

DISABILITY NEWS

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Uniting Church in Australia

from the Editor....

Greetings!

Whether the word is used or not various articles in this issues are concerned with people with disability being accepted within society and the church.

The article on the Shut Out report speaks of acceptance in terms of the need for major societal and political resources to overcome prevailing prejudice and neglect.

The review concerning the lifework of L'Arche founder Jean Vanier points to acceptance for people with disability being found in faith-based small group community.

The story of Michael, on this page, points to someone who feels the church no longer accepts him as they used to because he has acquired a disability.

The cartoon on page 2 speaks of words of acceptance that are not translated into practical support and assistance.

And that's the point, true and just acceptance moves beyond right-sounding sentiment to practical actions indicating sacrificial commitment.

Feel free to share this newsletter with your friends.

If you don't already, let me know if you would prefer to receive this by email.

Email me (address above) with the names of anyone who would like to be added to the mailing list.

Your feedback is always welcome.
Enjoy the read.

Rev Trevor Whitney
Disabilities Ministry Chaplain
UCA, Presbytery & Synod of SA
Pastoral Relations Committee

The Church and M.S. - Michael's Story

I first met Michael 5 years ago in my role as a denominational chaplain at Julia Farr Services, an institution that offers healthcare and accommodation for people with a range of disabilities. He was in his early 60s, and I soon observed him to have searching eyes and, at times, a rather impish smile. He seemed pleased to see me and engage in serious, thoughtful conversation. It also became apparent that he could be quick to challenge the comments I'd make if he felt I hadn't properly considered an issue.

As a person who has nurtured his Christian faith in the church over much of his life Michael has a sizeable library of theological books in his room, which reflect a lifelong passion for study and learning. Even in his senior years he continues this interest studying for a degree in theology at an Adelaide seminary. This he manages to do despite living with the ever-advancing effects of Multiple Sclerosis, a disability he has lived with now for many years, and which sees him move around in a motorised chair.

To look around his room you will also see pictures of his wife and grown-up daughter. You will also observe an array of CDs reflecting his love of classical and church music. In his more able, younger days he was a very competent church organist.

I recently asked Michael how he felt the church had accepted him since acquiring his disability many years ago. He indicated that while he had an absolute confidence in the acceptance that is intrinsic to the nature of the "invisible church," at a practical level he found that the church now puts him in a tightly constrained box titled "DISABILITY." This box prevents him from being able to contribute his talents in the way he used to do before acquiring his disability. He feels frustrated and under-valued, searching for ways to still express his Christian ministry within a church that seems to no longer value what he still has to offer.

Michael is a highly intelligent, caring, and gifted person who has a deep love of God and of the Body of Christ. It seems to me that having acquired his disability Michael has had to accept a somewhat neglected role within his corner of the Body.

While this neglect continues the church is diminished.

May the church learn to open it's arms ever wider to those with disability and allow them to enrich the church through their presence and the exercising of ministry that reflects their talents.

Told with permission

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THE HARD PLACE (MY DISABILITY)

A poem by Kerri-Ann Messenger

*Can you hear the ocean music
as it goes in and out?
Can you hear the ocean singing out to you?
and by a wave it greets you.
Me, as I sit on a rock.*

*The ocean around me
to keep me company.
Only love that washes over me.
My care washes away from me.
My rock is like a bed
as the waves lull me to sleep.*

*Only hearts are like the ocean
Tamara, Andrew and Paul.
Only the people who
know me deep inside.
Like a sapphire that lies deep within.*

*My bed is like a boat
as I feel the bed rocking with the ocean
which makes the dream forevermore.
Let the ocean wash the pain away
so no one can see the Down Syndrome in me.*

*The reflections of me
I see the 'plain Jane' girl.
The sunset shines in my eyes
and the dawn calls my heart.*

*The sunset turns to the stars
and the candles are lit.
The lingering fire lies within us
just like the sunset blazing in our hearts.*

*The magic is in the light of the candles.
The stars sparkle in my eyes.
That magic sends sparks in the eyes of
Tamara, Andrew and Paul.
We have a connection and they see me
before my disability.*

*The salty breeze swirls around me like the ocean.
The ocean is my home as my mind drifts away
to where the mermaids live.*

Kerri-Ann is a young Adelaide woman with Down Syndrome.
She participates in a writer's group,
and has written various poems and stories.
She dreams of one day being published.

Beatitudes of acceptance

Blessed are you who take time to listen to
speech that may be slow,
for you help me to know that if I persevere,
I can be understood.

Blessed are you who walk kindly by my side,
for in your friendship I feel good to be myself.

Blessed are you who never bid me to hurry up;
and, more blessed, you who do not snatch a
task from my hands and do it for me,
for often I need time rather than help.

Blessed are you who stand beside me as I
enter new and untried ventures,
for I may surprise myself and you.

Blessed are you who ask for my help and
realise my gifts and abilities,
for you help me to believe in myself.

Blessed are you who help me with the
graciousness of Christ,
because I sometimes need help
for which I cannot ask.

Blessed are you who, in all ways,
assure me that what makes me an individual
is not my particular difference,
but my God-given strengths and virtues
which nothing can confine.

Rejoice and be glad,
for you affirm my value as a gifted person and
your understanding and love have opened the
doors of love for me.

Australian Catholic Disability Council
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The *Shut Out* report is the result of a recently convened Rudd Government nationwide consultation with the disability community that involved more than 760 submissions and more than 2,500 personal attendances at public consultations across the country.

The report represented responses from a wide range of people with disabilities, carers, advocates, service providers, and many others, and sought to substantially uncover what life is really like for people with disabilities.

The report's author, Rhonda Galbally, heard and collated stories that indicated that despite mainstream Australians, until the recent Global Financial Crisis, enjoying the most sustained period of economic prosperity in its western history, people with disability remain victims of disadvantage, discrimination and prejudice.

Galbally states, "What I saw and heard was profoundly shocking—and utterly shameful.

I heard that people with disabilities are unable to access housing, employment, education, health care, recreation, sport, arts—the very things that most people in the community take for granted.

I heard that they are denied access to childcare, kindergartens, schools, shopping centres, participation in community groups. I heard that their lives are a constant struggle, that they are isolated and alone."

Estimates suggest that whilst over the next 70 years the numbers of those with severe disability will increase up to three times quicker than the overall population, the number of unpaid carers who can support those people will decline. Urgent situations can only become even more dire without appropriate intervention.

One strong suggestion was the idea of a national disability insurance scheme that could provide critical funding for essential practical helps such as critical care, home modifications, equipment and therapy. The Uniting-Care National Office supports this proposal.

Whilst it is hoped that the report provokes vigorous discussion it must produce critical initiatives from the Federal Government that make urgent improvements for those living with disabilities who deserve to live decent and just lives.

- ◆ The Shut Out report can be downloaded at:
http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/disability/pubs/policy/community_consult/Pages/default.aspx

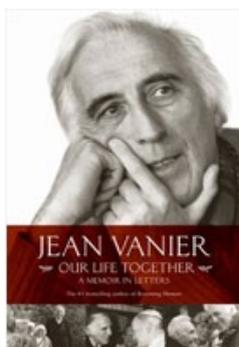
"Many people in the community believe that disability is someone else's problem. They do not believe that disability will touch their lives ..."

**Shut Out Report
p.vii**

Reviews Reviews

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

A MEMOIR IN LETTERS



by **Jean Vanier**
Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008
\$62.95

For the past 45 years Jean Vanier has devoted his life globally to the care of the poor and, in particular, those with an intellectual disability. In this impressive memoir that takes the form of myriad letters he writes to colleagues and friends over this time, he details his devotion for and ministry with those he refers to as "the excluded."

Vanier's younger years betray his eventual calling and passion. Born in 1928 of devout Catholic and comfortable French-Canadian parentage, he served in the navy. But he yearned for more. As he says, "... my deepest desire was to be a disciple of Jesus and live the Gospel message..."(p.3).

In 1964, through the mentoring of a Dominican priest, he moved to Trosly, France, where he established his first faith community for adults with intellectual disability. He named the community L'Arche after the ark Noah built to save God's creatures from the Flood. Over the following decades he established 130 of these communities in 30 countries on all continents. As an adjunct to this ministry he established 1400 support groups for the families of people with disabilities called Faith and Light.

In the slums of Calcutta, the ghetto communities of Sao Paulo (favelas), in maximum security North American prisons, and in places of dictatorship and asylum in Africa and Asia, we see Vanier's faith and vision forged through deep engagement with the poor and needy of these places.

In 2008 Vanier celebrated his 80th birthday, his role in the communities he created now figurative rather than hands-on. But his legacy of devotion to people with intellectual disability expressed through faithful community lives on as a profound testimony to the God who comes to the poor and neglected.

This memoir is a fitting tribute to a deeply faithful life and an all-embracing and welcoming God.

Jean Vanier, at age 80

*"We speak of the rights of the disabled to live on their own, to get married, to work or not work ...; but what about the right of that person to be different, to be loved and appreciated and find places of belonging?
This ... is now the focus of my life."*

"Our Life Together," p.551

Christmas reflection

*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.
But to all who received him ... he gave power to become children of God.”*
John 1:11, 12

God comes into the world in the form of the Word who became flesh (John 1:14), to live among us and reveal God's glory. Whilst there were those who accepted him as of God there were those who did not accept him. Why?

A significant reason for some was that they could not conceive of God taking on human identity, becoming one who felt the gamut of human emotions, who lived the range of human experiences, and who fully absorbed the reality of human frailty.

However, whilst such an incarnate figure was a stumbling block to some, he was liberation for the oppressed who had found one who fully identified with their situation in life.

In Jesus' day people with disability, such as the lame and the blind, were often treated with contempt, regarded as unclean, and thus socially isolated and without the resources for living.

Many people with disability today experience marginalisation through isolation, misunderstanding and prejudice, however through the incarnate Word, there is access to the one who has come to be seen by some in the disability community as "the Disabled God."

This is the God who is not to be found in glorious transcendence, but is to be found journeying in solidarity with those rejected because their disability causes offence.

In such solidarity there is comfort and hope. Thanks be to God

Disability Celebrations

Two services celebrating the place of people with disability in the life of the church have been held in Adelaide in recent weeks.

On Sunday November 1st a special service was held at **Adelaide West U.C.**. The Minda-based choir Tutti Ensemble were the featured musicians, and they sung up an absolute storm. Adelaide West church member Darryl Selwood delivered the message, sharing his story.

On Thursday December 3rd an ecumenical service was held at **Holy Redeemer Anglican Church, Ingle Farm**, to celebrate the International Day of People with a Disability. The service was supported by the South Australian Council of Churches, and organised by the SACC Task Group on Disability Issues, and the Holy Redeemer Church. The featured artist was Adelaide musician Chris Finnen who sang beautifully. Two people with disabilities, one younger, one older, shared their journey, and spoke of what it is like for them being people with disability in the church.

The message that came from both of these services is that all people with disabilities belong in the life of the church, and that the church is less than what it could be without their presence and ministry.

Kid's books

Don't Call Me Special

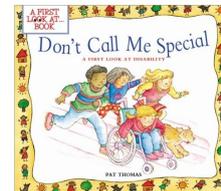
A FIRST LOOK AT DISABILITY

author: **Pat Thomas**
Hodder Wayland, 2001

\$6.95

age: 5-8

disability topic: **physical disabilities**



This readable book simply explains issues related to physical disabilities in a way that is accessible to kids.

It looks at how people of different ages can deal with a range of disabilities and live purposeful lives.

Good to read in small group contexts.

Lucy's Picture

author: **Nicola Moon**

\$16.95

age: 5-8

disability topic: **vision impairment**

Lucy takes special care at school to design a tactile piece of artwork for her vision impaired Grandpa.

Disability Resource Website

www.sa.uca.org.au/goto/disability

Soon to be updated this UCA site offers disability resources such as Reviews, Disability News newsletter (back copies), Kid's Books, Ministry items, Liturgy, Prayers, Poems and Stories.

For church & personal use.