

# Ministering to Adults and the Elderly with Disabilities

*By Dr. Jim Pierson*

*Children with disabilities become adults with disabilities.* However, as a director of a children's rehabilitation center, I was taken aback by this assessment from a veteran advocate for people with disabilities at a regional conference. His comment changed my perspective on my approach to rehabilitation. It is one thing to teach children to walk; it is another matter to provide them with somewhere to walk. In spite of my acceptance of this fact, when I became engaged in disability ministry, I focused on children. As those children in my very first Sunday school class became adults, I once again changed my approach to ministry. It is one thing to teach students the exciting stories of the Bible; it is another thing to provide them with a strong faith in Jesus and a place of ministry in the church.

There are two groups of adults with disabilities that need to be considered when planning ministry through the church. First, there are those who were born with disabilities or developed them early. The child with Down syndrome, who has been in the children's program for years, will continue to need to be taught and encouraged to be a part of the life of the church.

Second, there are those people with adult-onset disabilities that need ministry. The member who is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 35 will need encouragement to stay active and involved with the church.

The goal of the congregation in both cases is to create an atmosphere that allows both members with and without disabilities to make these statements, or at least, feel them:

- Christians with and without disabilities are equal in the sight of their Creator and one in Christ.
- Everyone, regardless of ability, has access to all of the programs of the church, especially a place to serve.
- People with disabilities will have ministry in this church for their lifespan.

## **The First Group of Adults to Be Included in Ministry**

Let's talk about adults born with a disability or who have a disability that developed at an early age. If the adult has been in a program in the church since he or she was a child and/or teen, his or her faith needs to continue to be nurtured. On the other hand, if the adult is entering the church's disability ministry for the first time, a plan for developing his walk with the Lord should be established.

In either case, five components will provide a solid foundation for the adult's participation in the life of the church.

1. Providing a Christian education
2. Embracing faith in Christ

3. Learning to worship
4. Finding a place to serve
5. Locating a community outlet to meet social needs

### **Providing a Christian Education**

The ideal approach would be for the adult to be included in his regular Christian education group. However, because of the difference between mental age and chronological age of his typical peers, a separate class approach is better, especially with adults with intellectual disabilities. The class should function like any other class: have a regular Bible lesson, have social functions, and support a missionary. In order to keep the members of the class in touch with other adults in the congregation, sponsor activities that foster interaction between the groups.

Finding appropriate materials for the class should not be difficult. While there are some published materials available, the lessons will often have to be adapted to the level of the class members anyway. Some ideas would be to use materials already in the church library to create a series of lessons stressing the positive characteristics of Old Testament heroes, a series of lessons on the life of Jesus, or a series on the attributes of God. As you get to know the class, the lesson materials will be easier to choose because you will know their personal struggles and you can format lessons that offer biblical solutions.

If there are only one or two adults with intellectual disabilities in the church, include them in a typical adult class. Encourage members to take turns sitting with them, assisting them in finding Scripture references, and making interaction with other class members easier.

### **Embracing Faith in Christ**

The primary objective of the Christian education component is to lead the adult to faith in Jesus Christ. In regard to adults with intellectual disabilities, people often ask, “Can they comprehend enough to embrace faith?” The answer is, “Yes!” Often pastors hesitate to baptize persons with intellectual disabilities who request it. How does the minister know when they are ready? It is easy to determine—just ask. Then listen for a response that includes a phrase that says he or she loves Jesus and wants to obey Him.

The role of church leadership is to teach the Word, provide worship experiences, and set good examples. The influence of the Holy Spirit attached to the message of salvation will find its way to the non-disabled heart.

### **Learning to Worship**

After embracing faith, adults with disabilities should be taught to function as a part of the Body of Christ. A part of our training for them should be the various facets of worship; items that could be taken for granted. They need to know the songs of faith, how to pray, to support the church financially, how to use their gifts and talents for the church, how to tell others about Jesus, how to listen to lessons from the Bible (sermons), and to live according to biblical precepts.

If a person with a disability is to participate in the worship service, the congregation must create a welcoming atmosphere. The church leadership should radiate an attitude of acceptance of all of God’s children. This inclusionary attitude should be conveyed by ushers and greeters who embrace the philosophy.

During the worship service, the members who have disabilities should be encouraged to integrate with other members. I am familiar with one church which had a large group of attendees from a residential facility that all sat in a group. This concerned one of the church members so she came up with an idea to encourage members of the congregation to “adopt” a resident. Both the family and the resident were given “papers” to frame. The “family” sat together in church, shared lunch, remembered birthdays, and other kindnesses common to family.

## Finding a Place to Serve

The act of worship will lead to service. The old church bulletin statement says it well: “Enter to worship, depart to serve.” Adults with disabilities need to be a functional part of the congregation. What can they do? Well, the same things the rest of us do. Everyone has gifts, talents, and abilities that can be used to make a difference to the congregation. It is a matter of fitting capabilities to the task. Consider the following options for service:

- Greeter: In many cases they can train the regular greeters in the art of being friendly.
- Office assistant: Folding, stapling, and organizing materials are nice jobs. They would enjoy folding the bulletins for Sunday morning or inserting materials.
- Cleaning: Picking up items people leave on the pews after the service. Cleaning parts of the building would be helpful to everyone.
- Christian education assistant: Collecting attendance records; delivering materials to and for the teachers.
- Teacher’s assistant: Assist with classes for younger children.
- Gardener: Mowing, raking and mulching on the church property or for shut-in members.
- Server: Helping prepare and serve food at church functions. Help pack and deliver Thanksgiving baskets; fill backpacks for needy school children.
- Prayer: Be a part of a prayer team.
- Worship: Pass the collection plates or serve the communion.

Service opportunities are a good time to build relationships between those with and without disabilities by helping them to get to know one another. Such times of togetherness build friendship, acceptance, and a sense of being part of the congregation. It might be necessary to do some awareness training for both groups, but it will pay off. Simply inform each group of what to expect from the other. Being able to serve helps our adult friends with disabilities feel that they “belong” to the church family. A dear friend of mine with moderate intellectual disability enjoys being a part of the service. On a trip to place flowers on his parents’ graves, I asked him if he had gone to church on Sunday. “Yes,” was his quick, proud response. “I served the people.” He had passed the communion and collection plates.

## Ministry Outside the Church Building

A critical part of your ministry to adults with disabilities is to have a vision of ministry that goes beyond the church building. There are a variety of opportunities that will enhance your in-house ministry and broaden your outreach within the community.

First, provide ministry where these adults live and work. You can visit their residential facility or take a meal to the group home; take trips to movies or sporting events with others from the church. You can make a brief visit to their workplace, but be sure to check protocol in advance.

Second, volunteer in community organizations serving people with disabilities. Special Olympics is a wonderful secular organization I recommend. You can allow other organizations to use church facilities, as well as provide social events for the community. I know churches that organize dance instruction, art classes, and sports teams.

The Jesus Prom has become popular in communities across the country. The concept is based on Luke 14, where Jesus shares the story of a host who gave a party and no one came; so, he invited people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> One staff member in charge of disability ministry in a large church noticed that the members with disabilities did not attend their school proms. This leader set about organizing a prom just for them. The community donated food, tuxedos, evening dresses, hair styling, transportation, and money. From its meager beginnings, this event has now grown to nearly 2,000 attendees.

Finally, it might be that the adult with a disability cannot leave their home. If that is the case, find a volunteer to provide the person with a Bible lesson and some music on Sundays. This can minister to caregivers as well by providing some much-needed respite.

## One-on-One Ministry

Probably the single most important factor in the spiritual development of an adult with a developmental disability is having a mentor. The person needs a caring person to guide them on their spiritual journey. If the term “mentor” seems too formal, use “friend.”

Key factors for successful mentoring relationships include a welcoming congregation, a supportive family, a lead mentor, additional mentors, and a friendly relationship amongst all. The lead mentor is the person who understands what is going on and will involve others as necessary. Any mentoring situation should be as natural as possible. The right chemistry is essential between the mentor and their protégé.

In my years of supporting my friends with disabilities, I have learned that the positive results of mentoring don't happen immediately. Trust takes time. Trust is built on consistency.

The following steps will assist with building solid mentoring relationships:

**Step One:** Learn about your friend's environment. Where does he live? Does he have a job? What is his support system? Is his family involved? What is his mode of transportation? What is his daily routine? What does he do when not at work? Does he have a hobby?

**Step Two:** Learn about their diagnosis. Remember, a diagnosis happens to a real person with a name and a story. Online information and a chat with a family member or caseworker will give you enough information to help the relationship develop. For example, if your friend has autism, it is helpful to know that he might not look you in the eye or not enjoy being touched. You will begin to understand more about their specific disability as you get to know your friend.

**Step Three:** Give your friend insight into your world. Who is your favorite sports team? Where do you work? What is the make-up of your family? What is your story? What is your hobby?

**Step Four:** Learn to communicate with him. In most cases it won't be difficult. In the case of a friend whose speech is not clear, do not say or act as if you understand if you do not. There's no need to apologize if you do not understand. Just say, “Please say that again.” You might need to ask your friend to write things down. As you get to know your friend communication will get easier.

**Step Five:** Find common interests. It might be sports. It might be church. It could be movies. Maybe it's playing cards or a popular table game. You might teach each other a new game. The point is to land on something that the two of you enjoy.

**Step Six:** Make the relationship mutual and honest. As in any good relationship, it should not be one-sided or condescending. The mentor should not make all the suggestions of what to do, where to go, or pick up the tab. Pre-determining boundaries on how often you meet and the length of time of the meetings will prevent hurt feelings.

**Step Seven:** Relax and enjoy your friend as you grow in friendship and faith.

## The Second Group of Adults to Include in Ministry

Now, let's look at the second group of adults we need to provide ministry with in our churches. “With” is an important word. Most of these people will be people who have attended church alongside you and have

had their lives altered as a result of a disease, a disorder or an injury. When you read in the church paper that a member has had a stroke, it is time to consider how the church can serve the person and their family.

Awareness of the most common triggers in adult-onset disability is a good place to start. The following list covers the most common ones that adults will face:

- Cardiovascular disorders of heart disease and stroke often lead to difficulty with motor skills.
- Dementia describes a group of symptoms that result when brain functions change. The most familiar one is Alzheimer's disease.
- Injuries threaten the well-being of many Americans over 65 years of age. The major causes of injuries are elder abuse and maltreatment. Falls occur about once a year in up to 40 percent of people over 65; these falls may result in Spinal Cord Injury. People over 75 years of age are at risk for Traumatic Brain Injury.
- Mental Disorders happen to almost 25 percent of the population over 18 years of age. The common ones are Depressive Disorders, Bipolar Disorder and Schizophrenia, and Anxiety Disorders (panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and phobias).
- Some others are Multiple sclerosis (symptoms appear between the ages of 20 and 40); Osteoporosis (a million and a half people fracture bones because of osteoporosis, especially hips); Parkinson's Disease (as the symptoms become more pronounced patients may have difficulty walking, talking, and doing simple tasks); and Post-polio syndrome (25 to 40 percent of adults experience symptoms years after having poliomyelitis as children).

Our aging population is another factor to consider for future ministry. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of older Americans will have more than doubled to 70 million or one in every five Americans by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

## Coming Alongside

So what are the specific needs of those with adult-onset disability and how can we minister to them?

There will probably not be a need to start a special Bible study class. For most, continuing to attend their usual class and worship service will not be a problem, unless there are transportation needs or there is a special health issue. If the person has served in the church, provide supports that will allow them to continue in that service.

Additionally, your church might consider adding resources to the church library that provide information on dealing with a new lifestyle, coping with a disability, where to go for help, and a biblical perspective on disability. Develop a team in the church to do odd jobs for members who can no longer complete these tasks for themselves. These are great service projects for youth groups.

## Be Sensitive to Their Needs

Probably the most important service church leadership can provide for their members with an adult-onset disability is to inform other members on how to be sensitive. Think about how the disability has altered their lives and ability to carry out their previous tasks. The following ideas will provide a start.

1. Make the building and grounds of the church user-friendly. Disabilities which impact mobility are usually easier to recognize. Accommodating them is a matter of accessibility. Survey your grounds and buildings. Can a person in a wheelchair or with a walker or cane maneuver with no obstacles? If not, what modifications can you make? Check local building codes to see if there is a specific set of rules for accessibility.

2. People with sensory disabilities may be accommodated by providing auditory and visual aids. Advise greeters and other church staff to be observant. Generally, for persons with visual impairments, provide large print and Braille materials. Provide amplification or interpreters for persons who are hearing impaired. Learn as much as you can about specific needs.
3. Be aware of transportation needs. Provide it, organize it, or arrange it through a local provider. Most communities with a public transportation system will have some type of service that might be utilized. Do not park in spaces designated for persons with disabilities.
4. Share the same social courtesies you would share with anyone. Offer your hand to shake. The person without a right hand will offer his left, touch your shoulder, or do whatever he does when greeting others.
5. Do not hesitate to ask the person about his disability. Show genuine interest. If he shares personal information, keep it confidential.
6. Know the services available in your community and share them with the member who has a newly-acquired disability.
7. Keep the person involved in the life of the church. Encourage people to maintain their former patterns of friendship with the person. Do not allow them to become isolated.
8. Visit a person who cannot leave their house because of an illness or a disability. Get other members to follow your example.
9. Include members with disabilities in your activities—attending a Bible study, going to the mall, walking, or enjoying a movie.
10. Encourage these members to continue to share their talents and worldviews.
11. Do not ask the person to read in a group or participate without asking first.

## Conclusion

Whether an adult has had a disability since birth, or since having a stroke, the goal is to guide the person to an active role in a body of believers. I have a friend who illustrates this goal.

When he was 20, Corey, a fine man with autism, became a member of our church. After attending a special class for awhile, he started to grow. He needed more stimulation in his Bible study. The solution was to attend an age-appropriate class. Corey chose the college class. The teachers were responsive to him and he enjoyed the companionship of his peers. He flourished.

Worship time is the highlight of Corey's Sunday experience. He enjoys the sermons and often sits on the pew with the minister. His singing inspires the worship leader. Even though he is sometimes a note or two ahead of everyone, his enthusiastic approach gives her a boost. Unless there is a family outing or an out-of-town car race, Corey is at church. He is a beloved member.

Most often I have guided his participation in church activities. However, recently the children's department made a concerted effort to recruit volunteers for their work. Corey, without any encouragement from me, heard the plea and volunteered. I found this out after the fact.

One morning I walked by the children's area and, to my delightful surprise, Corey was working. Watching him interact with the children was refreshing. He has found his niche in our church and his faith in our Lord is growing. I can't help but wonder what this involved member will do next. His autism is no longer a factor. Corey is an active part of his church where he is accepted and serves.

## Notes

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1. Luke 14:12–24
2. <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/olderadults.htm>

## About the Author

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**Dr. Jim Pierson** devoted his life to meeting the spiritual needs of people with disabilities and training students with a similar desire at both Johnson University and Milligan College. Jim was the Executive Director of the East Tennessee Children's Rehabilitation Center between 1967 and 1984, and the founder and Executive Director of the Christian Church Foundation for the Handicapped (CCFH Ministries) between 1984 and 2009. His education in speech pathology and special education, his work at the children's rehabilitation center and adult residential programs, and authorship of five books about disability ministry set him apart as one of the world's leading thinkers on ministering to both children and adults with disabilities. Jim received an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Milligan College in 1991 and was the 2003 recipient of the Henri Nouwen Award presented by the Religious and Spirituality Division of the American Association on Persons with Intellectual Disabilities.