

# OUT OF MIND

A single mother breaks her leg in a bicycle accident, and the church has things covered. (The women's auxiliary delivers meals until the cast is off; the deacons make sure the victim gets a ride to church events.) A businessman undergoes open-heart surgery, and the church responds with loving care. (The pastor makes hospital visits and offers prayer; a Sunday school class sends off a handmade card.) These are times of vulnerability and crisis when the body of Christ typically rallies and cares for those in its community.

But what about when a person's mind is broken? A baby is born with Down syndrome or cerebral palsy. A young woman survives a car crash with injuries that leave her brain impaired. A teenage boy's erratic behavior leads to a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. A young father begins to hear voices, and the doctors suspect schizophrenia. A professor can't shake her depression and considers suicide.

Is the church good at rallying around those whose minds are subject to deformity, damage, or disease? Do we meet this kind of brokenness with love and protection, joy and embrace?

Sadly, history reveals that we reach out neither often nor

well to those who suffer from troubled or challenged minds. And yet Jesus did. If we seek to follow Christ in all things, we will follow him—courageously and joyfully—in this

as well, drawing in these children of God who are so often consigned to the margins of society, to halfway houses and subway stations, to loveless institutions or weary families who lack the resources (emotional or physical) to care for them sufficiently.

Although many differences exist between those who live with mental illness and those who live with intellectual disabilities, both groups suffer from stigma, isolation, and misunderstanding. The stories and challenges that follow constitute a cry to rouse the church from its indifference and begin to recognize these people in our community, people who are yearning for the body of Christ to acknowledge, befriend, love, and learn from them. The works of art that grace these pages were all created by persons suffering from either

mental illness or cognitive disability. Will we awaken to the gifts and needs of the least of these, our brothers and sisters, Christ-in-disguise?



# OUT OF SIGHT

# “There Are No Retarded People in St. Louis”

BY JEFF MCNAIR

“There are no retarded people in St. Louis,” my brother Scott once told me. He’d been living in that city for six years, and neither his work life nor his church life had ever brought him into contact with anyone with a cognitive disability—thus the apparent logic of his conclusion.

As a member of the upper echelons of corporate America, Scott might not expect to encounter many people with mental retardation in his office or boardroom. At church, however, one would hope for a different story. Surely there at the foot of the Cross, where all are welcome and equal in God’s sight, Scott would come into contact with those of God’s children who deal with cognitive disabilities. Why had he never met any?

Amazingly a majority of Christians, although claiming to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, do not see the need to include persons with disability in their worship and other activities. Jesus, on the other hand, was consistently in contact with people who were dealing with disability, and his followers included many who had recently been healed of disability. He was emphatically drawn to persons with disabilities and often located them in a crowd. The Pharisees recognized this and tried to use it to their advantage; they were so sure of Jesus’ sensitivity to persons with disability that they planted a man with a withered hand in a crowd on the Sabbath, knowing that Jesus would see him, heal him, and thus invite a controversy on which they could capitalize.

But the church today has a regrettably distorted view of disability. At times it seems the church doesn’t recognize disabilities, or the people affected by them, anywhere. As a



result, Christians like my brother don’t come across people with mental retardation within the confines of their churches. At other times it appears that when we do recognize disability in a person, we see the disability only and not the person.

We would think it odd if we rarely saw someone of a particular ethnicity in the church, particularly if that ethnicity was represented in the community. We might suspect discrimination on behalf of the church, or wonder if the ethnic minority found something offensive in the church. But we don’t seem to ask ourselves these questions in regard to persons with intellectual disabilities. They are not represented in our churches, but we do not miss them. Perhaps, as my brother surmised, there really aren’t any retarded people in our communities.

Yet according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 8.8 million persons with cognitive disabilities are living in the United States today. At around 3 percent of the population, their numbers are similar to that of the homosexual community. Unlike the homosexual community, however, persons with cognitive disabilities remain a hidden minority, lacking both the intellectual and the financial resources to make themselves heard.

**Above:** “Blue Eyes/Disco Dance” by Sheila Mann (courtesy of Achievement through the Arts)

**Opposite:** “Spirit Dance” by Kathy (courtesy of Naemi.org)

People with cognitive disabilities are indeed present in our communities and, in my experience (both professionally as a professor of special education and personally as a friend to persons with cognitive disabilities), they are eager to participate in the life of the local church. But they are acutely underrepresented in the church. What does their absence imply?

In reality, it is often Christians themselves and their churches that are “disabled” in their ability to engage with persons with cognitive disabilities. When we claim to be agents of Jesus and yet fail to interact lovingly with a person with disability, we misrepresent the God we serve. We pervert our true calling and expose ourselves as the ones that are truly disabled.

## “I’m Loved Here” *Church Under the Bridge* *embraces persons with mental illness and other social outcasts*

BY JIMMY DORRELL

She sat on the bus bench, huddled behind the plastic wall to cut the cold wind. No one was around, but from my car at the red light I watched her babbling incessantly to “someone” who was clearly there in her world. With varying emotions, she got angry, then childish, then seemingly “normal.” Who really knows what the voices were saying to her? More importantly, who *cares*?

Serious mental illness is a type of leprosy in our culture. Stared at and even ridiculed, many of these men and women walk alone on the streets of every city in our nation, looking over their shoulders and fearing confrontation. They wander about day in and day out, often never speaking to anyone except in response to the voices they hear.

Others are protected by family and loved ones who provide shelter and safety and daily doses of medication. But even these caregivers are often overwhelmed and perplexed about how to provide adequate care, and many become so drained that they require outside support themselves.

Although millions of persons suffer from mental challenges, “serious mental illness” (SMI) is the term for those in which psychosis, a medical term for some loss of reality, affects accurate views and responses to the everyday world. Delusion, hallucination, mania, extreme withdrawal, and other acutely abnormal behavior patterns are some of the effects common in those suffering from SMI. Schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, clinical depression, ADHD, eating and anxiety disorders, self-injury, and personality disorder are some of the more common diagnoses. Recent research suggests that 22 percent of Americans had a diagnosable mental illness

in 2001 and 5 percent had a “major mental illness” (from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Household Survey on Drug Abuse).

Yet less than one-half of those struggling receive treatment or counseling—a growing trend due to budget changes. In the 1980s funding and access to mental health hospitals and professionals were severely cut. Many of those formerly receiving acute care were subsequently released from mental health facilities and ended up on the streets of cities across our nation. Statistics of the chronic homeless population suggest that one-third of the homeless suffer from serious mental illness. With the addition of substance abuse, used by some as a coping mechanism for the “voices” and anxiety they experience, these “dually diagnosed” individuals are the least served members of the U.S. homeless population. They walk the streets with virtually no assistance or hope of relief.

Why is it that the truly “least of these”—those who are most in need—are so often ignored by the Christian community? Some believers consider these disorders demonic and reprobate, but most Christians understand that medication, consistent and loving relationships, and help with basic needs are required to care for these people. While many Christians believe that the tax dollars paid to state providers should cover the needs of the mentally ill population, we must recognize that the role of the church is critical for healing and hope.

Admittedly, many congregations lack the expertise to diagnose and adequately care for people suffering from mental illness, but churches can get involved and lend support in

Our worship environments today are often so fragile and brittle, so professional and sterile, so socially demanding that little or no room exists for the kind of people Jesus chose to focus on. Those who clap off rhythm, speak a little too loudly in their enthusiasm, stand a little too long after a song, lack perfect hygiene, or even look unusual are just not desired in such a setting. Those who are unable to memorize the

Nicene Creed or express their faith using the appropriate Christian lingo are at best only grudgingly admitted.

We fear that people with cognitive disabilities will disrupt our established way of doing things and interfere with the comfortable atmosphere of our church. We imagine how much effort it would take to include them or how much money it  
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a variety of other ways. They can assist professionals who desperately need additional sources of support. They can advocate the use of more tax dollars to augment dwindling pools of funding at both the state and national levels. They can provide emotional support to caregivers who are spiritually and emotionally exhausted from the demands of working with persons with SMI. And they can help offer new sources of treatment and counseling for the thousands who qualify for government subsidies but never receive them.

But perhaps most importantly, congregations can choose to get involved personally. Including and building friendships with those who suffer from SMI is a fundamental Christian responsibility—and privilege. Many of the fears and presuppositions held by congregants will be dispelled through the kindling of these relationships. Even as occasional abnormal behavior occurs in group settings, loving congregations will grow in their capacity to accept such interruptions as a healthy sign of a caring church that has made room for all of God's people.

### What this looks like “under the bridge”

Anyone who has attended Church Under the Bridge (CUB) in Waco, Tex., will tell you that it is an unusual experience. Aside from the noise of interstate traffic roaring overhead and the weather-colored particularities of an outdoor worship service, our congregants include every sort of person imaginable: young and old, homeless and well-heeled, high school dropouts and seminary students, punks and housewives, addicts and pastors, saints and sinners of every race. And in the mix are numerous persons with serious mental illness. Some cling tightly to their sleeping bags and few possessions, remaining isolated from the worship, awaiting the hot meal served at 10:30 a.m. But others are helpful and engaged as full participants in worship and leadership.

Kenneth, a Vietnam War vet with post-traumatic stress disorder, calls himself “certified crazy” based on his VA diagnosis. But at CUB he is called “head deacon” and is in charge of passing out the bulletins. Kenneth first came to us 10 years ago, after being refused entrance to two other churches soon

after his acceptance of Christ. As a homeless man, his unkempt appearance, dirty clothes, body odor, and untrimmed beard repulsed others. Today, Kenneth writes letters to prisoners, assists folks in need, and helps with Mission Waco's Poverty Simulation, a weekend program during which economically privileged Christians experience poverty firsthand by struggling on the streets and in the lower income neighborhoods of Waco. “I'm loved here,” Kenneth says with a smile.

Patrick's love, if not his gift, is music. Diagnosed with a serious mental disorder and living in a group home, he still wants to be on the worship team at CUB. So each week, playing an unplugged electric guitar, he strolls the gravel aisles of the church, strumming and greeting folks as he goes. It would be hard to imagine worship without his cheerful involvement.

Freddy and Helen occasionally sing “specials” at the church. A mentally retarded married couple, their smiling countenances are contagious.

Others are less front stage. Robert, a schizophrenic homeless man, helps set up chairs and tables. Michael, whose emotional immaturity leaves him socially disabled in most settings, visits with Baylor students in the back, sensing their acceptance of him. A new woman pushes her baby stroller with only a toy doll on board. Still others sip hot coffee at the fringes, leaning on one of the pillars of the bridge. But even they know they are welcome.

After 12 years of being in church together, most congregants will tell you that the joy and fellowship of worshipping with persons with SMI is what makes the Christian fellowship here so genuine. “God is always reminding me how foolish I am in all my ‘wisdom,’” says one member. “And it's never dull here!” ■

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# The Kingdom at the Bottom of the Hill

*The rewards of downward mobility* BY JONATHAN KOPKE

Our adult Sunday school class was right in the middle of a discussion about all those worldly trappings of success that we as Christians know to be hollow.

“Was Jesus a ‘player?’” Our new visitor blurted out the question. Taken aback, some of us attempted to answer the question reasonably, while gently redirecting the discussion back to the topic at hand.

“Well, what’d they kill him for anyway?” she demanded. “That Jesus, he must just be a legend in heaven,” she concluded.

Again we worked our way back to the discussion of worldly trappings. This was familiar territory for me. As a facilitator of my former church’s stewardship committee, I’d lost count of how many classes I’d taught on cultivating a Christ-centered financial lifestyle. I knew the list by heart. That morning I was ready to renounce—once again, for the sake of the gospel—all kinds of luxuries I didn’t have.

And our visitor, as it turned out, was just like me—ready to give up things she didn’t have. Her list of hollow trappings, however, weren’t at all the ones I’d heard before. “Safety,” she volunteered. “Privacy. Control. Security. Respect.”

Her words hit my heart dead center. “Lord, you’ve done it again,” I thought to myself. “Idols that I’m still coddling after 16 years of study, you’ve fingered in 10 seconds through a woman from a group home.”

This kind of thing seems to happen to me a lot lately. I used to be a comfortable member of one of the most prominent evangelical churches in the country, literally at the top of the hill in our part of the city. But then one Sunday, I visited an inner-city church at the bottom of the hill, and I didn’t escape with my life intact. I began to feel called to be part of this fellowship—and not because I heard



*Untitled by Lucia Ballester (courtesy of Naemi.org)*

celestial voices; I found I actually liked it better than the prominent church.

Of course, with change there is loss, and with loss there is grief. I may never again be part of a hilltop congregation that can pull together \$60,000 on a single Sunday to build a house for a mission doctor in Honduras. But in my new church at the bottom of the hill, I have had the opportunity to witness with my own eyes a street drifter go up to the offering plate and drop in his last 17 cents. How often do you get to see someone give away his entire worldly fortune in a single act?

I’ve left behind the Christmas concerts where spectacular pyrotechnics required us to run fat cables into the sanctuary from a diesel generator in the back lot. But somehow, it seemed more authentic celebrating Christ’s stable birth last year at the bottom of the hill, where the donkey got pulled back into position by his flannel tail, and where I heard somebody’s mother whispering, “I wore that same old star costume when I was a kid.”

I’m no longer part of a church that publishes its own literary magazine. But I’ve shared a pew with a troubled woman who scrawled out a poignant poem that began, “Sin is a thing with scales that coils in my soul...”

I’ve deserted the friends of a lifetime. But at our covered-dish dinners at the bottom of the hill—as we join hands to pray in a circle that’s black and white, affluent and poor, blue collar and white collar, educated and uneducated, able-bodied and crippled, sane and not-so-sane—I’ve realized that more than ever before in my life, the kingdom of God is quite literally “at hand.” ■

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might take to serve them. We imagine that others will be put off by their social deficiencies. Our imaginations cause us to fear for our children, our time, our comfort, our resources. In the end, we thank God that there are no retarded people in St. Louis, or Los Angeles, or Urbana, or Cinnaminson. Our imaginations are truly the church's biggest problem (for more on this, see my essay, "The Limits of Our Practices," in John Swinton's *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology* [Haworth Press, 2005]).

Yet imagined inconveniences do not hamper our efforts to go and tell those around the world about salvation through Christ. We have the 10/40 window, short-term missions trips, and extensive campaigns to support missionaries around the world—as we should. We scour the earth for "hidden peoples" that we might share the gospel with them in their own language. Yet at the same time there are thousands of persons

in our communities, many of whom are unchurched, who are just waiting for someone to invite them to church. They *want* to go to church. They want to go to *your* church! They are literally waiting at home on Sunday mornings for you to go several blocks out of your way to pick them up.

Change requires a softening of the church, beginning with the church leadership. We must expand our definition of normal and acceptable. We need to recognize that people with disability are much more similar to the rest of us than dissimilar. But this understanding will only come through exposure to and relationships with persons with disability. As with any stereotype that needs to be overcome, when we get to know persons with mental retardation, the more "normal" and the less threatening they become to us.

How does one get to know a person with disability? My brother figured it out. By asking around, he discovered a group home down the street from where he lived and invited a few guys over for a barbecue. They had an enjoyable time visiting



*Untitled by Lucia Ballester (courtesy of Naemi.org)*



together. He was surprised to find that the men could do yard work, and in fact enjoyed doing it. This is no surprise to friends of adults with mental disabilities. When service is asked of most adults with cognitive disability, often the only question from them is, “When will you pick me up?” When the church learns to fully embrace persons with cognitive disabilities, we will be delighted as we discover their various gifts—of which cheerful service is one of their strongest.

What is involved in including persons with cognitive disability in your church? It isn’t rocket science. Provide a ride to church as regularly as you can. Call someone every couple of weeks to talk about the weather, sports, or politics. Take

*“Looking Beyond” by Dorie Shahler (courtesy of Naemi.org)*

# Meeting Jesus at the Well

BY AMY DURKEE

Joel Pulis didn’t set out to found a church for people with mental illness; it just worked out that way.

After college, Pulis returned to his middle-class, predominantly white home church in north Dallas to serve in youth ministry. In his three years there he had many encounters with low-income neighbors, most of whom would come in with physical needs, but many of whom intimated their spiritual needs as well. “I wanted to invite them to our church,” says Pulis, “but I knew they wouldn’t feel at home there.”

Although Cliff Temple Baptist is a welcoming church, he explains, the racial and socio-economic gaps between the two groups were significant. Add to the equation struggles with serious mental illness and the disparity seemed too much to overcome.

So he started visiting the boarding houses in Cliff Temple’s neighborhood and befriending the residents. Gradually he got a glimpse into the reality of their lives: poverty that required them to survive on federal assistance (about \$550 per month);

isolation born of virtually no contact with their families; and illness in the form of a diagnosable mental disorder such as schizophrenia or major depression, along with the stigma that accompanies such disorders.

Pulis’ ministry of advocacy and pastoral visitation soon grew to include a weekly meal and church service for persons with mental illness. No longer simply an outreach of Cliff Temple, the Well Community, as it is now called, became a church of its own.

Now in its third year, the Well Community is like most churches: Members worship together, support each other, and participate in the service in meaningful ways. Vivian writes notes to church members who miss a service. Jasmine sings her own songs for the congregation. And Juan joins the rhythm section most weeks—his instrument a set of jingling keys. The congregation is interracial and intergenerational, cutting across culture and class lines.

An average of 80 people gather on Saturday nights, a time chosen to accommodate those whose medications cause morning drowsiness. Services are highly interactive, and most songs include hand motions to get people moving. As for sermons, Pulis explains, “A story-telling method of teaching is a better way of engaging them. The point-by-point approach doesn’t work well.”

“When we started, I just knew there were people not being touched. I knew my purpose was to find people not being connected with. Slowly, God focused us on people with mental illness. Following God led us to methods (like friendship and building community) that we later discovered to be the ones recommended in mental health literature.”

someone out to McDonalds every once in a while—a big deal for someone on a fixed income. Invite someone over for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I was once shocked to learn that a woman I know with developmental disability hadn't received a Christmas present for many years. Although her family lived nearby, they didn't care about her. Ever since that discovery, this woman has spent Christmas with our family and delights in making several trips to the car at the end of the day to carry home her gifts.

Through these types of involvement, persons with disability become known to our children and to our family. They also become known to those around us. Our involvement causes others to wonder what they might do to reach out, whom they might assist. Perhaps someone steps forward

to hold a class for adults with intellectual disabilities or volunteers to be a "buddy" who accompanies a person to an adult Sunday school class or Bible study. Perhaps a social event is planned. If these requirements seem simplistic, it is because what is required to come alongside the people with mental retardation is really very simple: kindness, camaraderie, consistency.

People with mental disabilities face enormous challenges. The President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities reports the following figures from the year 2002:

- Approximately 90 percent of adults with intellectual disabilities were not employed.
- Less than 1 percent of persons with intellectual

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As for mental illness, Pulis says, "It's a spectrum. We're all ill in some ways, but some of us have the support and resources we need to deal with our illness. With people who don't have the support of family and community, I can see where mental illness would get the best of them."

Pulis notes that his congregants can't hide their weaknesses the way most of us can, and he's grateful for that. "I had to ask a man in our church to leave the other day. He was making racial slurs and cussing. It's his self-righteousness. He's unable to see the sin and evil in himself. That's in every church, but in our church it's right out there where we can deal with it." Through this, Pulis says, he's learning lessons applicable to the larger church. "I'm learning about how the church can truly be the hospital where people share their wounds and are healed."

"I dream of a time when we'll all worship together," he says, "but right now, I just don't want these folks to be hurt." He's too familiar with the rejection many have experienced in churches in the past. Still, Pulis works to break down the stigma of mental illness so that a more integrated church may one day become a reality.

He's already seen encouraging changes. When the Well Community first started meeting in Cliff Temple's facilities, Cliff Temple members were uneasy. Now, after three years of positive experiences, Pulis says, "They don't want us to leave!"

And on Saturday nights, teen and adult volunteers from several area churches prepare and serve dinner to the congrega-

tion. The more timid volunteers stay in the kitchen, while others sit at the circular dining tables with church members to talk or pray. "Saturday volunteers are now starting to come back for other activities during the week," says Pulis. He mentions one teen volunteer who is now a pen pal of a church member. "She has moved from serving from afar to being right there," he triumphs.

Pulis hopes more Christians will take a step in this direction. "It's not about offering professional services," he insists. "It's about friendship. Find out who the people are in your area, visit them, and see where it leads." ■

*Amy Durkee is a freelance writer who contributes regularly to PRISM.*



*People suffering from mental illness find a warm and welcoming church home at The Well.*

**“There Are No Retarded People in St. Louis,”**

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- disabilities owned their own home.
- 26 percent of youth with intellectual disabilities dropped out of school.
- Less than 15 percent participated in post-secondary education.
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) were a major source of income for people with intellectual disabilities.
- At least 50,000 people with intellectual disabilities were on waiting lists for Medicaid waiver services for individual and family supports.
- Over 700,000 people with intellectual disabilities lived with parents aged 60 or older.

*(From “A Charge We Have to Keep: A Road Map to Personal and Economic Freedom for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in the 21st Century—2004”)*

The report goes on to say, “These dismal statistics describe a situation that would clearly be unacceptable for any group of people in this great nation in the 21st century. Applied to such a significant portion of the population, they are simply intolerable and must be improved.”

Imagine the difference a church could make in these lives if we made it a priority to befriend persons with disabilities. We should note that although these statistics represent the many challenges particular to persons with disability, most of these persons do not see themselves as having a poor quality of life. The fact that services are limited and need to be improved and expanded suggests not that their lives are not worth living but rather that our society at large does not value persons with disability.

Then there are the families of persons with disability. Many families no longer are able or want to go to church because of the treatment they have received there. Some are actually told, “There is no place for you at this church” (see “Letters to a Disabled Church” in *Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God’s Children* by Brett Webb-Mitchell [United Church Press, 1997]). Others are wounded by the insistence that their disability was caused by their own sin or lack of faith.

Many neighborhood associations become quite vocal in opposing group homes or other facilities that serve people with mental disabilities, not wanting “that kind” of residence in their midst. If not the church, who will speak up for those



*“Mujer con Flores” by Mario Mesa (courtesy of Naemi.org)*

who often don’t even know they are experiencing discrimination? Who will invite them into faith in a God who says that all persons—yes, even persons with disabilities—are created in God’s image?

In Jeremiah 22:16 God refers to King Josiah, saying, “He used to examine the cases of the poor and needy, then all went well. Is not that what it means to know me?” It is my prayer that we will someday look back upon the church’s sin of exclusion of persons with cognitive disability with the same repentance we feel over racial and other forms of discrimination which have too often characterized the church. The church’s foundational discrimination against persons with disability is a serious problem that we neglect to address at our own peril. ■

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