

## ADVOCATING FOR PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

By: Kathy Cavagnaro

The Holy Father's prayer intention for February 2008 is "that the mentally handicapped may not be marginalized but respected and lovingly helped to live in a way worthy of their physical and social condition."

Carrying out this prayer is the goal of the Advocates for Persons with Special Needs Committee. Spearheaded by Mrs. Joan Rischmiller and Sister Maureen Fanning, the committee was formed in September 2006. It seeks to increase disability awareness and to ensure the inclusion of all parishioners and students, young and old, with physical and developmental disabilities.

"Affirming the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and among us," the committee "seeks inclusion in the life of our parish of persons with special needs as active participating members to the degree each person is able to do so," according to the panel's mission statement. "We aim for a reciprocal participation so that all may contribute to the growth and vitality of the parish as well as receive the assistance required to do so," the statement adds.

The committee is working on:

Opening Minds – Making parishioners aware of the challenges faced by the families of children and adults with special needs; educating those who minister to parishioners with disabilities; and helping the disabled participate during Mass. A Confirmation preparation program for teens with special needs is being prepared.

Opening Doors – Ensuring easy accessibility to parish facilities. This includes making sure that parking spaces are clearly marked and that doors and bathrooms also are identified and in proper working order for the physically challenged.

Opening Hearts – Establishing a parish survey to see if any parishioner's needs are not being met. These needs include services, programs and transportation for those unable to attend Mass, as well as educating our youth in the faith and getting hearing aids to those who need them for Mass.

So far, the committee's accomplishments include the installation of cameras in the church. This allows the Mass to be seen in other areas, such as the Gathering Room vestibule, for persons with disabilities who cannot sit through an entire service. Also, an automatic door has been installed in the Gathering Room vestibule for persons using wheelchairs and walkers. A wheelchair-accessible bathroom is located in this area.

Many changes at our parish have resulted from the committee's monthly meetings. Anyone can attend. Meetings are held on Mondays at 7 p.m. in the school art room. For more information, call Joan Rischmiller at 688-5760 ext. 358, or email [jrischmiller@stgregs.org](mailto:jrischmiller@stgregs.org), or call Sister Maureen Fanning at 688-5678 ext. 340. The remaining meeting schedule is as follows:

Feb. 11, 2008

March – No Meeting

April 7 – (last meeting until September 2008)

A diocesan picnic will be held on Saturday, July 19, 2008, from 12:30 to 3:30 p.m. at the St. Greg's Ministry Center for persons of all ages with disabilities and their families. For more information, contact Sharon Urbaniak at 847-5514.