

The Evolving Definition of Disability

Some Background

A growing community of concern has taken a fresh look at what it means to be disabled. The lexicon will continue to evolve, just as it has in any other community which struggles to move beyond the negative stereotypes of the past. The following ideas reflect current thought developed within the disability leadership.

An Expanding Community of Concern

Each year medical and rehabilitation techniques and technology salvage lives which would have been lost a generation ago. This rapidly expanding group of individuals looks forward to new opportunities and challenges. The challenge of the 1978 *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities* that people with disabilities be offered the opportunity to participate fully in the celebrations and obligations of membership within our faith community still guides our efforts toward inclusion. Implementation of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990 brings with it federal guarantees of equity and dignity for 49 million citizens who have too long awaited recognition of their gifts.

A Common Yet Unique Experience

The risks, stresses and strains of the living process result in the development of assorted impairments. These may occur early in life or in old age. They can result from alterations in an individual's gene code, *in utero*, during the birth process, or later in life. Each person's journey toward disability is highly personal and unique, just as each of us is unique. Our shared vulnerability means that the development of such disabilities is less an individual tragedy than an experience which grows more common with each passing year. In fact, some limitation in function is completely normal for an increasing number of citizens. Thus, future plans in all aspects of the Church and society must include recognition that access for those who currently have disabilities is insurance for all.

Looking More Specifically At Language

Impairments: Impairments are the physiological glitches which hamper one or more basic life functions. These include physical, sensory, mental, and emotional difficulties. This word is most closely associated with medical aspects of the experiencing of human vulnerability.

Disabilities: A disability is the personal experiencing of those limitations and impairments mentioned above. One moves through the world "with" a disability. While there is an emphasis on use of the phrase, "people with disabilities" there

has also been a sense that the commonality of experience requires a designation which stresses the union of one person to all others who share the pain of exclusion and discrimination on the basis of assorted impairments. As the *Americans with Disabilities Act* has recognized those with disabilities as members of the newest minority, many now speak of the disability community with emphasis on the commonality of disability, rather than emphasizing the separateness of each individual.

Handicaps: The word “handicapped” was used in past legislation. Currently it is used to describe the relationship between one who has an impairment and the environmental features which hamper function.

Using These Words in Context

“I have an impairment.”

“It is a medical condition which hampers my vision or hearing, my mobility or my comprehension.”

“I have a disability.”

“I have some difficulty seeing or hearing, moving my body or understanding everything quickly and clearly.”

“I am handicapped.”

“There is no braille agenda, therefore I am handicapped by those who planned this meeting.”

“There is no ramp into this building, therefore I am handicapped in my attempts to worship.”

“There is no assistant to help me read all these signs, therefore I am handicapped in finding my way to the classroom.”

“There is no captioning for this videotape, therefore I am handicapped in sharing in my parish's adult education program.”

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