

FAMILY MATTERS:

A PLACE TO **Belong**



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How can we as the Church care for those who are disabled, their caretakers and their families?

Families who experience disability have much to offer the body of Christ. Too often, they are marginalized or at best misunderstood. The Church has historically had a mercy mind-set, seeing these families only as needing to be ministered to. While we have needs, many are not so different from those of everyone else. We also have gifts, talents and lessons learned to enrich those we encounter and to provide opportunities for spiritual growth for others.

Children, parents, siblings, grandparents, spouses, adult children and extended family on the journey of disability all experience loss. For them, the death of the family dream is very real. Whether this loss comes with experiencing a traumatic accident or illness, the birth of a child with a disability, a wounded warrior returning home, a mental health diagnosis, deafness, blindness or any other disability, it is a significant loss to work through.

We all seek a place to belong. The Church is (or ought to be!) the sanctuary for all from the rest of life, a place where God's unconditional love is alive; a place of welcome where all are invited to be still, to listen, to be fed spiritually, to serve with our God-given gifts and to be in fellowship with others; a place where all are recognized and valued equally.

The Church is also the place in which God comes to all of us—no matter what our mental or physical capacity may be—to provide us with spiritual food. He gives His gifts of Word and Sacrament to the entire body of Christ. He leaves

no one out, strengthening the faith of all of God's children despite intellectual and physical challenges. In these tangible ways, our Lord reminds us that He intimately knows the needs of every soul and is quick to heal and comfort with a word of forgiveness and peace.

Fed by Christ's Word and Sacraments, how can a congregation help those in its midst who experience bodily limitations? Simply ask! Surprisingly, it's that simple. Each family situation is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. No special programs are necessary. The process of welcome used for any visitor or new member works just fine in this situation as well. For these families, however, we tack on a few additions.

Here are some questions to get you started:

- › How can we support your family?
- › What do you personally need?
- › What works best for you?
- › What does *not* work for you?

We all need friends, prayer, respite for the caregivers, welcome and meaningful participation for each family member including the one with the disability, reprieve from disability issues, mentorship, fellowship, activities of shared interest and time and opportunity to serve. When the Church steps into the gap, it can help to keep the workload light but the contribution significant.

RESOURCES

Organizations

- › LCMS Disability Task Force: lcms.org/disability
- › Bethesda Institute: bethesdainstitute.org
- › Bethesda Lutheran Communities: bethesdalutherancommunities.org
- › Lutheran Braille Workers: lbwinc.org
- › Lutheran Friends of the Deaf: millneck.org

Publications

- › *Confronting a Culture of Disrespect*, in *The Lutheran Witness*, May 2010, by The Rev. Charles Werth: blogs.lcms.org/2010/confronting-a-culture-of-disrespect-5-2010
- › *Feeling Comfortable with People Who have Disabilities*: bethesdainstitute.org/page.aspx?pid=1028
- › *Congregational Disability Assessment Tool*, a free downloadable resource available at: lcms.org/disability
- › *LCMS Michigan District Mental Illness Resources*: michigandistrict.org/congregations/christian-care/mentalillness

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- › The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offers information, referral, and education to assist people with mental illnesses, their families, friends, mental health professionals, and the general public: nami.org
 - › Chosen Families provides information to parents, family members, religious leaders, and the general public on effective solutions to living in families with mental illness. chosenfamilies.org

Dr. Jim Peirson once noted that “There are no disabled souls.” As the Church, let’s work toward life together, building Christian community:

- › where people with diverse support needs are in regular Christian fellowship, community, and service;
- › where life lessons are learned together;
- › with limitless fellowship opportunities;
- › that delight the Father as His children all learn from each other.

On the Last Day, when Christ returns in glory, all the bodies of Christians will be transformed to be like His glorious body (Philemon 3). Knowing this, we look forward to the Resurrection in hope and joy, confident in our Lord’s promises that He will make us whole and complete, perfect forever in Him.

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