Catholic Courier

Ministries challenge 'disabling attitudes'

Last year, John Hellems went to attend a friend's funeral.

There was a problem, however.

"They had it in a small chapel, and there was nothing but a long flight of stairs into the church," recalled Hellems, who due to spinal cord damage gets about in a wheelchair. "There was just not any way I could get into the Mass."

Fortunately, fellow attendees were able to carry him — and his chair — into the chapel for the service.

"I was upset at the fact that I couldn't get in," said Hellems, a parishioner at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration. Still, he added, "I thought it was great the guys were able to help me get in."

A decade or two ago, such incidents might have been more common, acknowledged officials of Catholic Charities Community and Residential Services, which operates group homes and offers a variety of services for people with disabilities. But many Catholic parishes have since created physical accessibility to their church buildings by installing ramps and elevators.

Thus even though efforts continue to promote physical accessibility, those who work with people with disabilities have shifted focus in recent years. Now they work to broaden understanding of full accessibility.

"I think that that's been one of our unwritten philosophies, that a ramp doesn't make you accessible," noted Paul Pickering, Community Residential Services executive director.

"The focus is not so much on physical accessibility as on attitudinal accessibility," explained Lyn Zyla, community awareness coordinator for the office.

"Attitudinal accessibility" involves making sure that all people feel welcome and invited to participate in parish ministries — including serving as lectors and eucharistic ministers, singing in choirs, serving on parish committees and taking part in parish projects — Zyla and Pickering noted.

Such involvement is simply a matter of justice — both to the parishes and communities, and to the individuals with disabilities, they suggested.

"The people we're involved with have a right to be in the community, but they also have a responsibility," Pickering declared.

Thus, for example, each of the nine residences operated by Catholic Charities has at least one goal about giving back to the community, according to Kathy Termine, director of Catholic Charities' Developmental Disabilities Services.

The residents help to deliver food baskets, adopt needy families, and assist people in their neighborhoods with such chores as shoveling snow, she explained.

Some residents of the Holt Road Community Residence in Webster, for example, travel every other Thursday to Bethany House, a shelter for homeless women in Rochester, to help prepare dinner or sort donated clothing.

"When we first went, they asked why do we have to do extra work," acknowledged Holt Road staff member Nicole DeMauro. "Now they understand when we go there, we're going to do things to help people in the community."

An episcopal affirmation

Such activities and the attitude behind them are just what the U.S. bishops are calling for.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 18 approved "Welcome and Justice for Persons With Disabilities."

The document details 12 points on how the church should treat people with disabilities, including:

Peggy Schulz, above, and Adeline Holley, who both live at the Catholic Charities Holt Road Community Residence in Webster, organize and hang donated clothing while volunteering at Bethany House, a shelter for homeless women, in Rochester Dec. 3. They visit the home every other week to help out the staff.

STORY BY LEE STRONG • PHOTOS BY GREG FRANCIS