



THE DANCE OF LIFE

Incorporating Disabled Children into the Life of the Spiritual Community

In September 1998, as a new pastor in Columbus, Ohio, I grew familiar with my parish in the usual ways. I visited with my parishioners, visited the shut-in and the hospitalized, and preached on Sundays. I usually went home and rested afterward, preparing for the week of pastoral care and concerns. It was in that month that my ministry was challenged by a need that presented itself in a most surprising and interesting way. I received a phone call from a woman who lived in the community, looking for a church to attend with her son. I warmly welcomed her to attend my church and said, "We'll look for you on Sunday." Her voice grew somber. "My son Timmy doesn't sit still for long, and he sometimes yells out loud." I tried to reassure her. "Timmy won't be doing anything unusual, as this is an African American Church, and that's rather normal." She laughed, and then began to cry. "My son is handicapped—he couldn't sit still if he tried. He has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair." I again welcomed her and looked for her on Sunday. They never came.

I realized after that incident I failed to meet the needs of that woman and her son. Oh sure, I could offer the church, its programming, its choirs and the building, but that was it. What those two persons needed was love that was unconditional, and a different way to express it. It then occurred to me that we weren't doing a good job at that. Primarily, the building was the first assault—no power doors and no accessibility ramp. The bathrooms were downstairs with no elevator to access them. And worse yet, the parishioners kept their physically challenged loved ones at home. Subliminally, they felt that the physically challenged needed to be outside of the church as well.

The one thing I learned at seminary can be expressed in a single sentence: "The only thing one can do with a mistake is correct it." Invariably the correction came through the meeting of trustees, financiers, and a general contractor to change the "mistakes" of the

building. The church was renovated to include power doors and ramps, with accessible bathrooms. Changing the "mistakes" of the hearts and minds of people proved to be more challenging.

Clair United Methodist Church (CUMC) got its chance to correct its mistake by incorporating itself in an MR/DD (mental retardation/developmental disability) program at a neighborhood school. The administrator thoughtfully solicited the church to come into the school and volunteer. As the pastor, I signed up and volunteered, and some of my parishioners followed. But there were some healthy skeptics who said, "Why should we do this? Couldn't we get sued if something happened to those children? We aren't prepared to deal with children with those kinds of problems!" I volunteered, and was enriched by the reception of the staff and students alike. They shared with me their challenges of being in a wheelchair, having problems reading and writing, and generally gaining acceptance from strangers and the community. I suddenly remembered Timmy and his mom. I realized that this was an opportunity to correct another "mistake."

I began having a special ministry for my new found friends. I asked the choir director to start a new choir for the children at the school called Halos. The children performed on the second Sunday of each month with signed and sung songs. The Halos also performed at school functions. Their greatest achievement was a performance at the School District's "Safe Neighborhood Night." The Halos also read the Scriptures on Sunday morning and did sign language. The healthy skeptics became fewer and fewer until there was a genuine spirit of love for these children that was evident. It took the church two and a half years to correct a mistake, but I believe that its correction was priceless. CUMC's involvement with an MR/DD program was a blessing that dropped into our lap. The spiritual community should not believe that this is the only way to minister to disabled children and their families.

The spiritual community should be aware that it has been a place of separation by virtue of an inaccessible building or by inaccessible people. Both are clear signs of woeful negligence to persons of worth in the sight of God. The spiritual community should be ready and willing to correct its mistakes. It will be wonderfully blessed in doing so. The spiritual community has great opportunities for mission and ministry in schools and community service programs. Volunteers are needed and greatly appreciated. When the efforts of social advocacy, government agencies, and private humanitarian entities seem less workable, the spiritual community has an obligation of time, resources, and manpower to create meaningful experiences and programming for people with

challenges. There is always someone who can do the job and is willing.

My greatest achievement as a pastor came at a Communion service when the children from the school came and participated. As Communion was served, a child in a wheelchair was wheeled by a parishioner to the front. As I gave the child Communion, she kissed me and said, "Thank you for letting me belong here." As tears streamed down my face, I realized we all belong. It is the responsibility of the spiritual community to make sure that happens.

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