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EDITORIAL

## Welcome the Exceptional

Churches that embrace people with disabilities do more than they imagine.

A *Christianity Today* editorial [ posted 1/04/2010 ]

Ginny Thornburgh, director of the Interfaith Initiative at the American Association of People with Disabilities, recently told *Christianity Today* that "too many churches have barriers to the full participation and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities—physical, sensory, psychiatric, and intellectual."

Many congregations are aware that their buildings are not as disabled-friendly as they could be. But when it comes to the estimated 54 million Americans with a disability, Thornburgh has something more fundamental than the church building in mind: "The barriers of attitude are the most difficult to address."

Those barriers are subtle, but they affect both policies on the national level and church life on the local level.

Recent research on Down syndrome reveals what common sense suggests: Negative attitudes about disabilities significantly increase the chance that a mother will have an abortion. Researchers estimate that in both the United States and the United Kingdom, 90 percent of pregnant women who find out that their child has Down syndrome will choose to terminate the pregnancy.

Brian Skotko, a pediatric geneticist from Boston, found that many doctors give to expectant parents a negative and badly outdated portrait of raising special-needs children. A Harris Poll found that medical professionals were the group most likely to be pessimistic about whether people with disabilities can lead quality lives.

Ironically, these findings come during the time of greatest opportunity for persons with disabilities. There are now 90 colleges and post-secondary schools with programs for the more than 83,000 young adults with Down syndrome. And new treatments and technologies allow disabled individuals to live longer and far richer lives than ever before.

Despite the abortion survey findings, additional research has determined that the percentage of newborns with Down syndrome in the U.S. has increased by about 1 percent annually since 1979—most likely because more women over age 35 are having children. But the explosive growth of safer prenatal testing, which many doctors now recommend for all pregnant women, means that more parents are exposed to pressure to terminate pregnancies when tests detect disability or birth defects.

In October 2008, President George W. Bush signed into law the Prenatally and Postnatally Diagnosed Conditions Awareness Act. (Senators Sam Brownback and the late Edward Kennedy were the two who labored the longest for this legislation.) The law requires the federal government to

- distribute to health-care providers comprehensive and accurate information about disabilities;
- establish a hotline for new and expectant parents; and
- create a registry of families interested in adopting newborns with special needs.

Unfortunately, current federal budget proposals do not adequately fund the law. And this is where churches can step in to help fill the gap, says Thornburgh.

It's not as if churches do not try to extend compassion to people with disabilities. But we tend to think of the disabled as people we

minister *to*, by offering worship and other opportunities to them. Thornburgh reminds us that "those of us with disabilities have enormous gifts and talents to bring to the church. We are not a project. We are on this earth for a unique reason." Churches would be wise to remember that people with disabilities are like the rest of the congregation: They can contribute mightily to the work, witness, and leadership of the church and community.

Harold Wilke, the late United Church of Christ pastor and seminary professor who was born without arms, is one such example. Famous for sipping tea from a cup held with his toes, Wilke became a powerful advocate for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). After President George H. W. Bush signed the bill into law, he handed the pen to Wilke, who received it with his foot.

Thornburgh says that extending "the sacred gift of friendship" is the most important accommodation that Christian congregations can make. "We can have a church building that is perfectly ADA-compliant. But that sacred gift of friendship—the body of Christ, one on one"—is the key to creating a community where all people are embraced as brothers and sisters in Christ.

That sacred friendship often begins when a mother in the church gives birth to a child with a disability, and the church rallies around the family. That action says, "We will journey with you and this beloved child. We will not abandon you."

As Thornburgh suggests, celebrating the birth of every child, regardless of prenatal test results, is the first act of friendship that can transform not only churches but also entire societies.

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