

## Ministry to Kids With Special Needs: Overcoming the Challenges

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More houses of worship in America are looking less homogenous and more representative of the national melting pot. However, one population remains grossly underrepresented in America's congregations: individuals with special needs. The number of Americans with disabilities, impairments or limitations is equivalent to the combined populations of Florida and California. Between 2002 and 2005 this population grew by three percent. Today, almost one in five Americans is a person with special needs.

Many places of worship are considering and implementing ways to include people with special needs. And more churches are pioneering a path (beyond mere "accommodation") as they engage persons with special needs and their families. However, for the average church with no special needs ministry or one still in its infancy, many obstacles remain. Fear silently lurks inside of our churches. Staff members may see a special needs ministry as a potentially taxing program competing for both limited volunteers and shrinking budgets. Others worry of the liability in a litigious environment. After interviewing pastors and lay leaders who have chosen to champion special needs outreach, I found a common emerging theme of perseverance and God's provision.

### Responding to a Call on Faith

Laura DiFatta sensed a call to start a special needs ministry after watching her sister and young niece experience rejection at a church's nursery check-in. Laura's niece was diagnosed with Rett syndrome, a condition requiring one-on-one care. The nursery worker turned away her niece and informed Laura's sister that the church simply wasn't prepared to provide care for special needs children. Laura's heart was broken when she witnessed the obstacles that her sister faced just to attend worship. Not long after the disappointing nursery experience, Laura presented to her own church's leadership with a thoughtful and practical ministry plan to welcome and minister with children with special needs. Laura said that getting that ministry off the ground required more grace, patience, and negotiation skills than she naturally possessed. In 2003, within a year of Laura's ministry vision, Dawson Baptist Church (Birmingham, Alabama) launched its "Hearts & Hands" children's program.

Since the ministry's inception, Laura has grown deeper in her own faith. "If you're called to a ministry, you've got to trust God to work out the details," she said. Laura laughs as she recounted times when she doubted that God was working on those "details." In review, Laura sees God's hand at work when an upcoming event was very short on volunteers. While each event required careful planning and personnel management, volunteers miraculously appear more often than not. In addition, the "Hearts & Hands" volunteer team today includes individuals who were originally skeptical of the proposed ministry six years ago. Moving stories have emerged inside the congregation where families have come to know Christ simply because the special needs member had a welcome place at Dawson. Those stories serve as the greatest form of volunteer recruitment for the ministry.

### Trusting in God's Provision

God has a plan for each child. And that plan often reaches beyond our understanding. Since God is in control of these wonderfully created children, so too does God control the ministries that touch their lives. While the churches with special needs programming are required to pull from their general budget, additional resources usually come from outside and unexpected sources. The stories are often similar: the ministry is begun on faith and with no special financial provision. As the program is launched, a family touched by the ministry or an anonymous church member steps forward with a designated gift. Individuals from the congregation with ties to foundations may emerge and available grants come to light. In addition, some churches participate in community outreach in a way that qualifies them for outside grants.

In 1996, Virginia's McLean Bible Church recognized that four children with special needs required an appropriate environment for their own spiritual formation. Thirteen years later, its "Access" disability ministry has grown to serve 500 families in the Washington D.C. area. McLean Bible's program is widely considered one of the most comprehensive and innovative faith-based special needs programs in the nation. One component of the financial provision for McLean Bible's Access ministry is through their published "Wish List." McLean features their Access wish list on its Web site and makes periodic pushes for wish list donations during worship services. Jackie Mills-Fernald, director of McLean Bible Church's disability ministry observes, "Rarely do we purchase crafts or food supplies anymore. The wish list allows church members just one way to feel a part of the ministry even if they aren't volunteering their time."

### Leading the Way

Ten years ago Darby Gillam was a busy mother of four children, one with Down's syndrome. As Darby's child with special needs approached the fifth grade, she realized he was not thriving in his age-appropriate Sunday school class at South Cliff Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. The dilemma did not have an obvious solution because Darby's son needed more devoted attention, either amidst his same-age peers, or in a teacher/room setting more conducive to his learning style. Darby and her husband approached the senior pastor at South Cliff with the idea and willingness to be a part of a special needs ministry. Darby shares, "Not only was our pastor receptive, he then developed a vision for the program and weaved the ministry into the mission of the church."

Pastoral and staff support (or lack thereof) is often the greatest determinant for the success of a special needs ministry. Louise Tucker Jones, co-author of *Extraordinary Kids* (Focus on the Family) and *Special Needs, Special Ministry* (Group), says that "behind the most effective special needs programs you will find a church staff passionately cheering on the ministry." Staff and congregation members' attitudes are largely shaped by the senior leaders' emphasis on the special needs population. Whether or not a church has a staff designate, and especially an advocate, for the special needs ministry is crucial. In cases where a layperson champions the ministry, it is especially important this volunteer leader advocates the ministry among church decision makers.

When the staff and congregation offer encouragement, there is almost always a broader support of a special needs ministry. Every person interviewed for this article noted that his or her ministry experiences a surge in congregational interest the week after it receives any amount of Sunday worship spotlight.

### **Engaging Secular Professionals**

At this point in time, the best training and education for creating a welcoming environment for the special needs community lies outside religious circles. Jackie Mills-Fernald of McLean Bible Church explains, "Volunteer retention hinges on equipping them properly. Our best resources for learning how to handle common issues in special needs environments have come from specialists outside of the faith-based community." Rather than wait for colleges and seminaries to catch up and provide appropriate training, McLean Bible's Access ministry has engaged secular specialists in its local area including special education teachers, intervention specialists, pediatric occupational and physical therapists, and liaisons from various government sponsored programs. Jackie now serves on several county boards and commissions, as she has earned a place of influence in the greater special needs community.

Learning the terminology of the special needs population is a challenge for churches. "But the good news is that it doesn't require a trained professional to pursue that knowledge and understanding," explains Louise Tucker Jones. "It just takes someone interested enough and willing to connect with the professionals." Jackie Mills-Fernald of McLean Bible has been such a person. Jackie began in 1996 as a volunteer in McLean's Access ministry. Along the way, Jackie developed a passion for special needs outreach and eventually left her secular consulting career to join McLean's staff. Over the last decade Jackie has surrounded herself with secular experts so to equip the Access ministry team to convey Jesus' message in a way people with special needs best understand.

Amy Fenton Lee writes to equip and inspire church leaders. Amy, her husband, and young son are active in the ministries of Perimeter Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

### **Best Practices for Special Needs Ministries**

- Pray for the ministry and individual participants.
- Train volunteer buddies in special needs' care and vocabulary.
- Create a buddy rotation of regular volunteers for each child.
- Maintain updated information sheets or questionnaires on each child for his or her buddy's access.
- Have parents update the information sheet/questionnaire yearly and as needed.
- Host a buddy team & parent meeting for each new ministry participant.
- Keep a bin of favorite games and books for each individual.
- Require ministry volunteers to sign a confidentiality statement.
- Accompany and model interaction with program participants for new buddy volunteers.
- Offer both mainstream classroom inclusion and stand-alone special needs environments, and use the buddy system for both environments.
- Recognize that the same child may float between the two settings (inclusion or stand-alone) either in a single day or at different points in their development.

- Provide the weekly program coordinator with a pager to expedite response time during ministry activities.
- Create emergency plans for children with life-threatening health issues (allergies, seizure disorders, etc.)
- Create special parking spaces or offer free valet services.
- Place trained greeters at every entrance where persons with a disability may potentially enter.
- Build a network of secular educated professionals. Invite their participation in a ministry advisory board.
- With a family's permission, attend an outside therapy activity to understand how a program participant learns best.
- Utilize music! Many individuals with special needs have profound appreciation for music.
- Assist other family members' integration into their respective education environments.
- Facilitate introductions between a family and other ministries and staff members. Assist in building the family's in-church support team.
- Encourage interaction between families of typical children and those with special needs.
- Utilize various environments to educate the congregation. For example, young parents may appreciate hearing a pediatric therapist address common developmental milestones and disorders of their special needs child.

### **Resources**

- Special Needs, Special Ministry, by Jim Pierson, Louise Tucker Jones, and Pat Verbal (Group).
- Extraordinary Kids, by Cheri Fuller & Louise Tucker Jones (Focus on the Family).
- 2010 Accessibility Summit, sponsored by McLean Bible Church (mcleanbible.org), to equip church leaders to develop ministries for special needs persons.
- Zachariah's Way (zachariahsway.com), a nonprofit group that helps churches minister to special needs people and their families.

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