

VARIOUS GIFTS - ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT

The Gift of Stewardship: John Greenwald (part 1 of 4)

When John was a college student, he was accosted on the campus of his university by a member of a “Christian” organization. He was told that his disability, cerebral palsy, was God’s punishment for his sins and that if he had enough faith, he could be healed! John had grown up in the church but, during his college years, he did not find the church a welcoming community. John says that he returned to the church “on a dare.” He remembers, “muttering,” to himself, “I’ve got to find a church.” After weeks of listening to John’s frustration, his personal care assistant challenged him, “Do something about it.”

John describes his finding Westminster Church, Minneapolis, MN as “magical” and says that he knew immediately that Westminster was the right church for him. According to John, there are churches that “get it” and churches that don’t. “Westminster,” he says, “is the safest place I have.”

John has found numerous ways to use his gifts. Every Sunday morning he leads the choir in his wheelchair as it processes into the sanctuary. Choir members describe him as having a “beautiful tenor voice” and he has found the tenor section a “real community.” When John volunteered for the choir, he discovered that the choir loft was not accessible. Lois Hietala, a long time advocate for persons with disabilities, worked with John and the Board of Trustees to plan accessible space for John’s chair.

John is using his time and talent in other ways. On Wednesday afternoons, he helps set up the church supper that precedes choir rehearsals and adult education classes. In addition, he is one of the lay readers who assists in the Sunday worship.

John’s feelings about his church and his relationship to it were shown recently in a gift he made. In 2005 Westminster pledged to support an HIV/AIDS worker in Africa for five years. When the project was announced, John, who works two days a week, was the first in the congregation to present a gift. John said that the appeal touched his heart deeply because “I know how it feels to be different.”

Like other people who live with disabilities, John faces challenges laid on him by a society that either blames him for his disability or views him as heroic because of the barriers he faces every day. To the latter he says, “I’m no saint; I’m just doing what I have to do.”

John sums up his relationship to the church by saying, “I like being asked (to serve) because it helps me figure out what my gifts are.” When asked what stewardship means to him, he answered, “That’s how I view my own personal faith, as very holistic.” Like other people with disabilities, John says, “I am more than my disability. It’s not all of who I am.” When congregations can see beyond the disability, they can discover the rich gifts people with disabilities bring to the service of God.