

Employment and Disability

Christians believe that work brings dignity, self-respect, and responsibility, and that a lack of employment is demoralizing, socially isolating, and wasteful of a person's abilities. Congregations can help people with disabilities find jobs that allow them to be full participants in their communities.

"The church is filled with people who are more connected to more diverse businesses than any service system would know how to access," says Vanderbilt University researcher and special education professor Erik Carter.

Unemployment rates among people with disabilities are at least double that of the general population, even with the help of government-based programs. A lack of employment may mean that adequate food, housing, and medical care are not attainable.

In light of these realities, people of faith can expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities by:

- Drawing attention to the abilities of people with disabilities with which they can contribute to the workforce
- Hiring qualified people with disabilities to staff and support the work of the congregation
- Offering support to members and visitors with disabilities who are out of work, including moral support, specific advice and training, supervised volunteer opportunities, and introductions to those who make hiring decisions
- Encouraging employers in the congregation and community to hire qualified people with disabilities.

"In many ways a church can provide both indirect and direct supports to an individual who is employed in the community," says Scott Witte, Director of Partnership and Service Development for Hope Haven in Rock Valley, IA. "This can happen indirectly by including and incorporating an individual into the life of the church, and directly by such supports as providing rides to/from work, names of or contacts with potential employers, personal references on behalf of the job seeker, and even paid employment for jobs within the church."



Lessons Learned through a True Friend

Clayton, a devout Christian living on Cleveland's West Side, desires two things: a loving, Christian wife and a job. For most of us, these 2 desires are attainable. When you have schizophrenia, and no one to advocate for you, it is nearly impossible.

I met Clayton over 10 years ago. He rang the parsonage doorbell and asked if I wanted to buy any of his "stuff" so he could buy food. He had glasses from amusement parks and sports teams, VHS movies, magazines, bad vinyl records, etc. I told Clayton I wouldn't buy his stuff, but I would send him home with some food. Thus began our friendship.

At the time, Clayton was working for a local mechanic. The owner of the shop "helped" Clayton and his mother with their finances. Every month they would give him most of their two Social Security checks and all their bills. He was to pay their mortgage and utilities and any credit card bills they had. More often than not, the shop owner never paid Clayton for his work at the shop, citing some infraction that cost the shop money.

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After several years of friendship with Clayton, I convinced him that his "employer" was taking advantage. Clayton agreed to let me help, but already their house foreclosed, their utilities were hundreds of dollars behind, and his mother's health had deteriorated.

Today, Clayton's mom is living in a wonderful nursing home. Clayton lives in an apartment near the church, and all of his bills are paid in full. (He agreed to let me be his payee for his disability check so he wouldn't spend all his money.) He details cars, and would like more hours and a more social job, but he doesn't understand that many employers will not hire people with mental illnesses.

Clayton is still seeking a wife to love.

I am blessed that the Lord brought Clayton in my life. He is a true friend to me, and because of Clayton I have learned a lot about our society, myself, and God.

—Christine Van Farowe
Calvary Reformed Church, Cleveland, OH

Disability Concerns



everybody belongs • everybody serves

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