



## **DISABILITY AWARENESS**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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#### **I. Introduction**

In Mark 7:31-37, Jesus heals a man who was deaf and unable to speak. Although this was the only miracle in his ministry pertaining to a person with hearing loss, Jesus was keenly aware of people that we would categorize today as having disabilities. Earlier in Mark 2, Jesus healed a paralyzed man brought through the roof of the house by four friends. In John 9, he gave sight to a man blind from birth. And, by today's employment classifications and insurance practices, one can perhaps argue that the woman healed from twelve years of painful hemorrhages by touching the hem of Jesus' garment in Matthew 9 was a person with a long-term disability. There is no question of Jesus' awareness of and the attention he paid to people with disabilities. But are people living with disabilities given that same level of attention and acceptance in the lives of our congregations? If not, perhaps it is because we are not aware of or paying sufficient attention to the needs of people with disabilities within our sanctuaries.

#### **II. National Disability Awareness Month**

In 1988, Congress established October as National Disability (Employment) Awareness Month. This is the month and the time for our congregations to heighten disability awareness and consider the following possibilities for ministry to people living with disabilities. These acts require less of an investment of money than an investment of care:

- Including large print (perhaps Braille versions) church publications (song sheets, bulletins, etc.) for the visually impaired;
- Purchasing large print Bibles;
- Reserving parking spaces for people living with disabilities and locating them closest to the nearest accessible entrance;
- Providing a sign language interpreter and/or audio equipment for the hearing impaired;

- Designing lesson plans to ensure participation of people with disabilities in Christian Education efforts;
- Purchasing a church van and/or assigning church members to provide transportation to people living with disabilities; and
- Designating Sunday October 18 or another Sunday in the month as Disability Awareness Sunday, designing the worship and programs of the church to heighten disability awareness.

### **III. Who is living with Disabilities?**

According to a report issued in December 2008 by the US Census Bureau, 19% of Americans, 54.4 million people, reported some level of disability, with the percentage much higher for persons over eighty years of age. This means almost one in five persons sitting in church pews have some type of disability.<sup>1</sup> I suspect that most people associate congregants with disabilities with those in wheelchairs, those using hearing aids or needing a sign language interpreter, or folks requiring a walker to get around the sanctuary.

However, while these types of disabilities are more commonly known, they are hardly the only ones. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) defines the term “disability” as a “physical and mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities” of an individual.<sup>2</sup> These activities include walking, seeing, or hearing, but also include breathing, working, and dressing and bathing oneself. Under this definition, conditions such as cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, and Down’s syndrome are disabilities. Types of disabilities also include cognitive impairments or developmental disabilities that adversely affect a person’s ability to learn or process information. Speech impairments ranging from stuttering to a complete inability to speak that require coaching, assistive devices, or an interpreter are also included.

It is important for congregations to be cognizant that disabilities can be acquired at any time. These disabilities may occur due to age, disease, or a cataclysmic event. Famous examples of the latter include Teddy Pendergrass, paralyzed by an automobile accident in 1982; Curtis Mayfield, paralyzed from the neck down when he was struck by stage lighting during a concert in 1990; and actor Christopher Reeve, who championed the issue of disability awareness after a horse riding accident in 1995 left him paralyzed from the neck down. Last year, many in our churches prayed for famed gospel singer Reverend Timothy Wright, who suffered a severe spinal cord injury in an automobile accident that claimed the lives of his wife and grandson. These examples illustrate the fact that anyone attending church on any given Sunday is one event away from living with a disability.

Church members also may be quite surprised to find the following listed among disabilities that substantially limit “major life activities,” as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act:

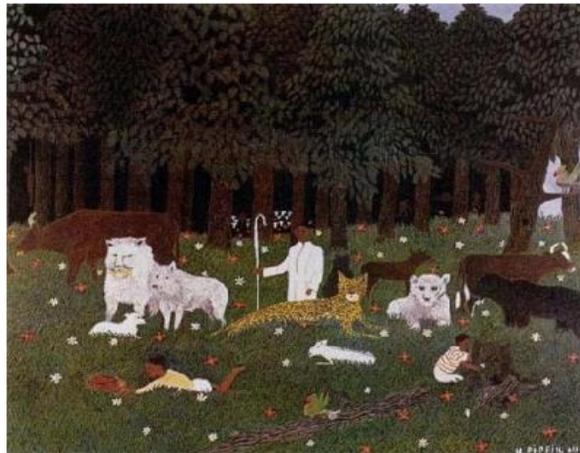
Epilepsy  
 Rheumatoid arthritis  
 Bi-polar disorder (clinically diagnosed)  
 Depression (clinically diagnosed)  
 Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome  
Alzheimer Disease  
HIV and AIDS  
Dyslexia  
Asthma  
Autism

The Americans with Disabilities Act may be found in its' entirety by logging onto [www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm](http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm).

Perhaps some larger churches have wheelchair accessibility or a sign language interpreter. But how does a Sunday school teacher effectively impart the gospel story to a child with dyslexia or autism? What ministries are needed and exist for people living with HIV/AIDS, given the longstanding lack of acceptance and stigma associated with the disease? There is a clear need among churches for both heightened awareness and acceptance of people in the pews who are living with disabilities.

#### IV. African Americans and Disabilities: Our Past



(A) The above painting, modeled from Edward Hicks “Peaceable Kingdom” series from Isaiah 9, is part of the “Holy Mountain” series by African American painter Horace Pippin (1888-1946). While fighting with the all-black 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment in World War I, Mr. Pippin suffered a serious gunshot wound to his arm and shoulder and was given an honorable discharge and a disability pension by the French government. He returned to his hometown of West Chester, Pennsylvania. After encountering little success with finding work, Mr. Pippin turned to painting, using his left hand to guide his crippled right hand. Despite his disability, Horace Pippin is considered the first self-taught African American painter of national recognition.<sup>3</sup> Horace Pippin’s work is a visual example of abilities abundant within people sometimes considered “less than” because of a disability. Christian Education instructors may construct a lesson plan for both adults and youth based on his art, which is often based on scriptural themes, as well as the struggle for equality of African Americans. Ideas for lesson plans can be found by logging onto [www.nga.gov/education/classroom/counting\\_on\\_art/bio\\_pippin](http://www.nga.gov/education/classroom/counting_on_art/bio_pippin).

Horace Pippin is one of many famous persons throughout African American history who lived with disabilities. Harriett Tubman (1820-1913) suffered from a form of epilepsy after being struck on the head by an overseer at age thirteen.<sup>4</sup> This did not stop her from being known throughout the world as the rescuer of slaves and the Moses of her time.

(B) Today's video features Tom Wiggins, also known as Blind Tom Wiggins (1849-1908). One can log onto AfriClassical.com online at:

<http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/wiggins.html>, follow the links, and hear more of Wiggins' music. Wiggins was a slave who was not only blind, but a musical genius who would today be defined as an autistic savant. After giving his first musical concert at age eight in Columbus, Georgia, he went on to write more than one hundred compositions.<sup>5</sup> Additional information about Mr. Wiggins can be found on numerous websites.

(C) One Voice Who Spoke for Many



Almost thirty years before President Barack Obama electrified the 2004 Democratic Convention floor with his keynote address, another African American Representative, Barbara Charline Jordan (1936-1996) of Texas, delivered a powerful keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York. Although the United States had just celebrated a bi-centennial, much of the nation was still reeling from the effects of the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon. It was at this critical time that Representative Jordan, daughter of a Baptist minister and, then, only the third African American woman licensed to the bar in the state of

Texas, became the first African American woman to deliver a keynote address at the convention of a major political party. Her speech, "Who, Then, Will Speak for the Common Good?" is ranked 5<sup>th</sup> among the top American speeches in the 20th century by 137 scholars of American public addresses, four places behind Martin Luther King Jr.'s top rated "I Have a Dream" speech.<sup>6</sup> More than thirty years later, her words still ring with power and relevance:

*...And now -- now we must look to the future. Let us heed the voice of the people and recognize their common sense. If we do not, we not only blaspheme our political heritage, we ignore the common ties that bind all Americans. Many fear the future. Many are distrustful of their leaders, and believe that their voices are never heard. Many seek only to satisfy their private work -- wants; to satisfy their private interests. But this is the great danger America faces -- that we will cease to be one nation and become instead a collection of interest groups: city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual; each seeking to satisfy private wants. If that happens, who then will speak for America? Who then will speak for the common good?*

*We must address and master the future together. It can be done if we restore the belief that we share a sense of national community, that we share a common national endeavor. It can be done. There is no executive order; there is no law that can require the American*

*people to form a national community. This we must do as individuals, and if we do it as individuals, there is no President of the United States who can veto that decision.*<sup>7</sup>

Three years prior to this convention, in 1973, Barbara Jordan was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. However, those familiar with this condition know that long before the diagnosis, Jordan suffered from its presence. In the early 1980s, she began having trouble climbing stairs and eventually used a cane and a wheelchair. Jordan tried to keep her health well out of the public eye until it was impossible to do so. When she returned to the convention podium in 1988 to nominate Senator Lloyd Bentsen as the Vice-Presidential candidate, she did so from a wheelchair. She died of complications of the disease in 1996, but not until she completed a distinguished career in government and as a professor at the University of Texas in Austin. Barbara Jordan is a model for the potential that exists in the millions of persons today living with disabilities, given both acceptance and access.

## **V. African Americans and Disabilities: The Present**

If we do not know someone personally who has a disability, we undoubtedly know some famous African Americans who do. When boxing legend Muhammad Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, doctors noted that his condition was brought on by repetitive head trauma.<sup>8</sup> Golfing great Tiger Woods talked to his dog to overcome his stuttering as a child. Rap singer Foxy Brown was diagnosed with sudden hearing loss while recording a project in 2005.

According to the study released by the United States Census Bureau last year, African Americans have the highest proportion (21%) of people living with disabilities within all populations.<sup>9</sup> All persons with disabilities experience discrimination (ranging from the relegation to lesser services, activities, and jobs to barriers in architecture, transportation and communication that deny access and participation). However, African Americans, according to Ethel Briggs, former Executive Director of the National Council on Disability, also deal with prejudice and economic barriers that deny full participation in communities. This statement is supported by the fact that the poverty rate among African Americans with disabilities was 37% compared to 19% for African Americans without disabilities.<sup>10</sup> This presents fertile ground for our congregations for increasing the awareness of the challenges faced by our brothers and sisters living with disabilities.

## **VI. Disability Awareness: Images**

- Scenes from Jesus Children of America is a short film directed by Spike Lee about a young woman living with HIV/AIDS. Since it is 20 minutes long, it could be shown in its entirety as part of a program on disability awareness. For more information log on to [www.40acres.com](http://www.40acres.com); see it at youtube.org <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr-11PKz594> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQUDRs3T1BY&feature=related>.
- John Davis' CD, James Davis Plays Blind Tom: The Eighth Wonder. Samples can be heard by logging onto NPR [www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2002/mar/blindtom/index.html](http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2002/mar/blindtom/index.html).

- My Brother is a little known but powerful movie depicting the life and bond between two brothers living in New York, one of whom is developmentally disabled. This movie, released in 2007, won Best Picture honors at the American Black Film Festival for that year. See the trailer online at: <http://www.youtube.com/libertyartists>. It contains scenes of the movie that can be shown to classes and groups.

## VII. Disability Awareness: Personal Reflection

Have faith in God  
 Have faith in God  
 Have faith in God for deliverance  
 Have faith, have faith in God....

He'll bring you out....  
 He'll see you through.....<sup>11</sup>

### Personal Lessons

There was no question that people living with disabilities were part of my church life as a child. At St. Stephen's Baptist Church in Washington, DC (now in Temple Hills, Maryland), most were elderly and experienced problems of mobility associated with age. Our congregation prayed not only for the sick in our membership, but also the "shut-in," mostly people whose disabilities kept them from traveling by public transportation or from traversing the stairs from the sidewalk to access the narthex, sanctuary, or social hall. Nonetheless, I do remember our congregation making extensions of hospitality to people in wheelchairs and/or ensuring a comfortable place to sit. A vivid image at church during my young adult years was the Senior Choir at St. Stephen's singing the above song. Mrs. Gladys Myers, who sang next to my mother on the front row as a soprano, was seated in the congregation. She had become blind because of advanced diabetes. As the choir continued into the song, the Spirit overcame Sister Myers and she "got happy" in the vernacular of our congregation, and cried out "Yes Sir!" As our ushers dutifully attended to her, it appeared to me that that we were hearing not only praise, but also a lament of her condition. Yet through her cries, I heard a firm conviction that her faith would see her through. It was the last time I saw Sister Myers alive, but the memory of her faith as she lived with her disability remains with me over thirty years later.

Today, I see firsthand the need for ministry to people living with disabilities. I have visited many churches in the New York metropolitan area, and those fully accessible to persons with disabilities (not only including sanctuaries but entire church facilities) are few and far between. A search of the websites of numerous large churches revealed few mentions that facilities are ADA accessible. If people living with disabilities are not even aware that they can come to church on a Sunday, how can they participate in the lives of our churches and ministries? Disability awareness poses both a challenge and an opportunity to our churches and congregations.

## VIII. Disability Awareness: The Challenge



African American congregations, as do all congregations, face the following challenges with respect to disability awareness: 1) fostering greater awareness of the types of disabilities faced by members; 2) overcoming stigmas (often associated with perceptions of lesser gifts, skills, and abilities) that limit the acceptance and the participation of people living with disabilities in the lives of our churches; and 3) making worship and church both meaningful—and, in some way, spiritually healing for people living with disabilities.

These challenges are coupled with the fact that there is little incentive to heighten awareness of the issue. Most without disabilities apparently find no need to address the issue. The American with Disabilities Act, legislation passed in 1990 to address architectural, communication, transportation and employment barriers, contains a specific exemption for religious organizations. Not only does this exemption include churches, it also includes schools or other activities operated by churches. Therefore, congregations have no obligation to make their facilities more accessible for persons with disabilities, particularly those whose vision, hearing, and mobility are impaired. Moreover, the cost of renovations to render facilities accessible to all persons may involve capital expenses of hundreds of thousands of dollars. This prospect could make the idea of accessibility cost prohibitive for congregations to undertake as an investment despite the best of intentions.<sup>12</sup> This being the case, this cultural resource unit provides inexpensive and moderately expensive ways to assist persons who are differently abled. **See Section IX.**

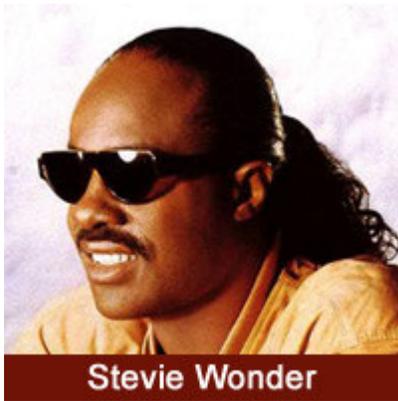
Regardless of whether people with disabilities can speak out or not, it is our call to hear the voice of God that speaks through them. That responsibility was taken up in 2006 by students and faculty at Gallaudet University, a federally chartered college for the hearing impaired in my hometown of Washington, DC. The protesters barricaded themselves in one of the buildings on campus to protest the hiring of Jane K. Fernandes, a woman born deaf but “mainstreamed” by going to schools with hearing children. While the appointment was seen by some as pointing to the inclusion of people who grew up not using sign language, the students viewed this selection as an instance of “audism” - discrimination and stereotypes against hearing impaired people, as well as part of a long pattern of prejudice by the school’s administration. This protest, reminiscent of African American student protests of the sixties and seventies, resulted in the withdrawal of Fernandes’ appointment by the University’s Board of Trustees. Regardless of the wisdom of the appointment and the withdrawal, this protest drew national attention to the discrimination and the challenges faced every day by people with disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

What perhaps can go a long way in overcoming stigmas and discriminatory ways of thinking attached to people with disabilities is the reframing of our language on the issue. In a number of countries, they do not speak of “disabled people,” but rather “differently abled” people. The term, originated by the U.S. Democratic National Committee in 1980 as a more politically correct term than “handicapped,” has found popularity in countries such as South Africa, who make the following distinction:

The term “disability” implies a disassociation from an ability—even more so, when one refers to a “disabled person” ... For example, an able person can climb a mountain, and a person in a wheelchair can also get up a mountain with a modified wheelchair. They are both able to do it, just differently.<sup>14</sup>

Although the term “differently abled” may not be part of mainstream terminology, it raises a critical point with respect to disability awareness. People with disabilities have abundant gifts and abilities. And, as the Church, we are to include and celebrate these gifts and abilities.

Tell me!  
Tell me holy  
Holy roller  
Are you standing  
Like a soldier?  
Waell...<sup>15</sup>



Recording legend Stevie Wonder, blind from infancy because of a high dosage of oxygen which damaged his eyes, wrote the above lyrics that provide an appropriate question and challenge to our congregations regarding disability awareness. What are we standing for with respect to this issue? What is the extent of our awareness and what are we doing with it? Prayer for healing is a faithful response, but doing so as the only faithful response may: 1) invalidate the gifts and richness of life experience that people with disabilities bring to the table; 2) pose an “easy way out” of our own accountability and foster discrimination and exclusion of the differently abled in our lives of our churches.

As with all life matters, our model and motivation for ministry to people living with disabilities is Jesus. The story in Mark 7 is one of many instances in which Jesus paid attention to people in his community living with disabilities. Perhaps we cannot physically heal them in the way that Jesus did, but perhaps we can provide spiritual healing through our awareness and acceptance. In that way, we are following Jesus’ example of ministry, which includes the participation of all people in the reign of God.

## IX. Resources for Disability Awareness

- Hopefully, this Disability Awareness cultural resource unit, its accompanying lectionary commentary and worship unit will be useful to your congregation.
- That All May Worship is a 56 page interfaith publication by the National Organization on Disability that offers advice on becoming more accessible and welcoming to persons with disabilities. For more information contact the National Organization on Disability by logging onto [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org).

- The Disability Resource Manual is a guide published by the Evangelical Covenant Church. The manual includes definitions of disabilities, suggestions for ways churches can be more accessible, and information for starting a ministry to people with disabilities. Log on to [www.covchurch.org/resource/disability-resource-manual-a-practical-guide-for-churches-and-church-leaders](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/disability-resource-manual-a-practical-guide-for-churches-and-church-leaders) to download a PDF version of this document.
- From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations and People with Disabilities written by Janet Rife and Ginny Thornburgh. Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 1996. This book offers additional resources for congregations seeking to be more welcoming to people living with disabilities. This book may be purchased by going online to [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org).
- Money and Ideas: Creative Approaches to Congregational Access. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001. This book offers fifty stories from churches and ideas for making churches more accessible to persons with disabilities. It also provides information on how churches with limited financial resources can become accessible. A PDF version of this book may be downloaded by logging onto [www.congregationalresources.org/MoneyAndIdeas.pdf](http://www.congregationalresources.org/MoneyAndIdeas.pdf).
- Unexpected Guest at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church by Brett Webb-Mitchell. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1994. Based on the parable of the wedding banquet, this book includes ideas for worship and religious education that increase acceptance of people living with disabilities.

### Notes

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