**BELONGING**

Belonging is very important to who we are. Belonging begins from when we are born.

Most of us can remember back to our school days. When we where included in a group or a team or a program, then we really felt that we belonged. So too it is in our churches. When a person is included, when they are encouraged to participate, they feel that they belong.

The early church in Acts 2 tells us that they went from house to house where they ate together in gladness, praising God and having favour with **ALL** people. They looked after each others’ needs as well. God intended for **ALL** of us to belong

The two of us are the Regional Advocates for Disability Concerns. That means we meet with your Church Advocates or your church’s Disability Concerns Team. When we get together with Church Advocates or Teams, there are a number of issues we talk about. We talk about accessibility: elevators, ramps and accessible washrooms, coat racks, hearing devices and large print. These are some of the physical aspects of accessibility that most churches are doing quite well in. We may also spend some time talking about the various “invisible” forms of disabilities such as anxiety and depression. We also discuss policies and training including the accessibility standards that our government has put into place known as the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. All of that is important and cannot be neglected by our churches. But a large part of our discussion often centers on the different kinds of attitudes our people have towards those with disabilities. The various attitudes that our people have will likely also reflect on how our churches ministers with people who have special needs. Does our attitude toward people with disabilities present a barrier or a welcoming experience for them and their care givers?

Through these discussions we discover a range of different attitudes. Here is a helpful summary of different attitudes called “The 5 Stages of Disability Attitudes” which was put together by Dan Vanderplaats, from Elim Christian Services in Palo Heights, Illinois.

The first stage which we don’t encounter too often any more but still exists is **Ignorance.** That’s the person who will tell you things like this. “I don’t have a disability, so I don’t need to be involved.” Or “The church should not spend time or money on this. We have other issues that are more important.” Or “Disability is a result of sin, and I don’t think God can use those people.” Some of the people in the time Jesus was on earth certainly held some of those views.

A little bit more common is the next stage: **Pity**. People with an attitude of pity will say things like this: “that poor family” or “I really feel bad for her” or “There but for the grace of God go I.” Much of what we say or do often stems from pity, which is not the basis from which we should begin our ministry. A father of a daughter with autism was approached by a fellow parishioner who said to him. “Life must be very sad for her”. To which the father responded, “She is a happy-go-lucky girl, often more so than her siblings. Your pity is not needed. Rather than pitying her, you just need to accept her for who she is.” An attitude that does not move beyond pity will often drive a family who has a loved one with disabilities away from the church.

**Care** is the third stage. We want to be a caring church, and that is good. We do need to show that we really care. What often happens is that we assign someone to take **them** a casserole or find a volunteer to clean **their** side walk. Caring can easily become a role we perform. Sometimes our caring becomes a service **we** provide for **them** thereby showing who is the giver and who is the recipient. Something is lacking if that is how we want to fill a need in someone’s life. Caring has to come from a heartfelt desire that they are part of our family. Caring comes out of knowing and understanding where they are at in there lives, which leads us to a better stage.

That brings us to the fourth stage: **Friendship.** Friendship means a desireto share time together. It’s not **them** and **us**, but it is **we**. Friendship walks alongside people through the valleys of despair as well as the heights of celebration. Friendship does not see a person with a disability or their family as remote from us, but sees them as part of our family, part of our church family. When we value people with disabilities as friends, we will take the time to build relationships with them. We will realize how much God blesses us and the church through them. Through friendship, pity and care take on a wholly different meaning.

Which brings us to stage five, when we see people living with disabilities as **Co-laborers** in God’s kingdom. We acknowledge that people with disabilities are also placed in our church and in our community by God. We recognize that we and they both have limitations in our abilities, and we see that God provided each of us with gifts. As a church we need to encourage them and equip them to use their gifts just like the church seeks to encourage all of its members to serve in meaningful ways. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes to us about the church as one body, though it is made up of many parts. Even those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are necessary in order to make one body. Co-laborers means that we want to work together in the life of the church.

I pray that you as elders, deacons, pastors, will report back to your churches the need for leaders in your church to have a conversation with your Disability Concerns team or your Church Advocate. Invite or rather urge them to attend one of your council meetings or your deacons meetings to find ways to minister with people living with disabilities that will ensure that no-one is left out, but rather that everybody belongs and everybody serves. For this too is God’s will.

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