

Developing Awareness about Persons with Disabilities in Children, Youth or Adults

The following ideas can be used/adapted for use in Children's Christian Education Classes, Children's Moments during Worship, Youth Group/Adult Discussion Groups or Classes. Some ideas can be used as illustrations in sermons or in other presentations.

- **Watch J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* video/CD or the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy** available from your local video store or public library.

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy can be a discussion starter as to how we think, feel and interact with people who have disabilities or those who we think are different from us.

“The setting of the movie, “Middle-Earth” is populated by different “races:” Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, Men, Orcas... Wizards, Ringwraiths and Trolls... During the weeks and months of the perilous journey to return the “one ring to the fire from which it was forged, the Hobbits, Dwarves, Elves and Men were dependent on one another. The abilities and characteristics unique to the people of these different races were needed to ensure success. Members of the Fellowship were very different from one another, and time after time, it was the *differences* among the individuals that were, in fact, strengths! None of the group thought himself superior to the others; none felt sorry for the other because of these differences; and none saw himself as “deficient” in any way, nor wanted to be like the others. What may have appeared as an inequality in size, strength, age, experience, or ability to wield a weapon *did not diminish a person's value*.... The Fellowship included people whose characteristics spanned the gamut: short/tall, playful/serious, timid/bold, novice/experienced, and more. Yet each person was equally valued, equally important. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy reflects independence, inclusion, and community for all...

Maybe just thinking of the word – fellowship – during our daily activities will influence our actions and lead us to take steps to ensure we're in fellowship with people with disabilities and differences. Simultaneously, being in fellowship will enable us to recognize the strengths, abilities, and gifts of others – characteristics which have always been present, but which may have been invisible to our unseeing eyes until now. The gift of fellowship is one we can all give; the gift of fellowship is one we all need.”

Excerpt from *The Gift of Fellowship* by Kathie Snow, c 2002-2004, Revolutionary Common Sense. Used with permission. For a copy of the complete article, contact Kathie at kathie@disabilityisnatural.com. For other excellent articles from Kathie see www.disabilityisnatural.com.

- **Engage in Personal Interactions** with Persons with Disabilities
 - Invite a person from your congregation (or from the community) who has a disability to come to your class/group and ask them to share their life story and engage the class/group in asking questions that would enable them to understand what life has been like for them, what it is like for them to live with their particular disability, what they wish others would know about them, etc. When inviting the person to come to your class, make sure that they feel comfortable sharing

about their life and their disability, and ensure that they need not share anything they feel uncomfortable with, even if a “prying” or inappropriate question is asked. It might be helpful for you to propose several questions to them, or possible topic areas that they might like to cover. Is it more comfortable for them to share their story in a prepared “question and answer” format rather than for them to “make a presentation”? Some people find it helpful to “rehearse” what they would like to share. Model for your class/group hospitality and a respectful interaction with the individual. Do not be over-solicitous in “helping” the individual with a disability – ask them if there is any way that you can be of assistance to them, and help only in ways they ask for.

If you need assistance in finding a speaker in your community who has a disability, investigate community resources such as other churches in your area that have a disability ministry, a local disability advocacy group or non-denominational ministry, *People First*, the ARC, local Braille Center, volunteer coaches with Special Olympics, health or social service professionals in your congregation, or call the PHEWA office at 888-728-7228, extension 5800 for more assistance.

— Invite family members of a person who has a disability and ask them to share their story and how they think their life/lives is impacted by having a family member with a disability. Have them share about the family member with a disability and what that individual is like – their gifts and abilities, as well as any limitations that the disability might bring. What have they learned personally? How does having a family member who had a disability impact their thinking/interactions with others who have disabilities? What do they wish that able-bodied people and people with no family members who have disabilities would know and experience?

Make sure that this family member feels comfortable sharing their story and ensure them that they need not share anything they feel uncomfortable with, even if a “prying or inappropriate question is asked. Again, check to see what style of presentation is most comfortable for them and assist as appropriate. Follow suggestions in above scenario if you need help in finding a family member to speak to your class/group.

— Investigate the possibility of your class/group participating in a local event which includes persons with disabilities, such as Special Olympics, a guide dog training center, volunteering for special programs offered through the local parks and recreation department, or sponsoring a “Celebration for Persons with Disabilities” (see [www.bridgemin.org/Events/Sunday Evening Celebrations/Hosting a Celebration](http://www.bridgemin.org/Events/Sunday_Evening_Celebrations/Hosting_a_Celebration) in your church. Be sure to prepare your class/group for such interaction by talking about Disability Etiquette prior to volunteering (see the Disability Resources for both literature and videos available to assist you in this regard) and to follow-up the event by debriefing your group’s experience.

- **View the video “The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People With Disabilities”** available on loan from the PHEWA office. Contact Terri Gilmore at 888-728-7228, ext. 8100 or by e-mail: tgilmore@ctr.pcusa.org.
- **Put on a “Similarity Awareness” workshop** – See packet article “Disability Awareness vs. Similarity Awareness.”
- **Engage children/youth in being a “peer tutor” or buddy to their peers who have disabilities.** Brainstorm with them various ways they can help (assuming the person with a disability wants assistance) – i.e. pushing a wheelchair, sitting with their friend during class or worship, turning pages in their books, assisting in feeding, etc.

- **Read the children’s story, *Elmer*, by David McKee** (Lothrop, Lee & Shephard Books, NY, 1968) available from your public library.

Elmer the elephant is bright-colored patchwork all over. No wonder the other elephants laugh at him! If he were ordinary elephant color, the others might stop laughing. A comical fable celebrating individuality and diversity.

A person with a disability may feel different from others, or those who don’t have disabilities may feel that a person with a disability is quite different than himself or herself. Discuss what we share in common as human beings. Discuss the uniqueness of each person – our different personalities, gifts and abilities. Isn’t it wonderful that we aren’t all the same? What a boring world that would be! Highlight that even though a person has a disabling condition (i.e. have difficulty communicating, not being able to see, etc.), that that condition adds to their uniqueness and doesn’t mean that they don’t have marvelous gifts and abilities like the rest of us. Those gifts and abilities may just be more hidden from plain sight and require a closer look. As we spend time together and get to know the individual person, we will see their unique abilities and gifts. Our diversity is something to celebrate!

- **Read the children’s story, *The Missing Piece*, by Shel Silverstein** (Harper Collins, NY, 1976) available from your public library

This “piece” was not happy. Why? What were some of the great things that happened to the piece while looking for the missing piece? What made it the best time of all? When it found the piece that seemed to be just right, was life ideal then? What adventures did it then miss out on? What did it discover?

Have you ever discovered yourself searching for something you felt was lacking in your life, only to find it and then realize that you still were not happy or that life still wasn’t perfect?

Do you think that a person who has a disability might ever feel incomplete or that they were missing a part of themselves because they have a disabling condition? What lessons might they learn from reading this story?

Do you think that able-bodied people feel that persons with disabilities are “missing an important piece” and are not as valuable members of society because of this? How does *The Missing Piece* show that this way of thinking is not true? Giftedness can be found in unexpected places!

- **Bible Studies teaching about Jesus’ example**

Think about the wealth of stories in the Gospels where Jesus interacts with a person who has a disability. He treated persons with disabilities (as well as all people) with respect, dignity, unconditional love and compassion. Some examples are:

— **Bartimaeus**, a man who was blind.

Bartimaeus called out to Jesus and was hushed and rebuked by the crowd for doing so. Bartimaeus persisted in trying to get Jesus’ attention. Jesus stopped, told the crowd to bring Bartimaeus to him and inquired about what Bartimaeus wanted for him to do. In response to Bartimaeus’ request, Jesus restored his sight. Jesus modeled welcoming a person with a disability; ignoring what others thought about the man being unworthy to be singled out for personal attention; bringing the man out of his isolation; engaging others in bringing the person to him (i.e. encouraging

others to be welcoming and inclusive); and, asking how he might be of assistance – not assuming what the man wanted. **Mark 10:46-52**

— **A man at the pool at Bethesda**, a man who was unable to walk for 38 years. Jesus noticed the man, struck up a conversation with him, asked him if he wanted help and then healed the paralyzing condition. Jesus modeled intentionally going to places where persons with disabilities tended to hang out; taking time to be with an individual with a disability; noticing the individual and engaging in a personal conversation with him; showing a genuine interest in getting to know the person; seeing the person and not just their disability; and, asking permission before helping the individual – not assuming what the person wants. **John 5:1-9**

— **Man with paralysis and his friends**

Jesus was preaching in Capernaum and a large crowd had gathered, the room being filled to capacity. Four friends brought their friend who was paralyzed to Jesus, lowering him through the roof. In response to the friends' faith, Jesus forgave the man for his sin and healed him. That the friends went to extraordinary measures for their friend highlights the depth of their relationship with their friend, their offering practical assistance and the persistence which made a difference for their friend, as well as the role that they played in introducing their friend to Jesus. The friends model finding a way for a person with a disability to know Jesus (get to church). **Mark 2:1-12**

~ Donna Whitmore