

### Welcome to Holland

*These words were written by a lady called Emily Pearl Kingsley and relate how it feels to have and raise a child with a disability*

When you are going to have a baby, it's like planning a vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make wonderful plans. The Coliseum, the Michelangelo, David, the Gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. After all the months of anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says "Welcome to Holland". "Holland??" you say. "What do you mean Holland? I signed up for Italy. I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy". But there is a change in flight plan. They landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guidebooks and you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a

whole new group of people you would never have met otherwise. It's just a different place. It's slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you have been there for a while you catch your breath, you look around and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills. Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy and they are bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I planned". The pain of that will never, ever, ever go away, because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss. - But if you spend your life mourning about the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the lovely things about Holland. *This paper was presented by Rev John Murning, to the Crieff Study Conference for Healthcare Chaplains at the Crieff Hydro in May 1998.*

### Learning Disabilities: Who's Problem?

by John Swinton

Stanley Hauerwas, in his book 'The Suffering Presence,' makes a somewhat startling assertion. He suggests that within a society that had a different moral system that was not dependent on competitiveness, individuality and productivity, the concept of learning disability simply would not exist. In other words, the very term 'learning disability' indicates adherence to a particular moral code and system of valuing human beings which reflects the ideals of individualism, liberalism and a capitalist economy. Within a society which uses the criteria of independence, productivity, intellectual prowess and social position to judge the value of human beings, people with physical, psychological or intellectual disabilities will necessarily be excluded and downgraded as human beings of lesser worth and value. If this is so, it becomes clear that society is, at least partially, responsible for the disablement of impaired individuals. According to this view, it is not the physical or mental condition of the individual that makes them disabled. Rather it is society that, by placing barriers and developing systems of valuing which exclude, stigmatise or downgrade particular groups of people, transforms physical or mental impair-

ments into disabilities. Whilst not wishing to downgrade the important reality of the disablement brought about by individual impairment, the reality of the life experience of many people with learning disabilities is that it is the imposition by society of a negative social identity brought about by a deeply impersonal system of valuing, which lies at the heart of the social experience of disability. In this sense disability is a social construct. The question is, do we as chaplains and healthcare workers construct or deconstruct the disabilities of those whom we seek to offer care to? Do our attitudes and understandings move people with learning disabilities towards or away from an accepted place in community?

#### Endnotes

Stanley Hauerwas. *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped and the Church*. T & T. Clark, Edinburgh. 1988, page 159 ff.

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