

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON ACCESSIBILITY

Membership

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Summary of the Task Force Work

The Task Force on Accessibility was appointed by the Presiding Bishop to respond to the following resolution of the 67th General Convention (D-120A):

“Whereas, there has been minimal response to the 1979 General Convention action on integration of disabled/handicapped into all aspects of Church life; therefore be it

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That the 67th General Convention direct the Executive Council to establish a Task Force with at least 51% of the members being disabled/handicapped to deal with accessibility of disabled/handicapped persons into all areas of the life of the Episcopal Church; and be it further

Resolved, That the word “disabled/handicapped” be added to minority listings printed in the official publications issued by this General Convention; and be it further

Resolved, That the Joint Commission on Constitution and Canons be asked to review the Canons to insure inclusion of the words “disabled/handicapped persons” within the intent of the Canon and to report its findings to the 68th General Convention.”

The Task Force has been concerned not only with physical barriers that confront persons with disabilities, but also with communication barriers, learning needs, and problems of attitudes and awareness.

Shortly after its formation, the Task Force conducted a survey of all its dioceses to ascertain the extent to which they had complied with the 1979 General Convention action calling for establishment of committees concerned with disabilities/handicaps. Both a written questionnaire and a telephone follow-up revealed that a total of 19 dioceses have in fact formed such a group. Of those who did not have a specific committee or task force, 45 did specify a particular contact person in this area. Names of specific diocesan groups and of contact persons were entered into a computerized “resource data bank,” and this data bank has formed the basis for initiation of a networking system that will be used to provide increased intercommunication and information sharing among Episcopal bodies working towards the inclusion by the Church of all persons with disabilities.

Those dioceses that have not yet established such a group were targeted for future communication, designed to point out the need for such action and encourage them to take it.

The Task Force has sought to encourage ministries *with* (rather than only to, or for) persons who have a disability. It has assisted clergy and other Church leaders in exploring ways of incorporating persons with disabilities “into all areas of the life of the Episcopal Church.”

Specifically, the Task Force has performed the following tasks and services:

- Gathered and shared information on existing projects and resources (both Episcopal, and of other denominations) related to the Church and handicaps;
- Sent representatives to ecumenical meetings related to the Church and disability concerns;
- Mailed informational materials to dioceses, seminaries, and parishes;
- Initiated networking among Episcopal groups working towards the inclusion of persons with disabilities;
- Supported the special publication—"Ordination of Women with Disabilities" (topical issue of *The Caring Congregation*)—by the Healing Community, White Plains, NY;
- Displayed materials related to the Church and disabilities at the Episcopal "Models of Ministry" Fair held in North Carolina during May, 1984.

An estimated 80% of the general population will have a disability at some point in their lives. Currently, one of every seven persons is considered permanently disabled, and the incidence of disability is expected to increase.

In its effort to increase awareness and sensitivity about disabilities, the Task Force has underscored the following five points:

- Even though it may appear that there are no persons with handicaps in our parishes, we must be concerned about the needs of these people. Christ has charged us as his body, the Church, to love one another, and to care for the needs of all people. It is very likely that there are indeed persons with disabilities in our Church community. Because of attitudinal and architectural barriers, many persons with disabilities do not feel welcome. Thus, "to seek and serve the Christ in all whom we meet," we must identify and invite these persons into his family.
- When we can avoid stereotyping, dispel myths, and eliminate negative language, we are able to see the whole person rather than just the disability. Even though attitudes have been changing, people with disabilities are still portrayed according to two main stereotypes—the poor pathetic creature, and the courageous hero struggling against all odds. In addition, we speak in ignorance and fear of the "deaf and dumb" and the "crippled;" we use other negative terms such as "victims," "stricken," and "afflicted." We group individuals in a devaluing way, calling them "the handicapped." What is most important to celebrate the abilities as we learn to accept the disabilities in individuals.
- As disabilities differ, so do individual needs. Social, emotional, learning, mobility, and communication needs of persons with disabilities are the same needs non-disabled persons have; but often, these needs must be met differently. Accommodations must be made to ensure the inclusion of these individuals.
- Cost is not a valid reason for our inactivity as a Church community. Valuing "cost first" reflects our negative attitude toward the worth of persons with disabilities.
- While ministries with persons with disabilities take place at the local level, dioceses and national bodies are increasingly providing guidance, resources, and direction.

While the Episcopal Church has taken a leadership role in numerous areas of social justice, it has lagged behind other denominations in the area of disability concerns and

accessibility. For example, several major denominations recently established a national office on disability concerns. Publications of other liturgical churches—on such subjects as guidelines for meeting communication and learning needs of persons with developmental disabilities and accessibility needs of persons with physical and sensory impairments—number in the dozens and in some cases in the hundreds. A number of major denominations have their own curricula and multi-media materials for teaching children and adults with developmental disabilities. Episcopal Church leaders working in this area have had to borrow heavily from other denominations. While many of these materials are of high quality, they reflect the religious outlook, priorities, procedures, and customs of these denominations rather than those of the Episcopal Church.

From the work of the Task Force on Accessibility, and such models of ministry as the Office of Ministry with the Handicapped (Diocese of Minnesota), Office of Ministry with Persons with Disabilities (Diocese of Central New York), the Task Force on Persons with Handicapping Conditions (Diocese of Tennessee), and the Episcopal Awareness Center on Handicaps (EACH, Inc.—in Northern Virginia), the groundwork has been laid for increased national efforts in this area. The work the Task Force has done must continue.

Resolution #A—70

Resolved, The House of _____ concurring, That the 68th General Convention commend the Task Force on Accessibility and encourage it in its work and ministry; and be it further

Resolved, That the Task Force be continued as constituted by the 1982 General Convention and that it continue to provide leadership, training, and education in the Episcopal Church at all levels.

Additional resolutions

For additional resolutions in this area, please refer to the Blue Book report of the Standing Commission on Human Affairs and Health.