



Christian Disability Partnership

In Australia

Newsletter Winter 2003

From the desk of the editor:

Welcome to the winter edition of *Christian Disability Partnership Newsletter* which is well overdue as it has been some time since the last newsletter. Over the last few months we have been reviewing our objectives and looking at how we can better meet our purpose of seeing people with disabilities participating in the life of mainstream church activity and involved in ministry.

We have confirmed our commitment to minister to, and with, people with disabilities but have changed our main focus from developing links with church leaders and developing policies and resources for church leaders. Although we still see this as important, our focus is turning towards the grass roots by encouraging individuals with disabilities to participate in church and ministry opportunities within their local church. We are also keen to further develop the *Inclusive Congregation Program*.

In this edition we are featuring stories from two new members of the committee. Louise Gosbell has written a summary of her Bachelor of Theology Honours thesis looking at **Jesus' miracles and Disability**.

Jason Forbes tells **of his ministry to all, including people with disabilities**. Jason, who has cerebral palsy, is studying theology with the aim of going into full time ministry.

Please forward this newsletter on to anyone who you think would be interested in the ministry of Christian Disability Partnership.

Martin Butcher

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Disability and the Miracles of Jesus

By Louise Gosbell

There has been much written over the last few years about the miracles of Jesus. Some claim that as Christians we should all have a ministry of healing just as Jesus did. Others believe that this kind of healing was relegated only to Jesus' ministry, as a way of proving that he was the Messiah. Either way, what is most often overlooked in the miracle accounts of Jesus is that He was interacting with people in a way that was unique. These are *real* stories of *real* people who had a *real* experience of Jesus.

Many of the miracles of Jesus focused not only on healing the sick, but also healing those who were physically impaired. When we read these miracle stories we often marvel at the power of Jesus. Often though, we don't consider what the healing meant to those who were involved. To understand this a bit more it is worth taking a brief look at the religious attitudes towards people with disabilities in Jesus' day.

Many people that Jesus interacted with were Jews, and of course, Jesus Himself was a Jew. So what was the Jewish understanding of disability? In fact there were many facets to the Jewish understanding of disability, but due to space restrictions here, let me highlight just a few that are relevant to the main issue here. Although the Hebrew Bible is clear in outlining a believer's responsibility to care of people with disabilities (Deut 27:14-26), what is also apparent is that many people with disabilities would have found life difficult. In the Hebrew Bible purity and cleanliness are shown to be important to the religious life of the community. Those

who were considered to be unclean by the community, such as those with physical impairments, were removed from the group until such time as they could be classed as clean. For some, however, unless a miracle occurred, they would always stay stigmatized and excluded from the majority. This meant, for many, that they were unable to participate in the religious life of the group.

It wasn't only Jews that Jesus associated with though – Jesus also spent time with many Gentiles in His community. Unlike the Jews who had a clearly defined religion, many of the Greeks & Romans of the day worshipped many different gods, including the kings & emperors. As a result of such religious diversity and the lack of clear rules on religious behaviour, purity & cleanliness weren't as important to the Greeks & Romans as they were to the Jews. However, what was important to the Greeks & Romans was fulfilling societal roles, such as working, serving in the government & military & other civil duties. For women, the societal expectation primarily lay with childbearing & assisting with family duties. Unlike the Jews, the Greeks & Romans didn't simply exclude people because they considered them to be 'unclean', however, if someone wasn't able to fulfill their societal duties because they had a physical impairment or disability, then there is every likelihood that they too would have been outcast and excluded.

These various worldviews are the backdrop to the New Testament. When Jesus encounters people with physical impairments throughout His ministry He is meeting with people who are outcasts – those who have been rejected by society. Jesus doesn't *just* heal people to show that He is the Messiah, rather, He is interested in them as people and their relationships with their family and their

society. Jesus brings more than physical healing – He offers people restoration. Where once these people with physical impairments were considered to be worthless, unclean outcasts, Jesus offers them the opportunity to have restored relationships.

Jesus didn't heal because people need to be physically whole to enter the Kingdom of God & Jesus didn't heal people because they were 'suffering' from divine punishment or curses. By touching those considered unclean and by being willing to spend time with those who society had rejected, Jesus showed He considers all people valuable. Where once people would have been isolated and alone, Jesus brings them back to their families and communities. But more than this, Jesus offered them a greater healing, a greater restoration. Although physical healing was important to be restored to their earthly relationships, Jesus offers them the opportunity to be spiritually healed – and the opportunity to be restored in the most important relationship of all – their relationship with God.

Some people witnessed Jesus walk on water, others saw Him create a meal for thousands from a meagre amount of fishes and loaves and others still saw Him perform life altering healing miracles. What was important in each of these situations was not the miracle but each individual's encounter with Jesus. Jesus invites all people, regardless of their physical ability, to be in relationship with Him and to become a part of the Body of Christ – a place of diverse ability and unconditional acceptance. The results of the miracles are temporary but spiritual restoration is eternal.

Louise Gosbell

Louise is currently completing a Bachelor of Theology (Honours) thesis on Jesus and Disability.

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Jason's ministry to all – including people with disabilities

Jason Forbes was born with Cerebral Palsy but maintains a high level of mobility and independent living. He's very much an adventurer with his interests including cycling, four-wheel-driving and camping. He isn't one to back down from a challenge, despite any difficulties that may be presented. Jason is currently studying at the Presbyterian Theological Centre as a candidate for ministry in the Presbyterian Church. Jason speaks of his concern to see the faithful expository teaching of the Scriptures available to all. This particularly includes people with disabilities.

My concern is our ministry programs and churches may not be suitable for people with disabilities. I have sometimes paused during events, such as a Katoomba Conventions, and have wondered how a person with a severe disability is supposed to access these highly effective ministries. Sure, I can pitch a tent, or stay in a dormitory. But what about someone in a wheelchair? Where do they stay? How do they get around? How can they afford it when most are on a pension? I have also met people who have had to change churches simply because the building is not accessible.

Added to this are people who, in effect, are living on the fringe of mainstream society due to nothing more than their disability. These people require 24 hour care and live in highly institutionalised environments. Because of this, their worldview and social abilities are quite different. Different enough to require ministries that address their concerns at their level.

In June 2002 I began a fortnightly devotion at the Spastic Centre at Allambie Heights with people who are severely disabled, most who use electric wheelchairs for their mobility. Those who can't use an electric wheelchair, require someone to push their manual wheelchair to where they wish to go. All but a few have severe communication difficulties with some not able to speak at all. Others are deaf, or partially deaf. Because of these disabilities, accessing a church is either extremely difficult, or outright impossible.

My ministry at the Spastic Centre has been to provide expository teaching, and mutual edification through prayer, to those who can't access a church, or perhaps, aren't even welcomed because of the appearance of their disabilities. For many of these people, this is the only time when they have the opportunity for spiritual input, and to meet as Christians.

I pray for this ministry to expand so that it addresses not only people with disabilities, but their carers as well. I also aim to raise the awareness of people with disabilities and their needs in the church, and to encourage and build up other people to be active in such ministries as part of my ministry to people with and without disabilities. **Jason has joined the CCC ministry and will be presenting at the next seminar in Orange.**

CREATING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

AN INFORMATION SEMINAR
encouraging congregations to
minister to and with people with
disabilities.

Next Seminar:
Saturday, 1st November 2003
9:30am to 7pm

St Barnabas Anglican Church
Orange.

\$25 per head

For more information look on
our web site or contact Neville
02 636 26810.

Ask Anges..

Dear Anges

I am writing because I felt your answer to the question regarding the scanning of paid and unpaid workers did not go far enough. (CDP News - Winter 2002)

Having been involved, as a volunteer, with a private institution for people with intellectual disabilities as well as leading a group at my church for the past fourteen years and spending some years working in a group home, I am aware that in the past people with intellectual disability have been abused sexually: physically and emotionally. Christians need to be made aware of this and the enormity of their *duty of care* before God.

With all the current publicity about sexual abuse occurring within the church we need to be seen to do the right thing. The act of signing consent from and being checked at least makes workers pause to consider the seriousness of the commitment they are making.

Yours in our Lord,
Yvonne

Dear Yvonne

*Thank you for your letter. Your experience has demonstrated the importance of the **duty of care** disability service providers and churches have towards people with disabilities. The recent resignation of Dr. Peter Hollingworth as Governor General, over his dealings of sex abuse cases as a church leader, demonstrated that churches are being called to account for how it failed its **duty of care** to vulnerable people within the flock, including children and people with disabilities. The expectation that the community has communicated over the last few weeks is no higher than what God expects of his workers.*

Christian workers (volunteered or paid) have a responsibility before God, to ensure that people in our care are not put in a situations where they may be sexually, physically or emotionally abused. This may mean asking workers to sign a declaration and doing reference checks for paid workers. As you point out the standards required by Christian organisations should be higher than monitory requirements.

Crossroads NSW have developed a "Code of Conduct" for helpers in its groups. The code is significantly higher than the monitory requirement for the care of people with disabilities over 16 years old. This code is available by contacting Crossroads Office.

By ministering to people with disabilities we have a privilege to share a little of their lives. With this privilege comes a huge responsibility to watch out for, and advocate on their behalf if they are unable to speak for themselves. Although most of the people are provided with a high quality of care with professional and caring staff there are still times when people with disabilities are abused or are neglected. The national Disability Services Abuse and Neglect Hotline is an Australia-wide telephone hotline for reporting suspected incidents of abuse and neglect of people with disabilities using government funded services.

To find out more about the service pt to make an allocation call the hotline on 1800 80 052 or loge onto the website www.disabilityhotline.org.

ANGES

Anges is open to any questions or comments about any issue regarding ministering to and with people with disabilities. Feel free to contact Angus via CDP.