

My Disability, My Church

A personal testament on Adventism's unique potential in ministering to those with disabilities.

by Kathy Roy

IN MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE, I WORK ON PUBLIC policy issues that enable persons with disabilities and their families to live independent and productive lives. I am also a practicing Seventh-day Adventist, a convert who was lucky enough to find a community I could call my own. I also happen to have cerebral palsy. Thus I live in two worlds: developing policy on the one hand, and on the other hand recognizing that all the federal legislation in the world cannot replace a higher law to which I am accountable. In this article I will reflect upon my personal experience within the Christian community. Further, I will make some observations concerning what I believe to be a unique role the Adventist Church can play in the lives of persons with disabilities.

The Bible—especially the Gospels—is re-

plete with examples of healing persons with disabilities. It is clear to me that Christ had a great deal of concern for persons with disabilities. But somehow, the concern for persons with physical and mental disabilities is not always evident within the church—the living Body of Christ. I think there are a number of reasons for this. Moreover, I am convinced that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a unique role to play within the Christian community in helping persons with disabilities and their families.

My Congregation and People with Disabilities

The church—any church—is often uncomfortable with persons who have disabilities. Perhaps it is because we are hesitant to worship (and maybe even love) where there are persons with differences—differences that can't be healed. Maybe we feel some type of guilt that we are somehow responsible for

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these “tragic losses.” Or perhaps we are merely indifferent because, after all, we have so much to think about.

Whatever the reason, it is always interesting to go to church, especially a new church, when you have a disability. I have come to expect one of two typical reactions from those I meet: some smile as they quickly walk past; others are convinced that I can be healed to the glory of God.

Please understand that, as a Seventh-day Adventist and a practicing Christian, I believe in the healing power of Christ. I believe the myriad healings that are recorded in the Gospels. But I also believe that perhaps healing in the 20th century may mean something different. Perhaps it is not as important to walk like others as it is for the Spirit of God to enable you to live a productive life with whatever talents you may possess. Perhaps it is not as important to have well-articulated speech as it is to be able to listen to that still small voice within.

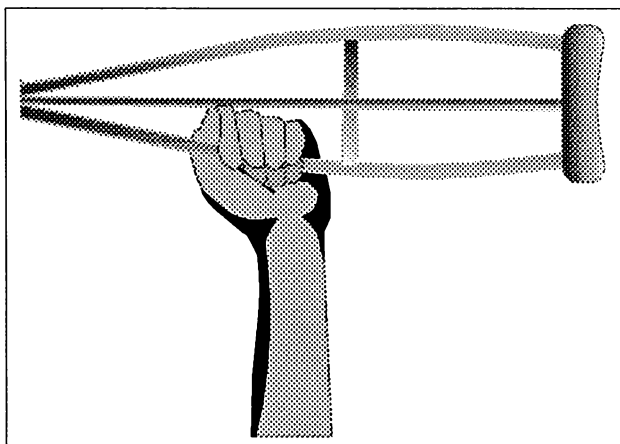
When one has a disability—or merely lives a crazy modern life—it is critical to have a sense of humor. I’m convinced that a good laugh (and some good music) can get you through just about anything. And yes, this even comes in handy when in church. Once, in my Methodist years, a dear lady of my church ran up to me one day and told (please

note: *told*) me that she was taking me to Ohio to “be healed so that the faith of our church can be strengthened.” How do you explain that going to a healing service when you know you have permanent brain damage is a bit difficult? Moreover, how do you explain that your personal healing and your commitment to Jesus Christ are, and will always remain, two separate issues? I took the bold approach: I was very sorry, but (lucky for me) I had to return to college to continue my studies.

While I can laugh at this and other incidences, there is something very important to know: this type of attitude has kept many of my friends with disabilities away from the church. Many people with disabilities simply don’t attend services because of a paternalistic attitude that makes many feel “different” and unwelcome. I find it somewhat sad that the one place where people—all people—should feel accepted and welcome is the very place where people with disabilities feel the most uncomfortable.

I must say that my own church has, in a sense, been converted over the years. In my early days of attendance at Sligo church, I think many in my congregation didn’t quite know how to take me. But gradually, I think that members at my church have come to understand that my disability is not an impediment to being a full part of the fellowship. Now, I feel a part of the family. Now I can be teased and hugged on Sabbath morning and pulled onto committees just like everyone else. And this acceptance—acceptance by the church—is critical. This enables me, like other members, to live out my faith in the context of a community.

All too often, people with disabilities are greeted with pity and not empathy. But pity and empathy are two entirely different things. Pity says that you are inferior and need “taking care of,” whereas empathy looks at the individual as a human being—a child of God—



and seeks to understand that individual as a person. It's funny, but as someone with a lifelong disability, you can smell pity a mile away. And don't get me wrong, these folks mean well, to be sure. For example, I have a speech impairment and when I meet someone for the first time, I'm usually tense, which only makes things worse. (Besides, it's Sabbath, and by the end of the week we're all tired, right?) So I slur a "Hello" introduction, and I quickly pick up that the individual assumes that all my cookies aren't in the jar. (A word of honesty here: All of my cookies *aren't* in the jar, but this has nothing to do with my disability!) I've developed a method of very quickly letting that individual know that yes, I work, I pay bills, and I'm happily married, thanks very much. I give this illustration to make the point that many people have preconceived ideas about people with disabilities. Often, people believe that having a disability means that the individual is, by necessity, dependent on others. But all of us are dependent in one way or another. And isn't this what the church is about?

An SDA "Theology of Disability"

When I was young I was taught and believed for many years that "God has given you cerebral palsy for a reason." I grew up thinking that my own disability was a part of God's grand scheme. It was not until I had attended Sligo for many years that then-senior pastor James Londis and I had a long and rather heated debate about God, cerebral palsy, and the universe. I remember that Jim had just finished a sermon entitled, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People." His conclusion, not surprisingly, was that God does not do terrible things to "teach us a lesson." Further, God wants only good things for his

children. To those of you who have had the blessing of growing up in our church, this is no great revelation. I was flabbergasted. I vividly remember speaking to Jim after the service in a rather animated discussion. I even recall stating that this could not possibly be correct, that this flew in the face of how I'd been raised. But this fundamental Adventist understanding of God's grace has gradually helped me, not only with my personal understanding of my disability, but in other personal tragedies I have experienced. And it is this fundamental belief which perhaps makes our church uniquely qualified to welcome persons with disabilities into our fellowship.

Toward an Adventist Ministry To People With Disabilities

Today, many churches of other denominations are reaching out to persons with disabilities. Many have one or more services interpreted for persons who are deaf. Many churches are also being made physically accessible to persons who use wheelchairs or other assistive devices. And I understand that some churches are working on study curriculums that can be used by the cognitively impaired. I am pleased with all of this progress. In fact, I think these types of reforms are well overdue and *must* be embraced by our church, and many congregations are doing just that. But I also believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church may have a unique role to play in enabling persons with disabilities to reach their full God-given potential.

Knowing that we, as Seventh-day Adventists, believe that God wants only good for his children, and that he reached out to people with disabilities, I think our church has an obligation to reach out to persons with disabilities in a variety of ways. First and foremost, we must openly accept and encourage

persons with disabilities into our fellowship. If we, as individuals and as a community, can make a commitment to look at the person, not at the disability, then we can build an authentic fellowship with these individuals, many of whom experience devastating loneliness.

We may also think about a role for our college-aged members. Many persons with disabilities require assistance for a few hours a day (or even less) to do personal care, cleaning, et cetera. (I am certain my home would come to a screeching halt without a young woman, who happens to be a member of our church, who helps me once a week.) If we are encouraging our young people to go into health-care professions, what better experience can we give them than the knowledge that comes with this type of work? I might also point out that the trend is for the personal-care assistants to earn a wage, and not merely be volunteers.

Finally, if people with disabilities need to have an open fellowship with the church, the parents of persons with disabilities need it all the more. I could (and perhaps will) devote another article to the needs of parents of children with disabilities. Even parents whose children with disabilities are “doing just fine” carry a burden. They feel guilt, social isolation, and worry. For parents of mentally disabled persons there is the ultimate question: “What happens when I die?” Parents of children with disabilities face these and many other issues every day. I’m not suggesting that the church find all of the answers to these questions. In fact, this would not be realistic. But I think we need to be keenly aware that these parents need the church in a very real way. They—and their children—need the support and love of the community of faith which I think the Seventh-day Adventist Church is uniquely qualified to render.