

Successful Teaching for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

By Linda Smith

Our lesson that night was about heaven. I read from the New International Reader's Version, an easy to understand translation: *"God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or sadness. There will be no more crying or pain. Things are no longer the way they used to be"* (Rev. 21:3–4). As I pulled items out of a bag, I asked, "Do you think we'll need this in heaven?" Tissues and pill bottles were voted down and thrown into the trash. Maracas were voted as possibly useful in heaven as they could accompany us in worshiping Jesus. Lastly, I showed a picture of King Jesus surrounded by the throngs in heaven. "Do you think it might look something like this?" As I held up the picture for each of the eight adult students, Richard grew agitated. Leaning toward the picture, he motioned for me to come closer. I knew his eyesight was failing, so I handed Richard the picture and he drew it near. After a few moments, his face broke into a smile and with one finger he gently stroked Jesus and sighed, "Oh." With that simple gesture Richard was worshipping his King with depth and integrity. In that moment, everyone in the room was drawn into worship with him, as we reveled in a King who longs to receive adoration from all those who know and love him.

Teaching adults with cognitive disabilities about Jesus is a privilege; not only because they are generally appreciative, affirming and enthusiastic, but because of their potential. Since spiritual truths are spiritually—not intellectually—discerned, these students have the same potential for spiritual growth as other church members. Spiritual maturity may look different in a person with cognitive disabilities, but it is just as real!

The key to their achieving spiritual maturity is to have the Gospel and principles of growth presented in simple terms. Imagine trying to grow in your faith while attending worship services presented in a language that you only minimally remember from a year of high school French or Spanish. You would grasp some content, but much of it would be over your head. Adults with cognitive disabilities have a similar experience when their only spiritual food comes through the pastor's sermon.

Yes, individuals with cognitive disabilities need to be actively involved in the life of the church. However, they also need a time and place where they can receive spiritual guidance that is prepared with them in mind. This could be in a special needs Sunday school class, or a weeknight small group gathering. Ultimately, if the church ignores the spiritual needs and potential of those with cognitive disabilities, we do both them and our congregations a disservice.

They Are Adults, Not Large Children

To help these believers grow in their faith we must remember they are adults and should not be treated like children. Their learning difficulties require teaching that accommodates their deficits and builds on their strengths, but they should not be taught using preschool material.

Although their reading level or even their developmental level may be that of a five-year-old, they have many years of life experience. Like any adult, they deal with problems such as housing issues, the need for meaningful work, and the decline and loss of aging parents or siblings. They have sexual desires and a need for meaningful relationships. Aging complicates their health issues, as it does for us all, and may add to the isolation that is often inherent in disability. When teaching, remember that the issues your students deal with are, in many ways, much like your own. Yet their life situations are unique. For example, many adults with cognitive disabilities live in a group home. These may be homes that they did not choose for themselves, where they live with roommates they did not select. Staffing at these homes is often precarious, with caregivers changing so quickly that a student doesn't have time to learn their names. God's grace and protection are crucial in such difficult situations.

Making the Bible Come Alive

As you share God's Word with your students, make its truths as clear and uncluttered as you can. One of the best ways to do this is by using action stories from the Bible. Though you might study Philippians or probe Isaiah's prophecies in a typical adult Bible study, adults with cognitive disabilities will benefit more from the action-packed Gospel of Luke or a lesson on the life of Moses. Those stories are easier to remember and are more concrete than Paul's epistles or the lamentations of an Old Testament prophet. Streamline your lesson by leaving out some story details. For example, when teaching about David slaying Goliath, omit the parts about David trying on and rejecting Saul's armor, or the prize offered to the man who defeated the giant. These details are not essential to the lesson and can distract from your main thrust.

All of us learn differently—some are visual learners, others are auditory or kinesthetic learners. The same is true for adults with cognitive disabilities. Presenting your story several times in ways that engage a variety of learning styles will optimize your students' experience. If, for example, you are teaching the story of Jesus stilling the storm, first read the story from an easy-to-understand translation. Then show a video version of the story from *The Visual Bible* or another movie that presents a biblically accurate version of the story. Avoid animated versions of Bible stories because they feel like "make-believe." Live action movies help students remember that the Bible story is true. Or, tell the story in your own words, using pictures or household items as props. Providing students with something tangible to see and touch helps engage them with the lesson.

Students will best comprehend and remember a story if they act it out themselves. Ask questions about the main characters in the story and review the plot with them. Although Jesus has the lead role in the stilling of the storm, for example, other students can participate as disciples or handle props. In this story, two students can hold up a blue sheet in front of the boat and shake the sheet to create the sensation of waves. A spray water bottle can be squirted to produce rain! When Jesus says, "Stop!" or holds up his hand, the waves calm down and the rain ceases. Costumes can be elaborate or basic, or could simply be a sign that reads "Jesus" or "Follower of Jesus" for students to wear around their necks. Drama impacts many of our senses. The students see the story acted out; hear the words from others or speak the words themselves; feel the story as they put on costumes or handle props; and move within the story as they act it out.

Making Real Life Applications

Even more important than how you tell the story is what you do with it, or why you tell it. As you approach a Bible story, ask yourself, "What is the most basic truth I want my students to learn from this story? What message does this passage teach that my students need to hear?" Pray and ask God for insights into their spiritual health and how to reach them.

Let's continue using the sample lesson of Jesus stilling the storm. Perhaps you decided that the theme would be, "Because Jesus is with me, I don't need to be afraid." Or, maybe God directed you to focus on,

“When I’m in trouble, I should call out to Jesus.” The more concisely you can state what you want your students to come away with, the better you can build your lesson around that truth. In reality, your goal is not for the students to be able to re-tell a dramatic Bible story. The goal is that when they are afraid, they will remember Jesus is with them. We study God’s Word to allow him to change our character and draw us into a more personal relationship with Jesus, not to master biblical content. The goal is the same for students with cognitive disabilities. Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who will help a student recall things that he or she learned in class.

Since your goal is bigger than just conveying a story—you’re trying to truly impact their lives—begin by introducing the truth you want to bring home to the students. Often, teachers tack on an application at the end of a story and find that their students can’t make the connection. If the application or spiritual truth is at the heart of the lesson, you can build around that before, during and after the story. Share an example from your own life of a time when you were afraid to try something new, but the reassuring presence of a parent or teacher gave you confidence to go forward. Or, show pictures of people with fearful expressions on their faces and ask your students what they think the people might be afraid of.

Interestingly, if you ask your students directly what they fear, many of them will likely tell you that they are not afraid of anything. Self-evaluation is difficult for adults with cognitive disabilities, and they often want to present themselves as stronger than they actually are. Many are very aware of and frustrated by their cognitive deficits, and hesitate to admit to things that they see as weaknesses. They fail to understand that fear, for example, is a human emotion we all experience and need God’s help to face. Gently encourage your students to identify their fears by being honest about your own, and putting words to the fears that may be difficult to express. (“When you are going to a new work place the first day, does your stomach feel a little upset? Do you wonder what the other people will be like or if they will want to be your friends?”)

It’s critical that you help your students apply the biblical principles to their own lives, as they will likely have difficulty making this application on their own. If I hear a sermon on Jesus stilling the storm, and the pastor’s theme is that Jesus is with us when we are afraid, I start internalizing that lesson and thinking about situations where I experience fear. I remind myself that Jesus can speak peace into my situations . . . whether I am fearful about paying the mortgage, a wayward child or an upcoming biopsy. An adult with a cognitive disability listening to the story of Jesus stilling the storm may think, “If I’m ever out in a boat in a storm, Jesus can help me.” He or she won’t respond by correlating the fear in other areas of life. Your thoughtful teaching can help with this. As you tell the story, draw attention to how the disciples must have felt. “There was no Coast Guard out on the lake; life jackets hadn’t been invented yet; there was no 911 to call. They were afraid that they might die and they had no one to turn to but Jesus!”

Then, after the story has been told and perhaps dramatized by your students, help them to articulate settings where they too feel fearful. Make a list of situations where they might feel afraid as the disciples did. Although many of your students won’t be able to read, you can write a list and perhaps add a little picture with it. (Don’t worry if you are not an artist—explain what you are attempting to draw, and they will forgive your lack of artistic ability. Or, you can ask an artistic helper to illustrate for you.)

Investing time in getting to know your students will equip you to help them make application in their lives. Because of their difficulty in communication, they may not be able to tell you about their difficult roommate, or about their sick family member. If at all possible, visit your students in their homes for social times outside of Bible class so you can discover their interests and strengths. If you are unable to do this personally, recruit volunteers who can share their insights. For example, if you discover a student lives with her aging mother and has no siblings, it is reasonable to imagine that she has fears about her mom’s health and approaching death. If you learn that one of your students shares a room with a man who has a severe seizure disorder, it would be normal for him to have fears about what is happening when the roommate is having a seizure. As is true with all ministry, relationships are key to discipling others!

To help students bring the application home with them, give your students a specific action to take in

response to your lesson. For example, teach your students that when fear comes, they can say to themselves “No need to fear—Jesus is here.” Talk about the situations they have identified as potentially frightening, and ask, “What can I say when I start worrying about my mom?” They respond with, “No need to fear—Jesus is here.” Once this phrase and the truth is in their minds, the Holy Spirit can bring it back to them when necessary. A song is also a great way to help your students take home a biblical principle. It needs to be short, repetitive and easy to understand. If no song exists that conveys your message, adapt the words to a hymn or chorus, or make up words to a tune your students might already know. For example, you could turn the Disney classic “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho” into: “I know, I know, when off to work I go, Jesus will be right there with me, I know, I know, I know, I know!”

Principles to Hold on to:

As you teach and disciple the adults with cognitive disabilities that God brings to you, keep these things in mind:

- Help them to grow as disciples in their areas of strength—don’t worry about the areas of weakness. Your students will likely have a difficult time with extensive Scripture memory or independent Bible study. But they can be effective intercessors, heart-felt worshippers, or some can share their faith in Jesus with others. They are often less concerned about how others perceive them, which can give them a boldness that God can use for his Kingdom purposes. So in your teaching, focus on things like prayer, worship, evangelism, and godly character—things that are not affected by intellectual abilities.
- Facilitate opportunities for them to interact with the larger Body of believers in your congregation. Plan service projects with or for other groups in your church to help your congregation recognize the gifts and abilities, as well as the delightful personalities, of your students. Advocate for them. Help others in your church see the beauty in your students that God has revealed to you. Be open to sharing stories with the congregation about how you saw God work in a student’s life
- Don’t allow the enemy to discourage you or cause you to doubt the value of investing in your students. God’s Word is clear that he is not a “respector of persons”—each life has equal value in his eyes. Your students matter to God as much as your senior pastor does. He hears their prayers and desires a relationship with each one of them. And he will use them just as they are.

During a recent Joni and Friends Family Retreat, a friend taught a class of adults with cognitive disabilities about heaven. Sandy used the idea of the TV show *Extreme Home Makeover* to help students see that this world we live in is falling apart, and some day, God will make it all new! No need for medicine or wheelchairs or lamps there—God will be there, and he is all we will need! She sent her students home from the retreat with a ring of short Bible verses to help them remember the truths she had taught. Shortly after the retreat, I received a letter from a student’s father. John, a widower, had attended the retreat with David, his adult son with cognitive disabilities, and his adult daughter Pam.

As you may know, Pam continues to struggle with Margaret’s absence, as well as the changes in her own life. Today is the third anniversary of Margaret’s death; it seems harder now than the first two years. David, having heard Pam and I chatting on the phone the other day about this difficult time of year, came out of his room with the ring of verses and promises, and told me to assure Pam that we will see Mum in heaven, that God is coming back, and preparing a home for us!! Now, as you know, David has limited reading ability; despite that challenge, my best buddy did a masterful job of reading the text, paraphrasing along the way.

Dave got the message, and now closes his presentation, even to me, with “And I believe,” as he points to his heart. After attempting to get Pam back on the phone, she called us last night and I turned her over to “Pastor Dave” and he again did a wonderful job of witnessing, paraphrasing from the heaven lesson, his favorite!

Our God cares about your students, and he will guide you as you share his Word with them. And he will use them to build your faith and his Kingdom!

About the Author

Shortly after graduating from Houghton College, **Linda Smith** became involved in disability ministry and has served in that field for over 45 years. Linda has served on staff with Joni and Friends New England and most recently with Young Life Capernaum, ministering with teens and young adults with intellectual disabilities. She is the author of *Beyond Limits 1 and 2*, two volumes of Bible curriculum designed for teens and adults with cognitive disabilities. (beyondlimitscurriculum.com) She also serves as legal guardian and roommate/caregiver for a woman with physical and cognitive disabilities. Linda's passion is seeing people with intellectual disabilities growing in their relationship with Christ and being received as valued members of the Body of Christ.