If I told you that there is a group of people spread out across the world that, if formed into a nation, would be the world’s third largest nation and would lead the world in homelessness and poverty what would your educated guess conclude?

Would it be people with disabilities? This is a surprise to many but the truth is that there are more than 600 million people in the world with disabilities.¹ There are nearly 60 million Americans with disabilities.² In 2006-08 more than 15% of school-age children had a developmental disability—that is about 10 million children.³ Eighty percent of families of young people with special needs are single-parent families. The strain on marriage is tremendous. Sexual abuse of young people with special needs is dramatically higher due to their vulnerability. Over 65 million people in the world need wheelchairs but do not have one.⁴ Autism is on a dramatic rise. And the sad truth is that only a very small percentage of churches are engaged in some type of ministry to people with special needs.

History

When Jesus’ disciples encountered a blind man on the side of the road, their assumption regarding his condition was that it was the result of sin Who sinned? This man or his parents that he is this way? (John 9:1) This has been the pervasive view in many parts of the world about people with disabilities. There is something very wrong about them. They are cursed in

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² http://specialeducatorswebpages.com/subjects/employment.html

³ http://yourlife.usatoday.com/health/story/2011/05/One-in-six-children-have-a-developmental-disability/47467520/1

some way. This view is held in many cultures in our world today.

In other cultures that do not ascribe to this belief there is still great ignorance, and people with disabilities tend to be viewed as disabilities who happen to be people. This creates a distinct sense of invisibility as evidenced by the disciples talking out loud about this man in front of him rather than with him. This is common today. When I take one of my friends in a wheelchair to a restaurant it is not uncommon that the waitress or waiter asks me, “What does he want?” all the while looking at me and not my friend. This ignorance and assumption of intellectual incapability inevitably makes my friends feel invisible. I simply reply, “Why don’t you ask him?” and a new view of my friend is created.

In cultures where a curse or sin is assumed a person with a disability is hidden away, abandoned, or used to gain funds by begging. In cultures where invisibility is at play it takes other forms.

For instance it was not until the 1970’s that architectural accessibility came into law for people with disabilities in the United States. All one needs to do is try to navigate in a wheelchair in public settings that are still not accessible to understand how huge an issue this is. But it goes beyond architecture. Non-access architecturally is non-access socially. It keeps a person outside where everyone else has gathered. I have also experienced many instances when I have had to take a friend around back and through a kitchen to get to the place we desired because the front entrance was not accessible.

Educational access came into law in the United States in the 1970’s also guaranteeing the right to an education to young people with disabilities. Let that sink in for a minute. Before the 1970’s a school did not legally have to accept a student with a disability.

In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed guaranteeing civil rights to people with disabilities. For the first time the rights of a person with a disability had teeth by virtue of the law.

What does this all mean? Personhood for someone with a disability has only been recognized for approximately 36 years, and in terms of civil rights, only for the past 21 years.

When I began my ministry to my friends with disabilities I had no experience or background with people who happen to have disabilities. So I asked a friend for advice. My friend had 11 years of experience as a liaison for people with disabilities to the Los Angeles City Council. She said, “I will not give you advice. I will merely tell you that as a nation in a hundred years we will look back on how we treated people with disabilities the same way we look back on slavery in the 19th century.”

I was shocked by her statement and in disbelief at such a declaration. But it took little time to see the truth of this. Just as legislation abolished