

# For the Life of the World

## Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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**Being Church among the Differently Abled:  
People First, Baptized First**

By Dr. Jacob A. O. Preus

**Kenya Study Abroad Mission Trip**

Dr. Timothy C. J. Quill

**What Is Mercy?**

By Deaconess Cynthia E. Lumley, Ph.D.

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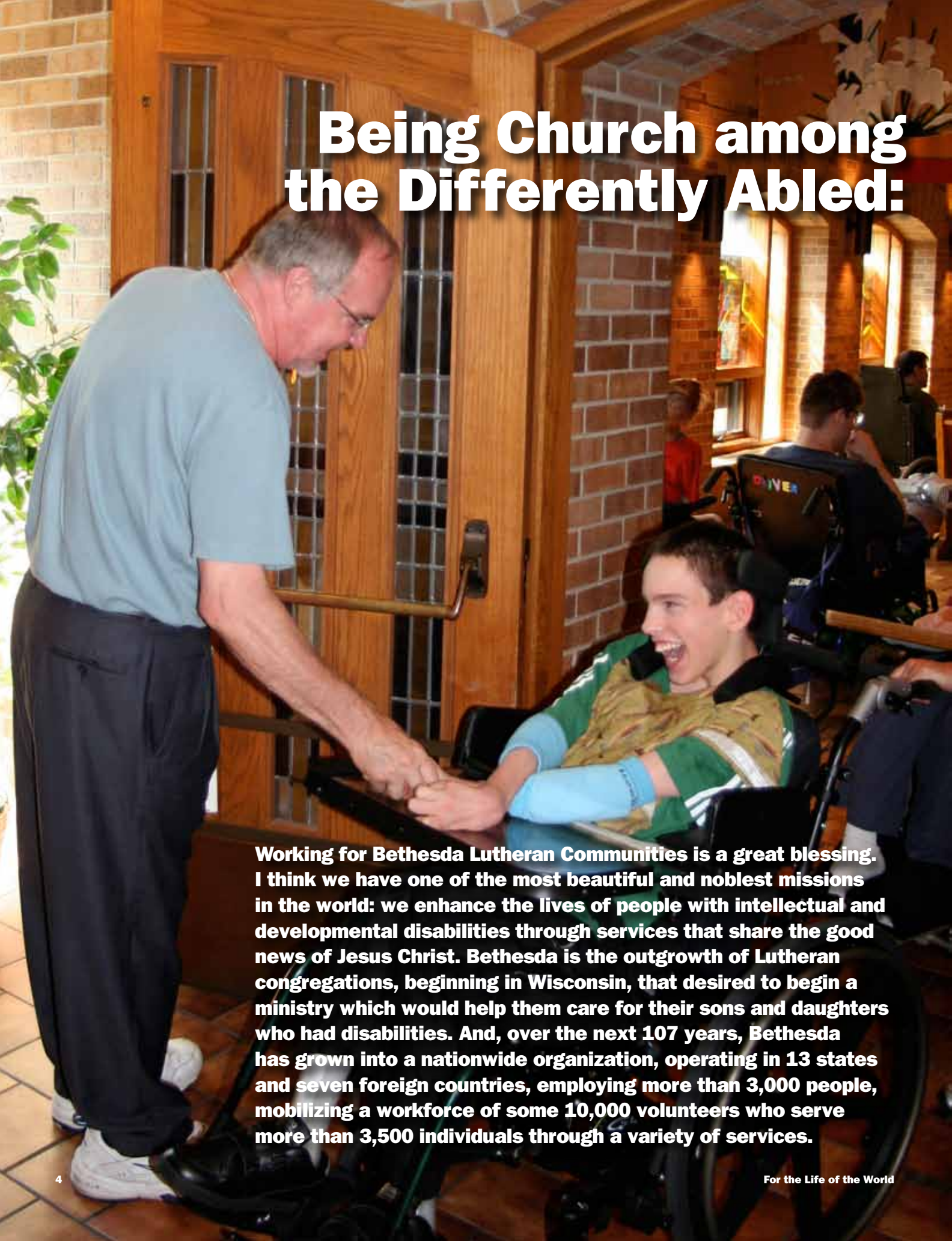
**By Deaconess Cynthia E. Lumley, Ph.D.**

The Office of Deaconess has been established by the church in love to support the Office of the Holy Ministry and to assist the faithful in their God-given vocations. But the deaconess does not wait for the people to step into the church; rather she goes out from the door of the church to extend Christ’s hands of mercy to those in need. For example, she may be involved in providing meals, visiting the sick, the lonely and the suffering, assisting the poor to find the resources they need, organizing a “Care and Compassion Committee,” teaching women and children or simply being present and offering a listening ear.

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# Being Church among the Differently Abled:



**Working for Bethesda Lutheran Communities is a great blessing. I think we have one of the most beautiful and noblest missions in the world: we enhance the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities through services that share the good news of Jesus Christ. Bethesda is the outgrowth of Lutheran congregations, beginning in Wisconsin, that desired to begin a ministry which would help them care for their sons and daughters who had disabilities. And, over the next 107 years, Bethesda has grown into a nationwide organization, operating in 13 states and seven foreign countries, employing more than 3,000 people, mobilizing a workforce of some 10,000 volunteers who serve more than 3,500 individuals through a variety of services.**

# People First, Baptized First

By Dr. Jacob A. O. Preus

One of the hallmarks of our work over all those decades is that we have provided for the spiritual well-being of those whom we serve. But it isn't realistic, nor is it even desirable, that the entire task of tending to the religious lives of people with disabilities be left to Bethesda or other charitable organizations. In the first place, we couldn't possibly do it all. But, more importantly, we shouldn't do it all. People with disabilities should receive spiritual care and support in the same way everyone else does: by their own pastor in their own local congregation. Congregational integration is the best way to care for people spiritually because in a congregation they can receive the Word and Sacraments, they can be cared for by their own pastor and they can join in the fellowship of believers, just like anyone else.

## The Church as "Charity"

But, that's not as easy as it sounds because people with intellectual disabilities need a higher level of care than others and because, frankly, congregations have not always been the most inclusive and caring places for people with disabilities. To be sure, great strides have been taken in making churches more accessible to people with disabilities, but so much more needs to be done. As I thought about this, it occurred to me that part of our problem may be that we are working with a flawed notion of what the church is. We may be working with the wrong model, at least when it comes to people with special needs.

It seems many times that our primary understanding of being church, when it comes to people with disabilities, is what we might call a "charity" or "generosity" model. I think this is true of any other disability or disadvantage as well. What I mean is that we operate with a model of church wherein people with disabilities are invited to come into our churches because we can fill their needs. Of course, generosity is a very good thing and charity is required of Christians. Christians have always established hospitals, orphanages and homes where those who have a variety of needs receive relief or help or support.

But, as church, we need to reexamine the basic model for how and on what basis we relate to one another. Specifically, we must take another look at how we relate to the "disadvantaged" among us. We need to get past the "generosity" model, which implies that we relate to a person out of generosity or pity toward their needs, or based on what we can give them. Such a way of relating will always give rise to a culture of inequality and dependence. It inevitably results in erecting barriers (or "dividing walls of hostility..." Ephesians 2:14) between one another and alienation from each based upon our differences. With the charity model there will always be imbalanced relationships: givers and receivers, haves and have-nots, disabled and "enabled," us and them and so forth.

## Fostering a Culture of Koinonia

The "charity model" fosters the notion that we relate to one another on the basis of: "I have what you need."

Generosity, of course, can create the occasion for something much deeper to occur. But, it is not an end in itself. Integration into Christ, being made disciples, is the end. And that is done, not by what we do, but by what Christ Himself does as we "baptize and teach all things He has commanded us" under His authority and by His promised presence to the end of the age (Matthew 28:16-20).



**All of us, no matter our disabilities or abilities, have fully what Christ gave His life on the cross to give us. So, in the church it's not about us. It's about Him. Who we are through faith in Him (forgiven sinners) defines and shapes our relationship in the church.**

Without a doubt, charity will always be necessary (Jesus says in Matthew 26:11, "The poor you will always have with you..."). But charity is an activity, not a relationship. It is a result, not a cause. We will always need places

like Bethesda whose activities on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities are absolutely necessary. But we mustn't define the relationship we have with people in the church and as church based upon their intelligence level (or any other ability or disability they may have).

So, we must move from a "generosity" model back to a more biblical "communion" (koinonia) model. In such a way of thinking, we relate to our fellow believers in the church because of something much more basic than their need (whatever that need may be, and, of course, we all have needs). We have communion with one another because

- 1) We are creatures of a creative God, that is, because we are fellow human beings.
- 2) Secondly, and more importantly for our relations as church, because we are baptized into "one faith, one Lord, one baptism..." (Ephesians 4:5).

What defines our relationship as members of the body of Christ? We must reclaim the Trinitarian, creedal pattern of our lives together as Christians. We relate to one another because we are created by God in His image (First Article). We relate to one another as redeemed people through faith in Christ (Second Article). And we relate to one another as members of the "communion of saints" (Third Article). What we do, what we need or what we have to give, what we bring that others don't have, these do not define our relationship in the church. Rather what Christ has done for us defines us and gives definition to the church. All of us, no matter our disabilities or abilities, have fully what Christ gave His life on the cross to give us. So, in the church it's not about us. It's about Him. Who we are through faith in Him (forgiven sinners) defines and shapes our relationship in the church.

### People First—Baptized First!

People First! is a movement that has attempted, over the past several decades, to encourage people to do just that: see others as people first and not let their disability get in the way. In the church, however, we need to see all people not merely as people first, but as baptized people first. Emphasizing the communion model of church will enable us to see all who come to us as people, baptized people first, before we start categorizing them according to their external characteristics, according to who needs what and who has what to give. First, they are

- People who are fellow creatures of a creative God, who stand before God as sinners;
- People who are forgiven through faith in Christ;
- Baptized people who have received the "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5);
- People whose "old self" has been drowned and buried and in whom something new has arisen (Romans 6:1-11);
- People who are holy (Colossians 1:21-22);
- People who are righteous (Romans 3:21-24);
- People who are perfect and whole through faith in Christ (Romans 5:1); and
- People who are at peace with God (Ephesians 2:14-15).

In some ways the church has lagged behind our society in recognizing people with disabilities as people first. But, in the church we have an even greater incentive to create places of inclusion and respect: all the members of the body of Christ, no matter what abilities or disabilities they may have, are fellow believers in Christ. They are baptized first! 🏴‍☠️

*Dr. Jacob (Jack) A. O. Preus serves as Bethesda's first Executive Vice President for Mission Advancement and Spiritual Life. The Mission Advancement team of Bethesda includes the divisions of Communications, Resource Development, Religious Life and Church Relations, and Enterprise Development.*



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