

Affordable Housing for the Mentally Disabled: An Invitation for a Campus Response

By Dawn Clark, Director of Disability Ministries,
College Church in Wheaton

This country was founded, in part, by Christian men and women who were looking for a home—a place of safety; a place where they could build a new community and practice their faith freely. Today there is another group of people who are looking for a home, and I am not speaking of the millions of immigrants in this country. I am referring to men and women who have developmental disabilities, those who are frequently called “mentally retarded.” Their parents are aging and have difficulty caring for their adult children. Adults with developmental disabilities long for some independence. In the state of Illinois, there are not enough group homes to meet the needs and the waiting lists are long. Openings are reserved for adults whose parents are terminally ill or dying. Christian parents are looking for a place that will not only meet the physical needs of their children, but their spiritual needs as well. How do we as Christians respond?

Since there is much talk about diversity on college campuses these days, one answer might be for families, churches and Christian colleges to work together to form group homes near college campuses. Although inclusion and mainstreaming have been the elementary and high school experience of today's college students, there are very few opportunities for college students to interact in a natural setting with adults who have cognitive impairments. In this model, students and adults with developmental disabilities could live and work together and participate in extracurricular activities at the college. Students seeking degrees in higher education would learn the truth that “those parts of the body that seem to be less important are indispensable.” Not only do people with developmental disabilities need us, more importantly, we need them.

God tells us in Luke 14 that we are to invite “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” to eat with us, to be part of our community. These were the people who were marginalized by the society of the day. I believe that God still wants his house full of the people that society often marginalizes. Do we? Jesus cared so much for these people that he says in Matthew 25:40: ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ He calls them family.

Will we like the innkeeper long ago say that there is no room for Christ's family, that people with developmental disabilities just don't fit, that they are better off living with their own kind? Or will we prepare a place, a true home, for those

society has marginalized and in so doing welcome the Lord Jesus into our midst?
The choice is ours.