“...from now on you will be catching people.”


(Gospel Reading for Epiphany 5C—Sunday, February 7, 2010)

The camper talent show is the highlight of Camp Rainbow Connection, our conference summer retreat/respite experience for youth and adults with intellectual disabilities. Seasoned campers (those who have been to camp before) often come with their talent routines planned and rehearsed. Two of our past male campers, both of whom have Down Syndrome, always planned their talent together well in advance and came prepared each year with all the props and costumes needed for the performance.

One year, their talent was “Fishers of People.” Dressed in their Biblical robes (of course, looking somewhat like striped bathrobes), they stepped onto the stage, fishing poles in hand. As Luke 5:1-11 was read, our own Disciples of Jesus cast their lines into the “sea.” What a wonderful example of how we all are called to be fishers of people!

No matter what our gifts or ability levels, we are called to share our faith. Sometimes it is as powerful as leading another person to the altar and kneeling side-by-side as they accept Jesus into his or her heart. It may be as quietly moving as watching two of God’s special children fish for people. Yet, we cannot take any of the steps needed to share our faith if our hearts, minds, and doors are not open to anyone who wants to come in and be a part of our community.

We each have a story of our faith to share, in the way that is most comfortable and natural for us. We are participants in what could be the most contagious and fulfilling community of love and hospitality we have ever known. The real question for each one of us is this….

Are you ready to go fishing with open nets and no imposed limits on the catch?

Our answer should be a resounding, “YES.”
What is Disability Awareness Sunday?

The 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church voted to create **DISABILITY AWARENESS SUNDAY**. The **2008 Discipline** states in ¶265.4:

Disability Awareness Sunday shall be observed annually on a date to be determined by the annual conference. Disability Awareness Sunday calls the Church to celebrate the gifts and graces of persons with disabilities and calls the Church and society to full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the community.

In the Virginia Conference, Disability Awareness Sunday is the **first Sunday in February** – without a special offering.

How Should We Celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday?

This special Sunday gives every congregation the opportunity to challenge our hospitality and our inclusion of all persons into the full life of the church. This can be a time when persons with disabilities can offer their gifts and graces to the congregation and to God as participants, liturgists and leaders in this celebration. As you celebrate this special Sunday, let it be an opportunity for the congregation to launch or extend its hospitality to persons with disabilities. The trustees and other groups should involve members of the congregation along with their sisters and brothers with disabilities in identifying and offering solutions to physical, architectural, communication and attitudinal barriers. Develop specific plans and strategies to eliminate those barriers so that your congregation might be fully hospitable to all of God's people.

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The worship material included in this packet is designed so that you can incorporate pieces into your Order of Worship or fellowship times. The materials have been developed by members of our Conference Commission on Disabilities or disability advocacy groups. References are noted for sources outside our Conference. The awareness materials which are included can be used for Sunday School or small group activities at any time during the year.

Help us, as a part of your disability awareness activities, to educate Virginia United Methodists on the opportunity to get involved with Heart Havens, our conference-related agency which provides residential services for adults with intellectual disabilities. **February is Heart Havens Month. For more information about Heart Havens, visit their website at: www.hearthavens.org**
Worship Service Ideas

Call to Worship (from Disability Awareness materials prepared by the Southeastern United Methodist Agency for Rehabilitation—SEMAR):

Leader: We come together today as people with different skills, different abilities, different disabilities.
People: We come, however, as one body in Christ.
Leader: We ask God to help us be compassionate toward all, even as God has been compassionate toward us.
People: Gather us together, in compassion and in faith. Help us to welcome and honor everyone in this community.
Leader: Regardless of physical strength and ability,
People: Regardless of differences of mind or spirit,
Leader: Open us, O God. Make us accessible to your Spirit, and accessible to all your people.
All: Amen.

Prayer of Petition/Response:

Leader: We gather today as the Body of Christ.
People: We come from different backgrounds, cultures, with different skills and disabilities.
Leader: We come to learn to love and live with each other.
People: Christ welcomed individuals with disabilities and may we be as welcoming to our brothers and sisters.
Leader: Regardless of our differences we come with open minds and hearts to worship our Lord and Savior.
All: Amen.

The Confession of Sin (from Disability Awareness materials prepared by SEMAR):

Merciful and Life-giving God, we confess that we have been wayward children. You taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves and we chose to be selfish with our love. You taught us to feed the hungry and poor at whatever cost and we chose to be greedy and limit our willingness to serve. We have disregarded Your example and dishonored Your name when we chose not to celebrate the holiness of Your created world or proclaim the sacred worth of all our brothers and sisters. Forgive us, God of compassion, when we have veered from the path You created for us and when we forget what it means to welcome You in our midst. Help us remember Your teachings. Help us mold our life to Your example. Free us from our sinfulness, Holy Creator, and lead us in the ways of justice and truth. Amen.
“That’s a Keeper” Children’s Message Idea:

Do any of you fish? Do you like to fish? Who do you go fishing with?

There something that those who fish like to say when they catch a fish they like. Do you know what it is? They say, “That’s a keeper!”

What does it mean to say a fish is a “keeper”? To say a fish is a keeper, is to say it’s big enough to take home and eat! Maybe even big enough to win a fishing prize for the best catch! Those who fish like to catch “keepers”!

Jesus Christ teaches us that we in the church are to be fishers of people! If we are to fish for people and bring them into the church, what is it that makes us or anyone else a “keeper”? What is it that makes us someone that Jesus wants in the church?

• Is it that we are big—a certain height or a certain weight (like a “keeper” fish)?
• Is it that we are a certain color?
• Is it that we know how to swim?

No. It’s not our appearance or even anything we know how to do that make us “keepers.” What makes us keepers, the only thing that God is looking for, the thing that makes us worthy of the prize of Heaven, is a heart that loves the Lord. Nothing else matters. So, no matter how different we are, if our hearts are full of love, when it comes to the church, when it comes to Jesus, we are “keepers.”

Suggested Hymns:
From The United Methodist Hymnal -

- Many Gifts, One Spirit - #114
- We Meet You, O Christ - #257
- Jesu, Jesu – #432
- We Are the Church – #558
- Help Us Accept Each Other – #560
- Lord, You Give the Great Commission – #584

From The Faith We Sing -

- Together We Serve – #2175
- Wounded World That Cries for Healing – #2177
- Bring Forth the Kingdom of God – #2190
- Who is My Mother, Who is My Brother – #2225
Ideas for an Experiential Service

Those on the Commission on Disabilities realize that one cannot truly experience what it is to have a disability - physical, emotional or developmental, without the unceasing need to adjust and plan around that circumstance with each day a person lives. We are grateful for those on our Commission who share their strengths and insights and first-hand knowledge of living life with a disability and also for those on the Commission who have a special appreciation of this challenge, even though it is not their personal one, because they have a family member or friend who struggles with a disability or perhaps simply because God has called them to work and advocate in this area.

Understanding then that any approximation of the challenges presented by a disability falls far short of the actual experience, still we on the Commission of Disabilities would suggest that even a momentary exercise in limitation, contrived though it may be, could heighten the awareness of all those in our churches and thus, make them more welcoming to those with disabilities. In gaining insights and even in learning what questions to ask, the Body of Christ becomes more able to welcome all in Christ’s Name.

We suggest that on Disability Awareness Sunday, you select a small number of your congregation members in advance, perhaps only two or three, and ask them to either wear earplugs, a blindfold, or sit in a wheelchair from the moment they arrive at church until the time service is almost over. Provide a shepherd to be with them throughout this experience. Let the congregation assist them, as necessary, and provide just a minute or two, per person, at the end of the service before the last hymn for these individuals to come forward and comment upon what it is like to worship with limits to sight, hearing, or mobility. Let them comment upon what assistance was helpful, upon what challenges were easy to navigate, and upon what parts of the service or church fellowship were inaccessible to them.

After all who wish have spoken, close with the following prayer:

O God, together we are the Body of Christ. No one member of this Body has all of the abilities necessary to fulfill Your Commission. All of us have challenges. Forgive us when we use our and others’ limitations as an excuse to avoid being fully involved in our faith community. Forgive us when we fail to see persons with physical, mental, or emotional challenges as those with unique gifts and abilities who can enrich our congregations. By Your Spirit, let us be interconnected, sharing our gifts and abilities, our strengths and our weaknesses, with one another which allows us to be a fully inclusive congregation, where all find a welcome that is unlimited, and reassurance in the face of any challenge we face. Amen.

The following websites supply inexpensive earplugs and blindfolds:

http://earplugstore.stores.yahoo.net/

http://www.maskcraft.com/
Suggestions for Leading Worship and Being in Ministry with Persons with Disabilities

1. Don’t hesitate to ask each person how you can best assist them.
2. Get in the habit of always using “people first language,” putting the person before the disability or any other description. For example, speak of the “child who has autism” instead of “the autistic child” or the “person living with AIDS” vs. “the AIDS victim.”
3. Promote mutuality of ministry. Persons with disabilities are wonderful ministers to others, not those to be solely the recipients of ministry.
4. Preaching should never contribute to a person’s isolation or exclusion. Demonstrate pastoral care in the midst of preaching.
5. Offer Braille and/or large-print bulletins and hymnals (anywhere from 18-22 point font). Other printed materials, such as a newsletter, can also be made available in large print.
6. Taped services, taped newsletters and other church materials can be provided.
7. Offer sermon manuscripts or notes for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing.
8. Equipment for producing Braille materials, such as bulletins, is available at the conference office. Contact the Office of Leadership and Inclusivity.
9. Have pages marked for persons who find turning pages difficult.
10. During Communion, place the cup and bread in the hands of the participant.
11. When communicating, speak in a normal voice, do not speak loudly, and be visible to the person so they can read your lips. Keep your hands away from your mouth as you speak.
12. Provide personal hearing assistance devices.
13. If Power Point or other visuals are used, read aloud and/or describe the scene if audio is not available.
14. As people are seated, those with orthopedic disabilities and other mobility challenges could be encouraged to sit on the outside edge of the pews for easy access.
15. Pews can be removed or cut to provide space for persons in wheelchairs. Avoid placing this space at the very front or the very back of the sanctuary. Everyone wants to be able to choose where they sit in church.
16. Conduct an accessibility audit to call attention to areas of needed improvement.
18. Offer American Sign Language interpreters.
20. Make every Sunday a disabilities awareness Sunday. In worship planning, remember to include persons with disabilities as liturgists, ushers, communion servers, and preachers—all the ways people who are able-bodied share their gifts with the church.

For more information about these materials, programs of the Commission on Disabilities, or specific church needs, contact:

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