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The Special Need of the Local Church

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The Special Need of the Local Church

All around this world are individuals with special needs who are seeking to find a place where they truly belong: “According to a 2010 U.S. Census study, 56.7 million Americans, or about one in five U.S. residents have a disability” (Lee 40). With such a statistic, an individual with special needs is bound to be found in almost every church across the U.S. In her book *Leading a Special Needs Ministry*, Amy Fenton Lee states, “Congregations with a regular attendance from eighty to eight thousand are both impacted, as children with neurological and physical disabilities seek inclusion” (36). Many churches realize the presence of those with special needs but place them off to the side, failing to provide an environment where they may thrive: “Children with disabilities too often find that the church doesn’t truly welcome or truly value them. There simply isn’t a place for these children when kids scamper off to Sunday school classes on Sunday morning” (“The Need for Special Needs Ministries”). Without the acceptance and care they need, some families of those with special needs are left with no choice but to stay at home on Sundays. This may seem outrageous to some, but it is many times the sad reality for those with special needs and their families. Many individuals fail to remember that those with special needs are also created in the image of God and deserve to be included in the dynamic of the local church as much as anyone else. Local churches should establish ministries in order to provide children, youth, and adults with special needs the means to receive the gospel,

discipleship, and a sense of community in an environment unique to their situations and behaviors.

While several individuals may see the necessity of a special needs ministry in their local churches, they sometimes shy away from establishing such a ministry for various reasons. In her article “Four Reasons Not to Have a Special Needs Ministry (And Why They Are Ridiculous),” Sandra Peoples discusses why some churches choose not to have this type of ministry. Many churches give excuses such as fearing that it may ruin the way their community views their church, not having proper expenses for the ministry, or not having adequate volunteers to support such a ministry (Peoples). While many people may view these ideas as valid, in reality, there is no legitimacy to these objections. All people have been created in the image of God, and, as followers of Jesus, believers in the local church should seek to share the love of Christ with all people by inviting them into their church family, including those individuals with special needs. When looking at the costs for a special needs ministry, the additions to be made are not nearly as extensive as many may think. Peoples states, “The truth is, it doesn’t have to cost much more to be inclusive. If you already print bulletins, consider printing a few in large print. If you already have toys in the nursery, consider adding some recommended for kids with sensory issues next time you buy new ones.” When considering the subject of volunteers, many churches fail to realize that they may have many individuals in their congregation who are qualified to serve in this capacity such as therapists or special education teachers, and other individuals may have a heart to serve with those who have special needs. Thus, churches do not have any sound reasons for not having a special needs ministry.

However, some churches do realize the need for such a ministry and want to reach out to those with special needs, but they are not sure even how to begin such a ministry without going

all in, which holds the potential to be both chaotic and overwhelming to a church. While the goal is to eventually have a full-blown ministry, churches should seek to start off small, gradually creating more opportunities and events for the special needs individuals. For example, my home church, Richland Creek Community Church, began a special needs ministry in 2013. To launch this ministry, we began having monthly “respite.” Parents of special needs children were able to drop off their children at our church for a few hours while they enjoyed some time for themselves. During these “respite,” we were able to love on these special needs children, playing with them, learning more about them, and, most importantly, teaching them about Jesus. We then began teaching a special needs Sunday school class for these children every week, allowing those families from our community who came for “respite” to be welcomed back and become a part of our church family. Our ministry then expanded from not just including children to providing a Sunday school class for middle and high school individuals with special needs, as well as Wednesday night classes for both age groups. We are constantly growing, holding multiple Sunday school classes a week, Wednesday night classes, and monthly “respite.” While we are definitely not perfect, we hope that our special needs ministry may pose as a pattern for other churches beginning to establish this type of ministry, as we together seek to help those with special needs “become full participants and contributors in the body of Christ” (Waterman qtd. in Allen).

By providing those with special needs with their own ministry, local churches would have the opportunity to reach individuals with special needs with the gospel in a way that they may be able to better understand and accept. In Luke 19.10, Jesus declares: “For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” As Christians, those in the local church should follow Christ’s example and seek to share the good news of Christ with everyone they encounter, especially

those who are disabled and often looked down on. Followers of Christ in the local church should treat individuals with special needs in the same way they treat any other individuals, willing to do whatever it takes to have the gospel communicated to them clearly. In her article “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors: Including Children with Special Needs in Ministry,” Alyssa M. Barnes states, “Including individuals with disabilities was an essential component of Jesus’ ministry. For example, Jesus told a follower in Luke 14.21, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ Jesus wanted the church to be full with all people, so everyone could have the opportunity to know God’s grace.” In her article “The Gospel of Luke: A Framework for a Theology of Disability,” Kathy McReynolds says: “[D]isability ministry is not merely an option for the church; it is the very essence of the gospel. The gospel message is good news for all, but especially for the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. They are wholeheartedly welcome into the kingdom of God, and the church must also embrace them with open arms.”

In the setting of a special needs ministry, volunteers would be able to work with the individuals with special needs one on one in order to communicate with them in a way that suits their behavior and disability. With this opportunity, special needs children, youth, and adults would be given an opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel in an environment where other helpers would be able to listen and communicate with special needs individuals according to their specific needs in order to make sure they understand the gospel clearly, no matter how long it takes for them to respond. This type of environment provides special needs individuals with a safe place where they can take time to hear, process, and eventually accept the gospel of Christ, if they choose to do so. This is the ultimate goal of establishing such a ministry, as it is the will of God to see all come to know Him as Lord and Savior, whether they have disabilities or not.

In addition to giving these individuals an outlet to hear the gospel in a way they can better comprehend, a special needs ministry provides individuals an environment where they may be disciplined in an environment with other special needs individuals who share the same behaviors. After accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior, special needs individuals should be given opportunities to receive the same type of discipleship as other members of the church receive. In her book *Leading a Special Needs Ministry*, Amy Fenton Lee discusses the benefits of having a self-contained special needs setting and says that, by offering individuals with special needs classes on Sunday mornings where they can be taught various Bible stories and lessons using visual aids and modified learning exercises, local churches can give those individuals an environment where they are free to be themselves, without focusing on behaving in a socially acceptable way. When the individuals are freed in this way, they are able to really engage in the Bible lessons and the relationships with those around them (Lee 64). This gives them the opportunity to grow in their faith in Christ. Along with providing them with a conducive learning environment, a special needs ministry provides a setting for those with special needs where they have the opportunity to reach out and even disciple those around them, both other individuals with special needs and the volunteers who serve them. In her article “The Gospel of Luke: A Framework for a Theology of Disability,” Kathy McReynolds says, “Too often ministry to people with disabilities is seen as moving in only one direction. However, when those with disabilities have found themselves in Christ, they are mighty ministers and witnesses to the grace, love, and mercy of the Savior. As God uses their physical or mental brokenness for his glory, they become teachers to the church and to the world.”

Too often, those who have special needs are looked down on as outcasts of society, not having any place in which they truly “belong.” Orsmond states:

Researchers investigating the friendships of individuals with disabilities report students with disabilities have few relationships outside of their family and paid support staff. In a research study investigating the friendships of teenagers and adults with an autism diagnosis, 46% of individuals were reports having no friends of similar ages. (Orsmond et. al., 2004, qtd. in Barnes)

This disheartening statistic should motivate followers of Christ in the local churches to create a place where individuals with special needs may be able to form friendships with those their age who share the same behavioral tendencies as them. A special needs ministry offers those with special needs an environment where they may be able to be themselves without worrying about being socially accepted, and they can enjoy community with other individuals that are in the same age range and who may have the same disabilities. Providing individuals with special needs with the type of safe learning environment discussed earlier, the local church offers these individuals a place where meaningful friendships may develop as these individuals learn about Christ and fellowship with each other on a weekly basis.

By developing this type of ministry, the local church would be able to offer individuals with special needs opportunities to understand the gospel, to be discipled as well as reach out to others who share their disabilities, and to form meaningful friendships with those in the ministry setting. While there are objections to beginning such a ministry, none of them is sound, and local churches should follow Christ's example to accept all who come to their church, seeking to do everything in their power to love as Christ loves. All people should be reached with the good news of Jesus Christ, and a special needs ministry provides a place where individuals with special needs may be able to process this message and come to faith in Christ. This type of ministry would offer these individuals an environment where they may learn Biblical truths,

grow in their relationship with Christ, and reach out to those in the ministry and beyond. A special needs ministry also provides a source of fellowship where long-lasting friendships with other individuals with special needs may be formed. Such a ministry would bring unimaginable joy to those with special needs and their families, as there would be a place offered to them where they truly do belong. In Matthew 25.40, Jesus says, “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” May the body of Christ seek to follow His example and share the love and gospel of Jesus with “the least of these,” equipping a special group of individuals who have incredible potential to transform the world. These individuals themselves are a testament to His love and grace and are lights shining out into our dark and broken world.

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