

Making Room at the Table

by Ginny Thornburgh

The superb consultation “Making Room at the Table: Opportunities in Theological Education for People with Disabilities” (see article on page 26) confirmed my belief that Princeton Theological Seminary is committed to being a place of welcome and hospitality for people with disabilities and a place of theological and practical education about issues of disability.

As the mother of an adult son with mental retardation, I am aware that most religious leaders have had little opportunity during their seminary education to appreciate that my son, Peter, is a thoroughly enjoyable faith-filled man who brings an array of talents to his church. I also know, however, that several ministers and Christian educators have been moved by Peter’s energetic witness and have taken the time to get to know his unique gifts and needs. They have offered him leadership responsibilities such as filling the water glass at the pulpit, straightening the pew racks after services, being a shepherd in the Christmas pageant, laying out one-by-one the refreshment cups which are later filled with juice, and greeting folks at the door as they arrive.

What motivated these religious leaders? Did their seminary training help them learn how to accommodate someone like Peter, or did they figure it out on their own? In addition, how did they come to internalize the understanding that Peter is a valid reflection of the Almighty who has a right to a full life of faith?

Questions abound as I think about the possible impact of the “Making Room at the Table” consultation on the PTS community:

- How do we infuse our PTS curriculum with information, insight, and hands-on experiences so that people with disabilities are perceived as an addition to any church or seminary rather than an obligation or a “problem to be solved”?
- How do we develop a sound and useful theology that does not regard Peter’s disability or any disability as a sign of sin or of inadequate faith?
- At PTS, how do we present disability as part of the fabric of life that can come to any one of us at any time and can be best accommodated by the gift of friendship?
- How do we encourage PTS faculty, staff, and students to confront rather than avoid tough spiritual, social justice, and ethical issues surrounding disabilities, such as abortion and assisted suicide?
- How do we engage the entire Seminary community so that recruiting qualified students with disabilities becomes as important as recruiting qualified students on the basis of gender or of race?
- How do we nurture a culture within PTS that honors and addresses concerns raised by someone with disability rather than regarding that person as a nuisance or troublemaker?
- In short, how do we make befriending and accommodating people with disabilities a priority at PTS and in the church universal?

We are blessed at Princeton Seminary to have a new president, Dr. Iain Torrance, for whom disability issues are deeply important. We must join with him and work in a deliberate way to transform the academic experience, culture, and internship opportunities available at the Seminary so that our graduates are confident in their ability to serve and to serve *with* children and adults with physical, sensory, psychiatric, and intellectual disabilities in their congregations and communities.

Peter’s church has accepted our son and sees him as an able and contributing member. This spring, following weeks of one-on-one meetings with his pastor, Peter was confirmed—a day of joy for his family and his church. Peter delivered his confession of faith while his teary-eyed parents looked on with pride and awe: “My name is Peter Thornburgh. I am happy in my church. I am happy to have Jesus in my heart.”

It is my hope that PTS graduates will find joy in ministering to and with Peter and his many colleagues, young and old, with a wide variety of disabilities. Peter Thornburgh is absolutely sure that he is loved by Jesus and loved by God. I believe we in the Seminary community and in the churches of this nation have a lot to learn from his profoundly uncluttered faith. ■



Photo: Eric Rasmussen

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