



# Providing a Place for Persons with Special Needs

- discover with a purpose.
- make and initiate contacts.
- move into the community and into homes.
- search out nontraditional areas for caring such as in group homes.

“That boy won’t hurt you.”

I remember that Dad paused a few seconds before responding to my comments. I remember an evening worship service, a small church building in early summer with open windows, and insects flying toward the ceiling lights. I remember the scent of Dad’s after-shave and the strength in his powerful body as I leaned against him. As a seven-year-old I had never seen a person with cerebral palsy before. I remember the young man’s short-sleeved shirt and the friend or brother who sat next to him. I remember the young man’s twisted facial features and jerky movements. He smiled at me. I remember my fear and curiosity. I remember trying to tell Dad about it as we walked home after



---

church. I remember Dad's sensitivity to my unspoken question. I remember that his acceptance of that young man's presence at worship laid a foundation of acceptance in me.

This chapter is about discovering and enlisting people to study the Bible. It is about welcoming the people we know and meet to our Bible studies and times of worship. That means we do not assume they want to come, or that they know we want them to come. It means expending effort and energy to invite people to our churches. It involves making plans to meet specific goals.

Persons with disabilities are like you and me. As a matter of fact, when it comes down to it, they are you and me. But often, persons with disabilities are called *exceptional people* because they are the exception to the way the majority acts, thinks, and learns. These people often need special education interventions or special adaptive aids to help them learn, get around, or communicate. The range of persons is wide with an even wider range of needs.

Are you a pastor or a deacon? Do you teach a Sunday School class or sing in the choir? Are you the minister of education or the Sunday School director? Do you direct a Baptist association or a state Baptist convention? Are you a staff person or state Baptist convention worker who happens to have a disability? When was the first time you encountered a person with physical or mental disabilities? Did you discover and enlist such a person to study the Bible at your church? How?

The purpose of this book is to remind us the church needs to be a place for everyone, regardless of their needs, and many exceptional people and their families living in our communities are waiting for us to reach out and involve them in our churches. It is important that we include all persons in the life and work of the local church. All of us, including those with special needs, combine to create the mosaic of a church family.

## Discovering with a Purpose

More than fifty-four million Americans have disabilities. It is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of a community's population will include exceptional people. Many states provide for six-to-eight different types of special needs in their public school districts. These special needs may include those who are:

- mentally handicapped.
- physically disabled.
- visually impaired or blind.
- learning disabled.
- hearing impaired or deaf.
- multidisabled.
- behavior disordered.
- exceptionally bright.

For any one person with disabilities, there are 2 to 4 family members who are affected by the disability. Many of these millions are unsaved and unchurched. Over 90 percent of all churches do not have any type of purposeful ministry in any of the areas of special education.

This "Letter to the Editor" was written by an angry mother: "Children with mental handicaps are not welcomed in churches. Children's programs are for everyone, but not for the child who cannot



# CHAPTER 1

---

think and do things like children her own age. Children's programs in most churches are well-planned for children who can perform at their age level or better, but they are not for the child with mental handicaps. My child and I cannot be a part of your church. Churches do not want my child with mental handicaps."

Whether a church could minister to that child in traditional ways or would need to develop a ministry unique to that situation, the mother's cry for acceptance for her child and herself echoes throughout every state. This mother expressed her frustration publicly. Many families do not.

I met a friend who told me about his profoundly mentally handicapped son who lives in an institution in another state.

"You're the first person in this state I've ever told about him. My wife and I decided to keep our heartache to ourselves."

His colleague spoke with me later. "You know, most people don't know that our son is a paraplegic. He's grown, and the accident happened after he was married. We decided not to burden others with our problems."

Persons with special needs, or their family members, are found in every strata, every age group of the church. From departments for the youngest of babies to the most senior of adults, each has someone who is touched by disabilities.

## Areas of Special Education

*Mental retardation* is a condition which causes a person's intellectual and social development to be much lower than most other persons of the same age. Three levels of mental retardation are:

mild

moderate

severe/profound

A *visual impairment* is a condition which causes a person's vision to be 20/200 or worse, even with the aid of corrective lenses.

A person with a *learning disability* has *normal or higher intelligence* but has problems in understanding language which may result in low levels of ability in:

listening  
writing

thinking  
spelling

talking  
math

reading  
memory

*Gifted* refers to significantly above-average intelligence or talents that require special attention to nurture and develop.

A *physical disability* is a *permanent* condition which hinders a person's ability to carry out the activities of daily living by a limitation of movement.

A *multiple handicap* is any combination of two or more disabilities.

Other areas of special education:

- deaf/hearing impairments
- speech impairments
- traumatic brain injury
- behavior disorders
- autism

# PROVIDING A PLACE FOR PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

---

Reaching out means we have tools in place to minister to their needs. Reaching out means we meet people who, in turn, minister to us.

- Our friend David is a math whiz with an aptitude for mechanics. He is also deaf. His talents are well-used as he teaches other deaf people the Bible.
- Ramon's legs were cut off at his knees in the line of duty. He is not a patrol officer any more, but he still does an excellent job leading a men's Bible study.
- Mrs. Carmichael spent her last years confined to bed. She spent her days praying for each member of our church.
- Eric is so bright! His insights challenge us; yet his questions cause us to look beyond pat answers and explore the depths and riches of the Bible
- MaryAnn told me that the years spent as Nora's advocate have been more rewarding for her than for Nora. "I may have been there to help Nora make decisions about where to live and how to manage her money, but she has taught me more about the things in life that really count!"

Reaching out and discovering people means following the example of Jesus Christ who ministered to people with disabilities and showed us God's love and pronouncement of worth is for all persons.

## Making Contacts

Do you feel impressed to develop a ministry for persons with disabilities? Does your church currently support some type of ministry? How do you contact the people who would benefit from this ministry?

Start by being truly aware of the people around you every day. Remember the three simple words we had to repeat as children? *Stop, Look, and Listen* before you cross the street. Those three words hold powerful implications in other things we do such as relating to people. *Stop, Look, and Listen* to the needs of people around you.

- Get acquainted with the co-worker who is the parent of a disabled child.
- Listen to the woman who checks your groceries at your favorite market as she tells you about her husband who had a stroke.
- Attend a parent-support-group meeting. Those parents are anxious to tell you about their children.
- Survey your church members to discover people who should be reached through such a ministry.
- Develop friendships with exceptional people and engage in everyday things that both of you can do such as going out to eat or to see a movie, talking, or taking part in sporting events.
- Be a volunteer in your local school programs. Learn about the services your community provides to persons with disabilities. Become informed about the different exceptionalities. Get to know children's names.
- Volunteer at local and state events. Contact your local chapter of the Arc (formerly Association for Retarded Citizens). Be a host at Special Olympics events. Offer to let a support group use your church building once a month; provide refreshments and childcare services free-of-charge.
- Talk. Start a word-of-mouth campaign. Ask your friends to introduce you to their friends who have disabilities. Get names, addresses, and phone numbers so you can call or write people directly. Tell them your church has or is beginning a ministry for people with disabilities and ask if they would like to be part of it.

## Discovery in the Community

Advertise. Let others know what you are doing. Be visible.

Develop a brochure about the ministry. Distribute the brochure at stores and at your public library.

# CHAPTER 1

---

Make certain the ministry is listed on every type of publicity piece your church uses: brochures, Yellow Pages™ ads, or bulletins. Decorate a bulletin board in a well-used concourse in your church building.

Be an active member of one of the support groups you have encountered.

Host an Information Day in your church fellowship hall. Invite all agencies and churches who provide services and ministry to disabled persons in your community. Ask each agency and church to set up a booth to provide information about the services they provide.

## Discovery in Homes

More than most groups, exceptional people and their families need to see your sincerity. A visit into their home or an invitation to your home is the most powerful contact you can make. These people are delighted to share about themselves and their daily routines. Parents of children who are disabled especially encourage you to see how they work with their child at home and to ask questions about how you can transfer that knowledge to your class. Plan and prepare your visits. Call ahead to make an appointment. Adjust your schedule to fit the family's schedule.

Arrive on time.

Always take a class member or another teacher with you.

Have a purpose for going. Take a church brochure or worship bulletin to prospects. Also, take the latest copy of appropriate literature or other helps for the parent or caregiver.

Keep the visit brief. Be genuine and friendly. Don't be afraid to ask questions that will help you be a better teacher.

Visit in the home of each regular attender at least twice each year. Make note of any information about the learner or her family to share with other church workers or church members.

If the prospect is a child or an adult with a mental handicap, take a self-developing picture of her and the other teacher (or a class member). Give the picture to the child to keep in her room as a reminder of your visit. Or give her a picture of the group of teachers in your department. This will help her "know" the teachers before she comes to Sunday School. Play an audiocassette recording of a greeting and invitation from class members. Show a photo album of members and their activities.

One teacher of youth likes "pop-in parties." After making proper arrangements, he and two class members take soft drinks and snacks and "pop in" to a prospect's home for an impromptu get-together.

Record each visit you make.

## Discovery in Group Homes

Many adults with mental handicaps don't live in traditional home settings. Throughout the country the familiar group home where 10 to 15 adults live in a congregate setting is being replaced with down-sized living arrangements. You may find that adults in your area of the country are living in a house of 3-to-8 persons plus live-in house staff.

It is important that you know the types of adult residential centers that operate in your area and that you are known to the people who work in those centers or oversee the program. The house staff often changes each week. Meet each set of house managers so that they know you and your interest.

Know the name and interests of each person living in the same home with your class member.

Invite the entire group home to class parties and special events

Volunteer to help with at least one group-home activity each year. Act as a sponsor or provide refreshments.

# PROVIDING A PLACE FOR PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

---

Sponsor a fun night one Friday each month. Invite all the group homes in your area. Meet at the church. Ask house managers to provide transportation to and from the church. Some house managers may be required to stay with the group because of certain medical conditions. Otherwise, invite them to enjoy a “managers night out” for two hours. Play games, provide snacks, and sing songs; tell the Bible story from the next week’s lesson; and do an activity to reinforce biblical truths.

Conduct a session of Vacation Bible School one night each week for five weeks.

Offer to take individuals shopping each week.

Form a network of people who would each be willing to invite group-home residents to their houses for a holiday. Many persons living in group homes do not have a place to go, especially on Christmas. Be sensitive to residents who do not receive birthday or Christmas presents.

Know that agencies across the country are helping people live in apartments without the aid of full-time staff. Do not forget to include these persons in your group home ministry.

*Providing a place* means planning and providing for persons with disabilities because:

- God loves them.
- Jesus ministered to them.
- millions of people need to be part of the church.
- all other ministries can benefit.
- persons with special needs minister to you.
- the rewards are positive.
- such ministry is evangelistic.

# CHAPTER 1

## Q&A

Do you know anyone like this? Place check marks by the ones that apply.

- a young child who wears leg braces
- a parent of a physically or mentally handicapped child
- a highly intelligent, but troubled, teen
- an adult who has suffered a stroke
- a group-home resident
- a person who is deaf

Write the names of two persons you know who have disabilities but do not go to church. Pray for them now. Thank God for their lives. Ask Him to show you how you can enlist them in Bible study.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_

Look in your area telephone directory for names of support organizations, schools, or work centers for persons with disabilities. List here three of the names and telephone numbers.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Give seven reasons why your church should reach out to persons with disabilities.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
5. \_\_\_\_\_  
6. \_\_\_\_\_  
7. \_\_\_\_\_

## A MOTHER'S PRAYER

The following prayer is dedicated to teachers who have helped my son and others like him. May this be the prayer of all who are dedicated to God's work.

*Dear Lord,*

*I lift up my child, who has a disability, to You for Your love and care. I praise Your name for the mighty works seen through prayer already answered.*

*Teach me to forgive and love, as You forgive and love me, those who are jealous of our accomplishments and those who cannot endure our failures.*

*I pray that my child will be able to awake each morning with anticipation of the purposeful pursuit of the day. I pray for a quality life with activities, work, school, or play appropriate to his chronological age; for an independent life suited to his special needs; for a life with dignity, accomplishment, and acceptance.*

*Please open the eyes of people called by Your name, because they will be the instruments by which you answer this prayer.*

*Amen*