

Seeing Life Through Blinded Eyes

By Judy Redlich

In preparation for writing this paper, I surveyed some of my colleagues who are blind. They were glad to help pastors and lay leaders feel comfortable ministering alongside people with blindness. Thus, we (I, too, am blind) hope to paint a picture of who we are and how we would like you to see us. We represent the 1.3 million legally blind people in the United States.¹ Some lost their sight as babies. Others became blind later in life or may be gradually losing their sight.

My Story

Like many premature babies who spent time in incubators prior to the 1950s, the retinas of my eyes became detached due to an improperly regulated level of oxygen. Researchers identified this problem only four months after my birth and began working toward a resolution. My mom said that my blindness was a shock, but she and my dad always knew God would see them through. However, to my siblings, I was simply their bratty little sister whether I could see or not. When I was four, we moved to a neighborhood with sidewalks. I loved it when my dad walked beside me as I rode my bike up and down the street. Later, the training wheels came off, and I rode a two-wheeler. I discovered that with a clothespin or baseball card in the spokes of the bike in front of me, I could follow someone by listening to the “flip, flip” sounds of the spokes against the card.

Definition and Causes of Blindness

Blindness is a loss of one’s vision that cannot be corrected with glasses or contact lenses. People with “partial blindness” have very limited vision. Those diagnosed with “complete blindness” cannot see anything and do not see light. Typically, people with 20/200 vision or worse are considered “legally blind.”² In the United States, the leading causes of blindness are glaucoma, macular degeneration, diabetes and accidents such as chemical burns or sports injuries.

- Cataracts affect nearly 22 million people age 40 and older. By age 80, more than half of all Americans have cataracts.
- Glaucoma affects more than 2.3 million Americans age 40 and older. Another 2 million do not know they have the disease.
- More than 2 million Americans age 50 and older have advanced age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the stage that can lead to severe vision impairment. About 10 million have early, intermediate or advanced AMD.

- Diabetic retinopathy affects more than 4.4 million Americans age 40 and older. The number of people, especially young people, with diabetes is increasing: 19 million Americans age 20 and older have diagnosed or undiagnosed diabetes; about one-third are unaware they have the disease. Generally, the longer a person has diabetes the more likely they are to develop retinopathy.³

Statistics regarding blindness in third-world countries are much higher due to poor health and economic conditions. Thankfully, there are a number of ministries working to improve the plight of people with blindness around the world.

Steps to Understanding and Acceptance

Although Gaylen had been vision-impaired since birth, she still struggled when Retinitis Pigmentosa began to affect her central vision. “When I was diagnosed, the doctor sent me out the door with no information or support. Consequently, I dropped out of college. I eventually completed a liberal arts degree and worked as a graphics editor/illustrator for a newspaper until 2003.” Today, Gaylen works hard to get valuable information to persons newly diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa. She serves on several boards, and is very active with the American Council of the Blind. Gaylen also records and edits Bible studies for people who cannot attend church or a small group.

What makes people with blindness feel accepted? The same thing that makes you feel accepted, such as having sincere friends who make you feel wanted, not simply tolerated. I remember a painful incident from my high school days. I enjoyed playing in the band until one day I overheard a classmate say, “I wish Judy wasn’t in band, because we always have to figure out who is going to lead her around.” Wow, did that hurt! It also caused me to become more independent, which sometimes prevented me from getting close to others. The people I surveyed said they often felt the same.

Charlene, an independent living specialist in Hawaii, and her husband are both blind. They are currently very active in a church where they have many friends. But they couldn’t say that about their previous church. “We were left out of most of the activities and treated like invalids,” said Charlene. “We just wanted them to know us as friends and to think of us as real living people, who work, eat, sleep and play. We were hungry for honest fellowship. We tried to express our faith by serving at church in different capacities, but discovered that it was lonely being cast aside and pitied.”⁴ Charlene admitted she was shy and should have done a better job of reaching out to others, but it was like fighting an uphill battle.

Stories like Charlene’s reveal how much Christians need to be trained to welcome every person who walks into our churches. Here are a few helpful steps on serving people who are blind.

Step 1) Ask First

There will be times when you will wonder whether a person can or cannot see. It is okay to politely ask. People tend to assume that because we’re blind we aren’t intelligent. As a result, they think it is acceptable to make decisions for us. “I do need help at church dinners to get my food,” said Joleen, a retired physical therapist from Washington. “Usually, my husband knows what I like and goes through the line for both of us while I sit at the table. However, sometimes others serve my plate without asking for my permission. There is just a way of doing such things graciously without making me feel inferior.” Joleen also recommends people avoid grabbing a blind person’s arms when offering assistance, because this could startle them, sending them off balance.

Step 2) Avoid Being Overprotective

Mark is a 17-year-old high school student whose blindness was caused by a genetic eye condition. “I wish people wouldn’t walk on egg shells around me,” says Mark. “It’s not like I’m going to break or something.

Everyone is in a clique at school, but I am not in one. Being blind does not change a person, any more than it would change you if you were to close your eyes. One Facebook group got it right when they posted this motto: 'I'm blind, I've got a mind. Now, get used to it!'"

Hannah, a student at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, hopes to get a master's degree in special education, focusing on the visually impaired. Although she lost much of her sight as a baby going through cancer, she could read large print until recently. Hannah is now learning Braille.

"I want to teach blind children things I was not taught at a young age, like reading Braille, using a white cane and learning talking software," said Hannah. "My church provided me with a large print church directory. They put the words on screens in very large print. And I bought a pair of binoculars for watching videos. I also enjoy listening to the New International Version Bible on CD." Although Hannah has found ways to participate in worship, she still longs for more genuine friendships and needs the help of others. She can't even go shopping without a companion because without assistance stores are pretty lonely and daunting. She also needs rides to doctor's appointments since taxi fares are very expensive.

Spending time with people who are blind is the best way to get over your fear of saying the wrong thing or being overprotective. Inviting a blind person to share their story with your church or youth group is a great way to begin a dialogue.

Step 3) Help Provide Special Accommodations

As a child, my family attended a Lutheran church where volunteers provided me with Sunday School lessons in Braille. They also kept a Braille Lutheran Hymnal in the usher's room so that my mother could write down the hymns listed on the board. We'd pick the volumes containing those hymns to take into the sanctuary. The Baptists, Assemblies of God and Lutherans often provide materials in Braille or large print. However, only about 12 percent of blind people read Braille. Find out which format people use and adapt to their needs.

Since many blind people use computers or other adaptive readers, email is now a great way to provide materials in advance for someone unable to read regular print. If your songbook or prayer book is on computer, send electronic copies. This enables people with limited vision to bring the appropriate liturgy or readings in their preferred format and participate during services. An 18- to 26-point font is recommended for printed bulletins, hymns, or Sunday school materials. By law, materials may be reproduced in alternative formats as long as they are not sold. It is not necessary to secure written permission from the author or publisher for this use.

Beth's family always challenged her to be an overcomer. In college she enjoyed studying choral music direction, but her church wouldn't permit blind students to train as altar servers. Thus, Beth was especially hurt when they wouldn't permit her to carry a heavy, wooden cross during the processional, like everyone else. She spoke up in a meeting with her pastor: "Please don't treat blind people like special charity projects. If we express interest in doing things like serving communion, please help us find a way to do it, even if modifications need to be made. How can I get anything out of church if I'm just sitting in the pew?"

Transportation can be a huge issue for blind persons. Beth must cross a large, busy intersection to get to the church she prefers to attend. When she can't find a ride, Beth walks to a different church because it's a safer route. Unless someone helps her navigate a new route, providing specific landmarks, Beth is understandably afraid of getting lost or being caught in an unfamiliar intersection. Something as simple as providing a ride to and from church is a ministry opportunity.

What About the Children?

Children who have been blind since infancy have never seen color. But that doesn't mean they won't enjoy art projects. My mother was the glitter glue and tracing wheel queen. She helped me outline coloring pages

and bought me a box of crayons that were flat on one side so they wouldn't roll off the table. Here are some other helpful tips to engage blind children at church:

1. Coloring Pages—Find crayons with flat sides or jumbo crayons. Make a Braille label for each crayon. If children have limited vision, outline the picture with colored paint or glue so they can see the outline. You can also give them a bottle of glue and a box of small items to create their own pictures about their faith or a Bible story.
2. Drama—For skits, give children the script a week in advance or email it to their parents so they can help them get ready to participate. Provide detailed acting directions such as “move five steps to left stage.”
3. Music—Email songs in advance so parents can put the words into an alternative format.
4. Teacher's Helpers—If you ask children to take turns helping the teacher, please don't exclude blind children. Show them what to do and hold them accountable. Consider assigning helpers in pairs so everyone will have a buddy to work with, rather than singling out the blind students.
5. Embrace Differences—If a child uses a seeing-eye dog, ask him or her to give a class presentation on guide dog do's and don'ts.

See Inside Our Lives

People with limited vision might seem distant and hard to reach because well-meaning but thoughtless people may have disappointed them. They might also do things more slowly due to their disability. However, when church leaders are patient and don't make assumptions, they may find a hardworking, loyal volunteer. Many blind people are unemployed with time to contribute to their churches, and many would enjoy learning new skills.

Jessie is a blind Licensed Professional Counselor from West Virginia. Her church would not accept her offers to help with music. “Even though I'm a competent leader and professional in other aspects of my life, my skills have not been utilized at church,” she comments. Jessie recently attended a new church where they were eager to have her assist with music and would even provide transportation. But her guide dog was another issue. “Their plan was that they would ‘be my eyes’ for the time I was there. That I should leave the dog at home and ‘hold onto their hands’ while there. The dog was absolutely forbidden.”

In my own church, when I got a seeing-eye dog, my pastor asked me to give a demonstration in front of our congregation. He explained, “Velda is Judy's eyes. Would you want someone coming up and touching your eyes?”

Linda teaches music at a Christian school in Nebraska, gives private voice and piano lessons, and works with the church choirs. Linda says her Baptist church is very disability friendly, even offering her part-time employment and ministry opportunities. Linda partnered with another blind woman to create electronic files of their hymnal, and each uses the King James Version Bible in an alternative format. She also moderates an email list for blind persons in communities of faith, through a division of the National Federation of the Blind. Linda appreciates how inclusive her church is to her, as well as to her friends who are visually impaired.

Robert has been blind since birth. He is Missions Chairman at Faith United Methodist Church in West Monroe, Louisiana. Robert has been active in church most of his life. He holds a degree in computer science with minors in music and business administration. How did he handle rejection in church? Robert says:

In each case, the congregations tended to be insular. They were perfectly happy to have me come and put money in the offering plate, but that was as far as my involvement went. My solution to this rejection was to go to a different church. Currently, I sing in the choir, play bells in the bell

choir, serve on the Nominations Committee and the board of Trustees, am chair of the Missions committee and serve on the Staff Pastor Parish Relations Committee. In the past, I have also been the lay delegate to the annual conference. God has given me gifts and talents and he expects me to use what he has given me. It is my responsibility to put myself forward and volunteer. I pay attention to the workings of the church and get involved as opportunities become available. It doesn't matter if you are blind or sighted; you get out of a church what you put in.

Ernest is a retired registered nurse. He found that moving from a small church, where everyone accepted him, to a large congregation was not easy. When he offered to help in programs, one leader replied, "Well, I'm not sure what you can do." Thankfully, attitudes toward Ernest eventually changed, and now he and his wife often lead song service. He's been in the church choir and has been a teacher in a children's division for the past four years. Ernest gives these reminders:

Don't just walk past me because I don't see you. Speak to me, not over me to another. When talking to me, don't walk away without letting me know you are leaving. Find out my abilities/likes and give me some responsibilities. Greet me like you do anyone else. Being blind, I think one of the hardest things is meeting people, whether in church or other places, and not being able to look at folks to get their attention. Thus it is easy to be ignored by most of the congregation.

Getting Real About Blindness

Debbie is a mother of eight and a grandmother of 15, and served as a children's minister until she lost her vision in 2006 because of multiple sclerosis. Her husband went through a catastrophic illness in 2008, and could no longer work as a restaurant manager. She wants to help others understand their pain, loss and how to help.

"We never imagined both of us being ill in our fifties. A pastor should say, 'Hey, I want to sit down with you . . . get to know your family. I know you've had a lot of challenges recently, and perhaps you can help me understand where you are coming from so I can help you and other people who may go through your same challenge.'"

She says a brief conversation in a church hallway is not the place to bring up issues that are still overwhelming. After several years Debbie is still grieving her loss of sight. She confesses to being afraid to share her frustrations, at the risk of sounding unchristian or being whiny. She feels pastors don't really want an honest answer when they ask, "How are you?" They want you to give the typical response, "I'm doing great!"

Debbie said she still doesn't quite know where she fits. The very people who looked to her for advice and respected her in ministry now turn their backs. "What if Jesus came into one of our churches in a wheelchair or blind—would he even be able to get in the door?" Debbie wonders.

Pastor Paul is the director of the Center for the Blind and the Assemblies of God U.S. Missions National Representative for the Blind. He offers insights into walking alongside someone who is blind. "First of all, find out where people are spiritually. Above all, let them know that even if they may have to change their career, there is life after blindness."

Pastor Paul is married with five children, and wants to encourage others. "Your faith is going to be challenged. The Bible talks about the chaff being burned up by fire. You will find out what you really believe or how firmly you believe what you've been teaching. Your entire belief system will be challenged. Be prepared for that. If your faith is real, you will meet the challenge. It's easy to say you believe some-thing, until you are tested. There is hope and life after blindness. With the proper heart, and the right techniques, you will probably find your ministry more fruitful because of your greater dependence on the Lord. You'll be able to empathize with those you counsel more. Most importantly, you don't have to give up your calling."

Dave, a blind Lutheran pastor, and father of two says, “I find the most important thing a church can do is accept a person for who he or she is, expecting of him or her as much as any other person, and the willingness to utilize the individual’s gifts, with no emphasis or limitations.”

The next time you meet a blind person, ignore any fear that might hit you about that person being different. The rule of thumb is to treat us the way you would like to be treated. Don’t baby us, don’t ignore us. Develop a friendship with us, and anticipate it to be mutual rather than one-sided.

What are some hobbies people with vision loss enjoy? Here’s a list of just a few: playing golf, swimming, hiking, reading, traveling, singing, biking, writing poetry, cooking, listening to music, cross-country skiing and waterskiing. Do any of those match yours? Why not ask a blind person to join you in one of your mutual interests? Do you share similar occupations? Does it surprise you that blind persons are employed as musicians, web site designers, audio editors, computer programmers, psychologists, nurses, physical therapists, attorneys, school teachers, etc.?

There are areas where blind people can truly benefit from a friend willing to lend a helping hand, such as grocery or clothes shopping, trips to the bank, transportation, reading mail, filing and organizing printed paper work, matching and/or labeling clothing and jewelry, labeling canned goods.

Joleen sums it up for all of us: “I don’t want to feel like the amazing blind person, but rather a committed and capable member of our church family.”

In closing, please ponder the following beatitudes which sum up many of the stereotypes we face as blind persons:

Blind Beatitudes

Blessed are they who refrain from shouting when they speak to me.

Blessed are they who talk directly to me and not to someone else.

Blessed are they who say who they are when entering a room and say hello to me.

Blessed are they who say goodbye to me when they leave so I am not left speaking to the air.

Blessed are they who do not hesitate to say “see” when talking to me.

Blessed are they who tap my shoulder gently when approaching from behind or the side when speaking to me.

Blessed are they who wait for me to extend my hand before shaking it.

Blessed are they who place my hand on an object such as the back of a chair when telling me where it is, so I can seat myself.

Blessed are they who do not leave me in a strange environment without orienting me to it.

Blessed are they who offer me their arm to serve as my guide, instead of grabbing, pulling or shoving me.

Blessed are they who approach me in a crowd, offering to help when I appear disoriented.

Blessed are they who do not embarrass me in a group by referring to my blindness in word or action.

Blessed are they who laugh with me when I tell a joke related to blindness.

Blessed are they who read me the menu and its prices, allowing me to order my own meal.

Blessed are they who take me to the cashier so I may pay for my own meal.

Blessed are they who do not distract my guide dog from being my active eyes.

Blessed are they who treat me like a human being, for like it or not, I AM a human being.

Author Unknown, Contributed by Pat Seed

Notes

1. U.S. National Library of Medicine, "Blindness," Medline Plus, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003040.htm#Common%20Causes>.
2. National Federation of the Blind, "Major Causes of Blindness," Blind.net, <http://www.blind.net/g2000000.htm>
3. American Academy of Ophthalmology, "Eye Health Statistics at a Glance," American Academy of Ophthalmology (updated May, 2009) <http://one.aao.org/SearchResults.aspx?q=Eye%20Health%20Statistics%20at%20a%20Glance&t=o&type=o>
4. The quotes in this paper are from a "Questionnaire about Blindness," by Judy Redlich, (Survey, 2009).

About the Author

Judith Redlich has 32 years of experience in various aspects of the media industry. For twenty years, Judy produced and hosted a television interview show, for twelve years she produced and hosted a weekly radio talk show. As Manager of Joni and Friends Gateway she is responsible for administrating and implementing all of the programs in St. Louis, Mo. Judy completed her Bachelor of Science in Journalism and Psychology from Missouri Valley College. In 2009, The National Association of Professional and Executive Women named Judy "Woman of the Year" in Media Relations, and she received the 2006 Bronze Telly Award.