

#### Why are advocates needed?

People with disabilities and their families often experience obstacles to participating in congregational life that are not obvious to the casual observer. They are often reluctant to call attention to themselves or ask for what they may perceive as special favors. The disability may even be a source of embarrassment or shame. In any case, **people living with the daily realities of a disability may grow weary of speaking up for accommodations** that will enable them to participate fully in community life.

Moreover, many causes and concerns compete for the attention of contemporary church congregations. Among these important concerns, the supports that enable people with disabilities to participate in congregational life are vulnerable to being overlooked, especially if no one is assigned responsibility to think about them. This tendency to overlook may be compounded because **disability issues cut across every aspect of congregational life**; thus, disability concerns can be difficult to assign neatly to an existing commission or committee. As a result, even if one aspect of disability participation receives attention, others may be neglected.

Disabilities advocates **blessed by their congregation** benefit the entire faith community by assuring that the voices of persons with disabilities and their unique perspectives are heard in congregational conversations. The body of Christ is incomplete without the full participation of people with disabilities. Indeed, Jesus suggested that restoring people with disabilities to a saving faith community was **a sign for recognizing the presence of the Messiah**: "Go and tell...what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:4-5).

#### Commissioning an advocate

A **Congregational Disabilities Advocate** will be most effective when the congregation blesses a particular person (or group) for the role and assigns a place of accountability and support within the unique structure of a congregation. Depending on the congregation, this might mean:

- Designating a pastoral staff person or elder and adding advocacy to the job description
- Appointing a lay Disabilities Advocate who advises and reports to the pastor or elder group
- Designating someone from an existing commission or committee to advocate broadly for disability concerns
- Commissioning a small group or task force to lead the congregation in disabilities advocacy

- Linking disabilities advocacy to an existing role such as mutual aid advocate, deacon, or Stephen minister

An effective advocate will be someone who cares about inclusion of people with disabilities. Be cautious about assuming that a person with a disability or their family member is the logical choice. **Those most affected by disability may well need others to speak up on their behalf.** Self-advocacy is possible, but will be most effective when given significant support and empowerment. Without such support, appointing a person with a disability or their family member as advocate could add to the individual's burden. Commissioning the advocate in the context of worship or another public setting invites others to support the advocate through prayer and action. Blessing an advocate may be the beginning of a journey of growth and ministry for this individual that comes from having one's unique gifts, insights, and perspectives recognized (see story below).

#### ADNet can help

When a congregation informs ADNet about its Disabilities Advocate, the advocate will benefit from ADNet's abundant resources. **ADNet's Congregational Accessibility Network** offers tools designed to help an advocate just getting started, including its suggested Study Process, Individual and Family Needs Questionnaire, Congregational Assessment Survey, and links to a wide array of information and resources. Your congregation can bless others in turn when your Disabilities Advocate shares with ADNet what you are learning about including people with disabilities.

*By Christine Guth, ADNet Program Associate*

#### Additional Resources

Congregational Accessibility Network (CAN): [www.accessibilitynetwork.net](http://www.accessibilitynetwork.net).

Available at [www.adnetonline.org/advocacy](http://www.adnetonline.org/advocacy):

- "Responsibilities of a Disabilities Advocate"
- "Blessed for Disabilities Advocacy," a personal story of empowerment by Christine Guth
- "Disabilities Advocacy in All Aspects of Church Life" (a sampling of ways a Disabilities Advocate might interact with a congregation)

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