

## Diverse Needs Within the Body of Christ By Paige Kohlman

### The Call To Mercy:

In this year of Mercy, we are called to share Christ's love and compassion with all those we encounter. We are especially called to love those with diverse challenges and disabilities, who were the people Jesus most identified with. The marginalized people of society, the poor, disabled, lonely and heavy hearted. If we are honest we all, in some way, fall into these categories. We all long to be loved and accepted.

As the hands and feet of Christ, we are called to love one another with His deep love. We can love those with challenges by being understanding and adaptable. We can exit our preconceived ideas, enter into dialogue and give everyone a sense of purpose and belonging. As we do this, we become Christ's body, the hands and feet of mercy to those in need.

*"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27)*

### My Story:

Within my own life, I have learned to cope with having low vision and ADHD. Many family members thought I would never measure up. I chose to go to college to become an education assistant to help others in need. I now see the blessing of going through my challenges and having my disabilities because they have taught me to have compassion on others. Someone once told me, that due to having low vision, I have a gift for seeing the world in a different way. Others have told me that I am like a human lie-detector or that I can read people. In addition, having ADHD has been a wonderful mystery. I've discovered the great blessings within this so-called "disability", such as having a lot of energy to get things done, even if I sometimes get distracted or overly focused. I have also learned the virtue of patience and gained the grace to keep fighting for the things I want. For my story shows that if we broaden our understanding of what it is really like to live with a disability, we may gain a deeper respect for those who live with such challenges.

*"O what a happy soul am I! Although I cannot see I am resolved that in this world contented I will be; How many blessings I enjoy that other people don't! To weep and sigh because I'm blind I cannot, and I won't."  
(Fanny Crosby)*

### Walk Awhile in Someone's Shoes:

Take a moment and imagine:

**You are blind and cannot drive.** You must depend on transit or a friend or family member to get places you need to go. How often can you get to church?

**You are confined to a wheel chair or have difficulty walking.** Can you park close to the doors of the church? Is there a wheelchair ramp into the church? The office? Once inside, can you sit where you want or are you segregated? Can you access a washroom?

**You have depression** to the point that it is sometimes hard to get out of bed and live your life. **You have an addiction** to drugs or alcohol to the point that you cannot live without it. **You are the 'life of the party'** constantly inviting people to your home but deep down you worry that if you stop they will not want to spend time with you. **You are a single mom**, spending all her energy in raising a family. **You struggle with your sexuality**, feeling alone and unaccepted. **You just arrived to live in Canada** and do not know the language, customs, and culture. **You are a shy person** who is stuck in fear and cannot reach out to others.

**Does anyone from the church know? Or care? How comfortable are you with reaching out to someone in your church 'family'? Who can you talk to about your fears? Will the parish help in any way? Do you feel welcome in your church? Does anybody try to communicate with you at Mass? Does anyone smile or start up a conversation with you?**

#### **Embrace the Call to Love:**

We all are called to love one another as Christ loved us. Take time and reflect on these questions. How can I be a missionary in my own church? How can I help people know that they are valued and have a call on their lives?

*"This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you." (John 15:12)*

Many people with challenges feel marginalized within society but it does not have to be this way in the Church. However the sad fact is that some people feel alone and on the fringes of our community. In addition, our church community feels like a tight-knit group that is hard to get into. However, we as children of God need to give people with every type of challenge a purpose for their lives. Some of the most powerful prayer warriors are not those found inside the church but rather those found in senior's homes or confined to a hospital bed. So often we want to avoid suffering by numbing the pain or avoiding it. But if we truly reflect on what Jesus did on the cross, we would come to see that when he was at his weakest, he did his greatest work of redemption; he brought about the forgiveness of sins and new life. We need to empower these precious children of God to find a purpose and a place in God's kingdom that is made just for them - a place which no one else could fill.

*"But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord."  
(Jeremiah 1:7-8)*

### **Practical Ways to Help:**

There are many wonderful ways that I have seen members of the Body of Christ give people with challenges a chance to find their place within the church community. In my case, I have difficulty with depth perception. As a Eucharistic minister it would be a challenge for me to place communion on someone's tongue. So the priest allows me to serve the Blood of Christ. Now I even help train other people to become Eucharistic ministers. This goes to show that people with challenges are more than capable of contributing to church life but they may have to do it a different way.

What are some simple things that we can do to help people of diverse needs know and feel that they truly are a part of church life and ministry?

1. Invite people to come join you in ministry whatever that might look like.
2. Invite people for coffee, Tim Hortons is a lovely place to fellowship with people.
3. Go visit a senior's home and build relationships with the people in that home. Start a prayer group to give them purpose and empower them as prayer warriors for the body of Christ.
4. Give somebody who does not have a vehicle a ride to church. And from there, build a friendship with that person.
5. Sit with somebody who is alone at church and make a new friend.
6. When a person with a challenge wants to be a part of the ministry and has some limitations, make way for that person to be a part of the ministry.
7. Do not just try to be someone's mentor but rather be their friend, be truthful, be encouraging and be loving.
8. See the person first and their disability second. For these people are not a disability, but rather a person created by God who has dignity and value.

### **Dealing With The Challenges**

No matter what challenges we face, let us be encouraged that we are not alone. We are never alone for God is with each one of us and sees us as His precious child, even when we feel worthless and weak. Many of the saints had disabilities and challenges. But they trusted in God; that He works all

things together for those who love Him. Let us be empowered that we have a special job to teach people how to have compassion. Never be ashamed of a disability or challenge; rather, teach people about it. We are called to love as Christ loved us.

*"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong." (1 Corinthians 1:27)*

### **Final Thoughts**

I end with a quote which hangs in my kitchen to remind me that there is something that goes beyond our senses and abilities calling us to be merciful, and that four letter word is love.

*"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart" (Helen Keller)*