This issue of The Christian Citizen is dedicated to the memory of Michael Cushman (1981-2012), in recognition of his many years of service as a regular volunteer for Judson Press and American Baptist Home Mission Societies and for his contributions to the life and ministry of Calvary Baptist Church, Norristown, Pa. A man of deep faith and commitment, Michael was a blessing to others. We are the better for having had the privilege of knowing and serving with him.

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When President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), he called for the “shameful wall of exclusion” to come tumbling down. And so it has. Today, our society is more accessible and welcoming of people with a wide range of disabilities and chronic health conditions than it was in 1990. Nonetheless, progress on another matter that was also central to the ADA, employment of people with disabilities, has been more difficult. As noted in the “Statement of Solidarity by the Religious Community around Employment of People with Disabilities” (see page 12), “two-thirds of Americans with disabilities who want to work are unemployed or underemployed. That number has not changed since the ADA’s passage.”


In the course of my research, the biggest revelation has been that there are converging streams of demography, war, and science creating a wave of people in need, a wave that is about to break at the doors of our faith communities.

How might we respond to these mounting challenges? How might we expand opportunities for employment of people with disabilities? How might we make progress in moving our congregations and communities from access to inclusion? The following suggestions are just a few offered in this issue.

 Begin where you are and work incrementally. Bill Gaventa suggests not a new “special ministry that is tacked onto the church” but, rather, beginning “by talking with individuals and families about what they need and want and then taking a good look at what the church already offers.” Likewise, Joe Gratzel suggests approaching needed changes incrementally and “look-

 Cultivate an accessible attitude. Becoming a congregation that welcomes and includes people with disabilities and their families means changing attitudes as well as increasing the accessibility of the facility. As Elizabeth Fell-DeWalt writes, “It is in the best interest of any church’s disability outreach efforts to invest time in preliminary self-examination and consciousness-raising around the issue of disability.”

 Foster connections. Bret Li-Vaks notes, “As a microcosm of the community, the local congregation can be a place of important connections for persons seeking employment opportunities.” Create opportunities for employers in your congregation to connect with those with disabilities who are unemployed or underemployed. Create employment opportunities in the church itself.

 Educate and advocate. The Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition (IDAC) is spearheading an effort to raise awareness of and support for employment of people with disabilities through the solidarity statement (see page 12). Encourage your congregation to join American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) and other religious organizations in endorsing this effort and implementing its provisions. Review and consider supporting the policy changes suggested by Kelly Buckland and other writers in this issue.

These steps are only a few to consider as we work to expand opportunities for people with disabilities in our congregations and communities. Others are suggested in the articles that follow. We hope you’ll be encouraged and inspired to respond as, together, we move from access to inclusion for people with disabilities in the common life of our congregations, communities and society.

Curtis Ramsey-Lucas is managing director of Resource Development for ABHMS.
Those of us in public life often identify ourselves with Micah 6:8, where we are admonished “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” I am no exception. Rather than simply restating this timeless instruction, let me try to put it in the context of the particular challenges and opportunities of my own life.

First is the call “to do justice.” This duty might be considered almost instinctive for a lawyer—nearly second nature—by virtue of our training and our experience. Yet this responsibility clearly extends beyond the courtroom and boardroom. For me, it begins in the family with my wife and four sons, where fairness and just treatment are absolute musts for a productive and loving home environment. It extends into the community, where, throughout my career, I have tried to uphold “EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW,” as emblazoned on the façade of the U.S. Supreme Court, by providing legal aid to those who couldn’t afford a lawyer. As a prosecutor and as a governor, I tried to make a good-faith effort to combine the toughness necessary to maintain public order with a compassion that took into account the distress of people in real need.

The second instruction, “to love kindness”—or, as in the King James Version, “to love mercy”—is an admonition that encompasses the highest claim on those in public life—assisting others. First and foremost, it requires listening to others and identifying their needs—listening with the heart as well as the head. This obligation led me to a leadership role in securing passage of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. The act secured and advanced the rights of 54 million Americans with physical, sensory, psychiatric and intellectual disabilities by guaranteeing entry into the mainstream of American life. This opportunity had special meaning for me.

In 1960, our family suffered a terrible loss. My first wife was killed in an automobile accident while driving our three sons home after taking me to work. Our infant son, 4-month-old Peter, was seriously injured with multiple skull fractures and extensive brain injuries that left him with intellectual disability. After three years as a single parent, God sent Ginny Judson, a schoolteacher from Boston, who married me, became a mom to my boys and, later, added a fourth son. Ginny became an advocate for Peter, and then for all Pennsylvanians with intellectual disability, and eventually for persons with all kinds of disabilities around the world. She currently directs the Interfaith Initiative at the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), which supports people with disabilities and their families as they seek spiritual and religious access.

It is understandable, then, that I jumped at the chance when President George H.W. Bush asked me to be the point person for his administration in seeking congressional passage of the ADA. This effort represented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to combine my personal and political agendas. It culminated on July 26, 1990,
when some 3,000 people, with and without disabilities, gathered on the South Lawn of the White House to see President Bush sign the bill into law. The ADA has been in effect for more than 20 years. Like most reforms, it’s a process of two steps forward and one step back, but it has made enormous differences in the lives of persons who were previously denied equal access to jobs, education, public services and transportation.

The final instruction of Micah 6:8 is “to walk humbly with your God.” This is a difficult challenge to fulfill. Humility requires first turning ourselves over to God when facing decisions about careers, goals and ambitions. We can never act as if we, alone, have the wisdom and insight to provide the right responses to life’s varied challenges. It also means acknowledging when we are wrong—to the public, to be sure, but to family, friends and colleagues as well. These tasks are especially difficult for those of us in public life. Whether elected or appointed, we are regularly tempted to try to create an aura of perfection and infallibility about ourselves, not only to ensure that we are maintained in office, but also to accomplish our well-intended goals. During all my challenges, I’ve never hesitated to turn to God in prayer, not to achieve a particular result, win an election or to derive a quick answer to a knotty problem, but for the strength, wisdom and patience to deal with the varied problems of life. Those prayers have always been answered.

And my infant son who was so seriously injured in that accident? At age 52, Peter lives semi-independently in a supervised apartment in Harrisburg, Pa. He works most days as a volunteer at a food bank. He has brought great joy into the lives of his family, his friends and colleagues, and the United Methodist congregation with whom he worships regularly. Peter’s impact on our family, as you can imagine, has been profound. Peter slows us down. Peter forces us to think about essentials. He’s not impressed by the books I’ve read, how often I’m on TV, or how quickly I can do The New York Times Crossword Puzzle. He possesses a quiet dignity that serves as an inspiration to all who know him. His own values are very much in order. Once, when visiting with us, he and I went to the Washington Zoo. We saw all the animals, and laughed together at the antics of many of them. At the end of our excursion, I asked him what he’d liked best about our experience, expecting a reply related to the animals we had seen. Instead, he responded quite simply, “Being with you.” Walk humbly with my God, indeed. What a transcendent message my son shared with me that day!

Dick Thornburgh served two terms as governor of Pennsylvania and was attorney general of the United States under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. He is presently counsel to the international law firm of K&L Gates LLP, Washington, D.C.
hat are your church stories?” If you ask that question to persons with disabilities or their family members, the answers are never lukewarm. You will hear either stories about the wounds of feeling unwelcome, left out, or rejected or stories of appreciation for inclusion in various parts of congregational life—perhaps those you might not expect.

Such was the case for me at a Down Syndrome conference, where parents told their stories. One couple said their large church had become the trusted community in which their daughter could begin to separate from the family as she moved through her teenage years and into young adulthood. In the language of special education, that could be called a “ministry of transition.”

One mom, full of gratitude, said, “We took our minister with us to our IEP [Individual Education Plan] meeting at the school. It was wonderful. We got everything we wanted. They thought he was our lawyer.”

The story received the far-too-familiar laugh from other families and disability services professionals, who know firsthand the feeling of powerlessness that can accompany parents trying to work out the best supports for their children with an interdisciplinary team in a relationship that too often becomes adversarial. Who knew that the simple presence of a family’s minister would convey the message that the child and family were backed by a community that cares and wants to help? In this way, pastoral presence and family ministry readily become advocacy and community building.
People with disabilities and their families say, “We want a place that is safe, a sanctuary, a place of welcome and acceptance, a place where we can worship and learn, a place where we can both participate in and contribute to the life of a faith community.” That’s not so different from most other people!

Experiences with educational and service systems also set the stage for one of the most widespread feelings in families with disabilities about the church. Their weeks may be spent fighting to get the right kinds of services and supports. The last thing they want, or have the energy for, is to have to put on those same suits of armor when it comes to being part of a community of faith.

“What we most want,” I have so often heard, “is simply to be included in what is already there.” The place to begin, therefore, in ministries with people with disabilities and their families is not a new “special” ministry that is tacked onto the church. That approach can be derailed by first raising feelings of inadequacy among members about the skills they assume are necessary to include people with special needs. It is better to begin by talking with individuals and families about what they need and want and then taking a good look at what the church already offers. Then ask, “Why does anyone come? What are the gifts resident in the faith community and the congregation’s dream of its life and mission together?”

People with disabilities and their families say, “We want a place that is safe, a sanctuary, a place of welcome and acceptance, a place where we can worship and learn, a place where we can both participate in and contribute to the life of a faith community.” That’s not so different from most other people! The question becomes this one: “Is the faith and life of our congregation both deep and wide enough to include people who also thirst for these same waters?” The next questions should determine what needs to be done to welcome and include people in worship, in lifelong discipleship education, in gathering and celebration, in the work of caring for the facility, in the common caring for each other, in youth ministries, in social action, evangelization, in mission— in whatever is important to the congregation.

Inclusive religious education and youth programming, aside from offering learning and friendship for children and youth, becomes respite care for parents and caregivers, just as it does for all families. Simple tasks around the church become life changing openings for people with limited opportunity to do something for others, rather than always being on the receiving end. Members may realize they have an abundant capacity to support others on the margins of any community, especially the church. People may begin to realize that being more inclusive both broadens and deepens the foundations of their faith, life and mission together, thereby strengthening their witness to the wider world.

People with disabilities are not “consumers” who drain resources, but rather persons bearing gifts that beg to be received and used. The possibilities are enormous. Adults with disabilities talk about the transformation of their lives with the simple addition of a place to serve and create friendships. Families tell stories of the sense of incredible grace when they are church shopping (warily due to past experience) and encounter a community that says, “We have been expecting you. You have a home here.”

Congregations sometimes think, “We have only one or two families affected by disability,” but the possibilities are the same. Like pulling a single thread dangling on the edge of a sweater, we discover that the thread extends through the whole fabric, and there are multiple opportunities to not cut that thread off, but to tie it back in and strengthen the whole garment. The Apostle Paul wrote of the church as a body in which every single part has a gift to give—a gift to be respected and never cut off (Romans 12:5-6).

At the Down Syndrome conference, another parent privately told me a story about a teenage daughter with developmental disability, who, coming back one night from an activity at the umpteenth church on their shopping list, said in a halting voice: “No more church, Mom. No church. It may be God’s house, but he’s not home.” This experience also gets recounted in the wider community. The choice is ours. Do we want our churches to be places that are accessible and inclusive to the gifts of all or places that suggest by our actions and attitudes that God is not home?

Bill Gaventa, an American Baptist-endorsed chaplain, is director of Community and Congregational Supports at the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, and associate professor, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

Sources and Resources


The Power of One.pdf
Exuberant hospitality. That’s how I’d describe Sunday morning worship at First Baptist Church [FBC] of Manasquan,” wrote a local reporter who had recently visited our church. I was pleased to see that our intentional efforts to be hospitable were so apparent. Like many small churches, FBC Manasquan has always been a warm and welcoming fellowship. Beginning in 1999, we came to understand that welcoming also meant accessible and inclusive. In the intervening 12 years, we have made incremental changes to our facilities, staff and programs so that we can be true to our mission of “connecting people to Christ and each other and making disciples to serve the world.”

From the beginning, our biggest challenge was accessibility. The church was built in 1869, and the fellowship hall was added in 1960. Neither building has ground-floor access, and going from the sanctuary to the men’s rest room required traveling the length of both buildings and then navigating two full flights of stairs. There was no practical way to install interior or exterior ramps, and traditional elevators were cost-prohibitive. Therefore, we installed two platform lifts: one for the sanctuary, and one for the fellowship hall. If a person is ambulatory and can climb the three steps at the church’s front, he or she can access all levels from a lift in the vestibule. An individual in a wheelchair must enter through the fellowship hall, and then go through the Sunday school hall to access the second lift to reach the sanctuary. Once the building was accessible, we needed to create an accessible rest room. We were able to rearrange storage and combine two adjoining closets to create a unisex accessible bathroom in the Sunday school hallway. Although we made many adaptations to the interior of our buildings, our exterior doors continued to present a challenge to wheelchair access. We installed a power door opener on one of the fellowship hall doors and hope to modify another door in the future.

As our membership aged, vision and hearing problems made worship more challenging. To assist those with vision challenges, we use projection for announcements, song lyrics, congregational responses, Scripture lessons and sermon outlines. Another benefit to using
projection is that it assists visual learners of all ages. In our sanctuary, ceiling-mounted dual projectors worked best, but we have also used wall-mounted rear projection at one time. For our lighting conditions and distance, a 4,500-lumen projector works well. My unofficial test for projection is to view 36-point type in a PowerPoint presentation from the last pew. We project directly on the wall, so there was no cost for screens. We use the least expensive laptop we could find and Microsoft PowerPoint for our slides, but found it was important to use a high-quality remote for advancing the slides so that it works from anywhere in the sanctuary.

We assist people with hearing challenges in three ways. The screens provide visual reinforcement to what is being said from the pulpit. Memorial funds were used to purchase an adaptive listening system, which takes a feed from our sound system and broadcasts it to personal receivers, each about the size of a deck of cards. Access without inclusion, however, is not enough.

By using an incremental approach, thinking creatively about how to allocate or rearrange space, adding sweat equity and using a variety of funding mechanisms, we have made great strides in our buildings’ accessibility. Access without inclusion, however, is not enough. We have also worked to make worship services, Sunday school, youth programs and fellowship opportunities inclusive of people of all ages and abilities. From the young boy with Cerebral Palsy who helps the praise team, to the adult with Down Syndrome who serves as an usher, everyone has a place to connect and serve.

Laying out a plan and suggesting a preferred timeline will help members understand what is happening and the motivations for these changes. Since it is unlikely that most churches would be able to make many changes all at once, I suggest looking first to the needs of those who currently attend and those who may have stopped attending because of physical challenges. Once you start making changes, members embrace the venture and financially support further improvements. How will these efforts help your church reach more people for Christ? I am a believer in the “Field of Dreams” approach: “If you build it, they will come!”

The Rev. Joe Gratzel is senior pastor at FBC, Manasquan, N.J. He and his wife, Denise, are the adoptive parents of seven children, including Gavin, a son with special needs. Joe can be reached by email at jgratzel@juno.com.

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<tr>
<th>IMPROVEMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Six-unit personal-receiver audio system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power door opener</td>
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<td>Projectors and installation</td>
<td>Under $2,500 each</td>
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<td>American Sign Language interpreter</td>
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<td>at each service</td>
<td>(underwritten by a church member)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restroom renovation</td>
<td>$7,500 (from reserves)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two lifts</td>
<td>$35,000 (from capital funds campaign)</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Jesus’ teaching is replete with countercultural messages as evidenced in the many lessons of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) that include both “You have heard that it was said” and “but what I say to you.” Another example is Jesus’ validation of women, lepers and other disenfranchised groups. This article focuses on the ways in which local congregations can follow the model of Jesus and become countercultural beacons through outreach to one disenfranchised group: persons living with disability.

At a practical level, any church can begin by establishing a Disability Committee, either free-standing, or as a subcommittee of another group, such as missions or outreach. A name like “Inclusion Committee” may be preferable, as it focuses on the positive ministry of welcoming diverse persons fully into the life of the church, rather than reinforcing any stigma associated with disability. When a person with a disability begins attending, a helpful early step would be for a member of the Inclusion Committee to talk about needs with the person or, in the case of a child, with a parent, and then plan for periodic check-in. It is impossible for the committee to predict needs, so it is important to ask what steps the church can take to maximize participation in the life of the congregation. Even if no needed adaptations are identified, simply posing the question conveys the all-important message that the church cares.

Depending on a church’s budget, a number of steps can be taken to increase a facility’s accessibility. I’d like to recommend another important step be taken—one having less to do with physical change and more to do with attitude change. It is in the best interest of any church’s disability-outreach efforts to invest time in preliminary self-examination and consciousness-raising around the issue of disability.
around the issue of disability. The vast majority of parents are sensitive to whether or not their children are being accepted. This sensitivity is magnified when the child has a disability. A judgmental attitude—toward the child or the parents—will undermine outreach efforts, and the time, effort and funds put into ramps, lifts and other facility upgrades will have been for naught.

John 9:3 tells the story of Jesus’ and the disciples’ encounter with a blind man. The disciples demonstrate the condemning attitude of the day when they do not ask Jesus whether or not the blindness was due to sin. Instead, they ask whose sin—the man’s or his parents’—caused the blindness. There was no question in their culturally formed thinking that the disability was due to sin. Jesus challenged the attitudes of the day: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” While most today may not openly confess the outdated notion expressed by the disciples, congregants do need to ask themselves if or to what degree they hold an attitude of judgment about disability. Negative attitudes and assumptions can linger in the back of our minds, despite our best intentions. As the parent of a child with a developmental disability, I advise church members to do everything in their power to shed judgmental attitudes. This recommendation is consistent with Jesus’ general command that we “do not judge” (Matthew 7:1). As with many of the Lord’s commands, this one is not easy to follow; the human judgmental streak is often difficult to dislodge.

Jesus’ statements about those with disabilities can help us modify our attitudes. Examples include the following:

- **At that time Jesus prayed this prayer:** “O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever, and for revealing them to the childlike” (Matthew 11:25, New Living Translation).

- **But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed** (Luke 14:13).

- **Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave,** “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (Luke 14:21).

These Scriptures reveal that Jesus not only included but valued persons with disabilities. Who are we to do otherwise?

To the extent that the Messiah could become incarnate as one of the disenfranchised, he did. He was poor, homeless, betrayed at personal and institutional levels, and physically and emotionally abused. He also made treatment of the disenfranchised a standard of sorting the faithful (the sheep) from the unfaithful (the goats): “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). We can infer from his self-identification with “the least” that the King of Kings is one with all the disenfranchised and powerless, including those living with disabilities.

As a therapist, I understand the importance of a nonjudgmental stance for the success of the therapeutic process. Further, I understand that developing and maintaining a nonjudgmental stance takes work. This work is the same work that Jesus asks of us in all of our relationships—that we strive to purposely and consciously override the natural tendency to judge. If a church is going to invite persons with disabilities and their families through its doors, doing the work of routing judgmentalism is a critical, preliminary step.

At one church we attended, a parishioner reported to me in a tattling tone that another child was, “scared of” my son. Had the church engaged in **attitudinal** preparation for a child like mine, the approach to me might have been something more like, “We enjoy having your son here. We had a problem today that we’d like to problem-solve with you because we are sure you have more insight than we into what works with your child.” There would also likely be awareness that when someone who deals with my child for a couple of hours per week complains about his behavior, those complaints can come across as small and petulant in light of the behavior challenges I handle 24/7.

It has been my experience that most prejudice is motivated by fear of a person who appears different. As a church works on attitudinal issues, honesty about fears is an important part of the process. It has also been my experience that direct contact with the feared party helps to reduce anxiety. The direct contact that God has provided me through my son has certainly had that effect on me. Through him, I have learned many important lessons, one of the most treasured being my son’s lack of impairment in the area of love. Not only is Nate unimpaired in his ability to love, he excels in that capacity and serves as a reminder of the two great commandments—to love God and love others.

Safe and welcoming places for persons with disabilities are sorely needed. As any church meets this social need, word will spread in the disabled community, and church growth is likely to be the inevitable outcome. A church with a vibrant inclusion ministry makes a countercultural statement consistent with the Lord’s priorities and can only please him.

Elizabeth H. Fell-DeWalt, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice. She resides in Pine City, N.Y., with her husband, Robert, and children, Nathaniel, 18, and Abigail, 14.
At first, Ben* just didn’t seem interested. He did not take a seat and ready his play card for the Thanksgiving bingo game that was about to begin. Some of the children around the table had already separated the brightly colored chips according to hue as Ben and his focus bypassed the group and the game. Just then, Karen Hall asked kindly, “Who will be our caller?” Ben turned toward the table and with great delight exclaimed, “I will!” Pat DeVita responded happily, “Good choice, Ben!” and settled Ben in his seat. As the game proceeded, the facilitators made eye contact to express joy and constant hope to Ben and all the children attending the Play House.

The Play House is a free drop-off play group for children ages 3-11 on the autism spectrum and their siblings. Children from our church who are in the same age bracket also participate in the structured activities and games. According to Pamela Wolfberg, Ph.D. (creator of the Integrated Play Groups® model), both children on the autism spectrum and their typical-developing peers benefit from participation in play groups. The experience enhances the communication skills and social interaction of the child with autism, while the typical-developing peer benefits by developing awareness, empathy and a greater understanding of children with special needs.

We created the program four years ago in response to the needs expressed by families in our community for social-skills development opportunities for their children with autism. Having a niece on the autism spectrum, I am well aware of the great need for parents or other primary caregivers to have a safe and loving environment in which to leave their children. I am always so pleased that caregivers feel secure leaving their children to our care and then enjoy precious time to attend to other matters. This 90 minutes per month is a luxurious and much-needed respite. The staff and I are grateful that we are able to provide such a caring service to these families.

We have been told that our Play House has helped children to improve socially at school and connect to others. The staff and I continue to see the children in our church grow as well. Those who participate in this program better understand the joy and importance of giving and sharing. It is especially exciting to see a child from the Play House be welcomed into other programs at our church. One child who attended our summer camp for two years is presently enrolled in our children’s taekwondo classes. This works well because he knows many of the children attending the other programs and has formed friendships with them.

Trained staff members are crucial to this program. Participating church members are professionally trained, loving, patient and experienced. In addition to Hall, a certified speech/language specialist who works with disorders relating to autism, and DeVita, a paraprofessional who works one-on-one with a child on the autism spectrum, our program is blessed with Keisha Mayne, a special education teacher.

*Names of the children were changed.

The Rev. Stacie Turk is pastor of First Baptist Community Church, Parsippany, N.J. She holds a Doctorate of Ministry degree in Ministry to Marriage and Family. She can be reached at fbccparsippany.com.
The mission of the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition (IDAC) is to mobilize the religious community to speak out and take action on disability policy issues with Congress, the president and his administration, and society at large. IDAC is a diverse, nonpartisan coalition of religious and religiously-affiliated organizations whose core spiritual values affirm the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. IDAC members receive up-to-date information about disability policy issues emanating from the administration, Congress and the courts.

The 25 national organizations that are members of IDAC are from Christian, Jewish, Islamic and Hindu traditions. Each follows IDAC’s procedures and supports IDAC’s mission. While no dues are required of IDAC members, all members must possess authority to take action on national public policy issues. On July 23, 2009, American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) became one of the first religious organizations to join IDAC. Curtis Ramsey-Lucas currently represents ABHMS and serves on IDAC’s Steering Committee.

One of IDAC’s most significant projects is recruiting congregations, seminaries, denominations and faith groups to sign the “Statement of Solidarity by the Religious Community around Employment of People with Disabilities” (see page 12). This effort is in response to the fact that two-thirds of Americans with disabilities who want to work are either unemployed or underemployed.

The statement suggests the following specific activities for individual congregations:

- draw attention to the abilities of people with disabilities and their right to be recruited, hired, promoted and retained at all levels of work;
- hire qualified people with disabilities as ordained leaders, religious educators, musical directors, communicators, administrators, support staff, technical support and maintenance workers; and
- support members and visitors with disabilities who are out of work with specific advice and training, supervised volunteer opportunities and introductions to those who make hiring decisions.

IDAC addresses other public policy priorities, too. On July 11, 2011, through a hand-delivered letter to the office of every House and Senate member, IDAC opposed cuts to Medicaid programs that allow people with disabilities to live in their own homes and participate in their communities. Of great interest to IDAC members are the enforcement of the Supreme Court’s Olmstead decision (Olmstead v. L.C. and E.W.) establishing that individuals with disabilities have a right to live in community rather than in institutions, fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and protecting provisions in the Affordable Care Act that benefit people with disabilities.

In monthly Steering Committee meetings and twice-annual IDAC member meetings, there is a strong sense that common disability policy ground can be found among people whose faith practices and belief systems differ. All IDAC members understand that a united voice is stronger and more effective than individual organizations speaking on their own. We anticipate profound change and lasting good as IDAC works to bring the powerful and prophetic voice of the faith community to the 21st-century disability agenda.

Ginny Thornburgh, who serves as IDAC convener, has spent the past 40 years as an advocate for people with disabilities. She is director of the American Association of People with Disabilities Interfaith Initiative, whose mission is to support people with disabilities and their families as they seek spiritual and religious access.
Statement of Solidarity by the Religious Community around Employment of People with Disabilities

Twenty years ago, with bipartisan support in Congress and broad endorsements from the civil rights, faith and labor communities, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), calling for the “shameful wall of exclusion” to come tumbling down. Today, our country is much more accessible and welcoming of people with a wide variety of disabilities and chronic health conditions than it was in 1990.

Nonetheless, based on all of the available data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it is an unfortunate fact that the law mandating equal access to employment for people with disabilities has failed to result in an increase in employment. Two-thirds of Americans with disabilities who want to work are unemployed or underemployed. That number has not changed since the ADA's passage. This is a shameful situation which we in the religious community feel compelled to address.

Americans of many faiths, from congregations, seminaries and religious organizations believe strongly that work brings dignity, self-respect and responsibility and that lack of employment is demoralizing, socially isolating and wasteful of a person’s abilities. Title I of the ADA, the employment provisions, was enacted with the intent of removing barriers to employment for people with disabilities and of protecting disabled workers from discrimination.

Although the ADA provides important protections for workers with disabilities and has helped carve out a place for disability as part of overall efforts to improve workplace diversity, the rate of progress on employment for adults with disabilities in the United States has been disappointingly slow. The religious community must speak out decisively and take action so that people with disabilities can live out the American dream of having a productive life, contributing to the betterment of our society.

Religious organizations signing onto this Statement of Solidarity fully understand that all people share a common humanity and that not having a job does irreparable harm to a person’s self-esteem and makes it more difficult for someone to realize their full potential. Understanding that poverty so often accompanies disability, and that a lack of employment may mean that adequate food, housing and medical care are not attainable, the undersigned religious organizations, denominations and faith groups commit to working within our organizations and with other groups to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities:

- We support new initiatives which will result in hiring more federal employees with disabilities and in strengthened requirements that federal contractors engage in affirmative action for hiring and advancing qualified Americans with disabilities;
- We urge all religious organizations, denominations and faith groups to draw attention to the abilities of people with disabilities and their right to be recruited, hired, promoted and retained at all levels of work;
- We urge all religious organizations, denominations and faith groups to hire qualified people with disabilities as ordained leaders, religious educators, musical directors, communicators, administrators, support staff, technical support and maintenance workers;
- We urge congregations to offer 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;
- And, during the month of October, we will promote National Disability Employment Awareness Month within our own religious organizations, denominations and faith groups so that people with disabilities are understood to want what all people want—the dignity, value and worth which comes from holding a job.

With the aim of employing more qualified people with disabilities and making America work better for everyone, the undersigned religious organizations, denominations and faith groups pledge to promote the full employment and participation of people with disabilities and we encourage every American to join this cause.

To endorse or view a list of organizations that have signed, go to www.aapd.com > What We Do > Interfaith > Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition (IDAC).
Declaración de solidaridad de la comunidad religiosa en torno al empleo de personas con discapacidad

Hace veinte años, con el apoyo bipartidista en el Congreso y una amplia aprobación de las comunidades laborales, de fe y de derechos civiles, el presidente George W. Bush firmó la Ley de Americanos con Discapacidad (ADA por sus siglas en inglés), llamando al derrumbe del “vergonzoso muro de la exclusión”. Hoy en día, este país es mucho más accesible y acogedor hacía personas con distintas discapacidades y condiciones crónicas de salud de lo que era en 1990.

Sin embargo, basándonos en datos de la Oficina del Censo y la Oficina de Estadísticas Laborales, es un hecho desafortunado que la ley que obliga a la igualdad de acceso a empleo de personas con discapacidad no ha dado lugar a un aumento en el empleo. Dos tercios de personas con discapacidad que desean trabajar en este país están desempleadas o subempleadas. Esa cifra no ha cambiado desde la aprobación de la ADA. Esta es una situación vergonzosa que sentimos la obligación de discutir en la comunidad religiosa.

Personas de muchas religiones en este país, congregaciones, seminarios y organizaciones de fe creen firmemente que el trabajo trae dignidad, autoestima y responsabilidad y que la falta de empleo es desmoralizante, crea aislamiento social y malgasto de capacidades de una persona. El Título I de la ADA (disposiciones sobre empleo) fue promulgado con la intención de eliminar las barreras al empleo de personas con discapacidad y de protegerlas de discriminación. Aunque la ADA ofrece importantes protecciones para trabajadores y trabajadoras con discapacidad, y ha ayudado a crear un lugar para éstas como parte de los esfuerzos generales para mejorar la diversidad en los centros de trabajo, la tasa de progreso en Estados Unidos ha sido decepcionantemente lenta. La comunidad religiosa debe hablar con decisión y tomar medidas para que las personas con discapacidad puedan vivir el sueño americano de tener una vida productiva, contribuyendo a la mejora de nuestra sociedad.

Las organizaciones religiosas que firman esta declaración de solidaridad están plenamente conscientes de que todas las personas comparten una humanidad común y que el no tener trabajo hace un daño irreparable a la autoestima de una persona y hace más difícil para alguien rendir en su máximo potencial. Entendiendo que la pobreza a menudo acompaña a la discapacidad, y que la falta de empleo puede significar que una alimentación adecuada, vivienda y atención médica no sean accesibles, las organizaciones abajo firmantes, denominaciones y grupos religiosos nos comprometemos a trabajar dentro de nuestras organizaciones y con otros grupos para aumentar oportunidades de empleo para personas con discapacidad:

- Apoyamos nuevas iniciativas que se traducirán en la contratación de más empleados federales con discapacidades y en hacer más estrictos los requisitos para contratistas federales de tal manera que observen la acción afirmativa en la contratación y promoción de personas con discapacidades;
- Instamos a todas las organizaciones de fe, denominaciones y grupos religiosos a enfocarse en las habilidades de personas con discapacidad y en su derecho a ser reclutadas, contratadas, ascendidas y retenidas en todos los niveles de trabajo;
- Instamos a todas las organizaciones de fe, denominaciones y grupos religiosos a contratar personas calificadas con discapacidades como líderes ordenados, educadores religiosos, directores musicales, comunicadores, administradores, personal de apoyo, soporte técnico y personal de mantenimiento;
- Instamos a las congregaciones a brindar apoyo a sus miembros y visitantes con discapacidad que están sin trabajo, incluyendo apoyo moral, entrenamiento y asesoramiento específicos, oportunidades de voluntariado supervisado, y contactos con quienes toman decisiones de contratación;
- Y, durante el mes de octubre, vamos a promover el Mes de la Concientización Nacional de Empleo a Personas con Discapacidad en nuestras propias organizaciones de fe, denominaciones y grupos religiosos para que se entienda que las personas discapacitadas quieren lo mismo que todos y todas: la dignidad, el valor y el respeto que provienen de tener un trabajo.

Con el objetivo de emplear a más personas cualificadas con discapacidad y hacer que Estados Unidos sea mejor para todas las personas, las organizaciones de fe, denominaciones y grupos religiosos abajo firmantes nos comprometemos a promover el empleo y la participación plena de personas con discapacidad, y animamos a todos los estadounidenses a unirse a esta causa.

Para endosar esta petición o ver una lista de las organizaciones firmantes, vaya a http://power.aapd.com/IDAC.
The National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) is celebrating 30 years as one of America’s leading cross-disability, national grassroots organizations run by and for people with disabilities. NCIL is a passionate advocate for independent living policies that are based on the premise that people with disabilities are the best experts, with valuable perspectives on their own needs, and deserving of equal opportunity to decide how to live, work and take part in their communities. Our members include centers for independent living, which provide peer counseling, independent living skills training, referral, advocacy and support to divert and transition individuals from institutions to the community.

For many people with disabilities, independence is enhanced through participation in a faith-based community. As Ginny Thornburgh, director of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) Interfaith Initiative, notes: “For some people with disabilities, access to faith is just as important as access to education, employment, health care and community.” Unfortunately, architecture, communication, sensory environment and attitudes can create barriers to full participation in congregations. Spaces within buildings that are accessible via only a few stairs—for example, a choir loft—limit participation of people with mobility issues. Traditional restrooms, narrow doorways or improper door handles also create barriers. Quality lighting, assistive listening devices and American Sign Language interpreters are essential for full inclusion of people with vision or hearing impairments. Large print or Braille versions of materials can ease communication barriers. Limiting the use of scents or other chemicals can make worship possible for those with chemical sensitivities.

Attitudes may be the most difficult—but most important—barrier to dismantle. Welcoming attitudes are born out of the very things that the church already cultivates: valuing each other; empowerment, rather than pity; support, rather than stigma; patience; and a willingness to learn. The golden rule of independent living can be helpful as a church begins considering disability issues: “Nothing about us without us.” It is important to remember that people with disabilities are the experts in disability matters, and they are problem solvers.

Supporting the public policy concerns related to disability is another way for congregations to deepen a connection with persons with disabilities. As the U.S. Congress and state legislatures tighten their belts and budgets shrink, services for people with disabilities are some of the first cuts. At the same time, NCIL supports and advocates for policy changes that benefit persons with disabilities in areas of education, housing, transportation and employment:

- the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates education for all children;
- improvement of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), up for reauthorization, to ensure education equal to that of their peers for students with disabilities;

A welcoming church offers empowerment, not pity; advocacy not avoidance; and support not stigma.

—Disabilities and Faith.Org
a current House bill that removes caps on alternative testing for students with disabilities;

- the Inclusive Home Design Act, which would ensure that new federally-assisted single family homes and townhouses include at least one level that is accessible for people with mobility disabilities;

- the Preserving Homes and Communities Act of 2011, which would require protections for homeowners facing foreclosures requiring loan modifications and alternative options;

- increased accessible rural transportation services; communities with streets that include curb cuts, audible and visual crossing signals, and unbroken sidewalks; nondiscrimination during air travel; and accessible private transportation services, such as taxis, shuttle services, rental cars, buses and trains;

- policies that encourage employment and allow for increased asset limits, grants, scholarships or fellowships to be used for personal assistance services without loss of Medicare or Medicaid supports; and

- integrated employment in the community and strong employment standards, including fair and equal pay, to be reflected in Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, which would require federal contractors to hire a minimum percentage of people with disabilities.

This election year has been full of debates around entitlement programs. In many cases, reforms, rather than cuts, could save money while revitalizing services. We believe that all individuals are entitled to the basic rights of health care and long-term services and supports that Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid provide. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), while not perfect, provides a number of vital reforms that will benefit people with disabilities, including the Community First Choice Option (CFCO) program and the Community Living Assistance Services and Support (CLASS) Act. The CFCO allows states to create a plan to provide home- and community-based services to Medicaid recipients. Disability advocates are calling on the administration to release regulations for this program so that states can begin implementation. Medicaid is the public funding stream that serves more than 58 million Americans, providing health care coverage for low-income children and adults, as well as long-term services and supports for people with disabilities and low-income seniors. NCIL, disability rights partner ADAPT and allies are collaborating to save Medicaid through the “My Medicaid Matters” campaign.

Currently every state is required to provide nursing home placement, which is often paid with Medicaid funds. Requiring nursing home placement contradicts the 1999 Supreme Court Olmstead decision (Olmstead v. L.C. and E.W.) that people with disabilities have a right to live in the most integrated setting of their choice. Offering community-based services, such as personal assistants, could save states money. Allowing non-medical personal assistants to perform routine tasks, expanding consumer directed services and reorganizing Medicaid services by need rather than by diagnosis are additional cost-saving measures.

Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act, the legislation that funds and provides rules for centers for independent living, will be forthcoming. While we are hopeful that funding for the independent living program will continue to increase over time, reauthorization could also include the creation of an Independent Living Administration and a mandate for centers for independent living and statewide independent living councils to aid in the transition of people with disabilities from institutions to the community. The Independent Living Administration would not require new or additional funding but elevate the importance of independent living at the federal level.

A rich and rewarding disability ministry can be as simple as removing the architectural, communication, environmental and attitudinal barriers that keep people with disabilities from participating in their chosen community of faith. While dismantling these barriers is no small task, the disability community has years of experience and is a valuable resource. Understanding the everyday concerns of the community can help to bridge gaps and ensure that the church is supporting, empowering and growing its membership and leadership. Individuals can become advocates or self-advocates by supporting national organizations, reaching out to a local center for independent living or generating discussions about disability issues within the congregation.

Kelly Buckland, who holds a master’s in Rehabilitation Counseling, has been actively involved in disability issues since 1979. He has served as executive director of The National Council on Independent Living since 2009. He has testified before Congress several times on issues such as universal health care, fair housing and appropriations for centers for independent living.

For additional information on disability and advocacy, visit NCIL at www.ncil.org or on Facebook or Twitter (@NCILDirector); the National Disability Leadership Alliance at www.ndla.org; or the AAPD’s Interfaith Initiative at www.aapd.com > What We Do > Interfaith > Interfaith Initiative.
People with disabilities want nothing more than what others seek—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For people with disabilities, pursuing these things can have unique challenges. Quality of life can be constrained by lack of access to quality, affordable health care. Freedom can be constrained by life in an institutional setting, when living in a community with proper supports and the opportunity to work is a viable alternative. These are challenges many people throughout the world face. They are all the more acute for persons with disabilities.

Over the past 50 years, a number of laws and government programs have been adopted for the benefit of people with disabilities. Public education services have been crucial for preparing children with disabilities for full participation in community life. Vocational rehabilitation services have helped thousands of people with disabilities secure employment. The Social Security Act provides Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) ensures a basic level of income (albeit barely above poverty level). Health insurance programs, Medicare and Medicaid, are critical in helping persons with disability maintain good health. Medicaid is also the primary funding source for long-term care services that enable people to live at home and stay in their community of choice. Medicaid pays for services such as personal care attendants to assist with daily living needs, job coaches to help people obtain and keep a job, assistive technology to make the environment more accessible, and support to family caregivers.

Entitlement programs periodically go through some type of reform. (The name entitlement program is used because individuals who need them are entitled to receive them without delay.) Reform agendas of the past that have had the most positive effect for people with disabilities are those that provided alternatives to segregated, institutional services. The right to education in the least restrictive environment and the provision of community services as an alternative to institutions are the most noteworthy. Today, Medicaid and Medicare reform is taking the shape of managed care. State governments are pursuing contracts with health care companies to
provide services more cost-effectively through better co-
dordination of services. The results of this reform agenda
remain to be seen.

While publically funded programs provide some
support for people with disabilities and ensure access
to some services, they cannot ensure that people have
meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging in a
larger community or happiness. People with disabilities
often rely heavily on their families, but not everyone
with a disability has able, living or supportive relatives.
They sometimes become isolated from their families.
Some may have grown up in foster care or group homes.

The expectation is often that the general community
will supplement under-funded services systems as was
often the case in former times. Our culture, however, has
changed and community is often not there in the ways
of the past. A congregation that functions as a church
can fill the gap and greatly enrich the lives of people
with disabilities. The teachings of the Gospel emphasize
the need to hold community above personal needs—to
build a family bound by faith, rather than by blood. In
fact, many of the early followers of Jesus dropped every-
thing to build a family together—a foundational model
for a Christian congregation.

Many New Testament teachings suggest a path of
belonging and community for people with disabilities.
First Peter 5:2-5 describes duties of shepherding each
other, providing support with humility and setting aside
pride and greed. Paul wrote lovingly of a congregation
in Macedonia who gave liberally and with Christ’s love
(2 Corinthians 8:1-8), using their generosity to exem-
plify congregational faithfulness to the Corinthians and
through them to congregations today.

First John calls us to love not “with words or speech
but with actions and in truth,” including sharing mate-
rial possessions with those who have lack (3:16-18). Just
as Jesus laid down his life out of love for us, so, too, are
we asked to lay down our greed to act on behalf of the
family of Christ. Once we look at the congregation as a
family of faith, we recognize that every member is a part
of the family. Truly valuing the family of faith and hold-
ing it in your heart makes the needs of members with
disabilities a bit more important as well. Just one con-
gregant for whom this aspect of the family is a passion
can make a huge difference.

I know a mother whose son has a diagnosis simi-
lar to my own—autism. When her son came of age for
religious education, she struggled to make her congrega-
tion understand his need to be part of the community.
To facilitate his full integration, this mother became a
co-educator in the congregation’s program. The oppor-
tunities that the inclusive experience created for the son
sparked a passion in the mother and, eventually, other
church educators. They sought to recreate the experi-
ence for others and worked together to design a fully-
integrated curriculum and program for the congregation.
Because of their passion, no one would be forced into a
segregated setting for religious education.

Religious congregations can offer people with disa-
bilities experiences that can’t be delivered by services
alone: a sense of belonging and being known; the oppor-
tunity to contribute and help others; shared experiences;
friendship rooted in faith. Religious denominations can
assist congregations by convening meetings or appointing
committees to develop curriculum for use by pastors
and lay leaders. Topics for consideration are wide-rang-
ing, from relationship education to welcoming people
with disabilities. A Google search of “disability ministry”
will turn up a number of denominational agencies in the
United States that offer disability ministry resources and
opportunities. In addition, ecumenical bodies such as
the National Council of Churches maintain a disability
committee with representatives from member commu-
nions, while interfaith coalitions, such as the Interfaith
Disability Advocacy Coalition, provide resources and
advocacy opportunities to members.

For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable
according to what one has—not according to what one
does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief
for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of
a fair balance between your present abundance and
their need, so that their abundance may be for
your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

—2 Corinthians 8:12-14

Savannah Logsdon-Breakstone, who has autism, is a free-
lance writer in rural northwestern Pennsylvania. Nancy
Thaler is executive director of The National Association
of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services.
Some wounds of war are all too visible—a missing leg, a shattered arm. The invisible wounds of mind and soul are often more difficult to spot, and equally hard to treat. But those who know where to look can help them heal, and it’s a message that is hitting home for U.S. congregations as more than 1.35 million veterans adjust to civilian life after deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affecting an estimated one-in-six returning service members, congregations are coming face-to-face with the toll of war. Experts say faith groups have much to offer, even when the wounds include PTSD and traumatic brain injury. “Churches are kind of in the dark about how to help, unfortunately,” said Peter Bauer, an ordained minister and clinical social worker with the Veterans Administration in San Antonio. “But they don’t have to stay there. There are some very easy things that churches can do to be proactive and help with this population.” Bauer, a former Navy chaplain, recently convened workshops on PTSD and traumatic brain injury for pastors and seminarians at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Mass. His educational outreach builds on other small-scale initiatives that have gained momentum in recent years.

Since forming in 2009, the non-profit group Care for the Troops has equipped 37 Georgia congregations to convene peer groups, identify local clinicians with military experience and otherwise support soldiers’ families. The project is now adding congregations in Tennessee, California and other states. Illinois-based Wheat Ridge Ministries has been circulating Lutheran liturgies and other resources to help churches build bonds with military families. Point Man Ministries in New York has partnered with about 250 U.S. congregations to host veteran-led, peer support groups for those dealing with PTSD.

Last year, Army Chaplain Jeremy Pickens launched the Massachusetts Military Spiritual Strength Network, where clergy and laypeople receive training in how to make religious programs more military-friendly. The network now includes 60 local churches. “Sometimes we hear people say, ‘We don’t have the training to deal with PTSD,’” Pickens said. “But (to minister effectively), I don’t need to know what it means to have PTSD. I just need to know how to listen. It’s a matter of providing open space where people can talk.”

In his presentation, Bauer shared sobering facts about struggles faced by those returning from war. Example: in 2010, the military had more suicides (468) than deaths in combat (462).

The roots of trauma often go back to childhood, Bauer said, where 60 percent of veterans experienced physical abuse and 40 percent experienced sexual abuse. Such psychological wounds can get re-opened in combat, and by the time a soldier comes home, mental and emotional patterns can be habitual and difficult to overcome.

Hidden wounds can be tricky to manage, Bauer said, in part because they’re not easy to diagnose. Depression is common in the 3.2 million Americans who’ve suffered traumatic brain injury, he said. He urged members of faith communities to take note when someone seems overwhelmed by normal levels of light or sound, and make referrals for medical evaluations.

Congregations, however, can do much more than refer. Bauer suggested helping veterans find contemplative or more traditional worship services as an alternative.
to contemporary services where loud bands and bright lights can trigger anxious reactions. Churches can show ongoing care in simple ways, Bauer said, such as hosting a monthly support dinner for military family members. They should also appoint a volunteer sponsor to check in monthly with a deployed serviceman or woman, and a second sponsor for his or her loved ones at home, during deployments. “It’s unforgiveable in 2011 that someone (who belongs to a church) would be deployed to Afghanistan, and no one from that church would be willing to step up to the plate, be a sponsor and make sure they’re OK,” Bauer said. “That is a crime.”

Veterans say churches are finding their way in a new ministry landscape, though not always with success. James Knudsen, a Vietnam War veteran and PTSD sufferer in Marion, Iowa, says churches in his area have resisted requests for them to host support groups for veterans. “I have not heard of any churches in my area that are helping veterans,” Knudsen said. “They have other interests.” But in western Massachusetts, 29-year-old Robert Henry Hyde, an Air Force veteran who served from 2000 to 2004 and deployed to Iraq, helped raise awareness in local churches before he left the area to attend seminary. “Ministers, though they might not have served in the military and might not understand it, have the tools to help people handle PTSD or brain trauma, or at least refer people to the right professionals to get help,” Hyde said. “So in that sense, churches need to be a part of this” healing effort.

Even churches with a history of ministry to veterans see new opportunities now to branch out. The Rev. Jeremi Colvin, assistant rector for mission in homeless ministry at the (Episcopal) Church of the Holy Spirit in Fall River, Mass., hopes her church will soon begin hosting peer support groups for veterans. “There could be more outreach,” Colvin said at Bauer’s workshop. “We have a ministry of outreach to veterans and military families, but we need to spread out, talk to people, talk to hospitals, and make it more known that we’re there.”

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The Christian Citizen, Vol. 3, 2009, addresses the needs of returning service men and women and how churches can be effective in response.
The preceding words are familiar. Of equal importance is the promise of verse 26: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” This passage may be especially pertinent in our modern day in regard to persons with disabilities. So many individuals are returning disabled from wars overseas, while, at the same time, autism diagnoses are increasing at home.

Could “honoring” a part of the body become rejoicing when veterans with disabilities are helped to find or return to valued places in our communities and congregations? Congregations can take the lead in helping returning service men and women with disabilities become reconnected to society and to regular life. A critical aspect of reconnection is employment, which immediately allows us to be a part of something larger than ourselves. In our work-oriented society, a job is a badge of honor. Gainful employment, which is a societal expectation, also creates a sense of self-worth, security and identity—especially if a life-altering injury has been sustained in a combat zone. We are often measured by the work we do. Work is an underpinning of the American Dream. As it is for others, employment for persons with disabilities is critical to independent living.

The number of returning veterans with disabilities has increased exponentially. Because of advances in trauma medicine, the survival rate of those injured on the battlefield has increased. An estimated 100,000 returning service men and women have some kind of physical disability, including limb loss and traumatic brain injury. In addition, an estimated 100,000 soldiers are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Because the current system is overburdened, a growing concern is that many returning veterans will not have the necessary support to reintegrate into society. It is hoped that these men and women will not join the ranks of the 400,000 Vietnam-era veterans who experience homelessness for some period of time in any given year.

For a returning veteran to experience healing, he or she must contribute to society. While the mission on the battlefield may be over, the drive to make a difference in the local community and country continues. Many may need assistance in readjusting to all areas of life, which entails rebuilding self-identity and setting obtainable goals. Employment can help significantly with these two aspects of recovery.

Parallels exist between wounded returning veterans and the world of autism. While the increase in child autism diagnoses is gaining attention, we mustn’t forget about the first wave of children diagnosed with autism. Representing nearly 1% of all births, the first wave will enter adulthood in 2015. Many adult provider organizations across the country are unprepared. As with wounded returning veterans, many adults with autism have no access to needed services.

The assumption too often is that people with autism, developmental disabilities and physical disabilities are unable to work. People with disabilities want to be a productive part of society. Work is a basic right that many of us take for granted; it’s a key component of the ability to pursue happiness as we define it. While money can’t buy love, the ability to earn money can lead to a lifestyle with options that help meet physical and psychological needs. People with disabilities understand this fact. People with disabilities want to be integrated into society—not be marginalized as less capable than others. Employment can help make people with disabilities part of the community.

As a microcosm of the community, the local congregation can be a place of important connections for persons seeking employment opportunities. Congregations often include business owners, community leaders and persons who work within various businesses and organizations. These individuals can help find or create positions of employment for people with disabilities. Such an effort requires church leaders’ guidance and the congregation’s willingness.

Churches also have members with unique gifts and strengths that can be used to help support persons with disabilities in the search for meaningful employment. Is someone in your congregation good at writing or editing? Can he or she assist others in developing effective...
resumes and job application cover letters? Perhaps others are uniquely qualified to help those recently employed navigate the learning curve at their new jobs. Can IT professionals in your congregation help to identify useful assistive technologies or applications for those who have a disability?

If financial constraints place these services out of reach for some individuals, can others in the congregation provide needed financial assistance in the form of a gift or a loan? Can a few individuals help others with transportation to and from their places of employment? A good way to begin is by helping people find ways to use their gifts in the life of the congregation.

In addition to helping facilitate connections that will assist persons with disabilities, clergy can serve as a vital point of connection in the lives of those with disabilities and their families. Because of the stigma often associated with disability, many wounded veterans and their families as well as the families of children and young adults with disabilities will go to a minister or priest for assistance before going to a government office. They need practical support and guidance as well as spiritual nourishment. How better to support returning soldiers, veterans and other parts of the body who yearn to be functioning members of the whole than by walking and working with them on this journey? In so doing, the path we walk together can become a way of honor that leads to great rejoicing when all people truly feel like they are home.

Bret Li-Vaks is a training and consultation specialist at the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, New Brunswick, N.J. His primary focus is supported employment, management, organizational leadership and autism.

As a microcosm of the community, the local congregation can be a place of important connections for persons seeking employment opportunities.
During February, Jewish communities across North America observe Jewish Disability Awareness Month. It is an opportunity for us to raise awareness of the needs, strengths, opportunities and challenges of individuals with disabilities in our communities, and to ensure we are building more inclusive communities that celebrate all of our neighbors.

The Jewish community, through its institutions and social service agencies, has been increasingly effective in serving the critical needs of individuals with disabilities and their families. At the same time, we recognize the indispensable impact that Medicaid has on the ability to provide for these needs.

For many members of our communities with disabilities seeking healthy, independent lives, Medicaid is an essential resource. Earlier this month, Jewish leaders from across America came to Washington to express to Congress how vitally important Medicaid is to the disability community, as well as the agencies and communities that serve them.

More than 8 million individuals with disabilities in America rely on Medicaid as their sole source of comprehensive health and long-term care coverage. Medicaid ensures that people with disabilities have access to essential services, including transportation, medical care and personal care assistance. This, in turn, ensures that they are able to contribute economically, socially, politically and spiritually to their communities.

Unfortunately, under several prominent congressional proposals being considered as part of deficit reduction efforts, Medicaid would be restructured by capping funds flowing to states and/or creating a block grant formula. Block granting or capping Medicaid funds would result in the denial of health and long-term care to millions of Americans, including those with disabilities. These kinds of spending cuts and harmful changes to Medicaid would undermine human dignity by limiting the choices and opportunities for people with disabilities.

Terry Burke and Andy Berman of St. Louis Park, Minn., say that Medicaid has truly been “the saving grace in their family.” Their 23-year old daughter, Rachel, who has cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism and moderate cognitive disability, is the joy of their lives, but things have not always been easy.

When Andy was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, he and Terry quickly learned that juggling the demands of health care for Andy and care for Rachel was extremely challenging. Through Medicaid, Rachel is able to have personal care assistants, or PCAs, help her with basic needs, ranging from showers and meals to helping with her visits to the doctor. She also has the opportunity to participate in programs that truly contrib-
ven the most modest efforts can send a powerful message. St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Bryan, Texas, proclaims its intention regarding inclusion in no uncertain terms in its new members’ packet and on its website: “St. Luke’s strives to model God’s design for a community where individuals—no matter their differences—know they belong and can worship together.” Worship bulletins at the 150-member congregation incorporate graphic symbols as a way for people to follow along and comprehend the order of service. For example, praying hands are listed beside prayer times and musical notes next to songs and hymns. In addition to people with disabilities, in particular intellectual disabilities, these symbols aid children who cannot yet read and worshippers whose first language is not English, according to Kelsey Johnson, Communications Specialist at the Center on Disability and Development at Texas A&M University, who is also married to the congregation’s associate pastor of music and worship. In the Sunday school class-

rooms, a “visual schedule” is posted for children with disabilities, so they can follow the order of the morning’s activities. There is a magnetic strip with laminated cards with a graphic symbol and word (e.g., “Game” with a symbol of a pair of dice) that can be shuffled according to the schedule. “We consulted with the parent of a young child who has several disabilities to integrate him into Sunday school with the assistance of our volunteer teachers,” says Johnson. “He receives accommodations like larger copies of handouts, and we are mindful to stock only allergy-free art supplies and snacks.” While Johnson is quick to say that none of these measures are incredibly innovative, “they are ways we tried to think through inclusion issues and make our church as accessible as possible.”

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It is Communion Sunday. Joel, age 11, sits between his father, Wally, and me. As usual, we are sitting in the front pew so that Joel can’t kick the pew in front of us or reach forward and grab someone’s hair. By trial and error we have found that with Dad to his right, Mom to his left, and empty space to the front, Joel can usually sit through half of the worship service without too much fidgeting.

Because Joel loves music and is enthralled by the choir, the beginning of the service is something to which he looks forward. Often he stands up, pretend baton in hand, and imitates the choir director. During hymns he loves to sing along, usually (thank God) in tune, with a few words right, and always with a loud “amen” at the end, generally a few beats behind the rest of the congregation.

During the boring parts of the service (any part without music is boring as far as Joel is concerned), he twists and turns in the pew, stares at the people behind us, waves at the pastor, swings his feet, claps his hands or stomps his feet (usually during times of silent prayer), and at least once during every service declares loudly, “I have to go to the bathroom!” Worshiping with Joel is an interesting experience. It’s not unlike sitting on the edge of your seat during an action movie, when you’re not quite sure what’s going to happen next—you know only that something is going to happen. It’s difficult to develop a prayerful attitude in those circumstances.

On Communion Sunday, we pass the elements along the pews, speaking familiar words to one another. Before bowing our own heads in brief silent prayers of thanksgiving for this gift of grace, Wally and I allow Joel to take a piece of bread and the small cup. He prefers the grape juice and sticks his tongue into the cup, determined to get every last drop. Then he cranes his neck to watch and wiggle as everyone else is served.

This particular Sunday, the pastor raises the plate high in the air and proclaims, “This is the body of Christ, broken for you.” Then he raises the cup, saying, “This is the blood of Christ, poured out that you might live.” Joel pulls on my sleeve. I look down to see his face lit up as if from within. He stands up tall and taps himself on his chest. “For me! For me!” he cries joyfully. He turns around to the people behind us. “For me!” he repeats. “For me!”

Ordinary time stops. All that exists in this moment is the radiant look of understanding on Joel’s face. Joel knows that God loves him. My body remains in the front pew, but my spirit stands in the sacred presence of God. All the accumulated Sunday hours of embarrassment, impatience, frustration, disappointment and yearning for wholeness as the world knows wholeness slough away as I watch the love of God glimmer in the face of my son. And for a moment that day, the mirror of existence, like a mirror wiped clear of steam, brightened and cleared, and I understood clearly. Joel, despite his disabilities, is spiritually whole.

Kathleen Deyer Boldoc is a nationally recognized author and speaker in the field of disability ministry. The mother of a young adult son with autism and moderate intellectual disability, she has shared her inspiring story in several books, including “Autism & Alleluias” (Judson Press, 2010), from which this article was adapted. Order the book online at judsonpress.com or by visiting kathleenbolduc.com.
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