UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY: Everybody Belongs, Everybody Serves!

The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church encourages churches to set aside a week in October to celebrate Disability Week.

*Disability Concerns* was established by Synod in 1982 as an agency of the denomination. Much progress has been made during the past thirty years toward welcoming people with disabilities into the full life of the church. Even Christians, however, make it clear by the various barriers they tolerate that they don’t mean to include people with disabilities, though it is not their conscious intention.

A disability results, for the most part, from the various barriers that hinder full and effective participation in society. A person is not disabled simply because he or she is born with or acquires a slight, moderate, or severe, uncorrectable, long-term loss of function. People still function with their other abilities and with special tools or techniques. For example, hearing aids, large print, wheelchairs, canes and walkers, or individualized learning styles may help. A limitation becomes a disability when activities, products, services, or environment that could be made accessible, are instead left inaccessible. Accommodations that minimize the various physical or communication barriers for persons with disabilities are necessary for their daily lives.

Many people deny their own impairments or the fact that they may acquire a disability in their lifetime. Also, despite the large number of people with disabilities (17 percent of the general population), many people will not ask for help because of embarrassment associated with being seen as less than competent. Or perhaps they don’t know who to ask, or it’s more trouble than it’s worth and they don’t want any extra efforts made on their behalf. In some situations there may also be risk of injury involved. One graphic example: a person in a wheelchair is risking being dropped while being carried up stairs by kindhearted helpers.

The goal is for each congregation to be all-inclusive (i.e., large print, hearing devices, transportation, accessible facilities, pastoral care). The fact is, with a little foresight and without radically changing the purposes and locations of events being planned people with disabilities can be included in church life and service rather than excluded due to lack of accommodation. People with disabilities, just like all the rest of us, want to be valued and helpful. What more can be done as a congregation to find useful and important jobs in the church for people with disabilities, as a way to affirm them as unique children of God, rather than as simply a case of disabilities?

Adapted from *Disability Concerns* Website

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