successes. "I tell people this is not my ministry," said Hart, 58, who attends Beach United Methodist Church [in Jacksonville]. "This is God's work."

Hart was nudged toward volunteerism after the death of her mother and husband in 1990. She was drawn to Jeremiah 29:11—*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.* [NRSV] She became a Stephen Minister, participating in the nondenominational ministry providing congregational care in times of grief or trauma, and began volunteering with a hospice.

Then she felt a call from God to help those who are disabled or elderly. Hart said, "Sometimes I feel like I don't really have my feet on the ground, that I'm somewhere between heaven and earth, because the things I get to see and the people I get to meet are such precious people out there who are just struggling."

From a story in the e-Review newsletter of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, as adapted on the *Interpreter Magazine* website (February 2, 2007).

COMMUNITY OF FAITH By Roberta Porter

Called by Christ
to community--
to worship, to pray, to learn,
to care,
this

is not a place for us to be
unchanged, safe,
exclusive.

Here
we bring our common brokenness
and blessing;
healing happens
by God's grace,
and our gifts are given
for service.

Here, in Christ's love and compassion,
we belong to each other,
here the stranger is welcomed,
and called
friend.

From *Alive Now* (Jan./Feb. 1999).



AUTISM AND FAITH: A REVIEW

By Zelle Hammond

***Autism And Faith: A Journey Into Community*: Mary Beth Walsh, Ph.D., Alice F. Walsh, M.Div., and William C. Gaventa, M.Div., editors; The Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, Department of Pediatrics, and The New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community (May 2008). 46 pp.; \$5.00 ea. including shipping. Website: <http://rwjms.umdnj.edu/boggscenter>; telephone: 732-235-9300; mailing address: Boggs Center, 325 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08903-2688.**

I am a retired Special Education Teacher and Autism Consultant for school districts here in the State of California. I first encountered the phenomenon of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in 1969 when I stood before a class of 12 developmentally disabled students, 5 of whom had Autism. Since then I have been on my own journey with Autism from a time when it was virtually unknown to the general public to today when it has been called an “emerging epidemic” affecting an estimated 1 out of every 125 people. I am also a Deaconess with the United Methodist Church, commissioned to serve beyond the church in a social worker capacity.

Autism is a complex, mostly invisible neurological condition. Those who have ASD can range anywhere from being severely cognitively-impaired and unable to talk all the way to being very intelligent and verbal. All forms of Autism are distinguished, however, by a limited ability to relate to other people including parents and other family members and by bizarre, repetitive body movements. Persons with Autism generally have difficulty in perceiving what other people are thinking or feeling—what cognitive neuroscientists call “theory of mind”—and in responding to common social cues such as facial expressions and body language.

Reading the resource booklet, *Autism And Faith: A Journey Into Community*, was a wonderful surprise. This was the first time I had seen Autism connected with the topic of theology. So much of our faith practice is putting our beliefs into words and rituals, especially on the

community level, and this can present quite a challenge to a person with Autism and to those working with people with Autism. I was also glad to see that the booklet is very ecumenical in nature; the people whose stories are featured in the booklet and the authors of the individual chapters are all from differing faiths and religious traditions.

The editors state in the “Preface” that the booklet was written “so that others do not feel alone” in their at-

tempts to include persons with Autism in their faith communities. *Autism And Faith* is largely a compilation of stories of families who have had to take the lead in getting their faith communities to accept and include family members and other loved ones with Autism. Many of the parents recognized that some of the adaptations used in their schools and educational centers for Autism could be appropriated and implemented by faith communities as well. As a result of their experience, the booklet is full of practical suggestions and tips for getting started into this “journey into community.”

Each of the chapters is written by a different author or set of authors from different fields, but all of the authors have a family member with Autism or work closely with people with Autism. Just a few of the topics covered in this

(*REVIEW continued on page 6*)

UNIQUE VOICE ELECTED UMC BISHOP

By Rev. Nancy J. Webb

The Association of Physically Challenged Ministers of the United Methodist Church and the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church joyfully announce the election of the Rev. Dr. Peggy Ann Johnson, most recently pastor of the Christ United Methodist Church of the Deaf in Baltimore, Md., to the office of Bishop in the United Methodist Church at the Northeast Jurisdictional Conference on July 17, 2008. Besides being a bishop for the whole Church, Bishop Johnson will be a unique voice in the Council of Bishops for people with all sorts of disabilities—physical, sensory, cognitive—as well as for those with the challenges of mental illness.

In her service of consecration in Harrisburg, Pa., Bishop Johnson both spoke and signed the Communion liturgy. Members of the Christ United Methodist Church of the Deaf were present and signed the hymn, *I Have Decided To Follow Jesus*, while a voice interpreter recited the words to the accompaniment of a large drum. These words spoke eloquently of the attitude Bishop Johnson has had towards her ministry since her original call: I have decided to follow Jesus./ I have decided to follow Jesus./ I have decided to follow Jesus./ Change my mind? No!/ Change my mind? No!! This English interpretation of American Sign Language says it all.

We rejoice that God continues to be at work in our world!

Adapted from July 18, 2008, e-mail announcement. Webb is pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Baltimore, Md.

(REVIEW continued from page 5)



very comprehensive guide are the value of faith, Autism and the family, inclusive faith practices for children with Autism, how congregations can support adolescents with Autism, and how adults with Autism can be brought into ministry and service. One chapter, "My Story," is written by a person with Autism.

This booklet inspired me to approach families of my acquaintance who have members with Autism and to ask them to share their experiences concerning faith communities. They said it can be a difficult situation because many faith community leaders and workers are well-meaning but untrained and much explaining and sharing has to be done. But all families continue to try and provide a place and opportunity for those with Autism.

I am also talking with people with Autism who can communicate about faith at this level. They have a unique per-

spective and often see things in unexpected ways, and I feel I can learn much from them. Not only can people with Autism and their families gain from being part of a faith community, faith communities can gain from including people with Autism and their families.

I recommend *Autism And Faith: A Journey Into Community* for all parents, family members, teachers, faith community leaders and workers, and anyone else interested in the areas of disability and religion. Both informational and encouraging, it is an easy read of a difficult subject.

Hammond resides in San Marcos, Calif.
Her e-mail address is: zelleaut@cox.net.

Often we are made to believe that self-deprecation is a virtue, called humility. But humility is in reality...the grateful recognition that we are precious in God's eyes and that all we are is pure gift. To grow beyond self-rejection we must have the courage to listen to the voice calling us God's beloved sons and daughters, and the determination always to live our lives according to this truth.

— Henri Nouwen —

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



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