

Biblical Basis for Inclusion



A Powerful Expression of the Kingdom

What Happens When a Church Embraces a Ministry with Children with Hidden Disabilities and Their Families

Introduction

Why should a local church go to the trouble of providing a special ministry for Andrew, a six year old boy with autism? Why should a church have to recruit a “buddy” for Sarah, an eight year old with ADHD? Why should a church provide a support group for the Crawfords, parents of a child adopted from Romania who has an intellectual disability?

Launching and sustaining a special needs ministry is hard! It requires great commitment and the investment of significant resources, especially human resources. So, why should a local church, already stretched by a myriad of needs, demands, and desires, get into the challenges of a special needs ministry?

The answer that perhaps first comes to mind is this: *“To be Christ-like is to be compassionate. It is a ‘good thing to do’ to extend the care of the church to families who have children with special needs.”* If it is your primary motivation and justification for “trying” a special needs ministry in your church, you probably shouldn’t even get started!

Yes, Christians are called to be compassionate, and the church is called to extend ministry to all people and all circumstances. Yet, these are more attributes to bring to the ministry, not the motivation for making it happen. The call of a special needs ministry goes much deeper.

Facing the Realities

It is believed that 90% of families having children with special needs are not a regular part of the church community. The reasons should be obvious. Why go to a place where your child will be seen as a problem, or where your parenting will be questioned? Life is hard enough. The last thing you need is another hassle!

When a family with a child with special needs is excluded, or excludes themselves from the church three tragedies occur:

1. That child is denied the love and support of the Christian community and their witness to that child of God’s love in Jesus.
2. That child’s family is also denied the support and witness of the faith community, in the midst of circumstances that put tremendous stress on the family.
3. The family of faith is denied the blessing and gifts of the child and the family that have been excluded. And, in that denial, that church diminishes its experience and demonstration of the presence of God’s kingdom here on earth today.

The Heart of the Ministry – Jesus’ Proclamation of His Kingdom

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Luke 4:14-21 records Jesus' "Inaugural Address." In an inaugural address, the speaker seeks to declare the purpose, the objective, and the tone of their administration. "This is what I want my presidency (my administration, my reign) to be about!" is the topic of the address.

Who is This Man?

Jesus had just begun his public ministry. After his baptism by John, and his temptation in the wilderness, he had begun to move around Galilee teaching and ministering. Word about him was spreading. "Who is this man?" people asked. "What is his agenda? What is He about?"

Verse 14-17 "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written."

As often was the case, Jesus took a rather common event and made it extraordinary! He went to Nazareth, his home town. On the Sabbath, he went to the service at the synagogue, "as was his custom." It was also customary to ask someone in the congregation to read from the law and the prophets. It was a common courtesy to ask a visiting dignitary, or a returning son, or a respected member to read from the the prophets or passage of their selecton; and, if they desired, to offer a brief comment on the passage. Given Jesus' growing fame as a religious teacher, it is not surprising that he was invited to read.

Verse 18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The passage he chose was one that was well known and loved. It spoke of that day – that sweet wonderful day – when God would graciously – and dramatically – step into this messed-up world – restore Israel to her rightful place as the chief of all nations – and under her leadership and under Jehovah – justice, mercy, freedom would span the earth. Then this moment became different from every other Sabbath service ever held in history! Look with me at verses 20-21. He returned the scroll and sat down – the normal position for teaching. Everyone leaned forward to hear what he needed to day. He had gained such a reputation as a teacher. What would happen? He began with words they never expected to hear, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" This statement, I am sure, was long discussed and debated. "What did he mean? Isn't this Joseph's son? Yet, there is something different about him!"

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We, of course, have the advantage of hindsight. We have the experience of studying from this side of the cross and the empty tomb. We do not need to endlessly debate and discuss the meaning of that statement. God has made clear the truth. Jesus is the fulfillment of the plans and programs of God, and the hopes and dreams of the prophets, and the longings of his people. Once again, we are reminded that the Christian faith stands – or falls – upon the person of Jesus Christ.

Look again at verse 18. It begins “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me...” Jesus is not just another talented guy with leadership skills. Jesus is chosen of God, the anointed one of God, the one uniquely set apart and sent to accomplish God’s purposes and plans. He is appointed and anointed! “This is my beloved Son,” the Father declared at his transfiguration, (Mark 9:7), “Listen to Him.” We do not listen to Jesus because he says what we want to hear or even because he speaks the truth. We listen to him because he is the truth.

What does He offer?

What is the “chosen one” going to do? “He brings good news, to proclaim release and recovery and to be free.” It is amazing – and tragic – how many people see God as a celestial “kill-joy” whose primary job is keeping people from having too much fun. Think about it. When you picture a “religious person,” what do you picture? A person of exuberance, life, vitality or one who meekly sits in a corner thinking thoughts of God and staying out of trouble? Christ’s message and work is one of liberation and freedom and life! He comes not to destroy – but to free, to release, to empower!

Who are the recipients?

Who are the recipients – who are the beneficiaries of this liberating work? – “the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.” Every society has those that they write off as being useless, helpless or hopeless. We rather casually place people into three categories: (1) Those who have great potential and can make it pretty much on their own, (2) those with potential, but need some help, and (3) those who aren’t going to make it no matter what you do. The work and mission of Jesus reaches to the deepest places of brokenness and pain – “the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed” – those that, in his day, were seen as beyond hope.

Not only does his work liberate and free those who are most broken, it also declares that it is often not until we see ourselves as “the least of these,” that we can embrace the freedom, the new life that he brings.

It has been said that affluent suburbs in America are the most difficult of all mission fields. Not that it is the hardest place to build a church and gather a large congregation, but is the most difficult place to let go of our own dependency on things, our pride and self-sufficiency and receive the new life of freedom in Christ.

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Demonstrations and Signposts of the Kingdom

Look also at verse 20 – “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” With Jesus a new rule has begun. The hold of Satan in the world has been overcome, a new reign has begun. The rich joy of the poor, the newfound freedom of the captives, the restored sight of the blind, and the liberation of those who were oppressed, are not an end in themselves; they are signposts of God’s kingdom. They provide the tangible evidence that God is in charge and that his presence and power is greater than any other force that would oppose us.

As Christians, most of us have little problem seeing Jesus and his ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah prophecy. If we believe the account of the Gospel, Jesus did exactly what was described. He gave hope to the poor, he healed the blind, he released from bondage those captive to leprosy.

However we cannot look at this passage and this “inaugural address” and say, “Well, Jesus had a good three-year run!”

Jesus is the crucified risen Lord. He continues to reign. The Kingdom he began continues to be built. And, the work he embodied for those three years has now been entrusted to us!

As Christ’s body we have been “appointed and anointed!”

As Christ’s body we proclaim a message of hope, and freedom and life. As Christ’s body we are called to take that message to all – but especially to those who are the most broken – those our culture declares to be without hope. And as God circulates his wonders among us, those ministries of liberation and healing become signposts of the Kingdom and evidence of the promise, the work, and the power of the King!

Embracing Redemption Realities

The work of Christ is not just one with heavenly results – healing, restoring, and redeeming us in the future glory of heaven.

He is about the work of redemption today, bringing redemption to the brokenness in the needs and realities of life on earth today.

When we think of children with special needs, their families, and those who encounter them in the world, we often see great brokenness in all of them.

There is brokenness of the able-bodied. That brokenness is found in their pride – thinking that their accomplishments make them better in God’s eyes than those who can accomplish very little – at least according to human standards. That brokenness is found in judgmentalism – “if those parents were more responsible, then their kid would behave better.” That brokenness is found in fear – “special needs children scare me – I

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don't want to associate with them." There is the brokenness of the child with special needs. It is very hard not to accept a distorted sense of self-worth – one shared by a distorted world. It is hard not to resign yourself to a diminished sense of value when you can't do many things that the world applauds loudly and rewards handsomely.

There is the brokenness of the family with a child with special needs. There is the damage of extraordinary daily stress – damage on marriages, on relationships with a special child, and relationships with other children. There is the erosion of parenting confidence – especially when the child's disability is hidden and many wonder, "what is wrong with those parents?" And, perhaps most tragically of all, there is the erosion of the ability to love the child with special needs. When no one else seems to be able to show love to your child, it gets harder and harder to express love to others yourself. **JESUS CAN BRING REDEMPTION TO THIS BROKENNESS!** And, a special needs ministry in a local church is one of the places – a prime place! – for this redemption to take place.

Jesus can redeem the distorted view of the able-bodied who think that their accomplishments make them more worthy of God's love and grace. Jesus can redeem the distortions of self-worth when the child with special needs discovers that God's love is as great for them as for anyone on the face of the earth! Jesus can redeem the broken family with the faith community to walk with them through the stresses, with support groups who can support and not judge them and help them to be the best possible parents, and most of all with a congregation of people who can love their child with both the love of Christ and with their love!

Conclusion

So, why should a local church take on the challenge of a special needs ministry?

1. The answer, first of all, is that it allows the church to share together and to demonstrate to a watching world a powerful expression of the Kingdom Christ came to build in our midst today.
2. The second reason is that such a ministry will strengthen the entire body as the gifts and blessings of those who have brought into the body are shared with others.
3. The third reason is that a special needs ministry is one of the ways we learn that freedom and fulfillment as Christians come as we all recognize that we are among "the least of these."
4. And, the fourth reason is that a special needs ministry becomes one of the places where God provides an incredible, tangible ministry of redemption in our midst today!

Why begin a special needs ministry for children with hidden disabilities and their families?

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The answer is a practical one. It is a certainty that if there are children in the community you serve, then there are children with hidden disabilities. It makes no difference if your parish is urban, rural, suburban or small town. It makes no difference the ethnic, racial, economic, or political profiles of your congregation. “Hidden disabilities” are found in all kinds of families and circumstances.

Thus, launching and developing a ministry to families with children with hidden disabilities is simply offering faithful ministry to those God has placed within your midst. If your church were next to a college campus, you would want to have a ministry to students and faculty. If your church were next to a retirement community you would want to have ministry accessible to senior citizens. The truth is that your church – almost certainly! – is in the midst of families with children with hidden disabilities. To exclude the (consciously or inadvertently) is to eliminate a portion of the people God has entrusted to you.

Isaiah prophesied, “and a little child shall lead the” (Isaiah 11:6) that is true – and can be especially true – of a child with hidden disabilities, if we open our minds, our hearts, and our churches to this part of the God’s people.

Andrew the six year old with autism, Sarah, the little girl with ADHD and the Crawford family with the child they adopted from Romania who has an intellectual disability, will lead us as we together experience and demonstrate to the world a powerful expression of God’s Kingdom – the Kingdom Christ graciously builds in our midst.

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