

# Exciting Ways to Employ the Spiritual Gifts of People with Disabilities

*By Connie Hutchinson*

Pink, pink everywhere as far as the eye could see... as the 24-year-old mother-to-be relished every moment of her first baby shower. It was Tuesday evening, September 2, 1975, and members of the young married group from the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, CA “oohed” and “aahed” at the plush blankets and pastel onesies on display.

In the midst of the excitement, someone said, “Did you hear about John and Patty’s baby, David, born on Sunday? He’s been diagnosed with Down syndrome.” A hush came over the partygoers as everyone tried to digest the news and understand what it meant. John was the teacher and leader of their young married group and this was the couple’s first child. Everyone had witnessed their joyful anticipation. The awkward silence was broken by these words: “I was at the hospital this afternoon to see John, Patty, and baby David. They want all of us to understand that their son is a gift from God. He’s been uniquely created just the way he is by our Sovereign Creator, and God will use David in a special way to glorify him. Don’t feel sad, but understand that David is the perfect firstborn son for their family.”

With that, the baby shower continued. Soon, however, the mother-to-be went into labor—five weeks early. Her husband picked her up from the shower and they went straight to the hospital. On the way, they talked about baby David’s diagnosis, wondering how they would handle the news if their baby was born with a problem. What the couple couldn’t have known was that twenty-four hours later they would find out their newborn daughter, Julie, had Down syndrome.

I was that mother-to-be and that September day was the day our family personally entered the world of disabilities. Our daughter, Julie, has taught us that God wants to use every individual regardless of their abilities or disabilities. He has given us spiritual gifts to use in building up the body of Christ to better serve one another, to glorify him, and edify others.

## **Come One, Come All**

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that God has given each of us abilities to make our unique contribution to the church. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” We are all diverse, with unique gifts to give for the unity of the Church body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that

seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. . . . so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:17–23, 25–27)

Several years ago, our senior staff and leaders went through a spiritual gifts assessment program called *Network* by Bruce Bugbee, Don Cousins, and Bill Hybels. The program is designed to help church members understand who God has uniquely made us to be, the biblical nature and purpose of the church as the Body of Christ, and the unique importance of each member's contribution. During this time, as I studied my spiritual gifts and how to better understand God's design for me in the church, I was reminded of the great diversity in the body of Christ. 1 Peter 4:10 says that every believer has at least one spiritual gift. "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

I came to realize that spiritual gifts are special abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit to every believer according to God's design for the common good of the Body of Christ. It is imperative that people with disabilities be given the opportunity to exercise their gifts within the church body. However, for this to happen, disability awareness training might need to come first. Church members need to understand the importance and necessity for all of God's people, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, to be encouraged to use their spiritual gifts to edify and build up the Body of Christ.

## Is that You, God?

In 1992, I was hired as the first Director of Disabilities Ministry at the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton by default. Since the early 70s, our church has had a Sunday school program for people with disabilities to learn about Jesus while their parents worshiped together in the service. This classroom was for children of all ages and with various disabilities, both physical and cognitive. Through the mid-80s this class continued to grow as families were able to go to church while their children with special needs were cared for by a loving staff of volunteers. This class was going strong and meeting the needs of several families when Julie was born. However, as the push for mainstreaming and inclusion of people with disabilities became popular in the early 80s, the enrollment in our special education Sunday school class started to decline and I noticed that new families with young children with disabilities were not coming to the church. By the early 90s, the class that had once served over 35 people was down to less than a dozen students. Why was this?

When my daughter, Julie, was 15 she spoke these words to a group of church leaders in California at a conference for Advocacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (ADD):

When I was little, I went to Sunday school like everyone else in our church. When I was six, I stayed with my mom in the 4-year-old class where she was the teacher and I was her helper. When I was 10, my sister, Katie, was born and my mom stopped teaching the four year-olds. Lots of people thought I should go to the special education class at church because I was different. I didn't want to. In the special ed class there were students from 10 to 40 years old. One man was 23 and wanted to marry me. This was scary, and I didn't like it. Last June, I listened to my brother talk about starting in the junior high group at church and all the fun things they did. I wanted to be with teenagers too. Mom and Dad talked with the junior high pastor, and he said I could be part of the group. I was so excited. I went to summer camp, and I am in the Sunday morning core group with 10 other girls. It's fun, but I wish the girls were really my friends. Maybe if I had been with them from the beginning, they would know me better as a person and know that I am just a regular person with regular feelings who is more like them than unlike them. I hope that in your churches you keep everyone together whenever you can.

As I helped Julie articulate what she wanted to convey to the churches represented at that conference, I realized we needed to make some significant changes in our own church. It was up to me to help educate our well-meaning staff to understand that we needed to welcome people with disabilities into the life of our church. It was not enough to just provide a place for them in a secluded classroom where their gifts were not noticed or utilized. My husband and I met with one of our pastors and helped him to see the value of having someone on our staff as an advocate for people with disabilities. I was appointed to the search committee. After two years it became evident there was no one trained in disabilities from our seminaries. At that time there were no classes taught on disability issues in the Christian academic community. After exhausting every lead, I received a call one evening from the head of our search committee asking me to consider taking the position. I was stunned and unsure how to respond. I was enjoying my role as a full-time homemaker and mom and wasn't sure if I was ready to join the "work force" again. I hadn't worked outside the home since Julie was born. After two weeks of prayer, many sleepless nights, and several conversations with my husband, I felt convinced God was calling me to the ministry.

### Keep It Simple

My job description is simply to "identify and break down barriers that keep people with disabilities and their families from being able to fully participate in the body life of the church." Our Sunday school classroom for people with disabilities has become an option for those with intellectual disabilities who want to be together for instruction in the Word, prayer, worship music and fellowship. However, inclusion options are now available for children with disabilities, giving them opportunities to be with their peers. This also helps others learn to be more comfortable interacting with people who have disabilities. We realized people with disabilities needed to be involved in our corporate worship time, participating in the sacraments of the Lord's Table and baptism. As people with disabilities started to become more visible around our church campus, congregants became more comfortable and began to realize the value of having them included in various church activities, programs, and in service!

In the early years of our disability ministry, it was very important to have the support of our senior pastor. In one of his sermons in the early 90s, our pastor at the time, Chuck Swindoll, said, "How thrilling it is to know that this church, which we all love, has a ministry to people with disabilities. They are not pushed away into some back room and sort of kept out of our way. They are not in our way. They are part of our way; to be integrated into the flow and ministry of this church. For if it won't happen here, where in the world will it happen?" Chuck understood the value of people with disabilities and their importance to the body of Christ.

Strategic planning was done to help our church understand and accept people with disabilities. Yearly Disability Awareness Sundays were held. On one of these Sundays, Joni Eareckson Tada was our guest speaker and she told the congregation that "people with disabilities do more for the spiritual well-being of the church than you can imagine." Over the years, people with disabilities have become more and more visible on Sunday mornings. One Sunday, Bonnie, who is blind, read the Scripture reading from her Braille Bible. On another, Becky, who is deaf, stood in front of the congregation and shared through signing, as our sign language interpreter voiced her message to us. Two of our gifted musicians, Debra and Lynn, have multiple sclerosis and have shared their struggles and challenges before ministering through their gift of music. Both women are often part of our worship team, glorifying God with their voices.

It is critical to periodically remind your congregation of the importance of people with disabilities through church publications and other communication tools. Several years ago I wrote the following update in our church newsletter: "Over the last year, I have watched over a dozen children and teenagers with disabilities being included in our youth programs here at church. Last month, one of our pastors substituted for a boys' basketball class in Talent Factory (our second-hour Sunday morning program for children in grades 1-6). He noticed that one of the boys on the team had cerebral palsy and how positive

and supportive the other boys were. They didn't seem to be frustrated when he threw the ball out of bounds. He was accepted as a team player and included. Yes, rules were changed a few times and modifications made, but that wasn't important. The pastor knew that through this boy, the other boys were learning how to apply some of the biblical principles they are taught in Sunday school such as unconditional love, acceptance, and the unique way God created each of us. Isn't that what maturing in Christ is all about?"

Several years ago, our Pastor Dale Burke preached a sermon series on the *Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Members of the congregation were encouraged to personally examine their lives to help discover their purpose—what on earth are we here for? Each church member was challenged to reflect on how the series impacted their lives. What unique gifts has God given us to use for His glory and to build up our local body? I shared the following with our congregation on the final Sunday of the series:

Ted and Debbie are an active couple in our church who have three children; two with special needs. Jacob, who has autism, is in our kindergarten Sunday school class and is disruptive. He is sensitive to sounds, needs structure, does not like to play with other children, has limited speech and doesn't like to sit at the story circle with the group. As Debbie and I talked one Sunday, she made a statement I will never forget. She has come to realize that Jacob's purpose on earth is to teach others tolerance and compassion. This is his purpose; his life will make a difference and some of your children are having the privilege of being taught tolerance and compassion by Jacob right now in their Sunday school class.

Jacob's mom, Debbie, meets often with a group of moms in our community who have children with autism. She is one of the lone Christians in this group—having been told by several of the moms that they could never love a God who has done this to a child. Debbie loves these women. They know about her relationship with Jesus. This is her mission field. If just one person will be in heaven because of Debbie and Jacob, their lives will have made a difference for eternity! They are living the purpose driven life, using the spiritual gifts God has given to them.

## No Quick Fixes

It has taken time. Attitudes are not changed overnight. You must be intentional, patient and realize that not everyone will immediately understand the value of people with disabilities and the gifts they have to offer. Our church's key leadership has provided a consistent example of acceptance of people with disabilities. Their example, as well as Disability Awareness Sundays, and constant communication, has brought us a long way since our church first decided to start a disability ministry. Numerous opportunities have been provided for people with disabilities to use their gifts. Some opportunities have come naturally; others have been purposefully planned for the benefit of the entire church body.

Rick is our newly elected church chairman and head of our elder board. He is a godly man with a servant's heart and the gifts of administration and leadership. He has served on our Trustee Board and as Co-Director of our Next Step building project to mention just a few of the posts he's filled over the years. In 1997, Rick experienced a near-fatal auto accident caused by a young woman rushing to get to work on time. His car rolled off an overpass, and fell 65 feet. His survival was a miracle. The accident left Rick paralyzed from the waist down. On any given Sunday you can see him navigating around the church in his wheelchair. His input during our building campaign has been invaluable as he understands firsthand the need for ramps, ADA requirements, and handicap parking spaces for people with disabilities. He is a true advocate for people with disabilities.

At our church, the Deacon Board Chairman is permitted to supplement the elected deacon board by appointing additional deacons and deaconesses to serve one-year, non-voting terms. Chairman Tim purposefully decided it would be appropriate this year to appoint my daughter, Julie, to one of those spots. Julie is now a 34-year-old woman who lives successfully in her own apartment down the street from the church. She has a servant's heart and the spiritual gifts of hospitality and encouragement. There was some concern among

a few that it wasn't appropriate to have someone with a developmental disability serve on the deacon board. However, after discussion, prayer and some awareness training, Julie was appointed and is currently on the bereavement committee and greeter team. She serves cookies and helps where needed at memorial services and also greets people as they arrive on Sunday mornings. One of the deacons wrote a note to Chairman Tim:

I want to thank you for bringing Julie to the Deacon Board dinner and introducing her to the incoming and outgoing deacons. Julie is a very committed Christian and has great insight and is very prayerful. She will bring an added dimension to our board and I commend you for listening to your mind and heart. God will use her to reach out to many while she serves. As her Sunday school teacher for a few years, I can tell you that she is very discerning. Way to go, Tim!

## Heavenly Rewards

In 2002, a high school boy with intellectual disabilities desperately wanted to be a part of the high school group at church and attend summer camp. Drew had attended our camp for teens with disabilities, but he wanted to go to camp with the "other kids"—he knew the difference. Drew cannot memorize his phone number, read, or understand how to clock in with his timecard at work. Yet he has sensitivity for others, love for Jesus and a real desire to share his faith. After strategic planning and input from his parents, Drew successfully went to camp. This was carefully planned. The results were exciting and even somewhat unexpected; the high school students genuinely embraced Drew and included him long after camp. Now, several years later, Drew is an active member of the college group, greets new members, ushers in our worship service, and is part of the college leadership team. He was picked to go to New Orleans on a short-term mission team where he participated in demolition work and also shared his faith. He was the top support raiser for the team. Our Fellowship of Friends class is a group of teens and adults with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. As part of their holiday party, they share the Christmas story in a play performed for their parents, family and friends. This powerful presentation has been so well received that they have been asked to perform in our Chapel evening service this year for the entire congregation. David, a gifted speaker and a young man with Down syndrome, has been asked to use his spiritual gift and share the chapel message that same evening.

Becky, Bonnie, Debra, Lynn, Jacob, Rick, Julie, Drew, and David are just a few of the people with disabilities in our congregation who are actively using their spiritual gifts to make unique contributions to our church body. You will find people with disabilities serving on our parking lot crew, as support group leaders, on the worship team, as ushers, greeters, prayer warriors. I still remember when Joni told us that people with disabilities would do more for the spiritual well-being of our church than we could imagine. However, now we don't have to imagine because we are inspired by their service and their faith every time our congregation gathers. I can assure you that your church will be truly blessed when all God's people are welcomed, allowed, and encouraged to use their spiritual gifts.

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## About the Author

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**Connie Hutchinson** was the Director of Disabilities Ministry at the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton from 1992–2018. She has spoken at conferences and colleges nationwide as an advocate for people with disabilities. Connie has traveled to Romania, China, and Northern Africa to speak to parents, educators, church leaders and government officials on the value of all people—with or without disabilities. She also traveled to Ghana with a Wheels for the World team. Currently Connie and her husband Mike are enjoying this season of life, traveling and spending time with their adult children, 7 grandchildren, volunteering in the Women's Ministry and Indispensable Special Needs Ministry at Kindred Community Church in Anaheim.