

Inclusion Awareness at St. Nicholas Church

“If there are barriers of attitude, communication, or architecture for anyone, the foundation of the House of God is weakened for all.” – Pathways Awareness Foundation

Almost 20 years ago, each and every Sunday morning, rain or shine, a WWII veteran by the name of Wally sat in his wheelchair outside of St. Nicholas Church. He warmly and prayerfully greeted people as they entered the church, and refused offers to be carried inside by the ushers. Wally’s persistent witness to the body of Christ was difficult to ignore. The recently formed Human Concerns Committee quickly and aggressively pursued building a ramp into the church, leading the movement toward accessible worship space in the Archdiocese. Six years later (1996) and in the last year of their lives, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and Fr. Henri Nouwen (theologian, author and pastor of a L’Arche community for persons with disabilities) collaborated in leading a conference *That All May Worship*, to promote awareness of persons with disabilities in liturgy and church life. This conference led to the creation of Pathways Awareness Foundation and its “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” program (www.inclusioninworship.org).

Why include those of us with disabilities? Certainly, it allows for the ministering of compassionate care to those in need. But, more importantly, including those with *visible* disabilities allows a wider range of gifts to come to the table. Gifts as individual as the person who has them – gifts of perspective, wisdom, music, suffering, humor. Those living with visible disabilities bring their gifts of body and soul to *all of us* living with *less visible disabilities*.

Here at St. Nicholas, the Inclusion Awareness Committee recognizes many successes. We have an accessible and beautiful entrance to our church, along with flexible seating arrangements allowing for wheelchair use. We have two accessible bathrooms, assistive hearing devices and a large print bulletin. The ramp into the school cafeteria allows for access to many events. Daily Mass is offered in the church. The 9:00 AM Mass on the second and forth Sundays is signed for persons who are deaf. In June 2006, the elevator for Oldershaw Hall opened, a success made possible with the help of many parishioners, staff, a Research Retirement Foundation grant and \$250,000 raised over a five-year period. A state-of-the-art accessible bathroom was completed on the 2nd floor of Oldershaw Hall this fall.

But we, as a church, still have plenty of work to do. Some *physical barriers* still exist. Many committee meetings, individual spiritual direction, and premarital counseling are still held in the rectory. In the time ahead, *attitudinal barriers* and *communication barriers* require our focused attention. ASL signing is needed *every* week. We need to consider how to include our oldest parishioners facing physical frailty and increased vulnerability and finding it difficult to attend church. Similarly, we need to think about how to become a more inclusive community for some of the people struggling with mental illness residing nearby. Finally, we need to help *all of us* become more mindful and accepting of one another as well as our own limitations.

The Inclusion Awareness Committee welcomes new people, thoughts and energy. We meet nine times a year on the third Thursday from 7:00 to 8:30PM on the 2nd floor of Oldershaw Hall. Our first meeting is **October 30th**. Call Carol at 847 475-5395 or e-mail her at gaetjens3@gmail.com for more information.