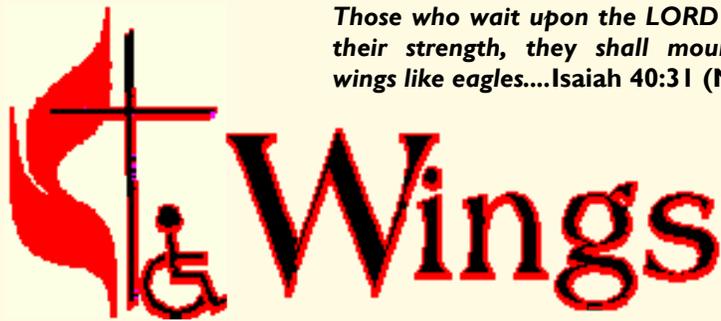


Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles....Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)



A FAITHLETTER FOR UNITED METHODISTS WITH
DISABILITIES AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM
Spring 2007 — Vol. 17 Issue 4 No. 68



FROM WHERE I SIT: FLESH AND BLOOD By Chaplain Van Dickens, USN

Editor's Note: Our guest columnist, Chaplain Van Dickens, is a United Methodist minister serving as a chaplain in the United States Navy. Currently with the First Marine Division, Camp Pendleton, he works closely with Marines returning from Iraq who have sustained disabilities as a result of combat injuries. Below is the message Chaplain Dickens gave at the Disability Awareness Sunday service at Fallbrook (Calif.) United Methodist Church on October 22, 2006.

There is a passage from Isaiah in chapter 58, verses 6 and the following: *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

I have always focused on the earlier words, but lately I have been aware of this last phrase, "your own flesh and blood." Such powerful words from a man who warned his people against evil and who reached out with the mercy of God for the suffering they had received from the war with Babylon. He now urges them to practice what they profess through acts of compassion.

I think of these words in the light of a certain band of brothers and sisters increasing in our midst, our disabled vet-

erans. Before they were disabled, they heeded the call to serve in harm's way for a Godly cause, not to spread violence but to stop it, to "loose the chains of injustice" to quote the prophet.

They made the sacrifices that few others have had to do. Better than anyone else, they know what the cost of freedom and democracy is. They are the ones who best know the price that must be paid. They are the ones who are still alive to hear the words of Jesus and to come nearest to appreciating those words when he says, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends," inasmuch as many of them nearly did so.

When disabled veterans come home from war, they are faced with a double challenge. First, there is the challenge of adapting to the disability. Some disabilities are obvious, the loss of a limb or an eye. Others are less visible—mental

complications from a concussion, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Gulf War Syndrome, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or a cancer that manifests years after exposure to harmful chemicals such as Agent Orange.

These veterans must adjust and learn to accept the hand that war has dealt them. There are efforts at easing the transition for them, such as the Wounded Warrior Centers that are adjacent to most of our military hospitals where they can be with others who are experiencing the same journey back to wholeness. Too ill to resume normal life but not so ill as to require hospitalization, they can share their burdens with others who know first-hand what it is like to be in war and to be wounded as well as the slow, painful process of healing in mind, body, and spirit.

Eventually, disabled veterans enter society as civilians who have vivid memories of a different world that few have seen or witnessed. No one, no one can imagine what war is like unless having been there. There are no words to adequately describe it. Dante's *Inferno* probably comes close to its description; it is hell on earth.

It is up to the veterans to somehow find a place inside their minds, inside their souls, where the war can be put to rest and peace be found. But the memo-

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ries themselves are anything but peaceful. They come at night to haunt the veterans, pursuing them like mad dogs that bite at their heels the faster the veterans try to run. Disabled veterans may turn to drinking or drugs in a desperate effort to find "wholeness" again.

Hopefully, prayerfully, some of these veterans will turn to God and, finding courage from above, will at last turn and face the dogs of war, acknowledge them, and share their burdens with others. Eventually they will place their burdens on the shoulders of the One who knows our griefs and shares our sorrows. They will make peace with their conditions, with themselves, and with God, by the grace of God. That is their first challenge.

The second challenge can be just as hard: facing the public. This week I watched a flock of pigeons land a few yards from me. In the flock was one pigeon who hopped instead of walked, and as I looked closer, I noticed that it had only one leg. It was interesting because I seemed much more aware of its disability than the other pigeons who simply saw it as one of them.

You and I are so attuned to the differences in each other that we sometimes fail to appreciate the fact that the disabled veteran, or anyone who is disabled, is essentially the same as you and I—someone who is just trying to make it through another day, hoping for the same opportunities and joys in life as we are.

Increasingly you and I will meet disabled veterans, not only from previous

wars but those from this war. They are so young and full of life and dreams. My prayer is that when we meet them, we will treat them no differently than birds of a feather, or better still, as brothers and sisters.

Inspired by the prophet, Jesus said, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." I believe he could easily have added, "I was disabled, and you treated me as your own flesh and blood."

STEPPING STONES

By Jane Eckert

Can I name each day one thing I believe with all my heart?

What do I hold as sacred and worth the commitment? What are my affirmations? What are the things I know to be true about what is lasting?

What do I grieve?

I cannot mourn the whole mountain at once, but I can feel one thing at a time, miss it deeply, savor its memory. Something about holding it close helps me let it go.

What do I desire?

Everything back to normal? Of course. But be real. We're in a "new normal" now which is why this very sorting must be done. Standing here, looking forward from here, what do I hope? What do I dream?

And now, given today and these reflections, what do I choose?

Here is where I find victory over the demon of helplessness. I have the belief, the release, the yearning, and the power to take the next step.

From *Alive Now* (Sept./Oct. 2006).



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

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LIVING WITH THE ALPHABET FAMILY

By Rev. Virginia (Ginny) Anderson

I have Myasthenia Gravis (MG), my roommate has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and Josh, the newest one in our household, has Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). Also in our little Cape Cod house is a collie with anger management problems (MADD), a Bichon Frise (little fuzzy dog) with three legs due to cancer (CA), and a fourteen year-old cat with no diagnostic letters except BOSS. Welcome to the Alphabet Family!

None are related, two are longtime friends, and one is a kid. Two are over 65 and one is 11. One has two masters' degrees, one a high school degree, and one struggles to get through sixth grade. How we came to be a family is, we just did.

Josh came to live with us when he was in first grade because with his overwhelming problems he could no longer function in a family. He is of normal intelligence but suffers from a mild form of autism, some developmental delays, severe depressive episodes, and emotional problems related to attachment disorder. Add to Josh's multiple problems two over-sixty-five-year-olds with alphabet attachments plus the usual joys of aging and raising children today in general and—you have a challenge!

Josh is a professional-level manipulator. He can catalogue all of our belongings and their places of residence, a mixed blessing for two "olders" dealing with "senior moments." "Mr. Charming" alternates with "Attila the Hun" when his every wish is not our command or when we interrupt an obsession. And his obsessions are many and frightening. Boundaries are non-existent to Josh. Much of the time he is sad, angry at his limitations, and sensitive to the fact that he is different. He is learning to control

a temper that flares into violence occasionally.

On the upside, Josh is a "sponge" learner, never forgetting anything or anyone. He is loyal to his friends, fam-

Once a perfectionist but now a parent with a disability raising a child with a disability, I have given perfectionism up permanently. This also gives others permission to be who they are.

ily, and his ideals. He can be "rolling on the floor funny," be massively affectionate, and sing his heart out. Unlike most children in the autistic spectrum, he is very social.

Josh has rescued us from the boredom of bridge and golf and the endless worry about arthritis and long-term care plans. Instead we read about child development, history, and anything Josh is interested in. Disney movies, children's museums, etc., are more fun than AARP planned travel anyway.

Josh is loved and accepted by the exceptional congregation I serve in Syracuse [N.Y.]. He is accepted for

who he is just as the rest of us are. In another year, he will be confirmed there. They understand our problems and love us anyway.

The impact that Josh has had on my ministry is considerable. Raising a child has changed my perspective about many things. I did not become a full-time parent until I was over sixty. I have a greater empathy with and understanding of people raising children. I have become an advocate for persons with mental illnesses and other disabilities. My own physical disability has taught me patience with and understanding of the

problems of others. Once a perfectionist but now a parent with a disability raising a child with a disability, I have given perfectionism up permanently. This also gives others permission to be who they are.

Josh is on an incredible faith journey of his own. He listens to my sermons (really!) and we discuss them. Every Sunday on the way home he asks to stop at his special place along the Erie Canal where he likes to spend time "talking to God." When I am not working, we go to a Friends Meeting (I am UCC/Quaker.)

(ALPHABET FAMILY continued on page 4)



DID YOU KNOW IT SAYS IN THE UMC BOOK OF DISCIPLINE...?!?

Conference Agencies

Whenever possible, meetings scheduled by the annual conference and its districts, boards, or committees should be held in places that are accessible to persons with disabilities even if this mean scheduling meetings outside church-related facilities.

In the nomination and election of the membership on councils, boards, and agencies of the annual conference, special attention shall be given to the inclusion of clergywomen, youth, young adults, older adults, persons from churches with small memberships, *persons with disabilities*,* and racial and ethnic persons, in keeping with policies for General Church agencies.

From *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2000*, ¶608.

*Italics added.

(ALPHABET FAMILY continued from page 3)



There in the silence it is the custom of parents to sit and hold their children or for older ones to put a loving arm around them. Josh loves this special time together.

What is the glue that holds us together? It is our faith, a wonderful church fellowship, friends and neighbors, and good mental health and school systems. We also sing a lot, drum together, and try to laugh when we are not crying or screaming. I love my little Alphabet Family. They enrich my life and my ministry. Chicken broth may be good for us at our age, but Alphabet Soup is a lot more interesting.

Slightly altered from *That All May Worship And Serve*, the newsletter of the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries (Jan-Feb. 2005). Anderson is pastor of Friedens UCC in Syracuse, NY.

DORIS' STORY: RETURNING TO SERVICE

This story is fiction, but it represents the experience of many of us people of faith who live with a disability:

Doris lived for many years with degenerative disk disease. The deterioration of hard disks pinched on her spinal column causing her great pain. While disk surgery is risky, Doris was in her late 50's and believed she still had much to offer if she could get some relief from the pain. She especially wanted to return to volunteer service at her church. She had stopped volunteering because of her back pain.

After the surgery, her recovery was long and discouraging. She had to use a wheelchair to move about, but after

some time she became quite adept at maneuvering her chair.

One day, Doris decided she had progressed enough to return to church and resume some of her volunteer activities.

What she discovered surprised and upset her. The people at church were glad to see her, but they also assumed she could no longer perform her volunteer service because of her disability. They did not ask her to help with the rummage sale. They did not ask her to serve on any committee of the church. They assumed she needed to be served so they did not ask her to participate on the hospitality committee. They kept trying to do things for her and assumed she could no longer contribute as a volunteer.

The effect on Doris was devastating. She felt isolated, unappreciated, discounted, and dismissed. She began to feel invisible in her own church. As time went by, she eventually stopped going to church altogether.

Doris' story is not uncommon. Well-meaning people make assumptions about what a person with a disability can and can't do. Instead of asking the person directly, they simply assume the disability prevents any further volunteer service, when in fact it's their own assumptions and attitudes that prevent participation by the person with a disability.

We people with disabilities have gifts to share. Ask us what we want to do. Include us in decisions that affect us. Don't deprive us of our right to decide our level of participation.

Adapted from *DAMI NEWS*, the newsletter of Disability Awareness Ministries, Inc.

Joy and sorrow are never separated....Joy and sorrow are the parents of our spiritual growth.

— **Henri Nouwen** —

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



OBSTACLES

By Jo D'Archangelis

The way seems filled with obstacles

Mountains so impossibly high to climb you have to stop every few minutes to catch your breath (in exhaustion? in wonder?)

Millstones you stub your toes against

Banana peels you slip on (to great comic effect)

Pebbles bruising your feet so badly you walk with a limp

Darkness so deafening you inch forward by feeling with your fingertips

Silence so thick you look feverishly for a street sign, an arrow pointing in the right direction, a mall "You Are Here" map

Multitudes of steps and stairways and broken bridges forcing you to make detours through side streets and back alleys

Jesus (who, not incidentally, referred to himself as "the Way") said that the real obstacles are within

Putting our addiction to things above our obedience to God's call

Forbidding the childlike qualities of trust, acceptance, and humility from entering our midst

Enclosing ourselves in the white-washed tombs of self-righteousness

Once you overcome these obstacles

It's downhill

All the way

From *Who Is Jesus?: A Lenten Devotions Booklet*, Fallbrook United Methodist Church (Fallbrook, Calif.: March 2007)



METHODIST ASSOCIATION PROVIDES ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT TO MINISTERS WITH DISABILITIES

The Association of Physically Challenged Ministers (APCM) is a national caucus in The United Methodist Church that has been in existence since 1990. Its main purpose is to encourage and support men and women who sense the call to ministry, who exhibit the gifts and graces for ministry, but who also live with a disability.

A current concern is that while the number of people with disabilities is increasing, the number of persons with disabilities in the United Methodist Church who are either in professional ministry or preparing for professional ministry seems to be decreasing. The task of the APCM is to alert the United Methodist denomination to the ways attitudinal barriers have discouraged such ministry.

The ongoing agenda of the Association is to increase dialogue with the leadership of the United Methodist denomination. This includes an ongoing educating and consciousness-raising of all United Methodists at every level; a continuing legislative effort through Annual Conference and General Conference petitions; and the encouragement and networking with all interested persons—clergy and laity, disabled and non-disabled, Methodist and non-Methodist.

A continuing hope is to be a support to those who are facing difficulties in their churches or conferences because of the response of others (including those in leadership positions) to persons with disabilities.

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church meets in 2008. Still, it is not too early for Methodists with disability concerns, both as individuals and as organized groups, to start putting together petitions to be submitted at the Conference. The petition process has always been instrumental in making needed changes within the

Church, and it is hoped that old and new members of the APCM will be inspired to make good use of this process.

Anyone interested in supporting the ongoing efforts and hopes of this caucus—clergy or laity, disabled or non-disabled, Methodist or non-Methodist—is encouraged to become a member. For more information about

joining the APCM or for current members to renew their membership and/or financial support, please contact:

Rev. John A. Carr
Executive Director
Association of Physically
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United Methodist Church
1249 Yale Avenue
Wallingford, CT 06492
1-203-284-8278
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Expanded from the **APCMUMC**
 website: new.gbgbm-umc.org/umcor/work/health/disc/apcmumc.

THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT OF THE APCMUMC

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 in-corporate 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.

(Adopted October 1994)

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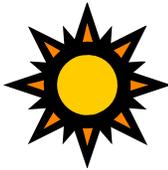
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It is well for those who find themselves in the dark night of the soul to persevere in patience....Let them trust in God, who does not abandon those who seek God with a simple and right heart, and will not fail to give them what is needful for the road, until he brings them into the clear and pure light of love.

— **John of the Cross** —

From *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, edited by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., from *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, ©1987 by Washington Province of Discalced Carmelite Friars, Inc., Paulist Press (www.paulistpress.com).

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