

REACHING OUT TO PEOPLE WHO ARE DIFFERENTLY ABLED: A PROPOSAL TO THE NORTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE

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Rachel is five years old. She is not like most little girls her age: she is labeled mentally retarded. She is a part of a church in which she has not been able to fully participate because of various limitations. "She has a physical disability, a speech impairment, and some seizure activity." Because of her physical disability, cerebral palsy, she has to use a walker. She communicates what she is feeling and thinking mainly through laughing or shrieking. Throughout the rest of her lifetime, Rachel will most likely be dependent on her family members, unable to do daily activities by herself. Rachel has a developmental disability (Dancing with Disabilities 20). People like Rachel who have developmental disabilities are often excluded from various life activities because of their disabilities. While it is a difficult task to make sure that these persons are included in every place they will go in life, it is our responsibility as Christians to include them in the life of our churches. Not only as Christians, but more specifically, as United Methodists, in the North Georgia Conference, there is much that we can do to include persons with developmental disabilities in our churches.

"Developmental disabilities are a diverse group of severe chronic conditions that are due to mental and/or physical impairments" ("What are Developmental Disabilities?"). According to the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act Amendments of 1994, the disability is displayed in a person before the age of twenty two, is likely to be a lifelong situation for the individual, and people with developmental disabilities have difficulties with three or more major life activities, such as: "self-care; receptive and expressive language; learning; mobility; self-direction; capacity for independent living; and economic self-sufficiency" ("Terms and Definitions"). Out of the top ten most frequently limiting conditions, "mental retardation" is named the number one chronic condition (at 87.5%). This means that 87.5% of people who have M.R., which is a type of developmental disability, have an activity limitation (Matthews 21), which is: accord-

ing to the NHIS (National Health Interview Survey), a person who is either unable to perform in a major activity, or able to perform in a major activity, but limited in the kind or amount of activity (Matthews 521). "According to the U. S. Census Bureau, about 49.7 million Americans have a disability, which includes people of all ages. About two-thirds of these individuals have a severe disability" ("Office of Disability Employment Policy"). The Georgia Department of Labor reports that one in five Georgians have a disability. It is estimated that there are over a million people in Georgia who are a part of the disabled community (Jenkins). Rachel, having both mental and physical disabilities, is one of these numbers. To some, that is all she is seen as: a number; a statistic. She is seen to some as only one of those unfortunate numbers who are unable to function normally in a society that thrives on independence.

There are a number of terms used to describe people with developmental disabilities: specific terms to describe an official diagnosis, such as: mental retardation, deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, defective in speech, slow learner, etc; handicapped (mentally, physically); having special needs; intellectually disabled; developmentally delayed; mentally disabled; or physically disabled. People with developmental disabilities, according to the legal definition, have difficulties with "major-life" activities. They are unable to function alone. In this depiction, they are shown as helpless creatures, unable to do one thing or another. This description, of course, has some truth in it. Yes, they are different. Yes, they need assistance with some activities. But by placing this type of label on persons with disabilities, we are not only confining them to their disability, limiting them from being successful in any aspect of their lives, but we are also saying that the best life is one of independence; not needing others to survive.

It seems that the most appropriate terms to use are "exceptional people" or "people who are differently abled." An exceptional person is one with a difference, but not necessarily a negative one. "It is this difference that makes him [or her] exceptional," but it does not define that person as a whole. "It is necessary to stress the important areas in which the exceptional person is just like everybody else...we need to keep the commonalities in mind and to remember that every exceptional person must be seen as an individual of worth and dignity" (Palmer 19-20). The phrase "people who are differently abled" also recognizes a difference, but does not limit a person's capacity to do other things. The

most important thing to realize when using labels (even less negative ones like differently abled), is that it is still a label. What must happen, no matter what terminology one may use, is that we look past the label to see who an individual really is (Unexpected Guests 24). Therefore, when working with persons who are differently abled, the focus should be on what they *can* do, not what they *cannot* do.

Rachel is a dancer:

She dances with a spirit of ease that brings a smile to her face every time. Often her smile is the dance, for it is an act of the body engaged with music. She often dances with her head and arms, though I'm sure she will get her feet moving as soon as she gets comfortable in the walker she has just started using...Rachel's dancing is evidence that she, as part of a community in which she is loved as a child of God, has been taught the practices that comprise a dance. Rachel dances because the community of Christians in which she has been raised and nurtured practices such dancing of face and movement of body in the context of worshipping God (Dancing with Disabilities xiii-xiv).

In this description, Rachel is no longer seen as a young girl with a disability, unable to do one thing or another. Instead, she is seen as a girl who dances!

The error in the legal description of “developmental disabilities” is not only that it focuses solely on a person's inability to do something, but that it also assumes that to be dependent on others is an inferior way to live. Philosophers and theologians have struggled with the issue of what constitutes a person. Thinking that rationality, reason, freedom, or a capacity for self-determination constitutes a whole person is exclusive, as it leaves out those who may not have the capacity for such things. The question being asked, therefore, is in error: it should not be *what* makes us persons, but *who* makes us persons. Each one of us has been created by God, and God has made each one of us in God's image. Every person is worthy of moral considera-

tion, because it is God's love that makes us persons, and that love is given to *all* (Wadell 70-71). Rachel is "part of a community in which she is loved as a child of God" (Dancing with Disabilities xiv). She is defined by whose she is, not by what she cannot do.

No one is expendable. Everyone deserves respect and is worthy of consideration. One's dignity and identity as a person are not measured in terms of intelligence, talent, physical ability, wealth, creativity, or even goodness; instead, they are determined by a love that never leaves them. The yet to be born, the not so talented, the limited or infirmed, the poor and the elderly, even the reprobate and the depraved count as persons because just like the healthy and wealthy and the good, they are held in life by a love that delights in them (Wadell 74).

Along with this view of "who makes us persons over what makes us persons" is a reminder that who we are as persons is a gift from God. One must remember that as human beings, "we are all part of God's creative order, dependent on God for our very lives and source of identity." It is not through ourselves that we possess the abilities we have, but through God. Seeing ourselves as independent beings, who do not need others (even God) to survive, is to live in a state of illusion. We are all born with things that we can or cannot do; no one is skilled in all areas of life. "All of us are dependent on a particular community that needs and wants our abilities and supports and cares for our limitations" (Unexpected Guests 47). The church is supposed to be this community for all believers. "One's disability or limitation is not a personal or private affair...rather, it involves a whole family, a whole church, a whole neighborhood" (Dancing with Disabilities 129). For Rachel, it should not matter that there are areas in her life in which she cannot be dependent, because the church should be that community for her. It should be a place where she can struggle, and still be accepted; a place where she can succeed by her own goals, and have others rejoice with her (even though they might seem simplistic and easy to achieve by a "normal" person). It should be a family that is invested in her life, who honestly love her and are

interested in what she has to offer them. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

The number of persons with “developmental disabilities,” as defined legally, is overwhelming. And yet if we look at our church congregations, we might not see but one or two persons who are differently abled at a Sunday morning service or a Wednesday night supper. Why is it that many differently abled persons are not a part of a church? It seems that the most obvious answer is that they are not present because their needs are not being met (these include social, educational, and spiritual needs). Brett Webb-Mitchell states that he “constantly hears stories of people with disabilities being excluded from church communities.” He tells the story of one woman who was “borderline mentally retarded” who went to a Protestant church’s Sunday school class for ten years, and was never asked to talk. He’s also heard stories of disabled babies who were denied baptism because of their disabilities (Dancing with Disabilities 135). In 2006 a Bishop in Phoenix did not allow a boy with autism to receive Communion because his father had to consume the bread after his son touched it with his tongue (the boy could not consume the bread himself, because he had problems swallowing things with that type of texture). The Bishop said, “Just to touch it to one’s tongue is not to ‘take and eat.’ ...so while your desire is for your son to receive Holy Communion, he is, in fact, only simulating doing so” (Cones 50). Differently abled persons may have special needs, but in these cases, they are being discriminated against, and their basic needs that all members of a church body should be able to have met are being denied. In some churches, people with disabilities, as well as their families, have been asked “politely” to leave worship, or even told not to come to church altogether. They are categorized with children, who are also asked to leave the service after the standard “children’s moment,” because, for both groups, “they are perceived as being unable to understand and enjoy the intellectual breadth of the liturgy.” They, then, would become bored, and the assumption is that they would begin to cause disruptions for those trying to learn (Dancing with Disabilities 3-4). The churches being described—who come together because of their commitment to a God who became human, and lived a life that was full of love, and who accepted and reached out and preached to *all*—contradict themselves by pushing people out because they are different. The church, then, as a whole, is not living up to its

role of being a community of believers who accept all and who depend on one another.

There are many reasons why we, as Christians, should reach out to people who are differently abled. Theologically speaking, there are numerous examples that show a necessity and a life's calling to reach out to include them in the life of the Church. There are several biblical texts to work with, including 1 Corinthians 12:21-22, Matthew 25:31-46, and in particular, the overall ministry of Jesus in the gospels. These texts, of course, are not limited to those who are "differently abled" (by definition), but speak in favor of all those who are oppressed and marginalized: those who are poor, discriminated against, weak, disabled, or anyone who is in need. For the purpose of discussing the needs of people who are differently abled, however, the focus will be on this specific group of people.

First, the text of 1 Corinthians 12:21-22 provides a powerful image in favor of the oppressed (the "weak") by saying:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head can not say to the feet, "I don't need you!"

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. (NIV).

The fuller context of these verses is an analogy comparing the parts of a human body to the Church. Basically, we cannot function without the other "parts of the body:" the other members who make up the church. Also, we make up the larger body of Christ, which is the whole Christian community. Not only do we need others to successfully function as the body, but the parts which seem to be weaker, it says in verses 21 and 22, are the ones that are especially important: they are indispensable! Although this text does not specifically identify "the weaker," it does call for the inclusion of all members of the body. Paul wrote this text to the church at Corinth because some people thought that certain "gifts" were more valuable than others. He was speaking to both those who thought they were superior, telling them that their gifts were no better than others, and letting those who thought they were inferior know that their gifts were just as valuable as anyone else's. "So far as the Christian community is concerned, every gift is indispensable to

its life.” As one scholar writes on the text, “There is a place in life for candles as well as stars. How dark the world’s darkness would become were all the lesser lights to be quenched!”

Those who are differently abled are a part of the Christian community, and are seen in our eyes as “weaker,” and are, therefore, indispensable. They have as much to offer the body as anyone else, whether we see it or not, for “the valuation of any gift and its use is a matter for God” (Short 160-161). In Luke 7: 36-50, Jesus visits one of the Pharisees who invited him over for dinner. A woman “who had led a sinful life” found out that Jesus was here, and came to the house with a jar of perfume. “She stood behind him at his feet weeping” and “began to wet his feet with her tears...then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them” (NIV Luke 7:38). The Pharisee did not understand why Jesus allowed her to do this, and assumed that he did not know how sinful the woman was. Jesus says to him:

Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven-for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little (NIV Luke 7:44-47).

In this story, Jesus finds the greatest gift not from the one who *seemed* to have the most to offer, but from the one who gave the most of herself. Those who are differently abled may, in fact, be able to offer more than one might think they can. But as discussed earlier, if they are constantly being labeled with limitations instead of focusing on their capabilities, what they *can* do, their gifts cannot be expressed. Remember Rachel: she is a dancer. What a joy it must be, a sheer *gift* from God, to watch her smile and laugh while she dances in front of her congregation. This gift she offers is undoubtedly unlike any other that members of her church can offer, which makes it all the more vital for the church to have.

Matthew 25: 31-46 also shows biblical reasoning that supports reaching out to the differently abled. In this text, Jesus is telling an “apocalyptic drama.” This story comes at the end of a series of six parables in which Jesus reveals warnings about responsible living in order to be prepared for the “coming of the Son of Man.” Instead of a parable, that relates to the familiar world around us, Jesus uses an “other-worldly depiction of the parousia- the coming of the Son of Man...” (Boring 455). In this text, Jesus describes the Son of Man sitting on his throne with “the sheep on his right and the goats on his left” (NIV vs. 33). Jesus tells those on his right that they are blessed, and tells them to take their inheritance, which is “the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (NIV vs. 34). The Son of Man gives this reason for their inheritance: “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 can to visit me” (NIV vs. 35-36). The righteous answer the King by asking when did they see him and offer him these things, and he replies: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (NIV vs. 45). Likewise, those who are cursed and are sent to “the eternal fire” are damned because they did not offer themselves to others (and therefore to the King) as the righteous did. From these verses, one can conclude that there is a great significance in serving “the least of these.” The question, then, is: who are “the least of these?” This question is a debatable one, but scholars believe that there are two options as to who is being addressed here: either (a) “the world’s needy generally” or (b) Christians, specifically or Christian missionaries.” It is a common belief that Matthew did write to fit the situation of his community at the time, and therefore his general point of this text was focused on “the reception of Christian missionaries” in his church. However, the term *adelphoi* used in verse 45, as well as other places in Matthew, is used to describe anyone who is in need. “Thus the needy brother or sister is not restricted to Christians or missionaries” (Boring 456). Since this text, then, focuses on the utmost importance of caring for those in need (in general), it is clear that this would include those who are differently abled: those who cannot always care for themselves, who need assistance, as well as the need to be given equal opportunities, especially in

the life of the church. It is our duty, then, as the Church, to provide for the needs of the oppressed, or the “least of these.”

Most importantly, the overall ministry of Jesus, shown throughout the gospels, gives an overwhelming depiction of a life of service to the oppressed (which includes people who are differently abled). As Christians, we are called to live a life that reflects the life of Jesus. One cannot ignore a major characteristic of his ministry, which was service to others. Jesus lived a life that was full of compassion for those who were oppressed. He reached out to those who were hungry. In Matthew 15:32, he says, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way” (NIV). He then performed a miracle by turning seven loaves of bread and a couple of small fish into enough to feed four thousand people. There are many other examples of Jesus’ ministry to the oppressed, including his healings: of the man who had leprosy, two demon-possessed men, and the bleeding woman, for example. When Jesus healed the man with leprosy, it is said that “filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man” (NIV Mark 1:41). Jesus also healed the two demon-possessed men, who were “coming from the tombs...they were so violent that no one could pass that way” (NIV Matthew 8:28). Because he was filled with love for all people, even those who were afflicted, Jesus cast the demons out of the men. The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years reached out and touched Jesus’ cloak, and was healed. The words he spoke to her give us an insight into a healing that was more than just physical.

When Jesus healed the woman who was bleeding, he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace” (NIV Luke 8:48). Her *faith* healed her. This faith was not based on what she had seen or heard about the man named Jesus. She believed in Malachi’s prediction about the coming Messiah: “the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” The word Malachi used for wings was “kanaf,” which was the same word used in Numbers for the edge of a garment. Some people in this time believed that when the Messiah came, there would be special healing powers in his kanaf. Therefore, the woman believed that Jesus was indeed this Messiah, and that there were healing powers in his “kanaf.” After she is healed, Jesus tells her to go in peace. The word Jesus would have used for

peace is the Hebrew word “shalom.” Shalom goes beyond the basic definition of “peace,” which for most people’s understanding simply means “the absence of conflict.” Instead, shalom “is the presence of the goodness of God. It’s the presence of wholeness, completeness.” Jesus was not only healing her from a physical inflection. He was healing her in her entirety: “for Jesus, being saved or reconciled to God involves far more than just the saving of your physical body or your soul—it involves all of you.” There is reconciliation in Jesus’ healings. Going beyond a basic definition for salvation (being saved from our sins), Jesus’ acts of healing show us that salvation is much more: “it is a way of life.” It is about living in harmony with God; “to enter into a totally new way of living in harmony with God” (Bell 106-107). For the faithful woman, part of this meant being restored to the community of faith. After he healed her, there was no longer anyone who could deny her the ability to enter the synagogue; she was no longer an outcast, but was able to be a full member of the religious society. God calls us to imitate Jesus’ ministry; to reach out to those around us in need. We may not have an instantaneous touch of healing as Jesus did, but there can be restoration through our actions. To follow Jesus and imitate his actions, however, is a call to be active *now*.

In Mark 1:15, Jesus says that “the kingdom of God is near” (NIV). His message was one that was radical; a new comprehension of what it meant to be religious. “As a first-century Jew, Jesus clarified and embodied what it meant for people to live out their lives under conditions of the reign of God.” Jesus spoke with immediacy in his message: we are called to live a life that is reflective of his *now*. When he proclaimed this message, “he was offering an image that was basically communal and social...that is, God’s rule called forth a new human community for the whole world based on love, liberation, inclusion, and gratitude.” Jesus befriended those who were considered social outcasts. His own disciples were fishermen, not considered to be prominent or worthy of following a rabbi. The only thing that mattered to Jesus was that those who followed him must be willing to follow the will of God. This was considered a “radical family life.” The new community that Jesus established throughout his ministry, therefore, was “a people of God open to the presence and action of God—open to the poor, to women and children, to the disabled, to Jews, gentiles, and slaves” (Legge

160-161). When we look at our churches today, we may not see it as a “radical family” if we do not truly embrace and support those who are considered outcasts. How many people in most churches today are homeless, drug dealers, or “severally developmentally disabled?” It is not enough to literally open our doors to these people. We have to do as Jesus did: we have to seek them out, and we have to do it *now*. Jesus’ ministry was not a passive one. He did not sit around in a synagogue hoping for sinners and afflicted people to show up. He went out and found *them*.

Since following Jesus is a call to be active now, in the kingdom of God, our purpose should be to take action *for* and *with* the oppressed. We are called to heal as Jesus did, through our actions, by living in solidarity with those in need. It is a call to reach others by being in relationship with them. In *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, Bob Ekblad writes about the solidarity he has entered into while leading bible studies with those who are oppressed. He says that before one can get close to marginalized (oppressed) people, he/she must first possess humility. He then goes on to say:

Meeting the [marginalized] people will lead to a newfound solidarity as we identify our common humanity in the other. Awareness of the context of struggle and suffering among the marginalized will help mainstream people become more conscious of the demands on them and the Scriptures in order for a word to be truly good news...But we must descend first. Descent into our suffering world may well involve the voluntary setting aside of privilege in the name of sensitive respect for the other (Ekblad xvi-xvii).

Although one may never really know what it is like to be oppressed, the Christian is called to form relationships with those who are differently abled, and to fight their battles with them.

John Wesley, the founding Father of Methodism, was a strong proponent of service to the oppressed. He not only preached about reaching out to those who were on the margins, but put his words into action. This can be seen from the earliest beginnings of Methodism, when Wesley was at Oxford. Before any intentional Methodist societies were formed, Wesley and several of his friends (given the name “Holy Club” by skeptics) would come together in search of personal holiness. This group would come together for study, prayer, conversation in religious

matters, and soon, by William Morgan's lead, the group also began participating in works of charity, such as visiting prisoners, the elderly, and the poor (Heitzenrater 38-40). Wesley continued a life of ministry to the less fortunate. M. Douglass Meeks describes Wesley's ministry as being "intensely practical," including "feeding, clothing, and housing the poor." Wesley not only gave them the things they needed, but he actually lived his life *with* the poor. There were several occasions when he even put his own life in danger, by being so close to those with diseases that he himself could have possibly caught. Meeks says that:

To be in Christ meant to take the form of Christ's own life for and with the poor. To be a disciple of Christ meant to be obedient to Christ's command to feed his sheep and to serve the least of his sisters and brothers (Runyon 185-186). John Wesley was obedient to this command to serve "the least of his sisters and brothers." If "the least of these" includes those who are differently abled, can it not be assumed that Wesley would have lived in solidarity with them as well?

There are several exemplary models of Christian communities that our churches can learn from, that are set up specifically for those who are differently abled. The first is the L'Arche community movement, founded by Jean Vanier. It began "in 1964 when Vanier invited two men with mental disabilities to move into a small house with him in Trosly-Breuil, France." A community was formed that grew from the initial household and was called L'Arche (The Ark). There are now ninety-five L'Arche communities in twenty-four countries worldwide. They are "devoted to recognizing and nurturing the dignity of the disabled," and "seek to create for people with mental disabilities a family-like environment in which they gain a deeper sense of their own worth through bond and friendship." Differently abled persons are not the only ones who benefit from the L'Arche communities, but, as Vanier understands, "it is we [who work with them] who will be spiritually nourished by them" (Thiemann 6-7). Just as the Corinthians passage says, "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (NIV 1 Corinthians 12:22). Vanier says that "people with disabilities, as 'different' as they may be, have a secret power to touch and open people's hearts." He gives the example of people who have volunteered to come "help" those who are differently abled at a L'Arche community, who are surprised when they discover

that they are the ones being helped. “Their hearts and minds are being opened,” as they realize that there is another way of living that does not involve independence, self-help, success, or money (“Response: The Need of Strangers” 29). In communities such as this one, there is not a dichotomy of “the helpless” and the “helper,” but rather, both people who are differently abled and the assistants who are “temporarily abled,” who work together and are dependent on one another, through their relationships.

Besides being a community that welcomes those who are differently abled, the L’Arche communities are grounded on religious faith. More specifically, they are grounded in love: love of God and of neighbor (the two greatest commandments). Vanier says that “we are constantly called to draw this love from the heart of God, and from God’s mysterious presence at the heart of poor people” (Thiemann 7). In a lecture he gives at the Harvard Divinity School, Vanier speaks of some of the persons living at L’Arche who are differently abled, and who have come to L’Arche broken; filled with tension, loneliness, and anguish, who are “wounded and suffering from [a] broken self-image.” This comes from their previous life circumstances, which lacked the sort of love that one needs for “inner peace.” These persons that face this lack of love come to L’Arche, and when they do receive the love and friendship that their souls long for, they become transformed. Vanier uses the term “resurrection” to describe their new life. “Their tense, angry, fearful, depressed body gradually becomes relaxed, peaceful and trusting. As they discover a sense of belonging, that they are part of a ‘family,’ then the will to live begins to emerge” (From Brokenness to Community 15). The L’Arche communities are not like hospitals, group homes, or other places that work with and house those who are differently abled. Other places seek to be the “helper,” but L’Arche seeks a family. It is a radical family, one that we are not familiar with in our comfortable four-person homes. Nevertheless, it is a family life that honors and pleases God. It is the family Jesus chose for himself, and the one he calls each of us to imitate. The L’Arche communities are an exemplary model that shows us the importance of living in solidarity with those who are differently abled.

Two communities closer to home that are set up specifically for those who are differently abled are the Aldersgate Homes and the Wesley Glen Ministries. Aldersgate Homes is a commu-

nity associated with the United Methodist Church that provides a Christian living environment for those who are differently abled. It has been a ministry of the North Georgia Conference since 1991. Their mission statement is to: "Make a positive difference in the lives of persons with developmental disabilities through education, advocacy, and providing residential alternatives in an affordable, safe, and comfortable normalizing environment as they become community participants." Their facilities are located in five of the twelve districts of the conference. ("Who We Are").

The Wesley Glen Ministries was established in 1984, and is a ministry of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. They provide homes for adults with "mental disabilities," but they choose to use the term "life-long care" instead of the word "housing." They offer "a nurturing, supportive environment for their residents" (Nelson 1). Their goal is not only to increase public awareness about "the strengths and barriers" of people who are differently abled, but is also being committed to "improve the quality of life" for those living in one of their homes, as well as their families. There are seven Wesley Glen homes in South Georgia, all of which strive to make those living there feel a sense of belonging ("About Us"). They do this through several different services, including the Home Living Environment. In the Home Living Environment Program, the residents are taught "daily living skills" in which each person takes part in "making the home function." Through doing these skills, like cooking, washing clothes, and other light chores, the residents learn to live with others, and share responsibilities that help give them a sense of self-worth and belonging to a group ("Services"). The Wesley Glen Ministry is an important one, as it provides a loving, Christian community for those who are differently abled. Unfortunately, "they are one of only six such agencies in the United Methodist Church." There is a great need for more homes that provide such an environment. The Wesley Glen Ministry has thirty-three residents at their Macon and St. Mary's homes, and serves a total of fifty-eight residents in their other four homes. While it is hard to critique these numbers (because they are non-profit and it is difficult for them to fund more homes), it cannot be ignored that there is an estimated 10,000 persons who are "developmentally disabled" in Georgia who live at home with their parents (or other care givers) who are over sixty years of age. "Who will care for these

individuals when their parents die, or are no longer able to care for them?” (Nelson 1). There is an obvious need, then, for more outreach to be done for those who are differently abled. Our churches can follow the examples of these communities to become “radical families” that not only include, but also live in relationship and solidarity with, those who are differently abled.

One North Georgia Conference church that is taking a step towards this radical family idea is Dunwoody United Methodist Church. They offer support groups for caregivers of people with disabilities. One of these groups is known as WINGS (When In Need of Group Support), which was created for parents of children with developmental, physical, and mental disabilities. It was created by Diane Morgan, director of Family Ministries at DUMC. The parents who participate in the WINGS group meet monthly to discuss disability-related topics. According to Ms. Morgan, “topics have ranged from nutrition to financial planning to tips for maneuvering through the school system.” This program has been doing so well that Ms. Morgan has created a new program called FINS (Friends In Need of Support). This program is designed for parents of children with learning disabilities, ADHD, and emotional disorders. Both FINS and WINGS “serve as the anchor of hope for many as they attempt to navigate the seemingly uncharted life of a caregiver” (“The Power of Support”).

Although there are things being done in the United Methodist Church, and even in the North Georgia Conference of the UMC, there is still much that needs to be done as far as reaching out to people who are differently abled at a conference level, district level, and also within each congregation. Although it is important to have communities such as Aldergate Homes and Wesley Glen Ministries, as well as support groups for families of those who are differently abled (like the ones created at Dunwoody UMC), there is still a need to do more ministry programs for those who are differently abled, especially within our local churches. There needs to be more programming, more support from the congregation, and overall, more inclusiveness of people who are differently abled. It is my belief that these things will not happen unless something is done at the conference level. Although there is a Disabilities Committee of the North Georgia Conference, it does not seem to be living up to its full potential. Its mission statement includes the following:

To acknowledge that we are all God’s

children no matter our abilities or disabilities; to have all churches and congregations totally accessible to every one; to continue making changes all of the time and in every place we as United Methodist come together - realizing that many are unable to drive, see, hear and some may be mentality challenged. Additionally, to pay attention so that those who wish can also attend and take part in worship; each of us have disabilities, some are more noticeable than others...Lastly to envision every United Methodist Church not make the statement that they have no one in there churches who are disabled but to asked the question, “*why not?*” (“Connectional Ministries: Disability Concerns”).

Although this mission statement seems to be in tandem with my proposal, the vision statement does not seem to be. It is simply, “To review and award seed monies in the form of grants and to assist churches in making their facilities accessible to those in their communities” (“Connectional Ministries: Disability Concerns”). It is important to make sure the church facilities are accessible for those who are physically disabled, but there is a need that goes to the *root* of that issue, which is making *every aspect of the church* accessible for everyone. This should not stop at including those who are physically disabled but should go further to include all who are differently abled. To make every aspect of the church accessible is a much greater task, but is one that is necessary to truly honor God’s calling to reach out “to the least of these.”

As stated before, there are some churches within the conference that have programming for differently abled persons. This information, however, cannot be found on the North Georgia Conference Website, or from anyone in the conference office. What if I was a parent of a child who was differently abled, and wanted to find a church home that had a ministry for him/her? I could not find out this information at the conference level. If not here, shouldn’t I be able to find some information

from a given district? After talking with all twelve of the District Superintendent's Administrative Assistants, I found that, while some of them were very polite and made an effort to get me the information I needed, none of them were able to tell me of any programs or ministries that their district as a whole was doing, and only one was able to direct me to churches within their district who had ministry programs for people who are disabled. Some of them gave me several church numbers within their district to call, thinking that they *might* have such a ministry (I called those numbers, too, and none of them had programs for people with disabilities). The one district superintendent's assistant that was able to point me in the right direction did so by sending out an email to all the churches in that district to inquire about their ministry programs. I was sent an email with several churches' information about their ministries for differently abled people. Although this particular district was able to point me in the right direction, it was the only one, and it was not as easily accessible as it should have been. Why didn't any of the administrative assistants know about these ministries? Obviously, there may not actually be any in their district, which is one problem. The second problem, for those churches that do have such ministries, is that the information is not as easily accessible as it should be. These programs are so important, and vital to have, and need to at least be *known about* by the persons in the District offices.

Someone who was helpful in my attempt to find churches in the North Georgia Conference that had such ministries for the differently abled was Mark Crenshaw, who is the executive director of the Interfaith Disability Connection at the Bobby Dodd Institute in Atlanta. Mark is in connection with many churches in the Atlanta area, and some of these churches are indeed part of the Methodist church, and therefore in the North Georgia Conference (Crenshaw). While he was very helpful in giving me church names with programs for differently abled people, I could not help but wonder why I could not get this information from a Methodist source. Also, what about those who might want to find a church in another district? The Atlanta district is only one of twelve. Those families who are seeking churches with ministries for their loved ones who are differently abled need to have more help in this search, no matter what area they might live in.

I have chosen this particular group of persons to write

about because I have felt a call to specifically reach out to them. I have worked with persons before with developmental disabilities at Camp Glisson in Dahlonega, Georgia. During this experience I was able to live with the campers for three weeks: taking care of them, teaching them, laughing with them, crying with them, and loving them. Besides my personal experience of working with them, I have also recognized the lack of such unique and gifted individuals in our churches. Therefore, I am proposing a plan for the North Georgia Conference to reach out to those in our churches who are differently abled. In writing this proposal, I confess that I do not have a perfect solution or formula, but rather suggestions that should be more educated. I have worked with differently abled persons at Camp Glisson, I am the daughter of a pastor in the North Georgia Conference, and have thus been raised in the United Methodist Church. I am currently a Religion major, hoping to be a minister of some sort in the United Methodist Church. I want to be better equipped to serve this unique group of people. However, there is currently not enough being done in the North Georgia Conference to help equip me and others who wish to serve this group. Therefore, my proposal can be seen simply as the beginning of a conversation about what we can do in the North Georgia Conference for differently abled persons.

I propose that the North Georgia Conference consider the following suggestions:

1. Have a presentation at Annual Conference about the need to reach out to those who are differently abled.
2. Advertise programming and ministry opportunities at the conference level and within each district for those who are differently abled.
3. Appoint a person for each district to help individual churches start, or continue, programs and ministries for differently abled people.
4. Offer training opportunities for church leaders.

First, I suggest having a presentation at Annual Conference about the need to reach out to those who are differently abled.

Although there may be classes offered at conference-sponsored events to learn about working with the differently abled in our churches, the participation in such events is often low. At the Sunday School and Beyond event in 2005, which roughly two hundred and fifty people attended, there was a

workshop offered called “Disabilities: Being an Inclusive Church.” Out of thirteen workshops to choose from, there were only four or five people (out of roughly 250 people) who attended this particular one (Lingenfelter). Not only does this tell us that including persons with disabilities in our churches is low on most priority lists, but it also tells us that training and educational opportunities about persons with disabilities in our churches are not reaching the majority of church leaders in the North Georgia Conference. Therefore, there needs to be a presentation at Annual Conference, for all to hear and participate in, perhaps including statistics about the number of persons in Georgia who are differently abled, how many churches in our conference have programs for these persons, and a general theological explanation about why we should include them (similar to the ideas presented in the first part of this paper). It seems, also, however, that this presentation would need to come from someone (or several persons) at the conference level who is (are) known and respected by pastors and district superintendents in the conference. If not, it may not be well responded to. To convince others that changes need to be made, the person(s) presenting must first be convinced. If not, it will be shortly lived. The presenter(s) should have some knowledge on the subject, including research: finding out how many churches in the conference have programs for those who are differently abled, for example.

Second, there is a need to advertise programming and ministry opportunities at the conference level and within each district for those who are differently abled.

The person(s) assigned to presenting this material to the annual conference should have found information about churches within each district that already have programs for those who are differently abled. This information needs to be easily accessible for families of the differently abled, as well as group homes for the differently abled, and differently abled individuals who may live on their own. At the conference level, the simplest way to get this information to the public would be on the North Georgia Conference website, on the Disabilities Page. At the district level, each district superintendent’s administrative assistant should be able to easily access this information.

Third, there is a need to appoint a person for each district to help individual churches start, or continue, programs and ministries for differently abled people.

This person should be knowledgeable not only in dealing with persons who are differently abled (either through experience or a degree in Special Education, for example), but should also be able to organize ministry programs within the entire district, as well as in individual churches (see below for more details). This person could be a part of assigning a “Minister of the Differently Abled” to an individual church as well.

Lastly, there needs to be training opportunities offered for church leaders.

The leaders (within a given church) of a ministry for the differently abled should be trained in some degree to run such a ministry. The appointed district personnel (suggested above) should also be equipped to lead such training opportunities for the leaders in the individual churches. This training, instead of a separate event, could be included in the district workshops that currently take place. These training opportunities should include both theological training as well as practical training. The theological training could use a multitude of resources, including the following:

1. Eiesland, Nancy L. The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability
2. Webb-Mitchell, Brett. Dancing with Disabilities
3. Webb-Mitchell, Brett. Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet

Three guides that might be helpful in the practical training could include:

1. That All May Worship
2. Loving Justice

1. From Barriers to Bridges (All three part of a series by Ginny Thornburgh and Lorraine Thal)

Along with the above proposal for what can be done at the conference and district levels, I would like to present a more specific proposal for what can be done in individual churches within our conference. The following can be used as a guideline for the district personnel in charge of appointing and training ministers within each church for differently abled people.

Ways that individual churches can implement a specific ministry for differently abled people:

Inclusion in worship

The first step in this aspect of ministry is to simply have an attitude of inclusion. As discussed earlier, there are some churches that exclude those who are differently abled from their

worship services, because they do not feel that these persons will get anything out of the service (assuming that the only thing worth getting out of a worship service is intellectual), and thus fear that they will be disruptive. However, Brett Webb-Mitchell says that “liturgy [in worship services] is the best place to integrate those who are mentally retarded into the life of faith communities.” He mentions two persons, Sue and Kevin, who are differently abled and live in a L’Arche community in London. They are active participants in their church, and offer a great deal of joy to those in their congregation. During the passing of the peace, Sue “becomes the peace of Christ.” Her words and her energy *transform* the energy in the sanctuary. “In this church, worship has become a celebration.” Kevin brings the same joy and energy to the congregation during infant baptisms. He mentions one occasion, when the priest was baptizing a baby, and Kevin got “his face right up close to the unfolding drama of the moment,” and then clapped his hands and shouted “hooray” as the priest touched the baby’s head with water. This occasion is indeed a celebration, and Kevin helps remind the rest of the congregation of that fact. Not only are Sue and Kevin *not* disruptive, keeping other members of the church from *learning*, but they “reveal to others the special moments of worship” (Dancing with Disabilities 7, 10). Therefore, it is important to help the congregation see how valuable these persons are in a community worship experience.

Second, our churches can include persons who are differently abled by allowing them to assist in worship. One church that does this is Roswell UMC. Although the district’s office that Roswell UMC is in was not able to tell me about their ministry opportunities for differently abled people, Mark Crenshaw was able to. In this church, they offer opportunities for those in their church who are differently abled to serve as volunteers; either as acolytes, ushers, or greeters. They also have a special service, from time to time, that they lead for the whole congregation (Crenshaw).

Inclusion in Education

One way to include those who are differently abled in education is in Sunday School classes. Two options that seem popular among churches who do offer ministry opportunities for those who are differently abled are: the inclusion classroom and the self-contained classroom. College Church in Wheaton, Illinois has a disabilities ministry, called the STARS Ministry (It

stands for “Seeking To Always Reflect the Savior”). Part of their ministry is to offer Sunday School classes specifically for those who are differently abled, known technically as “self-contained” classes. They offer such classes for children, youth, and adults, and they do so because they realize “some children and adults learn best in a classroom that is designed for their learning styles.” They do not limit their “stars” from joining a “regular” classroom, however. They also have an inclusion program, because they also realize that “some students with disabilities learn best by participating in our regular programs.” By offering both options, this ministry is showing commitment to reach those who are differently abled in their church where they are at. They are not lowering expectations by only offering self-contained classes, but they also are not neglecting their needs by only offering inclusion classes (“Stars Ministry”). Roswell UMC and Mt. Bethel UMC are two churches in our conference that offer Sunday School classes for the differently abled. The inclusion model at Mount Bethel allows those children who are differently abled to “learn and interact with their peers through their Sunday School class or in Children’s Worship Service.” In this model, at Mt. Bethel, the children are given a “teen helper” to be with them in the Sunday School class (McGarr). Mt. Bethel and Roswell UMC also use the self-contained class (used as an alternative for “severally challenged” persons at Mt. Bethel). At Roswell UMC, the class is designated for adults, and at Mt. Bethel, the class is for children (McGarr and Crenshaw).

Special Programming

Special programming is another option to help include those who are differently abled in the life of our churches. One special program that College Church in Wheaton, Illinois is doing this year is a Christmas program, in which those part of the STARS program will be telling the “story of Jesus coming to earth with songs, drama, chimes and autoharps.” They also offer regular programs for their “stars.” One program that is for the youth and adults in the program is known as Friday Night Fun. First, it is a time for fellowship. They provide a dinner and then there is a game time where those involved can choose between gym games, crafts, or table games. They end the program with a few songs and prayer (“Stars Ministry”). Although this church is going to great lengths in serving this special group of people in their church, it seems that this aspect of their ministry could be even *more* successful if they had special program-

ming in the church designed with their STARS in mind, but also invited and promoted the activities to *everyone* in the church. Too much special programming might seclude this group. However, doing some things, like Friday Night Fun, is a good start to reach out to include those who are differently abled.

My proposal is an attempt to include persons who are differently abled in the life of the United Methodist Church, specifically in the North Georgia Conference. It is my hope that children like Rachel, as they continue to grow up and become adults, can continue to be treasured and seen as valuable members of their churches, because *they are valuable*. These children are children of God, deserving the same opportunities that are offered to the rest of us, especially in the house of God. It does not matter to God what Rachel can or cannot do with her physical body; she is cherished just the same. She, like every other marginalized person, is valued by God. Even though this proposal is specific in identifying the need to include those who are differently abled in our churches, there is a more general need in our churches to include everyone. It may be a difficult task to include someone who has a mental disability, but how much harder would it be for us to include a former rapist or murderer? Jesus' life and ministry shows us that even though it may not be the socially acceptable way of life, it is the Christian's way of life: to include those who no one else wants to include—the outcasts, the poor, the sinners, the marginalized. This proposal suggests specific ideas about changes that can be made within our conference, but these suggestions and ideas are only scratching the surface of the problem. To totally transform our churches, we need a change of heart and mind. Until we, the Church, truly value the idea of inclusiveness, we shall remain only a faulty version of the body of Christ, unable to truly live life as Christ did: a life of love, a life of sacrifice, and a life of inclusiveness.

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