



# International Day of people with Disability

By **Janette Davidson**, Disability Services Committee

The International Day of People with Disability is celebrated on 3 December and each year the United Nations announces a theme. This year's theme is "Removing barriers to create an inclusive and accessible society for all".

Much work has been undertaken in our Diocese this year to appropriate the theme into our local parish communities including the following:

- 1 A **Disability Services Committee** has been formed with membership from Centacare, Catholic Schools Office, Parish Support Unit, the "Disability Focus Group" and chaired by the Executive Officer to Bishop David:
- 2 A **Survey** was made available to people with a disability, their families and carers via parishes, schools, Centacare, *Broken Bay News* and local newspapers with 245 replies being received. The primary issues identified by people with disabilities, their families and carers were in the areas of: Social connection within parish communities; Spiritual nourishment by being able to participate in parish programs and events; Employment opportunities; Accommodation needs.

A **Disability Forum "Gather Us In"** was held on Thursday 20 September 2012 with representatives from parishes around the Diocese and interested persons to hear input from speakers with expertise in the areas of concern outlined in the survey responses. Speakers included Trish Mowbray, Disability Advisor to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference; Leonie Reid, co-

ordinator of the "Personal Advocacy Program", a social and spiritual program for young adults with an intellectual disability (Archdiocese of Perth) and Deacon Anthony Gooley, co-ordinator of the "Capacity and Confidence Program" a parish-based initiative to support people with a disability, their families and carers (Archdiocese of Brisbane). The presenters generated much enthusiasm, ideas and many resources on how to address the concerns identified in the survey responses included:

- Strategies for raising awareness of the needs of people with disability and their families;
- Ways of identifying and expanding communication links with people with disabilities in our parish communities;
- Ideas on how to further develop the inclusiveness of liturgies in parishes/regions;
- Identifying ways to increase involvement of people with disabilities in Mass, parish ministries and parish social occasions;
- Raising awareness of the extensive services provided by Centacare, Broken Bay and facilitating access to these services by parish communities.

Feedback from participants at the Forum included: "A wonderful day! Excellent presentations, especially Deacon Gooley. The day was very enjoyable and provided some great resource ideas and materials." "The Forum allowed me to connect with other carers in nearby parishes and the presenters provided excellent information on how parishes can include people with disabilities in parish life and a checklist for parishes to look at access etc. for those with limited mobility."

Recommendations from the Forum are being reviewed and will be promoted by the Disability Services Committee in collaboration with parishes, agencies and external providers.

The **Social Justice Statement for 2012 – 2013** is "The Gift of Family in Difficult Times". In this Statement families with disabled children were identified as one of the most vulnerable. Sr Meg Tallafer, Co-ordinator of the Diocesan Social Justice Ministry believes that opportunities may arise for some parish Social Justice Groups to work collaboratively to support initiatives in this area as the year progresses.

On Sunday 11 November Bishop David celebrated the **Annual Mass for people with disabilities and their families**. Susan Lee, a member of the Disability Services Committee and parishioner of St Bernard's Berowra shared her experience of the day. "Some 100 people raised the roof of St Bernard's Church, Berowra in praise and worship. We began the celebration of the Eucharist with a Remembrance Procession to honour those of our friends who have died since we last met. People of all abilities participated in what has become a joyful, uplifting experience for all those who have attended over the many years we have held this Mass. It gives me much pleasure to be amongst so many people whose spirituality knows no bounds."

Many parishes are already responding positively and sensitively to the concerns of people with disabilities, their families and carers and we look forward to continuing and consolidating initiatives enhancing our parishes as inclusive and accessible communities.

