

Can a severely disabled child be confirmed?

# A Child Who Changed the Church

Can Powell be confirmed and become a full member of the church?" asked the young parents. "He was baptized as an infant but we have gotten mixed messages about whether he can actually be a member of the church." They had asked three different clergy and had received conflicting responses.

Powell had a severe stroke shortly after birth and suffered catastrophic brain injury. His intellectual ability is very limited and his verbal expressions consist of meaningless sounds. He cannot walk, and control of motor and other bodily functions is minimal. His ability to understand and communicate with the outside world is unknown but obviously severely limited.

Powell cannot mentally grasp and verbally express abstract concepts, such as church creeds and membership vows. He cannot intellectually understand what it means to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and membership vows are impossible for him to affirm. Can he be a full, contributing member of the church, or is he to be relegated to the margins where he will receive at best the church's charity and sympathy or at worst be rejected, neglected or ignored?

One pastor told the parents that since he could not take the vows of church membership Powell could not be confirmed as a full member. He quoted the *1988 Book of Discipline*: "When the persons have taken the appropriate vows..." The mother, who is an attorney, pushed the issue. "As a baptized person he is now a 'preparatory member.' What happens when he becomes eighteen and has not been confirmed?" she asked. "According to the *Discipline*, he is added to the constituency roll," the pastor accurately responded. When asked what "constituency roll" is, someone described it as "the dog pound of



church membership." Are persons whose disabilities prevent them from intellectually understanding and verbally affirming the doctrines and vows of the church confined to second-class membership where they are either ignored or merely the objects of sympathy?

I assured Powell's mother and father that I would indeed confirm Powell. Yet his parents wanted membership for someone like Powell to be a matter of right and not a matter of an individual pastor's discretion. They wanted to change the *Book of Discipline* in order to remove any doubt about eligibility for church membership. Therefore, that local church Administrative Board presented a petition to the 1992 General Conference to insert the following in the paragraph defining church membership: (In the case of persons whose disabilities prevent them from assuming the vows, their legal guardian (s), themselves in full covenant rela-

tionship with God and the Church, the community of faith, may recite the appropriate vows on their behalf.) [See Paragraph 214, *The Book of Discipline*, 2000]

## Deeper Questions

The issue of Powell's relationship to the church goes far deeper than legislative permission. It goes to the very heart of the gospel and the nature and mission of the church.

- Is incorporation into church membership dependent upon an individual's verbal and intellectual ability to respond to church doctrine, beliefs, and vows?
- Is a conscious mental decision by the individual the primary requirement for membership in the visible body of Christ, the church?

Kenneth L. Carder

## Where to Learn More

Southeastern United Methodist Rehabilitation, Inc., has a helpful website at [www.semar-umc.org](http://www.semar-umc.org). Click on "Downloads" to find links to useful resources, such as a sample worship service for Disability Awareness Week and "How to Conduct an Accessibility Audit in a Local Church."

For information about existing laws or proposed legislation related to disabilities, check the website of the General Board of Church and Society at [www.umc-gbcs.org](http://www.umc-gbcs.org). Search under "disabilities."

- Is it possible for a person with severe mental, physical, and verbal limitations to be contributing members of Christ's body?
- What is the role of the community in relationship with persons such as Powell? Can the community actually assume the vows for one of its own?
- What is the relationship between the sacrament and covenant of baptism and the process for church membership?

These are among the profound theological and ecclesiological questions raised by Powell and the thousands of similar persons in our United Methodist churches.

I suspect that the majority of parents of children and youth with similar or even less severe limitations as Powell assume that full church membership is impossible. They have merely accepted that the church is one more place where their loved one is relegated to the margins and treated as less than a contributing child of God. Some of those parents have themselves given up on the church and assumed an inactive status because there is no place for their child who is "different." They become hidden and forgotten, lost sheep for whom no one searches.

Although legislation now exists that provides a means for Powell to become a full member of the church, the theological and ecclesiological questions raised by his situation have largely gone unaddressed. Many other disabled persons continue to be ignored or even rejected by some churches and countless families assume the church has no place for their special needs children.

Even though Powell can be made a full member of the church, how is he to fulfill his membership vows? What service can he render? He will never serve an office, teach a class, work on a mission project, keep the nursery, make a financial pledge, usher, or do anything we normally associate with supporting the church with our gifts and our service. Does that mean his membership

status remains less than those who can do those things needed to add to the institution's strength and activity?

Powell began to change his local church the Sunday he joined simply by being who he is. My last Sunday as the pastor of Church Street Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, August 1992, was chosen as the day to confirm Powell. At the appointed time in the service, members of the congregation carried Powell to the high altar, physically bearing him up before God and the community. The parents and entire congregation responded to the examination and vows. As I and the other pastors laid our hands on him, the Choir began spontaneously to sing "Jesus Loves Me." Powell mysteriously responds to music with movement. He began to move in time with the music, as though deep within he knows its message. Following the singing of the closing hymn, "God of Grace and God of Glory," the music to which Powell moved with vigor and enthusiasm, the congregation filed by and welcomed Powell with hugs and tears.

But there is more to the story. Powell was welcomed into the youth group and became a regular member of the Sunday School class. The youth assigned one of their own to be Powell's "shepherd." The "shepherd's" responsibility was to give Powell special attention as needed. His presence in that congregation and with the youth group changed the church's understanding of themselves, the meaning of covenant community, what it means to receive the gifts of 'the least of these,' and sensitized them to agape love.

In May of 2002, the graduating seniors were given special recognition during a morning worship service. Since Powell has been a part of the group that was graduating, class members insisted that he be part of the service. He led the processional bearing the Cross in his wheelchair and being pushed by the Director of Youth. The sen-

ior who spoke to the congregation focused on the contribution Powell had made to her and the youth of that church. Here is some of what she said:

[Powell] has taught me not through words or actions but by just being the person he is. . . . Powell is to me the epitome of a true child of God.

He has not been exposed to the corruption this world has experienced in the same way most of us have, and he is definitely the least judgmental person I know. God has blessed so many [with Powell]. He has helped my family grow in their faith. He has helped many students . . . grow accustomed to and accept people who are different, and God through Powell, has helped our youth group by enriching our lives. Powell might not be able to sing with the choir but he is here almost every Sunday sitting on the back row supporting his peers by smiling and dancing.

Yes, if we really open our hearts, our minds, and our doors to others we are truly doing God's work and in turn we will God's blessing.

I talked recently with a mother whose child is autistic. One of her pastors had called to invite her son to become part of the confirmation class. The mother broke down and wept. She had assumed that since he could not understand the creeds, doctrines, and vows, he would never be able to join the church. Fortunately, her pastor knew otherwise. The perceived inability to have her son be fully a part of the Christian community had caused her and her family to distance themselves from the church. However, when the church reached out to receive the gifts of her son, the entire family joined the church. She said to me, "I have no doubt that my son will be welcomed with open arms by God. I just want him to be so welcomed by the church."

Not only will her son be welcomed into the eternal kingdom, but the rest of us and the church itself will surely be judged by whether we welcome him. □



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# HOT off the Press



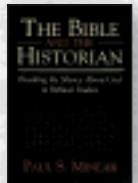
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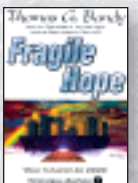
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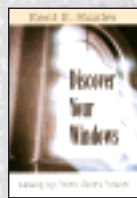
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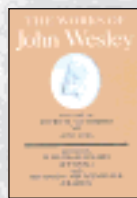
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