

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**
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FROM WHERE I SIT: A DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE By Jo D'Archangelis

Editor's Note: The following is a continuation of the "From Where I Sit" column in the Spring 2008 issue. Both this column and the previous one are (very) loosely based on a talk given at the First United Methodist Church in El Cajon, Calif., in July of 2001, in which I listed several important things I had learned from my participation in the disability ministries of Mariposa Ministry and the California-Pacific Conference disability retreats.

Another important thing I learned, or at least had reconfirmed for me, was: *Having someone else tend to your physical needs, even your most personal needs, is not the worst thing that could happen to a person with a disability.* In other words, having your nose wiped by another person is not the end of the world.

At a disability retreat I attended several years ago, two people told similar stories of relatives who had suddenly come down with debilitating conditions. One relative killed himself after stating that he did not wish to be a "burden" to his family, while the other relative refused to have surgery that would have lengthened his life but would also have made him more dependent upon others.

It is understandable why many of us with disabilities, especially those of us who have not had to deal with disabilities from early childhood on or who live

with progressively debilitating conditions, struggle mightily to do as much as we can for ourselves for as long as we can (or should) and resist becoming a "burden" to others. Sometimes we fear that those who are "saddled" with taking care of us, particularly family members and friends, will eventually come to resent us. Also, with increasing dependence on others comes an increasing loss of personal freedom, of control over our daily lives, that often results in depression.

Underlying these valid feelings of fear and depression is a deep-seated concern about how we appear to other people and to ourselves. From a very young age we buy into the Myth of Independence—i.e., that one of the marks of true maturity, of adulthood, is to be as physically independent and self-sufficient as possible, capable of taking care of ourselves at all times. To become physically dependent on some-

one other than ourselves robs us, or so we think, of our dignity as human beings and diminishes us in the sight of others. We become like children or, even worse, like infants needing to be bathed, fed, and changed.

I have been dependent upon other people for all of my life, and the older I get and the more disabled I get, the more dependent I become. I admit it's not always easy for me (nor, for that matter, for those assisting me). I am one of those annoying Monk-like people who *knows* that I would do things for myself much better and more efficiently than others can do them for me (it's that *control* thing). And occasionally I have been made uncomfortable, although only temporarily, by what other people have had to do for me.

Yet I have never felt undignified or diminished as a human being. Instead I have felt...well, I have felt cleaned, dressed, groomed, fed, positioned, transported, and generally cared for. Yes, there are many things worse than having someone wipe your nose, and one of those things is to sit alone and ignored while streams of nasal mucus drip off your chin.

I am grateful to God for all those people who have wiped my nose, among other things, over the years and have thus made it possible for me to concentrate on attaining real independence— independence of mind, heart, and spirit.

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DISABILITY MINISTRY TIPS: USHERS, ELEVATORS, AND LIFTS

USHERS

The ushers of most churches are volunteers whose service to their community of faith is a gift. Usually they are relied upon to use their best judgment in how to greet people who come to worship. Many, however, never receive any training, especially in regards to greeting people with disabilities.

In the book, *That All May Worship*, published by the National Organization on Disability, it states, "Ushers are usually the first sign of hospitality in the congregation. Because they are so visible, their gracious welcome to people with disabilities puts everyone at ease."

Here are a few things ushers can do to welcome people with disabilities:

1. Ask if there is a preferred location for seating.
2. Offer, if available, audio loops, large-print or brailled bulletins, and large-print prayer books and hymnals.
3. Be near all doors to assist those with mobility impairments.
4. Offer an arm to those with vision impairments to guide them to their seats.
5. If seating is movable, remove seats to accommodate wheelchairs.
6. If a person in a wheelchair prefers to transfer to other seating, give them

whatever assistance they specify and remove the wheelchair to an area where it can be readily retrieved.

7. Give a person with a walker whatever assistance they specify to be seated and remove the walker to an area where it can be readily retrieved.

8. Return any walkers or wheelchairs to their owners immediately after the service has ended.

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

ELEVATORS AND LIFTS

1. When planning an elevator or lift, ensure that it gives access to the sanctuary and all major program, office, and social areas in the church facility.

2. Place controls 54" or less from the elevator floor, reachable from a wheelchair.

3. Install brailled plaques on elevator control panels.

4. Put a handrail on at least one side of the elevator 32" from the floor.

5. Abide by all ADA, state, and local regulations in regard to the installation of elevators and lifts.

Adapted from *DAMI NEWS*, the newsletter of Disability Awareness Ministries, Inc. (May 10, 2004).



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FOUNDER/EDITOR COMPUTER LAYOUT/GRAPHIC DESIGN

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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Please also note that the partially-formatted Microsoft Word Document version of *Wings* without graphics is still available as an attached file and that this version seems to work best with computer "reading" devices.



GOSPEL LURES BLIND SINGER TO SPOTLIGHT

By Sue Anne Pressley Montes

Margaret Dickinson first met Brian Slaughter nearly 30 years ago, in the forgotten world that was Forest Haven. She was a graduate student, about to start work at the [Washington D.C.] facility for the mentally retarded. He was one of the residents, a young man who had lived there since the age of 10.

As Dickinson took in the conditions that day—the toilet overflowing into the day room, the two attendants engrossed in TV, the 60 idle men—she wondered how she could ever work at such a place. Shaking her head, she half-sang a line from an old hymn, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

A deep voice sang back, "Nobody knows but Jesus." It was one of the men sitting on the bench along the wall. "He was holding his trousers with his left hand because he didn't have a belt," she said, "and he had three big safety pins in the place where the zipper was. Most of the day's menu was all over his T-shirt, and he had shoes with no shoelaces and no socks." There was one more thing: He was blind. "Hi, I'm Brian," he said, extending his hand. "And I'm a gospel singer."

Years later, with Dickinson's help, Slaughter has become exactly what he said he was: He is a gospel singer. It is hard to reconcile that picture of Slaughter, now 56, with the life he leads today. Wearing dark glasses and often a red fez, he presides over the keyboards at the Art and Drama Therapy Institute, a day-care program in Northeast Washington [D.C.] for adults with mental retardation.

Slaughter is the assistant music instructor, receiving \$7 an hour. He also stars in the Inspirational Choir and Moroccan Ensemble, which appears at

churches and special events several times a month and has a CD and video.... "I like good gospel music,"

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Slaughter said in his preacher-like voice. "It starts my day off right."

Slaughter never forgets a name. He has hundreds of gospel songs in his repertoire and can launch into "Peace, Be Still" or "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" with a natural ease and authority. But he cannot read or write, and he would not be able to find his way to the store. Often, he can't recall exactly when something happened, but he has lots of plans for the future. "Gospel Time! That would be a good show," he said....

Brian Xavier Slaughter was born

three days before Christmas in 1950, in what would later be D.C. General Hospital. He and his twin, Byron, who lived just a few days, were three months premature. His mother was 19 and already had two young children and a marriage that was falling apart.

Iris McConnell, now 75 and a retired federal government employee, said she

still gets "very emotional" about that period. She has written about it in a manuscript she hopes to publish someday, "Brian's World."

"Sometime during his first week at home, I was examining his body to see if he had all his parts when I realized I had him in the light of the bulb with no shade on it and there was no response to the light," she read aloud recently in her Largo home. "He never even squinted."

McConnell, by then divorced, quickly learned there were few options for a special-needs child in the 1950s. Brian stayed with babysitters, until at 7 he entered a program at Anthony Bowen Elementary School. But he could not function independently, and school offi-

(GOSPEL continued on page 4)

NEW LIFE

By Roberta Porter

As seasons turn, impel the years away,
loss comes to my life.
Sorrowing, I mourn,
but not without hope.
My prayer is that the stark and barren winter
may be a time to see more clearly
God's given promise
that gain can come from loss,
that beneath the dark and frozen earth,
growth and grace and healing rest,
rooted in love
to fully bloom in time.

From *Alive Now* (Nov/Dec 2005).

Porter is a retired teacher who lives on the Oregon Coast with her husband. She is the mother of three and the grandmother of nine. This was written in memory of her brother Jon Post, 1941-2004.

(GOSPEL continued from page 3)



officials soon released him, McConnell said. As D.C. officials sought another place for him, she grew desperate. "I had nowhere for him to go, nor could I afford anything, so every day I would close my young son in his room," she said. She worried he might hurt himself while left alone.

Finally, McConnell said, a D.C. court official convinced her that her older children would be better off if Slaughter went to live at Forest Haven. McConnell had heard "nothing good" about the facility, she said, but she was "tired." The 10-year-old would have to be made a ward of the court. "We were [case]

number 15 that day," McConnell said about the long-ago proceeding. "Brian was dressed in his shirt and his little bow tie, clean and totally oblivious to what was about to go on. And when they called his name and I went forth, and the judge said whatever he had to say and then he struck that gavel and said, 'Committed,' it was just like my heart just left my body. 'What did I just do?' was what I said to myself."

The young boy, led away by a case-worker, entered institutional life. Details are sketchy about those years. There were home visits for holidays; occasionally, when he was older, Slaughter performed with a choir at the funerals of other residents. By the

time he met Dickinson, he had lived at Forest Haven more than half his life.

"Are you going to be our new chief?" he asked her that day. "Yes, I'm going to be your new chief," she said she replied, "and I'm going to get you out of here."

A year-and-a-half later, in 1981, Slaughter moved into a group home, becoming one of the first to leave Forest Haven as its problems became news. He had small jobs stuffing envelopes, folding papers. In 1992, when Dickinson and Finnish-born artist and therapist Sirkku M. Sky Hiltunen started the Art and Drama Therapy Institute, Slaughter found his niche....

The center has about 160 clients, 30 of them former residents of Forest Haven. When Dickinson started the Inspirational Choir and Moroccan Ensemble a few years ago, Slaughter quickly became the breakout star. He learned his songs, he said, listening to gospel radio. When he sat down at the keyboards, "the music just came out..."

Twice a week, the two dozen members of the choir and ensemble gather to rehearse. Clients must audition for the coveted spots and have to prove they can remain focused....Everywhere they go, their raw energy and open-faced joy has crowds jumping to their feet. Once, Dexter Slaughter attended a Special Olympics ceremony and was surprised to see his little brother and company up on the stage, owning it. "I knew he could sing, but I didn't know he could turn out a room," Dexter said.

Recently, Iris McConnell was at a seniors event in Southeast Washington when she heard the voice of her youngest child speak into a microphone, "Testing...testing..." as he prepared to entertain. Then the Inspirational Choir and Moroccan Ensemble launched into one of its favorite hymns, "O Happy Day." For Brian Slaughter, gospel singer, it was another very happy day.

Excerpted from "Gospel Lures Blind Singer To Spotlight," *Washington Post* (May 27, 2007).
Montes is a Post staff writer.

LARGE-PRINT MINISTRY OFFERS EPISCOPAL MATERIALS ON COMPUTER CD-ROMS

Episcopal laywoman Ann Dahlen and her Large-Print Ministry are offering two computer CD-ROMs that can help persons who are blind or visually-impaired, or who have other special needs: A *Large-Print Book Of Common Prayer CD* and a *Prayers And Psalms For Today CD*.

The *Large-Print Book Of Common Prayer CD* includes the entire *Book of Common Prayer* (1979). It is mainly in 18-point Times New Roman font and is laid out for 8.5 x 11-inch pages; it can be used to help prepare large-print worship materials. The *Prayers And Psalms For Today CD* includes selections from "Prayers and Thanksgivings," "Prayers for the Sick," "Prayers for Use by a Sick Person," and the "Book of Psalms" from the 1979 BCP. This CD is in APhont, a font developed by American Printing House for the Blind, and is in Microsoft Word format. The material is mostly in 20-point type and is laid out for use on 8.5 x 11-inch pages. While the prayers are from an Episcopal book, they may be helpful to people of other faiths as well.

Blind individuals with electronic note-takers and special software and visually-impaired people with access to computers can use the CDs. The material can be loaded into a note-taker and re-edited into a form of braille. The CDs are also useable in optical-character readers that can read material formatted in Microsoft Word.

Compiling and preparing material for the CDs was a two-year labor of love for Dahlen whose Large-Print Ministry is not a program of any diocese, church, or organization. A donation when ordering the CDs is appreciated, especially when more than one CD is requested.

For information on ordering the CDs and making donations, please e-mail Ann Dahlen at anndahlen@aol.com or largeprinthehelp@att.net, or write her at 1900 6th Ave., Apt. 513, Rock Island, IL 61201. Information is also available at Episcopal Resources For The Blind www.disability99.org, but note that the postage information for orders is out-of-date.



WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?: A COMMENTARY

By Richard Daggett

Editor's Note: This is the fifth and last part of a five-part series adapted from an oral presentation given by Daggett in 1994. It is based on Daggett's own experiences as a person with a severe disability and on his review of Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*.

PART FIVE: MIRACLES

Why do some people get cancer and others don't? I don't know, but I do know that God has given us the ability to observe, to reason, to think, and to work with nature to find explanations for these things. Somewhere in the laws of biochemistry there are reasons for illness, disease, and disabling conditions. When we care enough, God will help us find the causes of and then the cures for cancer—when we pay researchers more than we pay sports stars, when we stop asking why God has visited these plagues upon us and use our God-given talents to find answers.

Kushner talks about the time when he was fresh out of rabbinical school. He would go to the home of a bereaved family and someone would come up to him and ask, "Why has God allowed this to happen?" He thought they were asking a theological question. He would start to recite what he had learned in seminary. After a few minutes their eyes would glaze over. He thought maybe they weren't getting it, maybe he had better repeat it for them. It wasn't long, however, before Kushner realized that what they were asking was not about theology. He learned to keep his mouth shut. He learned to hug them, sit with them, let them know he cares, and not try to explain it.

Kushner quotes a 19th-century Hassidic rabbi who says, "Human beings are God's language." God speaks to us through people. He comes to us in the incarnation of caring people—in doctors and nurses and in family members and friends who support and uplift us.

Think back to last time you were having a hard time. What was more comforting—your theology or your friends? I bet it was your friends.

You know someone who is having a tough time, perhaps a person who has just experienced a personal tragedy and you don't know what to say? Don't wait—reach out, call! You can say "I'm sorry" and then just listen. They may say, "Why is this happening to me?" This is not a question; it's a cry of anguish. They don't want you to tell them why this is happening. Do you really think they want you to give them a list of what they did to deserve this? They want reassurance. They want to know that you care and that God cares about them.

Kushner was asked once if he believed in miracles. He replied that he did but not in little ones. The parting of the Red Sea was not a miracle; it was special effects. He said that Cecil B. DeMille did it just as well, and Steven Spielberg could probably do it

better.

Kushner says a real miracle is when timid people become brave, when weak people become strong, when selfish people become generous, and when people who have persevered over adversity for years, day in and day out, continue to find renewed strength. These are the real miracles—ordinary people with the grace of God doing extraordinary things.

Why do bad things happen to good people? I don't really have an answer to that; I just don't know. But I do know that God calls us to minister to the sick, comfort those in pain, and give aid to those in need. As a church and as individuals, we can be there for others. It is required of us as Christians and as human beings.

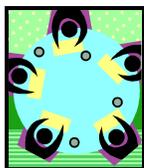
The United Methodist Church has a long tradition of outreach. We give generously to our mission projects—UMCOR, the Heifer Project, and many more. But our tradition also calls us to minister to those close to home—to members of our local church and to those in our community. I challenge you, whatever your abilities or disabilities, to keep this tradition alive.

Daggett is a post-polio survivor who contracted polio 54 years ago at the age of 13. Active in the Los Amigos Rehabilitation Center post-polio support group, he uses both a wheelchair and a respirator. He is also a long-time member of the Downey (Calif.) United Methodist Church where he has served as church historian.

TOWARD WHAT END? By Greg Anderson

Instead of asking, "Why did this happen to me," ask instead, "Toward what end?" Don't see your illness or disability as God's punishment. It isn't. Understand instead that it's something God can use, and remember that he is there, always there, to walk with you, to guide you in the journey, to help you triumph. That is what he wants for each one of us—to live triumphantly. This allows us to examine what we might do to live more positively now, today, in spite of the threat of illness or any number of other problems in our lives. Asking "Toward what end?" gets us to the point of seeing our illnesses as assets, circumstances that, with proper discipline, can be of help to countless other people. And more importantly, our illnesses can be the very events that make positive turning points in our own lives.

Excerpted from *The Triumphant Patient*, iUniverse (November 2000).



CONFERENCE ON IDD AND SPIRITUALITY TO BE HELD IN SEPTEMBER

Winds of Change, Spirit of Inclusion,” a national conference on spirituality and people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) will be held in Huron, Ohio, September 4, 5, and 6, 2008, at the Sawmill Creek Resort and Conference Center. The conference will be a faith-filled informational gathering for people who live, work, and minister with persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Key speakers will address “The Parish as a Welcoming Community,” “Faith-based Care in a Bureaucratic World,” “Gospel Drama,” and “The Person With Disability in the Life and Mission of the Church.” Session topics will include family issues, ethics and morality, spiritual nourishment for people with severe disabilities, inclusion in sacrament and education, autism and learning, and providing spiritual support.

People of all faiths and cultures are

invited to attend the conference which is sponsored by The National Apostolate For Inclusion Ministry (NAFIM), the US Catholic voice calling for the full inclusion of all people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and related disabilities, in faith communities.

Information about conference registration, workshops, activities, and rooms can be found at www.nafim.org, or by contacting Kitty Kruse, Co-Chair, at 800-884-9580.

Dear God, as we go about our daily lives, we do not ask that you show us the way, for you have given us abundant examples of the way through your Son. We ask instead that you give us the strength to follow in that way. And we ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

Adapted from a prayer by Richard Daggett (1994).



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