



BY MAGGIE KARNER

# LCMS Disability Task Force

People with disabilities long to be connected to the body of Christ. They have gifts and talents to share. Every pew likely holds someone whose family has, or will experience, a significant physical, mental or developmental challenge. Sometimes those disabilities are apparent, and sometimes they can be hidden. Unfortunately, people with disabilities often feel lonely and isolated, and so do their families.

Jesus wants His Church to have open doors, welcoming all people to worship. But for America's 54 million men, women and children with disabilities, those doors can lead to barriers—barriers of architecture, communication and attitude.

This challenge to the LCMS was identified by a 2004 Synod convention resolution, and in response, a task force was established. Ground-breaking work was accomplished as this early group met from September 2005 until August 2008. They completed many tasks that they reported to the 2007 LCMS Synod convention and also developed specific resources for specialized ministry to those who are blind, deaf or have learning disabilities.

However, funding issues forced the group to abbreviate their work. Fortunately, since then, a start-up \$15,000 Thrivent grant combined with continued support from the Office of National Mission (ONM) has allowed for renewed momentum behind this effort and a new LCMS Disability Task Force has been established to assist the ONM with outreach in this area. The group consists of volunteers who are experts in all the specific disciplines of work with those who have mental, physical, and developmental challenges. In addition, the task force includes representatives from the Lutheran education system and from our seminaries in an effort to increase the scope of outreach.

The re-formed LCMS Disability Task Force is back in full swing and is hard at work developing resources to equip congregations to welcome people with disabilities and their families. Additionally, we seek to increase awareness in all LCMS congregations about the joys and benefits of ministry alongside—with and to—those with disabilities. By determining what resources are needed most by our churches and schools, we hope to equip them to engage confidently in disability ministry.

One of the most important goals of the task force is to identify best practice sites (both in churches and in LCMS schools) that provide successful models of inclusion and Christian respite for those with disabilities and their families. Our goal is to share these best practices with the church at large as an example and a catalyst to increase participation in this vital ministry outreach. By working to create an active network of disabilities ministries and resource organizations, the task force hopes to encourage even more churches and schools to expand into this area of outreach.

The LCMS Disability Task Force gets its motivation and encouragement by remembering that God comes to all of us equally, despite our intellectual, emotional or physical challenges. The Spirit creates faith and animates the entire body of Christ by forgiving our sins and providing spiritual nourishment, no matter what mental or physical challenges we experience in this life. We are all equally in need of His grace. In particular, the Sacraments proclaim loud and clear that our Lord intimately knows the needs of every soul and tangibly comes to us—whatever our daily challenges are—and personally forgives and strengthens the entire body of Christ through these means.