

This We Believe

One Body



BY RICK MARRS



Interacting with people who have disabilities can be intimidating, but that's no excuse for the body of Christ!

Severe dementias, like Alzheimer's disease, are among the most debilitating of all disabilities. Pastors often continue to make pastoral visits on parishioners with such severe dementia that they no longer know their family members, let alone their pastor. I and other pastors have sometimes been told by well-meaning family: "Pastor, you don't need to bother with visiting our mother any more. Her Alzheimer's is so bad that she doesn't remember any of us or sometimes even acknowledge we're there." I have often responded with, "I invite you to come with me on my next visit to her." When those family members have attended with me, they have sometimes been shocked to see that their mother or father might still be able to move their lips to repeat the Lord's Prayer with me or join me in softly singing a familiar hymn like "Amazing Grace." Sometimes these adult children have been comforted simply to see their parent's face become more serene when they hear the Apostles' Creed or John 3:16. I then encourage those adult children to continue to read familiar Scripture and sing familiar hymns to their parents on their future visits. Several have told me how gratifying it is to know that they can still connect with their parent's life and spirit despite the dementia.

Our bodies are all "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). In the past few decades, medical research has made us even more aware of how truly the psalmist spoke. The complexity of the brain, neuro-pathways, sense organs ("my reason and all my senses" Luther says in the *Small Catechism*) and internal organs are utterly amazing. But that complexity also reveals how fragile we are. A bike accident, blood clot, random bacteria, or a myriad of other causes can bring about unnumbered types of disabilities in any of us. They

have already caused countless disabilities in millions of our neighbors, all of whom are loved by Christ.

We also learn in Scripture that we are all one body in Jesus Christ, a body made up of many individual members. 1 Cor. 12:18, 20–22 notes: "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose ... As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

Some Christians have had little experience interacting with a fellow Christian who struggles with schizophrenia, a cognitive disability, blindness, or deafness. That lack of experience may lead them to avoid their fellow members of the body. They may fear that they will somehow say or do the wrong thing or at least not be helpful. But many people with disabilities simply want to know that other members of the body of Christ recognize them as fellow members and are willing to take a risk to interact with them. They simply want someone else to mutually encourage them in their faith, to view them as some of those "indispensable members" of the body. Persons with disabilities have had scores of people say the wrong thing to them already. They're still willing to forgive their fellow members for those wrong things, as long as they sense a desire to share the Gospel with them and receive it back as well.

As we do interact with and serve our neighbors who are disabled, we can learn much about their faith in Christ and be mutually encouraged by them and their gifts as well. I have been greatly edified by brothers and sisters in Christ who are blind or deaf. They've shared with me the joys and complications of sharing the Gospel within their cultural groups. My faith has been strengthened by the parishioners

who have told me of their struggles in coping with life and faith after a debilitating stroke. I have learned how important forgiveness is when a woman struggling with mental disorders told me, “Thank you, Pastor, for giving me Communion. I always feel so forgiven after I receive the Lord’s Supper.”

Scripture teaches, and our Lutheran theology emphasizes, that the Holy Spirit is the One who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, despite the fact that individually we all start off spiritually disabled, even dead. God’s Word does not return to Him empty, but accomplishes and succeeds exactly as He intends it to (Is. 55:11). That is true for all of us, but it is good to emphasize this truth for persons with disabilities. Even those with severe disabilities, like Alzheimer’s disease, have taught me that the Holy Spirit is still working in them, that they are still comforted by the same gracious Gospel that I need to hear, and that the Holy Spirit will continue to comfort me into my earthly future through Christ’s Body, the Church, despite whatever disability might befall my fragile body and mind.



People with disabilities long to be connected to the body of Christ. They have gifts and talents to share. Learn more by watching a video at video.lcms.org/archives/417.

