**Welcoming the Most Marginalized**

*By Diane Talbot-Schoenhoff, Director of Communications and Outreach at The Raw Carrot Soup Enterprise*

Amanda was a friendly 13-yearold who loved to play with kids and volunteer in the church nursery. She was loyal, punctual and reliable. She also had a mild intellectual disability and couldn’t read past a Grade 3 level. It seemed she was headed straight into the social services system like her parents.

When Amanda was completing high school, a concerned adult mentor at church, Rebecca, inquired on her behalf about an employment training agency that offered job readiness skills. Rebecca drove Amanda to the program twice a week for six months. At the end of the program, Amanda had three interviews, but no job materialized.

There were a number of people like Amanda at the church—people who were marginalized because of intellectual or mental health challenges, or physical differences— some who had to access the church benevolent fund to make ends meet. While they had the potential and expressed a desire to work, they faced multiple employment barriers in the traditional workplace. Moved by compassion, Rebecca and Colleen created a social enterprise out of the church kitchen to fill the employment gaps.

**Breaking down employment barriers**

Previously supported by a bequest from The Presbyterian Church in Canada, The Raw Carrot Soup Enterprise is breaking down employment barriers by providing permanent, part-time jobs for people with disAbilities. The organization believes every person who wants to work should have the opportunity for a “hand up,” instead of only a handout in life. It partners with churches and nonprofits across Ontario to create delicious, handcrafted gourmet soups that are sold in local stores, markets and online.

Imagine living your entire life on the fringe of society because of your differences—not feeling accepted in schools, restaurants, workplaces and even in some churches. Sadly, that’s the reality for many people with disabilities. “In their lives, some have been mocked because of their ‘disabilities’ or made to feel they aren’t good enough, or have nothing to offer,” said Jennifer Klassen, The Raw Carrot, Kitchener.

The global pandemic compounded these challenges. Fear of illness, loss of income and social isolation amplified their barriers. But, for The Raw Carrot staff, the pandemic brought a renewed sense of significance and belonging. “Because of the pandemic, they were told that they are essential workers (supporting food manufacturing) so were able to work. Can you imagine what that message can do for someone?” said Klassen.

The Canadian Survey on Disability reports that 22% of Canadians aged 15 and older have a disability, while 50% of people who are food insecure have a disability. According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, 86% of Canadians reported Canada is doing a poor job promoting the rights of people with disabilities.

While Canada is one of the world’s wealthiest countries, millions live on the margins. Many have physical or mental limitations, are functionally illiterate, or grew up in families of abuse and neglect. Those who are excluded from the paid workforce and community life suffer from poverty, social exclusion and a harm to dignity. Despite these impairments, the differently abled are just as much a part of our communities as anyone else and deserve the same opportunities to flourish.

**A biblical response**

A scan of the Bible reveals at least 75 verses related to disabilities alone and over 2,000 references to the poor. From the beginning, Genesis 1:27 teaches us that every person is made in the image of God and is worthy of love, respect and dignity. “I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Throughout the scriptures, Jesus shows no partiality and models perfect compassion to the outcasts and disabled (Galatians 3:28). In fact, God’s law demands that we “Love your neighbour as yourself” (James 2:8) and Micah 6:5 compels us, “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

In a recent interview with Dwayne Milley, Christian Horizons Vice President of Operations, he shared his heart for disability theology. He points out that 1 Corinthians 12 speaks to the body being one and having many members and that the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, “…but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:25–26).

Dwayne also reminds us of Luke 14:13–14, “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

“If one in five or 22% of Canadians have disabilities,” said Dwayne, “that means in a church of 100 people there would be at least 20. And everyone in your congregation knows at least someone with a disability. If these people aren’t included, the church is missing out on their gifts and talents, along with those of their families.”

**How is your church showing inclusion?**

By taking the initiative to show compassion and promote inclusion, the church can play a vital role in creating a more equitable and just society. Are you aware of the disabled in your midst, keeping in mind that most disabilities are invisible or many people with disabilities may be unable or too intimidated to attend church? Aside from providing accessible parking, ramps and washrooms, does your church foster a welcoming attitude towards people with physical and intellectual challenges?

Pastor Paul Martin, Senior Pastor at Grace Fellowship Church in Toronto, teaches on the necessity of welcoming the weak in a series for the Gospel Coalition Canada. He says that many churches struggle to understand how to serve and be served by those with disabilities. He offers biblical and practical advice to ensure the whole body of Christ can worship and serve alongside one another.

As for Amanda, she still likes her job: “It’s pretty happy in The Raw Carrot kitchen,” she said. Being able to work has changed her life by giving her money to help with bills, food, pets, groceries and buying things for her mom.

*You can learn more about The Raw Carrot’s work by visiting therawcarrot.com; Christian Horizons at christianhorizons.org. For biblical teaching on disability, visit thegospelcoalition.org and theguildelight.org. For poverty rights, visit maytree.com. Statistics Canada for Canadian Survey on Disability, statscan.gc.ca. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ohchr.org. For latest research on employment barriers for people with disabilities, visit cardus.ca.*