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DEVELOPING A BIBLICALLY SOUND EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY
FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AT
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF JENSEN BEACH

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DEVELOPING A BIBLICALLY SOUND EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY
FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AT
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For my son Mark,
whose struggle inspires me
to deeper faith and to greater action.

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PREFACE

My desire to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree grew out of my desire to develop as a pastoral leader. I entered the program hoping to be challenged spiritually and academically. I am thankful that the faculty of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth provided those challenges. During my time at SBTS, I learned to think biblically and critically, I was exposed to top-level leaders, and I was challenged to work with diligence and discipline. I will always appreciate the opportunities to learn under men such as Al Mohler, Tom Schreiner, Tim Beougher, Thom Rainer, and Chuck Lawless. I also much appreciate the interaction of my cohort group. They have been friends, mentors, and confidants.

I am thankful to several people particularly who helped me through this process and encouraged me greatly. My dear friend and mentor, Tom Hayslip, and his wife, Karen, opened their home to me for weeks at a time for uninterrupted reading and research. They proofread my earliest drafts, they were my sounding board and advisors through all my many ideas. They have been a constant encouragement to me in ministry in general and to this project in particular.

I am also grateful for the patient and encouraging oversight of Chuck Lawless, who encouraged me not to give up on the project or the pursuit of the degree. He also graciously agreed to continue to mentor and oversee the completion of the project even after he was no longer Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth. His wisdom, insight, and genuine desire to see this project through have been invaluable.

I also want to acknowledge Mike Morgan, whose love for people with intellectual disabilities generally, and for our son Mark particularly, inspired me to begin

a ministry for this group of people at First Baptist Church. Mike volunteered great amounts of time and personal resources to make the idea of enABLE a reality. His work at fund-raising, promotion, design, and programming made the ministry possible.

Connie Dahn also encouraged me in this project and came alongside me throughout the development, implementation, and leadership of the enABLE ministry. Connie is a true advocate for people with disabilities and is a model of professional ability and Christian love.

I am especially grateful to the people and leaders of First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach who encouraged my pursuit of this degree and supported me financially and with the time off necessary for seminars and writing. Even more so, I appreciate their love for my family, especially demonstrated in the constant support of Mark and their willingness to do all they could to include him in the life and worship of the church. As they loved and welcomed Mark, they also demonstrated a compassion and desire to minister to many other people with disabilities and make them part of the church family. Truly this church is a model of care, acceptance, and inclusion for people with disabilities.

I am also thankful for the people of Calvary Baptist Church who have likewise embraced my family and the unique demands having a teenage son with a profound intellectual disability present. In addition, they have demonstrated a genuine eagerness to minister to other families like ours and to open up the doors and ministries of the church to people with disabilities. Lord willing, this church will soon be a model church for disabilities ministry for other churches in our city and in the region.

I give greatest credit to my wife, Cecilia. Her patient, yet constant encouragement to continue kept me going. She is my true partner in life and in ministry. Every idea, plan, or program I have developed has been in tandem with her. Her strength in the face of adversity, faith in the face of challenge, and love for Mark through anything we have experienced has been my inspiration. In her quiet, gentle, loving way she has

ministered to many families with disability. She demonstrates daily the difference that one person who loves the Lord and loves people can make.

Most of all, I am thankful for our son Mark. Throughout this project and pursuit of this degree, Mark's needs and struggles have been both a constant distraction and a constant motivation. The demands of care for a growing young man with autism and other disabilities can be great. Mark's need of constant supervision and care place a unique burden on our family and as a result on my work in the church. Yet throughout this process, I have worked because of him. He is my reminder that this type of ministry, though often challenging, is always worth it. My heart's desire is that as Mark has been loved, understood, accommodated, and genuinely cared for by two wonderful churches, so will other people with various disabilities experience Christian love in action. And as these two churches have borne many burdens for my family and me and been a genuine spiritual community for us, so may many other families struggling with the weight and difficulties of life with disabilities find churches that demonstrate Jesus to them.

Paul A. Thompson

Dothan, Alabama

December 2013

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to implement an evangelistic, biblically sound ministry program for persons with intellectual disabilities and their families at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach, Jensen Beach, Florida.

Goals

This project attempted to accomplish five goals. These goals served as the primary criteria for measuring the viability and success of this project. The first goal was to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for persons with disabilities and their families and caregivers at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach. This goal would be realized through the education of members and regular attendees of First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach about the nature of intellectual disabilities and the impact those disabilities have on individuals and their families and on their relationship with the local church. The education process included defining and describing the various diagnoses described as “intellectual disabilities,” and also addressing the perceptions and misperceptions people have about these conditions.

The second goal was to present a biblically compelling rationale for disabilities ministry within the local church. By demonstrating God’s desire to glorify Himself through all people, His love for all people, and the unique compassion Jesus demonstrated and declared for those with disabilities, the church would then be motivated to respond by reaching out effectively to people with intellectual disabilities. The teaching also addressed Paul’s body metaphor of the church and the implications therein

for ministry to all persons. Finally, this education process created a fuller understanding of the implications of the gospel for persons with disabilities, including our responsibility to share the gospel clearly with all persons and to embody the gospel personally.

The third goal was to help the congregation better understand soteriology with specific application to people with intellectual disabilities. The teaching was primarily aimed at three targets: (1) the gospel message much be effectively communicated to all people; (2) the majority of people diagnosed with an intellectual disability can understand and respond to the gospel—perhaps with atypical responses, but still discernible ones; and (3) a small percentage of people with cognitive impairments can neither understand nor respond in any discernible way to the gospel message. For those who cannot respond, the church must have a biblically defensible position on their spiritual and eternal condition.

The fourth goal was to develop a specific evangelistic program that addressed particular needs of the intellectually disabled in our community while affording us the opportunity to share and demonstrate a gospel witness to them and their families. This program was informed by the conclusions drawn from the exploration in chapter 3 of the issue of soteriology and persons with intellectual disabilities. This program was implemented in an six-session pilot program with a limited group of participants. This limited-term pilot approach allowed us to develop a specific plan, including requirements of space, staff, and finances, and also enabled us to evaluate its effectiveness and long-term viability for our church and community. At the conclusion of the pilot project, a determination was made to repeat the program the following year with more participants and for a longer period of time.

The fifth goal of this project was for me to develop as a leader in the areas of biblical teaching and leadership. This project represented a significant ministry initiative in the life of First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach. This project required significant volunteer participation and congregational support. To accomplish the development of a

successful and hopefully enduring disabilities ministry required me to present clear biblical truth and apply it to the understanding of disabilities ministry, and to lead the church to adopt and support this ministry.

Ministry Context

First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach is located in northern Martin County, along Florida's Southeast coast. This general area is referred to as the Treasure Coast. The Treasure Coast is known for its clean beaches, high quality of living, and relatively affordable housing. The Treasure Coast area includes three counties: Martin, St. Lucie, and Indian River. The majority of the population of this area resides in St. Lucie County. This area experienced significant growth from 2000 to 2010, adding more than 129,000 new residents.¹ St. Lucie County increased in population from 192,695 to 277,789. Martin County's population increased from 126,731 to 146,318 during that same period.² First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach is located only a couple of miles from the Martin/St. Lucie county border. The ministry area includes both Martin and St. Lucie Counties, with a large percentage of our attendees coming from outside of Jensen Beach.

Jensen Beach is a small town with a population of approximately 22,700 year-round residents.³ While small in number of residents and actual geography, Jensen Beach is not in an isolated area. The county seat town of Stuart lies directly adjacent to the church, to the south, while Port St. Lucie lies directly adjacent to the north. According to *Forbes*, Port St. Lucie has been listed among the ten best cities in America for jobs.⁴

¹Jim Turner, "Treasure Coast adds more than 129,000 people since 2000, 2010 Census shows," <http://www.tcpalm.com/news/2011/mar/17/st-lucie-county-surpasses-quarter-million-2010/> (accessed September 10, 2013).

²Ibid.

³HomeGain, "Jensen Beach Real Estate," http://www.homegain.com/local_real_estate/FL/jensen_beach.html (accessed May 15, 2011).

⁴Kurt Badenhausen, "Best and Worst Cities for Jobs," *Forbes*, April 10, 2008, http://www.forbes.com/2008/04/10/best-cities-jobs-lead-cx_kb_0410jobs.html (accessed

The Center for Missional Research estimates that by the year 2015, there will be approximately 255,860 people within a ten-mile radius from the church.⁵ Jensen Beach continues to attract both families and retirees who are seeking the coastal Florida lifestyle, affordable housing, and a small-town environment. While rapid growth has abated, the Treasure Coast continues population growth and geographic expansion adding new communities regularly.

According to church growth consultants, lifestyle diversity is high in our immediate ministry area. There is not a dominant lifestyle segment or category for our church to target. The largest single grouping is “established empty nesters” which account for 17 percent of our households. This demographic group is typically aged 60 and older and are permanent residents. The second most significant group is “new beginning urbanites,” a younger demographic that is more transient.⁶ The population is predominantly Anglo (86 percent) with a fast growing Hispanic segment as well.⁷ The largest age group in our area is the group known as “survivors.” The group, defined as “a mix of Gen X and young boomers age 23 to 43,” makes up 23 percent of the total population of our area. Overall, the average age in the community is 45.3.⁸

First Baptist Church is a 60-year-old congregation. In the first 30 years, the church demonstrated slow but steady growth under frequently changing leadership. Under the 14-year pastoral tenure of Gary Townsend, the church began to experience pastoral stability and steady growth and development. After reaching a peak of an average of

October 10, 2011).

⁵Center for Missional Research, “Knowing Your Community Demographic Report,” North American Mission Board, 24 May 2011.

⁶Rainer Group, “Pathways to the Twenty-First Century: A Consultation Report,” September 1, 2004.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

approximately 350 in Sunday morning worship attendance in the early 1990s, the church slowly declined to average about 250 in attendance by 1995.

It was in April of 1996 that Pastor Townsend resigned to accept another ministry position, and I became the interim pastor. I was serving as the church's youth pastor at that time and continued to serve in both capacities until December of 1996 when I was called to be the new senior pastor. I served in that position until February of 2012.

Under my leadership, we began to make substantive changes in worship style, church leadership structure, and general philosophy and approach. I began to lead the church towards more effective outreach to our community and to develop worship environments that were more attractive to unchurched people. We also began to revisit plans to build a new, modern worship center/auditorium. Over the last decade, we committed many resources to ministry to children, youth, and families. As a result, the majority of our numerical growth came from those areas. This numerical growth continued moderately and consistently over the last sixteen years. In 1996, the average Sunday morning worship attendance was 177. By January of 2012, the church was averaging over 700 attendees.

The church also experienced significant physical growth. In the spring of 2005, the church completed the construction of an 18,000 square foot, 780-seat auditorium. The student ministry facilities were renovated and the old sanctuary was converted to multi-purpose space and the hub of children's ministry space. With the completion of this conversion, the church possessed excellent and modern facilities for children and adequate space to begin ministry for people with intellectual disabilities.

In June of 2002, the church shared in the founding of The Hope Center for Autism, a public charter school meeting on our campus that served pre-school through second grade students with a diagnosis of autism. I was a co-founder, and also served for five years as the President of the Board of Directors. In the summer of 2009, the church

began a daily preschool meeting the educational needs of over sixty 2, 3, and 4 year-old students.

During my tenure, First Baptist Church was led by a competent and effective pastoral team. The staff shared a commitment to expository biblical teaching for life change, a commitment to evangelistic effectiveness, and a strong desire to be creative in meeting the spiritual needs of the community. Each member of the pastoral team possessed the ability and desire to expand his areas of ministry and effectiveness and all had the potential of leading and managing larger and more demanding ministries. The staff was poised for growth. The pastoral staff also enjoyed the benefits of a simplified church structure that allowed great freedom in setting direction, making decisions, and leading the ministries of the church.

Elders comprised the primary lay leadership of the church. They were supportive and encouraging of the entire pastoral staff. They provided a basis of support through accountability, biblical and doctrinal integrity, and general structure and guidance. This form of government allowed the pastoral staff to give functional, daily leadership to the church. Deacons provided ministries of service and pastoral care.

During the fifteen years I served as Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, I gained the trust and confidence of the congregation. I employed a team-based leadership system with the pastoral staff whereby the entire staff worked together to pray about, plan for, and implement the consensus reached among us. I functioned in the role of “coach” for the team, giving direction, accountability, and encouragement to each of the other staff pastors. The people tended to be receptive to new plans, initiatives, and ideas. There seemed to be a high willingness to take risks and experiment with new approaches. The church was generally healthy and free of conflict.

The church also had a positive financial record, exceeding its annual budget for the last ten years. The people were faithful in supporting mission causes, contributing

approximately 13 percent of our financial resources to support mission causes and organizations.

The members and regular attendees of First Baptist Church largely represent the demographic groups of the communities that surround the church. While the church has grown younger over the last decade, it remains multi-generational. The church has a large population of young families, a sizable contingent of older retirees, and every group in between.

The church is also socio-economically diverse. There are doctors, teachers, business owners, accountants, mechanics, landscapers, and many other occupations represented. The church valued evangelism but was not particularly effective in the retention of new members. Most placed a high priority on the weekend worship experience. They valued the music and preaching as our primary strengths. There was a general sense of satisfaction with the church and an excitement about its future.

Rationale

The rationales behind this project are rooted in the prevalence of intellectual disabilities within our area and beyond and the corresponding responsibility of the church to minister to all people. These disabilities include autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, mental retardation, or traumatic brain injury. Other less familiar conditions that present similar challenges include Angeleman syndrome, fetal-alcohol syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, and Williams Syndrome.⁹

While the United States Census does not collect specific data on the prevalence of intellectual disabilities, estimates of those with these disabilities range from 2 to 3 percent of the total population.¹⁰ The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia

⁹Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2007), 2-3.

¹⁰Administration for Children and Families, “ACF Questions and Answers Support,” <http://faq.acf.hhs.gov/cgi-bin/acfrightnow.cfg/php/enduser/>

tracked the number of children with intellectual disability in a five-county area and determined that 1.2 percent had a severe intellectual disability (defined as having a score of 70 or below at age 8 on the most recent test of intellectual functioning).¹¹ The overall numbers would necessarily be higher, as the CDC study included only children. The Arc for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities estimates that there were 4.6 million people with intellectual disability in America in 2000.¹²

Closer to home, according to the Director of the Hope Center School for Autism, Martin County, Florida has 18,067 students from preschool through 12th grade. Of these, 2,871 are identified as disabled. Of these students, 109 have been diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) while another 255 are identified as having some other intellectual disability. According to [cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com), autism is the fastest-growing serious intellectual disability in the United States. It is newly diagnosed in 67 children every day.¹³ In Florida, 1 out of 187 children will be diagnosed with autism.¹⁴

Nationally, the figures are even more tragic. Many older sources estimate a figure of approximately 1 in 150 children will be diagnosed with autism.¹⁵ According to *Pediatrics: The Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, however, the latest survey information reveals that as many as 1 percent of US children ages 3-17 have

[std_adp.php?p_faqid=940&p_created=1068054883](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/mr3.htm) (accessed May 16, 2011).

¹¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Intellectual Disability," <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/mr3.htm> (accessed May 20, 2011).

¹²The Arc, "Introduction to Intellectual Disabilities," <http://www.thearc.org/page.aspx?pid=2448> (accessed May 20, 2011).

¹³Danielle Dellorto, "Toddler Brain Difference Linked to Autism," http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/05/04/autism.brain.amygdala/index.html?eref=rss_topstories (accessed May 15, 2011).

¹⁴Fightingautism.org, "The Autism Epidemic," <http://www.fightingautism.org/idea/autism-state-rankings-prevalence.php> (accessed May 15, 2011).

¹⁵Associated Press, "Autism Rate in U.S. Higher than Thought," <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17047721/> (accessed May 15, 2011).

an autism spectrum disorder, an estimated prevalence of 1 in every 91 children, including 1 in 58 boys.¹⁶ Based on those rates, and in comparison with Church Marketing Solutions 2009 estimates of population from ages 0-19,¹⁷ within just a five-mile radius of the church we could expect to identify somewhere between 73 and 150 children with ASD alone.

In addition to autism, we would also discover many other families affected by traumatic brain injury, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, Down syndrome, and other intellectual disabilities previously listed. While the prevalence of intellectual disability is high in the community and most communities, the number of churches with intentional ministry to or inclusive ministry with persons with disabilities is low. The US Congregational Life Survey revealed that only 10 percent of congregations provide some form of care to people with disabilities attending their congregation or living in the broader community.¹⁸ People with intellectual disabilities, their families, and those who care for them have often found the physical facilities of the local church to be a barrier communicating they are either unwelcome or unthought-of. Mark York notes,

Ten percent of the population of the United States is composed of persons with some exceptionality. Yet when one looks at church congregations, handicapped persons are conspicuously absent. Why do disabled persons and their families seem to avoid churches? Is it because they do not feel wanted or welcome?¹⁹

While the theology of the local church might suggest that “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” often the facilities suggest that “An Impregnable Fortress is Our Church.” Others

¹⁶Michael D. Kogan, et al., “Prevalence of Parent-Reported Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder among Children in the US, 2007,” <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/peds.2009-1522v1> (accessed May 17, 2011).

¹⁷Church Marketing Solutions “DemographicsNow,” <http://www.church-marketing.com/> (accessed May 15, 2011).

¹⁸Carter, *Including People with Disabilities*, 7.

¹⁹Mark A. York, *Jesus Loves Me, Too: The Church Ministering to Exceptional Persons* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1985), 19.

have referred to the modern church and its less than stellar record of ministry to the disabled as a “city on a hill—physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.”²⁰

Thankfully, physical barriers are the easiest to address and remove. Where there is desire to do so, many of the changes required to accommodate the physical needs of people with intellectual disabilities can be easily made. And while the focus of this chapter and project is to address only those issues pertaining to people with intellectual disabilities, surely a church that has begun to recognize a disconnect with its community and the disabled population in particular will assess all of their facilities in light of accessibility issues for persons with disabilities of all types.

Many mistakenly assume that the Americans with Disabilities Act²¹ is sufficient for governing accessibility issues for churches. In actuality, however, the ADA does not apply to religious organizations and entities controlled by religious organizations.²² The burden of responsibility is the church’s. And that burden is not a legal one, but a spiritual one. If these barriers keep the church from effective outreach, loving ministry, and inclusion of all of God’s people in the life of the church, then we must alleviate these barriers.

Although the ADA does not apply to churches, some churches have adopted the acts accessibility standards for public accommodations. The National Organization on Disability publishes a handbook on voluntary measures taken by religious organizations to improve access for persons with disabilities. The handbook is entitled *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities*.²³ The handbook notes,

²⁰Nancy L Eisland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 20.

²¹“Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended,” <http://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2011).

²²Veronica Rose, “Churches and Handicapped Accessibility Requirements,” <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2006/rpt/2006-R-0756.htm> (accessed May 15, 2011).

²³Ann Rose Davie and Ginny Thornburgh, *That All May Worship: An*

Among the millions of Americans with disabilities, many have spiritual needs that are not being met. They cannot even get into the church of their choice. And when they do get in, they may not be able to negotiate stairs or narrow doorways. Some find print too small to read, sound systems that are inadequate, bathrooms they cannot use, or an atmosphere that is hostile.²⁴

The reality is that while the needs are great, churches are failing to meet them. It is as if churches ignore the reality of disability all around them and by so doing are also ignoring their God-given responsibility as the Body of Christ in a broken world.

Barbara Newman, author of *Autism and Your Church*, writes, “I’ve observed that many persons with disabilities feel more support and inclusion from public schools and government agencies than they do from the Body of Christ.”²⁵ She notes that the issue is not always lack of desire on the part of pastors and other Christian leaders. Sometimes church leaders simply do not know what to do. The result is a church that all too often leaves disabled people feeling “uninvited, misunderstood, patronized, and ignored by the community of Christ. They have been set on the margins.”²⁶

Jeff McNair, Professor of Education at California Baptist University and author of the weblog “disabledChristianity,”²⁷ notes some of the changes that will take place in the local church when the church is more responsive to people with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities. Those changes include more welcoming attitudes of people in the church, improved community perception of the church, and God’s blessing on the church for being obedient to reaching out to those whom Jesus reached out to.²⁸

Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities (Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 1992).

²⁴Ibid., 2-3.

²⁵Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2006), 7.

²⁶Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities Into the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 79.

²⁷Disabledchristianity.blogspot.com (accessed May 13, 2013).

²⁸Jeff McNair, *The Church and Disability* (Lexington, KY: Self-published,

The local church has the opportunity and responsibility to make the changes necessary in attitudes, approach, and efforts to include persons with disabilities in all the ministries of the church. To not make these changes creates or leaves in place barriers to the gospel itself. As Rife and Thornburgh noted,

If people with disabilities view themselves as somehow outside the realm of God's steadfast love, their ability to enter into community with others will be limited. Only when we all are accepted as equals, equally valued and cherished in the eyes of a loving God is it possible to enter into a caring community.²⁹

The first rationale for this project is the foundational biblical truth found in Genesis 1:26-27 that God created all people in His image, including people with disabilities, to glorify Himself. Rather than treating disabilities as a sort of curse of God, result of sin, attack of Satan, or something outside the control of a sovereign God, people should learn to see all people as part of God's plan and as potential images of God's glory. When Moses declared his inability to speak to Pharaoh on Israel's behalf, God declared to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? (Exod 4:11-12).

When the disciples inquired of Jesus who was to blame or what was the cause of a blind man's disability, the Lord replied, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). And when the crowds gathered around Jesus, his ministry to the disabled among them brought glory to God:

Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel. (Matt 15:30-31)

2009), 285-86.

²⁹Janet Miller Rife and Ginny Thornburgh, *From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations and People with Disabilities* (Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 1996).

When the church recognizes the sovereignty of God in all things, including the presence of disabilities, and works to bring people with disabilities to Jesus, God is and will be glorified.

The second rationale of the project is the responsibility of the church to reach out to one of the most unreached groups in the community. According to Mephibosheth Ministry, “People with disabilities are the largest unreached people group in the world. Ten-percent of the world’s population has a disability, and 90% of that group do not go to church or have a relationship with Christ.”³⁰ Because of perceived or real barriers, people with disabilities tend to be excluded from religious and church life.

The church must first perceive the barriers that have been erected to people with disabilities, and then understand how to remove those barriers. Those barriers can be physical impediments that facilities, classrooms, equipment, and even environments represent. The barriers can be a lack of education, training, and sensitivity of members about and towards disabled persons. The barriers can include previous negative experiences of people with disabilities in a local church context because they were neglected, ignored, or unwanted. Even past experiences in churches that attempt ministry with intellectually disabled people can also be a negative barrier today.

Perhaps these families were patronized, unfairly or inappropriately labeled, over-accepted (i.e., “swarming”), or isolated in these ministry settings. Even more tragic would be the people with disabilities or members of their families who experienced an abusive theological message in the churches attended. Families may have been told by a pastor that intellectual disabilities were the result of demon possession. Other families have been told that God desires all to be healed and a person’s lack of healing was due to a lack of faith. Many have also been told that the sins of their past were the cause of their child’s current disabilities. Messages like these are harmful and destructive to

³⁰Mephibosheth Ministry, “People Who Have Disabilities,” <http://mephiboshethministry.org/peoplewithdisabilities.html> (accessed May 15, 2011).

individuals and families alike. These messages are also creating nearly impenetrable barriers for disabled people to overcome if they are to find a place in churches.

Finally, some people may be angry with God for the disabilities in their families or lives. Blaming God for their condition, they may be reluctant to enter a church or participate in any religious activities. These people need to be told of God's love for them as revealed in the Bible, and have God's love demonstrated to them by people who genuinely care about them and their families.

The third rationale is the Great Commission, expressed in many texts of scripture, commanding believers to make disciples among all the nations, including baptizing them and teaching them all that Christ has commanded (Matt 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:8). To be obedient to this primary imperative of the Church requires Christians and the churches they are members of to pursue the lost actively, sharing an ascertainable witness to them and seeking an appropriate response to that message, while trusting God with the ultimate results. Scripture also reminds churches that saving faith, expressed as "calling on the Lord" requires an understandable witness. Specifically the scriptures teach that those who will be saved must hear the message and therefore it must be preached to them (Rom 10:9-15).

The challenge to the local church is how to translate that requirement for "hearing" and for a verbal response to that heard message for those whose disabilities may preclude one or both of those activities. Churches must find appropriate means to convey the gospel to all persons, including those with intellectual disabilities. On a person-by-person basis, the responsibility of Christian leaders is to try to discern the responses of those who are capable of some form of response and act accordingly, offering baptism and communion to those who give evidence of saving faith. For those who appear to be incapable of receiving or responding to the gospel message, Christian leaders must show the sovereignty, justice, and love of God for their salvation.

The fourth rationale is the need of the church to be inclusive and welcoming to

people with disabilities in order to function appropriately and biblically as the body of Christ. God’s design for the Church is that it be as a body of many necessary, interdependent parts. The Apostle Paul specifically refers to the “weaker” parts of the body as “indispensable” (1 Cor 12:22). For the church to be biblically whole and healthy, it must include people with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities. Jesus described doing ministry to “the least of these” as doing ministry unto Himself (Matt 25:40). While not referring specifically to disabled persons in that discourse, the call to ministry to those whom society considers “least” is an important challenge of the church.

The church must develop a better theological understanding of its role and function as a spiritual body so that it may properly relate to and include people with disabilities. The presence of people with disabilities in services of worship, small groups, studies, and activities makes churches and congregations closer to wholeness and to the biblical ideal of church as seen in the Bible. As mentioned in the third rationale, this need to be inclusive also requires the church to offer baptism and communion to persons with disability who have responded appropriately to the gospel.

The fifth rationale of this project is the need of hurting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ. Christians are called to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1). Individuals and families with intellectual disabilities carry heavy and typically lifelong burdens. Jim Pierson, author of *No Disabled Souls*, notes the incredible toll placed on families who experience disabilities. His research reveals that four out of five marriages that either produce a child with a disability or include a spouse who becomes disabled ends in divorce.³¹ He also states that children with cognitive disabilities are subject to 10 times more abuse than other children.³² The

³¹Jim Pierson, James O. Pierson, and Rodney Pate, *No Disabled Souls* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1998), 90.

³²Ibid.

other members of the family are also profoundly affected. Pierson states that, “siblings of a child with a disability are 4 times more likely to be maladjusted than their peers who have typical siblings.”³³

Many families with disabilities are overwhelmed with the challenges these disabilities cause. Routine activities such as shopping, going to school, having a meal together as a family, and going to church can at times be challenging, if not nearly impossible. The strain on families is real, profound, and often unseen by most. The church possesses spiritual and personal resources to help carry these burdens, and must do so. Conversion growth³⁴ will be an expected and natural by-product of the church reaching out in beneficial ways to demonstrate the love of Christ to hurting people.

Research Methodology

The project utilized a variety of tools that enabled us to gauge the opinions, attitudes, and actions of our church both prior to and after the twelve weeks of the project. Because the goal of the project involved leading the church to support and participate in a specific ministry plan for people with disabilities and their families, I first had to understand the prevailing attitudes of the church prior to the project so that I was able to lead them to embrace and endorse this evangelistic imperative for the church. To facilitate this understanding, I administered a pre-project survey to the participants in the first session of a four-week message series on disability ministry. The results of this Likert scale based survey informed my understanding of the current climate of the church

³³Ibid.

³⁴The rationale for the ministry is not just that it is the Christian thing to do. The rationale is to make Christians. Conversion growth then should be the expected outcome as people with disabilities are introduced to the gospel. Those who are able to demonstrate a response and are thus candidates for baptism would be considered “conversion growth” for the church. In addition, this ministry should facilitate the sharing of the gospel with family members and friends of those with disabilities. As the church begins to create an atmosphere of acceptance and love for people with disabilities, it will naturally attract families with disabilities and gospel opportunities will increase.

in regard to understanding definitions, needs, and ministry opportunities for people with disabilities.

As a comparative and evaluative tool, I administered the same survey to the same target group at the conclusion of the message series. In addition to these surveys, I conducted four focus group sessions with area professionals and leaders in the field of intellectual disability along with potential key volunteers and leaders for our own disabilities ministry. I utilized this discussion group to understand the needs that they perceived in the community, as well as to help in the development a clearer and more focused plan of ministry that our church can realistically implement.

I also relied on this group for ongoing feedback and commentary about the entire project, including both the information gleaned from research and the developing plans of the ministry itself. This group was helpful in establishing the details of the pilot program that was implemented as well as in the evaluation of the success of the pilot program.

Definitions and Limitations

The project was limited in three areas. First, the target group was comprised of 15 young adults with varying diagnoses of intellectual disability. The pilot group included people with autism, Down Syndrome, and other non-specified intellectual disorders. Effects of these types of disabilities are described as substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of major life activity: self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, capacity for independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.³⁵

The lessons learned while serving this group would later be applied to a much larger group of similarly diagnosed participants. And though the project was limited to

³⁵University of Minnesota, "About Developmental Disabilities," <http://ici.umn.edu/relatedresources/definition.html> (accessed May 15, 2011).

that initial target group, the lessons learned while serving them find easy application to ministry for people with any sorts of disabilities. We had to deal with attitudes and perceptions of the congregation regarding disabilities. We had to consider the accessibility issues of the campus. We had to intentionally discover a specific need of this population that the church could reasonably meet. And, we had to be creative in intentionally sharing the gospel.

The second limitation of the project was its twelve-week length. During that time we were able to plan the program, conduct it, and carry out initial evaluations. The long-term effect and the impact it had on the participants and their families is harder to measure. Hopefully, the participants and their family and caregivers will have an enduring positive view of the church, its people, and of God because of this ministry. Also, while one of the goals was to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for persons with disabilities and their families and caregivers within the ministries of First Baptist Church, this outcome was difficult to adequately measure in such a relatively short period of time. As the ministry hopefully continues, this will be an ever-increasing byproduct.

Ideally, as the needs of people with disabilities are increasingly recognized by the church, the members will increasingly be motivated to action. That action, undergirded by clear biblical principles, should result in long-term, successful ministry for people with disabilities.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR LOCAL CHURCH DISABILITIES MINISTRY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a compelling biblical basis for local churches to implement an intentional evangelistic ministry to and for people with intellectual disabilities. The chapter seeks to describe four key biblical themes that relate to disabilities ministry and the local church. The selected passages are representative of these themes. As such, this chapter will not provide an exhaustive overview of all potentially applicable passages of scripture.

These following four biblical rationales for an inclusive ministry for persons with intellectual disabilities find application to all types of people with disabilities, not just to those with intellectual ones. While many of the references in this chapter describe intellectual disabilities particularly, the principles explained are applicable to persons with any disability that causes them to be or feel disconnected from the local church. These four principles find an even wider application as they relate to all persons unreached by the church and untouched by the gospel.

An intentional outreach aimed at ministering to this largely unreached people group will likely bring the church numerical growth and the support and encouragement of the local community. Ultimately, however, the desire to include persons with disabilities in worship, ministries, and evangelistic outreach must be theologically driven, not pragmatically driven. The challenges to a church to make the necessary adjustments in theology, attitude, architecture, programming, and budgeting can be significant. These challenges will not long nor successfully be addressed if a church is simply after “results,” “numbers,” or public recognition. Churches must be driven by a clear sense of

what is right, good, and godly.

A church that wholeheartedly commits to an inclusive ministry aimed towards persons with intellectual disabilities must possess the theological grounding for it, and what Jeanie Weiss Block calls a “Gospel mandate”:

A theology of access acknowledges that our commitment to inclusion is not because we are being generous or good Christians, but because it is a Gospel mandate. A theology of access demands that we accept that God is not accessible to us on our own terms, and that making a place and a space for others, even and especially “people of exclusion,” is one of the basic requirements of the Christian life. A theology of access demands we search our community with truth and face the serious reality that some people of God have been systematically denied access to the community. A theology of access demands that we admit that our own attitudes and actions have excluded people.¹

This sense of mandate to reach all persons with the gospel of Jesus Christ and to open the doors to people regardless of their abilities, is the fuel of lasting ministry. This ministry must also be driven by clear biblical principles that give the local church the tools necessary to evaluate its efforts and results in reaching this people group.

What many churches will likely find upon a cursory evaluation of their members, attendees, budgets, and ministries is that they have excluded this unique people group. Besides being conspicuously absent in churches, most people with disabilities are disconnected from personal religious faith as well. Less than 14 percent of the disabled population claims to be Christian.² This is a huge, virtually unreached, mission field. The local church must consciously monitor itself against all forms of exclusion. To fail to seek to reach a group of people already marginalized from community life as a whole, include them, and develop them in Christ likeness, is unjustifiable. To not pursue them actively with the gospel is disobedience.

¹Jeanie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum International, 2002), 122.

²Jerry L. Borton, “Dreams Come True: Ministry with Persons Having Physical Disabilities,” in *Reaching out to Special People*, ed. Jim Pierson and Robert E. Korth (Cincinnati: Standard, 1989), 77.

The collective neglect of this group is, though, likely unintentional. Stephanie Hubach writes,

Active oppression must never, ever be a part of the life of the church toward people with disabilities or any other individuals. It is entirely antithetical to justice – and completely inconsistent with the character of God. But passive oppression can also occur, and this is more often the form of exclusion that takes place in churches. Passive oppression involves holding down of another through what is *not* done – and it generally occurs due to neglect. Reasons for the neglect can vary along a spectrum from ignorance to indifference. Ignorance can result in a failure to provide due to a lack of awareness that a problem exists, or because of an inability to know how to address a specific challenge. On the other extreme, neglect due to indifference is a complex matter of the heart: “We know, but we really don’t care enough to act on it.”³

Unintentional neglect is still unjustified, however. A closer examination of several key biblical themes and principles should provide sufficient information and motivation for us to act. These principles are founded in (1) the sovereignty of God in his creation, (2) God’s design and desire for His glory in all persons, (3) the ministry and teachings of Jesus, and (4) the implications of the church as the Body of Christ.

The Sovereignty of God in Creation

The first biblical basis for ministry to people with disabilities is the sovereignty of God in creation:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

That all people are made by God, in the image of God, and given unique responsibilities and roles is a good starting point for ascribing human value. John Walton and Victor Matthews write,

When God created people, he put them in charge of all of his creation. He endowed them with his own image. In the ancient world an image was believed to carry the essence of that which it represented. An idol image of deity, the same terminology as used here, would be used in the worship of that deity because it contained the

³Stephanie Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006), 157.

deity's essence. This would not suggest that the image could do what the deity could do, or that it looked the same as the deity. Rather, the deity's work was thought to be accomplished through the idol. In similar ways the governing work of God was seen to be accomplished by people.⁴

David Schroeder, professor of New Testament at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba, writes,

To be created in the image of God does not mean to have received some special faculties such as those of mind, emotion, or will even though these are essential to our being. Nor does it refer to some special characteristics we may have received, much as these are part of human life. To be created in the image of God is to speak of the possibility of relating to God and to other human beings as persons.⁵

Schroeder includes the following details of what it truly means to be humans created by God: (1) we are created as persons, able to relate to others and to God, (2) we are partners with God in meaningful, purposeful life and work, (3) we are participants in creating our own space in this world., and (4) we are created to acknowledge and worship God.⁶

The implications of God's sovereignty in creation are many. At the very least, the church must consider the God-ordained worth of each individual. One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom, said when speaking of this passage, "What is it whose pending creation is granted so great an honor? It is humanity, the greatest and most marvelous of living beings, and the creation most worthy of honor before God."⁷ To embrace the essential value of all persons as God's unique creations is the starting point for disabilities ministries.

The story of creation elevates the creation of mankind above all other acts of creation. Of all God created, it was only the creation of human beings that caused God to

⁴John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews, *The Pentateuch*, Bible Background Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 29.

⁵David Schroeder, *Celebrating Differences*, ed. Aldred H. Neufeldt (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1984), 2.

⁶Ibid., 2-11.

⁷Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1-11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 28.

say “it is *very* good” (Gen 1:31). Stephanie Hubach writes, “Human beings were God’s crowning act of creation. While fashioned as creatures, people were designed to intrinsically embody his likeness. That means that mankind has a myriad of finite potentialities that reflect God’s infinite reality.”⁸ That people reflect God and are made for His honor and pleasure is vital for a right understanding of the worth of all people. Thus, though there are persons with disabilities, intellectual and other, they are no less valuable or honorable to God. Jurgen Moltmann writes,

I begin with the conviction that there are fundamentally no “persons with disabilities,” but rather only “people”: people with this or that difficulty on the basis of which the society of the strong and capable declares them to be “disabled” and consequently more or less excludes them from public life. And yet they are people with the same human worth . . . as each and every person.⁹

When the local church fails to understand this foundational theological truth or fails to apply it properly and actively, its members will tend to have an insufficient view of the worth and needs of people with disabilities. Deborah Creamer writes of the local church,

When disabilities have been considered at all, it is the disability that is first seized upon. People with disabilities have historically been portrayed as suffering personified (to be pitied), images of saintliness (to be admired), symbols of sin (to be avoided) or signs of God’s limited power or capriciousness (to be pondered). Very rarely have people with disabilities been first portrayed as people.¹⁰

Because of the wrong perceptions and misguided ideas about disabilities, many churches have effectively excluded people from Christian communities and from receiving the gospel itself.

Mankind alone has the capacity to share in God’s nature, express his attributes,

⁸Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 28.

⁹Jurgen Moltmann, “Liberate Yourself by Accepting One Another,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eisland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 105.

¹⁰Deborah Creamer, “Toward a Theology that Includes the Human Experience of Disability,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 7, no. 3 (2003): 57.

and to have fellowship with him. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church, considers the understanding of this truth to be fundamental in the discussion of ministry for disabled persons: “Disabled individuals are people made in the image of God. Forget the physical or mental disabilities. They are people made in the image of God—that’s all. They’re no less marred and no less capable of restoration than his other creations.”¹¹

MacArthur also considers the consideration of whether or not a church should implement special ministry to reach out to them is no different a consideration of whether or not a church should reach out to lost people: “As Christians, we have no choice.”¹²

Ann Fritzon and Samuel Kabue also explain the practical implications of this concept:

All life is a gift from God, and there is an integrity to this creation. We read in Genesis 1:31 that after creating all of heaven and earth and every form of life, God saw that “. . . indeed it was very good.” God did not say it was “perfect.” With the breath of life, God has imbued each person with dignity and worth. We believe that humanity is “created in the image and likeness of God” (Gen. 1:26), with each human bearing aspects of that divine nature, yet no one of is reflecting God fully or completely. Being in God’s image does not just mean bearing this likeness, but the possibility of becoming as God intends. This includes all people, whatever their abilities or impairments. It means that every human being is innately gifted and has something to offer that others need. This may be simply one’s presence, one’s capacity to respond to attention, to exhibit some sign of appreciation and love for other people. Each has something unique to contribute (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) and should thus be considered as a gift.¹³

In this act of creation, one observes an ascending order of importance with man at the pinnacle of all God made. Kenneth Matthews points out the uniquely deliberative act of creation in regard to man as opposed to the impersonal words spoken in previous creation acts (“Let us make” in place of “let there be”).¹⁴ Matthew’s interpretation of the passage

¹¹Gene Newman and Joni Eareckson Tada, *All God’s Children: Ministry to the Disabled* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 32.

¹²*Ibid.*, 33.

¹³Ann Fritzon and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All* (Geneva: WCC, 2004), 77.

¹⁴Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 160.

suggests a thoughtful, personal process of intricate design. This process finds a parallel in Psalm 139:14-16. There, David the psalmist reminds the reader in poetic terms of God's specificity in his design and intentionality in his purpose for mankind:

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Ps 139:14-16)

The Scriptures speak of individuality, distinctiveness, and wonder in creation. James Montgomery Boice writes, "From that very first moment, God knew him and had ordained what his life was to be."¹⁵

Cathy Steere and her husband, David, are parents of an autistic son. Their ability to recognize that God is holy and exercises power and control over all of creation sustains them through the challenges of rearing a child with an intellectual disability:

To say that God is sovereign is to say that he exercises his will in the lives of each of his creatures—even in the life of our child. It is his sovereign will if he chooses to make our child deaf, dumb, blind, or handicapped in any way. He is the potter. We are but the clay. And because God is holy, we can rest assured that all of his decrees are perfect and just and right.¹⁶

The collective church needs to reach these same conclusions: Nothing occurs outside of God's will. God is holy, wise, and just. God uses all circumstances to grow us spiritually and personally into the image of Jesus. People have all been uniquely created in God's image. Scripture must be the guide in understanding God, the world, and humanity. When these conclusions are reached, it is easier to see disabilities as a part of God's plan for the individual, the family, and the faith community. Their disabilities challenge all to trust in the revealed character and nature of God and to love him nonetheless. Those disabilities also challenge the members of the church to act out their beliefs and convictions in practical ways. Though this world is affected by sin and

¹⁵James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 3:1220.

¹⁶Cathy Steere, *Too Wise to Be Mistaken, Too Good to Be Unkind: Christian Parents Contend with Autism* (Sand Springs, OK: Grace and Truth, 2005), 22.

suffering and accompanied by the reality of disability, people can yet know with certainty that in spite of problems, limitations, and disabilities, God made men for his purpose and glory. Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris state,

We are all created by God's intention. No person is a chance collection of atoms. To believe that would be to succumb to despair. It is true that when things go wrong we ask, "Why me?", to which we might respond, "Why not?" But within a Christian context we can cling on to the fact that not only are we intentionally made in the image of God and therefore of infinite worth, but also our lives are *for* something and that, therefore, we have a vocation from God. God has called each one of us into being. None of us is a surprise to God, or an accident or an embarrassment.¹⁷

A poignant example of a human disability causally attributed to God and also coinciding with God's will and purpose is the story of the calling of Moses in Exodus 4:1-11. Upon being called by God to his vocal messenger for the deliverance of the people of Israel out of Egyptian captivity, Moses responds with multiple reasons why he cannot accomplish the task. He tells God that he is "slow of speech and slow of tongue." To this God replies, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"

Moses, an 80 year-old shepherd, was called by God to be the deliverer of his people. Moses' response to God's compelling call was to reference his own inability. Whether this was simply an excuse on Moses' part, a minor incapacity, or an actual disability is unclear. What *is* clear, however, is that God takes personal responsibility for Moses' condition, as well as for the condition of all people with disabilities. What are some of the implications of this profound statement by God to Moses? Jeff McNair writes,

"Who makes the dumb?" God goes on to say, implying 1) that he knows of the variations between mouths, and 2) that he made the variations between mouths. That is, God even made the mouths of the dumb, those who cannot speak for whatever reason. These observations on God's part are not restricted to the mouth, however. He goes on to say, "or the deaf" (i.e., variations in the ear) or the "seeing or the blind" (i.e., variations in the eye). Once again, the implication is that God created the variations we see in human beings, down to what are called disabilities;

¹⁷Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), 33-34.

being unable to speak, unable to hear, or unable to see. One would assume that these variations could also include other types of ‘disability’ including physical and mental differences.¹⁸

Implicit in the passage is God’s sovereign will and his purposes in and through Moses. Phillip Graham Ryken writes,

These rhetorical questions are a reminder that God made us exactly the way he wanted to make us. Who gave us our eyes, ears, and mouth? Obviously God did. If that is the case, then he ordains our abilities, inabilities, and even disabilities. God has equipped us with every talent we need to do his will. He made us the way that he made us for his glory.¹⁹

What is clear in this passage is the intentionality of God’s purpose. God reminds Moses that he is exactly the person God desires to use, his disabilities are of no limitation to God, and in fact they allow the power and work of God to be demonstrated even more clearly. Of this encounter of God with Moses, McCloughry and Morris write,

Not only has God made Moses with a speech impediment but also this is a gift of God within the purposes of God. It is ‘given’ by God and not a frustration of God’s purposes for Moses. Because of it, Moses is assured that God will help him. Since God is the giver of all things, he is also the give of disabilities. Why God gives them, we do not know. But rather than seeing the disability as something God gives to people it may be more accurate to see disabled people as God’s gift to the world. God’s purposes cannot be completed without them.²⁰

Moses’ calling, resistance, and lesson from God’s reply give a good indication of how God’s plan and purposes supersede human inabilities. It is a clear demonstration that the sovereign and just God sometimes creates those perceived limitations so that His glory may be more clearly demonstrated. At the very least, one should recognize that disabilities do not disable God. Stuart Govig notes that “various texts suggest how persons with disabilities, though tolerated, were in most instances feared or kept on the

¹⁸Jeff McNair, *The Church and Disability* (Lexington, KY: self-published, 2009), 257.

¹⁹Phillip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory*, Preaching The Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 117.

²⁰McCloughry and Morris, *Making a World of Difference*, 47.

margins of a given community. But from a *divine perspective*, this is not the case. God brushes aside the speech limits of Moses.”²¹

Josie Byzek notes another important lesson from the Moses account: the need to be allies of people with disabilities:

Remember Moses, who stood in front of the burning bush, insisting he was not the right man for the job simply because of his speech impediment. God didn't take away the impairment and God didn't perform Moses' task for him, but God did give him a helper—his brother. Be like Aaron. Help your brother.²²

Moses demonstrated the power of God though his abilities were limited, and Aaron demonstrated godliness in aiding his brother. In either case, one can see the purpose of God's glory being carried out through disability.

God's Design and Desire for His Glory

Not only is humankind created in God's image, intentionally designed for his purposes and exist at his will, man is created for his glory. To view people as displays of God's character, nature, and salvation makes it difficult to view them as objects of pity, derision, or worse. Understanding that all people have the capacity to reflect God's glory, and to give God glory with their lives, makes it difficult to view anyone in an inferior manner.

The apostle Paul writes in Colossians 1:15-17, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” Special attention must be giving to the clear and direct “all” of this passage. There are no exclusions in God's act of creation regarding his purposes. All were made by and for him. And while there are certainly

²¹Stewart D. Govig, *Strong at the Broken Places: Persons with Disabilities and the Church* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 109.

²²Josie Byzek. “How Communities of Faith Can Become Allies with the Disability Community,” *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 4, no. 2 (2001): 44.

clear passages that speak of God’s glory being demonstrated in the lives and testimonies of those with disabilities whom he heals (e.g., the man born blind in John 9:1-3 and the many healed in Matthew 15:30-31), one would be mistaken to assume that God receives glory only when those with disabilities are healed. The Scripture instead affirms in Romans 11:36 that “from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.”

According to Ephesians 1:13, the very story of God’s grand plan of redemption and salvation for his people is all “for the praise of his glory.” It follows then that all that God does in this world with every person he has made is for his glory as well. Isaiah 43:7 perfectly connects the purpose of existence in relationship to God’s glory: “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” While this passage speaks specifically of Israel, it nonetheless describes the inherent nature and purpose of all people. John N. Oswalt writes, “They were brought into existence—created, shaped, yes, made—for one purpose: The glory of God. . . . Their whole purpose is that they might reveal the Holy One, whose glory alone fills the earth.”²³

A crucial point of this chapter is the realization that there is often a disconnect between society’s views of persons with disabilities and God’s view. God intended to use all people for his service and to bring him glory. Disabilities, far from being a hindrance to that outcome, often seem to be a catalyst for it. Careful theological considerations must be made however, to avoid undermining the sense of God’s sovereign and good design in all persons and will limit the desire and ability to minister to them as equals before God.

The first consideration is a misplaced theology of healing. While Christians can and should endorse a biblically-informed view of God’s ability and willingness to heal, and while Christians should pray for the sick, the hurting, and the disabled, no one

²³John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 142.

should assume that all people with an intellectual disability only have value if and when they are healed, or that their primary value to the church is as an object of prayers for healing. Christians must be willing to accept that God's plan and purpose for some people includes this disability. In fact, it may be an essential component of God's grace-filled purpose for them, their family, his church, and the community. John Swinton writes of a young man named Stephen who has an intellectual disability:

“Learning disabilities” are not things that simply need to be diagnosed, categorized, controlled, and excised. Rather, they are human experiences; ways of existing in the world, that need to be understood and respected as authentic forms of human existence which reveal something of the image of God. If any healing is required, it is a healing of our perceptions and understandings and the destructive social atmosphere that forces people to feel the need to change their faces in order to feel accepted. Healing, in its true sense, can come when all of us come to realize that Stephen's face reflects something of the face of Christ. As such, he is insured a place of honor and value within the kingdom of God and amongst the people who are called to image and reveal that same God.²⁴

Swinton rightly notes that such a statement does not explain the cause of disabilities, but that it does protect those who are disabled (and their families) from the juxtaposition of sinfulness with disability. Such connections have very negative implications for disabled people.²⁵

Instead of assuming that the existence of human disability is causally related to sin and thus must require healing, one should instead consider the intentionality of God and examine what Jesus actually said about sin and disability in John 9:1-3: “As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” Craig Keener describes that scene as a situation in which God allowed this man to endure (in this case, blindness) so that a future fulfillment could arrive that demonstrated a pre-

²⁴John Swinton, *Building a Church for Strangers* (Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust, 1999), 26-27.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 27.

ordained purpose (the display of God's goodness). He writes, "The Pharisees, even more strongly than Jesus' misinformed disciples, attribute the man's ailment to sin. Yet John is clear that the man was born blind not because of sin but so that God's works should be revealed in him. Jesus had now come to accomplish those works."²⁶ In a message on this text entitled "Born Blind for the Glory of God," Bethlehem Baptist Church's former pastor John Piper stated, "I conclude that in every disability, whether genetically from the womb, or circumstantially from an accident, or infectiously from a disease, God has a design, a purpose for his own glory, and for the good of his people who love him and are called according to his purpose."²⁷

Andreas J. Kostenberger raises another interesting point. Perhaps the disciples were trying to absolve God of any possible blame in the case of this, or any other disability by attributing its existence to sin.²⁸ Rather than affirming their implication, he instead takes full responsibility for its existence and describes his intentions through it. At the least, Jesus clearly cuts the cord between sin and human suffering. McCloughry and Morris state,

It is entirely illogical to link impairment with personal or parental sin which Jesus recognizes in John 9, because when human experience is reflected upon, it is clear that those who are seemingly wicked often go unpunished. It is also important to recognize that all human beings are in some way sinful, but the cross of Christ shows that God wants not to punish us but to redeem. This issue of perceiving impairment as a punishment for sin is undoubtedly linked to the question which many people ask if they become impaired later in life: Why me? When things go wrong it is usual that people look for something to blame: God, others, and themselves. To blame personal sin is supported by society, because it can then place the blame firmly outside the sphere of its own control and influence. Blames makes someone responsible but it can make a person feel guilty and ashamed when

²⁶Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 778-79.

²⁷John Piper, "Born Blind for the Glory of God," <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/born-blind-for-the-glory-of-god> (accessed October 16, 2011)

²⁸Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 281.

there is absolutely no reason to. Indeed, usually blame achieves nothing but pain and unnecessary anguish.²⁹

In their excellent overview for Disability Ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Mary Horning, Bob Horning, and John Knight provide some important clarity on the issue of healing and an effective ministry for persons with disabilities:

Many people assume that the best possible thing for people with disabilities (or their parents) is physical healing, and point to the ministry of Jesus as proof. “God does not cause disability,” rather than providing comfort, is an affront to the sovereignty of God. “Faith healers” and other frauds prey on vulnerable people for their own gain, using the Bible as their tool of deception. In our combined experiences, we have been prayed over in a wrong spirit more times than we can count, assuming that physical healing was what we needed most. Of course prayers for healing are appropriate and biblical. And if given the opportunity, nearly everyone with a disability or the parent of a disabled child would gladly accept such healing. We know from the Bible, however, that God uses suffering of all kinds to glorify His name. Thus, a more visible presence of those with disabilities brings opportunity for a fuller expression of confidence in God.³⁰

The second theological consideration that can subtly but surely sidetrack ministry in this area is the concept of human sin and the effects of the fall. While all humanity and the world itself exist under the damning effects of the fall and the consequences of sin, both collective and individual, no one has the capacity to understand all of its effects on this world or its inhabitants. It is narrow-minded, arrogant, and biblically untenable to think that anyone who perceives themselves as “typical” is not living under the effects of a world changed by sin. Whether the concept of causality is a direct relationship between sin and disability, (dispelled by Jesus in John 9) or an indirect one that suggests environmental factors as causes, one must have a general sense that all who are disabled are under either the perfect will of God via his divine design within the womb, or the permissive will of God that caused these disabilities at some other time.

²⁹McCloughry and Morris, *Making a World of Difference*, 98-99.

³⁰Mary Horning, Bob Horning, and John Knight, “Disability Ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church” (Paper presented to the Board of Elders on August 10, 2004), 10. Available at <http://theworksofgod.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/disability-ministry-at-bethlehem-baptist-church-august-2004.pdf> (accessed on June 15, 2013).

The purpose of this project, and indeed the driving purpose of the church's outreach to persons with disabilities should not be to ask, "Why?" but instead to ask, "What now?" The Church must affirm the sovereignty of God in all people and their conditions, and minister to them regardless of cause. What Christians believe about the causes of disability has no bearing whatsoever on the focus of this project, the gospel mandate, or the needs of persons with disabilities. Gene Newman and Joni Eareckson Tada affirm, "Scripture indicates that not only is God sovereign to physical injuries or illness, but he is Lord over the changes and alterations that transpire within the womb."³¹ Newman goes on to conclude that if God did not want or will imperfections or disabilities to exist, he would necessarily eliminate them completely. Yet he does not. He says, "God has his reasons. Whether it is to mold Christian character, to stimulate empathy toward others who hurt, to refine one's faith, or to focus one's attention on eternal glories above, only time and wisdom will tell."³²

It is imperative to view persons with disabilities as objects of God's glory. Through them God may choose to demonstrate his healing power, incite people to persistent praying, hone peoples' care giving skills, or test the genuineness of hearts. God may also use them to model to others what it is to love him in simplicity and sincerity, worship him wholeheartedly, and demonstrate selfless love and kindness towards others.

Wesley, a 26 year-old young man with Down syndrome, is a faithful church attendee. He makes it a point to sit right on the front row at church every week. He saves the pastor the seat right beside him. And he loves music in worship. Without any persuasion, he will begin to clap as soon as the music plays. Sometimes he even starts dancing a little, swaying from side to side rhythmically. Without any apparent vanity, pride, or thoughts of the perceptions of others, he truly seems to be engaged in honoring

³¹Gene Newman and Joni Eareckson Tada, *All God's Children: Ministry with Disabled Persons*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 19.

³²Ibid.

God. There is a simple purity to his worship. After the message, he will often show pictures he has drawn or notes he has taken from what he heard the pastor say. Sometimes, he will just point up at the stained glass cross, or sign the idea of the cross, point to his heart and tell those around him that he loves Jesus. Then usually he will tell them he loves them, too. I am sure that much of the content of the message he does not apprehend. But he apprehends God and his love. He gives God glory and he shows God's glory. There is much to be learned from people like Wesley. And there are a lot more Wesley's out there waiting to be accepted, included, and told the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Implications of Jesus' Teachings about His Kingdom

A third biblical basis can be found in Jesus' teachings on the coming kingdom and the welcome to that kingdom that is to be issued to disabled persons. Consider first the parable of the great banquet in the Gospel of Luke:

But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'" (Luke 14:16-24)

This parable causes the reader to reflect on the eschatological fellowship that comes in God's future glorious kingdom.³³ A man gives a great supper in his home as he hosts a time of great celebration. When all is ready, he sends out his servants to tell those invited to come. All invitees seek to excuse themselves. For each excuse-maker, something takes precedence over the invitation. When the servant returns to report what he has been

³³Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1271.

told to his master, the master becomes angry and compels him to go out and invite others instead. The servant is sent to the fringes of society where he is told to bring in the “poor and crippled and blind and lame.”

Of this parable, McCloughry and Morris note,

Here is a story that is not about a restored body but an inclusive community. It is an example of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God and the welcome received by all who are one the margins of society and respond to the invitation to the banquet. Those who come are accepted as they are; indeed that is essential to understanding the parable.³⁴

Referencing physical disabilities specifically, Jesus gives a mandate for the church to intentionally go out, find, and invite for total inclusion to his banquet those most typically excluded.

While the implications of this passage regarding the intended target of this outreach could be very broad, surely it must include those with intellectual disabilities as well. Limited by physical access, deterred by social acceptance, and excluded by benign neglect (at best) or outright discrimination (at worst), this group of people can and should be included as invitees to God’s “banquet.” This banquet is a metaphor of the kingdom of God that can only be accessed by God’s invitation. This invitation is the gospel message. Darrell Bock describes the parable’s inclusive meaning:

The inclusion of the maimed is significant in that they were banned from full participation in Jewish worship. The movie pictures Jesus’ offer of the gospel to the nation’s common and needy people. . . . Many who attend will be among those who were least expected to attend. God makes himself available—even to those whom many reject.³⁵

What keeps a church from actively seeking these unlikely guests at God’s table? Govig suggests we err in three areas: (1) People tend to avoid the “marked” people. He defines “marked” as having an identifying feature that sets a person apart from what is considered to be “normal.” In the case of an intellectual disability, the

³⁴McCloughry and Morris, *Making a World of Difference*, 58.

³⁵Bock, *Luke*, 1276, 1278

“mark” can be anything from physical features to distinguishing behaviors and mannerisms, or apparent inability to communicate. The tendency, he says, is to either pity them or shun them. (2) People tend to stereotype other people. By labeling them, we are libeling them, often assuming characteristics or limitations that are not there. The one with speech or hearing difficulties is assumed to be dim-witted as well. A person with an intellectual disability is wrongly assumed to be uneducable, etc. Labels and stereotypes rob people of the ability to treat others simply as human beings. Finally, he suggests (3) People are in denial about chronic disabilities. While many people typically rally to the very ill, knowing that the situation is temporary (healing at best, death at worst) people seem much less comfortable with the prospect of living with, helping, teaching, or caring for someone who will, save a miraculous intervention, be disabled for life. People simply do not know what to do. Govig states, “We are called to ‘bear one another’s burdens,’ but we do not know how.”³⁶

Because reaching those with disabilities is not typical or commonplace, the local church must be intentional and purposeful in attempts to reach out to them. How important is it that Christians actively seek and consciously welcome people with disabilities to churches? Brett Webb-Mitchell writes,

When the church fails to invite and welcome people with disabilities, they have betrayed the very people with whom Christ closely identified during his life ministry. Those with disabilities are the same people whom Jesus was told by God not only to invite, but, in stronger language, to *compel* to come to the Great Banquet Feast of God’s Kingdom.³⁷

Mitchell summarizes the parable:

None of those who were first invited—the ones that the host, God, first desired to entertain and welcome—will now be included. They, not God the host, excluded themselves from the banquet. Instead, those empty places will be filled by those seen as the most unlikely participants in this grand banquet. God in Christ takes those with disabilities who have been rejected by the rest of Jewish society, a microcosmic reflection of the rest of humanity, and transforms them from outcasts

³⁶Govig, *Strong at the Broken Places*, 16-17

³⁷Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (New York: The Crossroad, 1994), 10.

to honorably invited guests to the banquet of love, the kingdom of God. Who do the people who are poor and those who are disabled symbolically represent in this story? All of us. Those who are disabled also represent us. They represent all of us who come before God to sit at a table of love and life with one another and share in a meal, with all our wounds and sense of brokenness, with all our limitations and knowledge of our inadequacies, with all our sins well known already by God we come to share in the banquet presented before us. The invitation is not determined by a person's good works or good actions, but by accepting the simple invitation God has extended out of love for his children.³⁸

It is beautiful and amazing that Jesus would teach a parable of God's grace in salvation using those with disabilities as his object lesson. As this parable teaches that without God's invitation, no one can come to the banquet or even sit at the table, Christians are reminded that all people are equally dependent upon God's grace and his gracious invitation, without which all would be forever excluded from him. The church is also reminded that this ministry is ultimately about bringing people to Jesus, to enjoy a rewarding relationship with him now, and an eternal place in heaven later. Thinking evangelistically helps keep priorities well placed. Stephanie Hubach writes,

Jesus seeks out people with disabilities for his kingdom, and so should we. If your church leadership is committed to evangelism, pointing them to Christ's outreach to the disabled—the world's most unreached people group—may be the way to help them theologically engage with the subject of disability.³⁹

Finally, there is an apparent spiritual correlation between physical or mental disability, and spiritual disability, that the church should consider. Just as the physically disabled were unable to reach Jesus without the assistance of those who cared about them and demonstrated care for them, so all people also fit the description spiritually impaired or disabled and require the intervention of God, through the ministry of others, to reach God. The ministry of love and compassion to those who are disabled is thus a picture of the gospel and a beautiful object lesson—one used by Jesus himself. Hubach writes, “Clearly, doing nothing for those in need is not an option for the disciple of Christ. Jesus’

³⁸Ibid., 89.

³⁹Stephanie O. Hubach, *All Things Possible: Calling Your Church Leadership to Embrace Disability Ministry* (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2007), 13,

teaching mandates entering into the struggles of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.”⁴⁰

One of the last and most sobering, thought-provoking, church-evaluating, heart-examining parables Jesus taught was the parable of the sheep and the goats.

Consider its implications for intentional ministry for people with intellectual disabilities:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” (Matt 25:31-40)

How then should the church interpret the phrase “least of these”? Certainly the “least of these” would apply to those that receive the least attention and effort to reach in churches. One clear indication of its meaning is Jesus’ identification with the people that are so often ignore. David L. Turner states,

When the righteous profess ignorance of this merciful ministry, he tells them that they did it for him when they did it for one of his little brothers and sisters. The righteous are amazed because they did not realize that these acts of ministry to Jesus’s suffering people would be regarded as ministry to him. This is the central basis of judgment in this passage.⁴¹

It is also important to note that “the least of these” is not a measurement of value in God’s eyes, but a statement of judgment of a false sense of values and worth that people attribute to others. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes, Jesus is referencing flawed judgment.

An additional consideration in this passage is how good deeds rendered to the

⁴⁰Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 189.

⁴¹David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 609.

“least of these my brothers” demonstrates the validity of a genuine relationship to Christ and commitment to be His followers. D. A. Carson notes,

Good deeds done to Jesus’ followers, even the least of them, are not only works of compassion and morality but reflect where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself. Jesus identifies himself with the fate of his followers and makes compassion for them equal to compassion for himself.⁴²

Thus, one can readily deduce that loving care and attentive ministry for and to those who are hurting, needy, and outcast—all possible descriptors of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families—is ministry God receives and honors as if it were done to Jesus himself.

Implications of the Church as the Body of Christ

A final biblical consideration that influences theology and practice for this area of ministry is the concept of the Body of Christ introduced in 1 Corinthians 12:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor 12:14-26)

A cursory summary of that passage reveals the following: All people matter to God. While some parts may appear to have greater value, it is not so. If anyone believes otherwise, it simply means that person does not understand the significance of all

⁴²D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 520.

interrelated parts. Also, God did not design people with sameness of function, role, appearance, or abilities. But he did place people in the body as he chose. God assigns the parts and builds the body. People do not have the right to be dismissive of or unconcerned about any other part of the body. We need each other to function in the manner God designed and intends.

Those “weaker parts” receive special recognition from God as the “indispensable” parts. What makes them “weaker,” and why are they “indispensable”? It is in interrelation to those parts that people learn most about what it is to love and serve God. Every member of the body should receive the same loving attention and care from all the members. Members of the body that are selfish, unaware of the needs of others, or unconcerned about those needs rob the entire body of the care that God requires. The term “care” in 1 Corinthians 12:25 is an imperative in this passage requiring obedience. The effect of that mutual care is the building of unity in the body. Togetherness is the key. To endure suffering and hardship together is the mark of a true church. To honor each other as significant and worthy of love and fellowship demonstrates genuine Christianity. It was Jesus who said in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

According to David E. Garland,

The conclusion in 1 Corinthians 12:25-36 expresses the purpose of this ordering of the body: ‘In order that there might not be division in the body but that the members might have the same concern for one another.’ The opposite of division (*schisma*) is showing care for one another. Evidence of callous indifference to the plight of the “have nots” at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34) reveals a bodily breakdown. Their behavior at the Lord’s Supper disclosed their prejudice; these members could go missing with no great loss to the church. All have experienced, at one time or another, how the whole physical body suffers when one member hurts. The same is true for the Body of Christ. As one attends to physical ailments in the body, so Paul expects the church to attend to those members who are suffering. The principle of love embodied in the cross mandates that one should always seek honor for others, which stands in absolute antithesis to the dominant value that seeks honor only for oneself in a preening self-indulgence.⁴³

⁴³David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 597.

Certainly a practical understanding of this passage includes its application to persons with intellectual disabilities. In caring for those deemed weaker, people learn to show the love of Christ and learn to develop selflessness and compassion. The attitudes developed will then naturally carry over to any groups that have been excluded because of disability.

This passage is also a reminder of the God-given worth of every person. Each person is created by God, in his image, and uniquely gifted to bring him glory. While unique, the members of the body in this passage are equally necessary and their gifts are equally valued. This passage affirms both diversity and equality. The point to the text is that no one is excluded.abled or disabled, all are valued by God and commanded to be cared for by each other. McCloughry and Morris note that this body is a place of “interdependence,” stating, “How true is it that if one part of a human body hurts, it affects the way that the whole person feels. If the community of the Church is functioning as it should, then the same rule applies.”⁴⁴ Obeying this mandate in relationship to persons with intellectual disabilities will help the church to function as it should.

The results should include a church family that experiences the gospel through “Christian education, community life, corporate worship, caring, and contribution.”⁴⁵ That type of church honors God and shows fidelity to the Scriptures. The church and its members must be quick to remember that the biblically faithful church is not an aggregate of individuals, but a God-ordained “body” functioning in union to display the Glory of God. It is God who chose the parts and assigned the roles. Each person is a part of his plan and gifts he has provided to the wider body. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul tells the church to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) and also to “do good to everyone” (Gal 6:10) as people have opportunity to do so, giving priority to those who are members of the household of faith. For this to mean more than empty religious

⁴⁴McCloughry and Morris, *Making a World of Difference*, 76-77.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 176.

jargon, those needs must be known. And once those burdens, challenges, and needs are known, the church is to meet those needs with good works.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the local church should value and honor people with intellectual disabilities (or any disabilities for that matter) in the manner in which it values and honors any other person. A loving creator who intentionally crafts people for his purpose designs all. Though some are “disabled” by human estimation because we are different, or disabled due to injury or accident, or if the disability was a choice of God before birth, all people are nonetheless made to display God’s glory and to glorify him. From the life and ministry of Jesus, the church is reminded to remove barriers that separate people from Jesus, actively pursue those on the margins of society, and to serve people as if serving Jesus himself. And finally, the New Testament imagery of the church as the Body of Christ gives a compelling rationale to value, care for, and enable the expression of the giftings of every person or part.

At the beginning of this chapter, it was noted that it is ultimately a “Gospel mandate”⁴⁶ that drives desires to effectively minister to persons with disabilities. As Duane King notes,

The worst handicap of all is not to be deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or confined to a wheelchair—nor even to have all these handicaps at once. The worst handicap of all is to meet God on judgment day without Jesus as your Savior. That handicap cannot be overcome. It is eternally devastating.⁴⁷

Because the biblical commission of the church and its God-given responsibility in the world is to make Jesus known to all people, it is to the gospel mandate that is the focus of chapter 3.

⁴⁶Block, *Copious Hosting*, 123.

⁴⁷Duane King, “A Separate Culture,” in *Reaching Out to Special People: A Resource for Ministry with Persons Who Have Disabilities*, ed. Jim Pierson and Robert E. Korth (Cincinnati: Standard, 1989), 83.

CHAPTER 3

THE GOSPEL AND THE ETERNAL CONDITION OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

This chapter is based on three presuppositions. First, the local church has a God-given mandate to communicate the Good News of God's salvation to all people. This is the primary reason for the existence of the church. All other ministries, programs, or activities necessarily flow out of that singular purpose. Because there is no hope for salvation for anyone outside of the saving work of Jesus, this imperative is non-negotiable. The church must intentionally include people with intellectual disabilities in their efforts to communicate the gospel. Thus, all ministries for and with people with intellectual disabilities must have the communication of the gospel as their primary purpose. All other purposes and benefits are secondary.

Second, the church must possess a biblically sound soteriology for intellectually disabled people, including a theology that addresses the eternal condition of those who are apparently unable to understand the message of the gospel and are incapable of any discernible response. For the glory of God and for the comfort of family and friends of the severe intellectually disabled person, this is a must.

Third, the church must employ appropriate and creative methodology as it communicates the gospel with intellectually disabled people. Many are able to understand and even respond in non-traditional ways to the message if it is appropriately presented. Others who may appear to be or actually are incapable of comprehension and response should still be given access to the gospel, as it is impossible to know for sure what they are capable of cognitively and spiritually. Out of obedience to God and love for all people,

and with trust in God's goodness and sovereignty, the church should make the gospel accessible to all.

The Gospel Mandate

Currently, 15 percent of the world's population has a disability.¹ If one were to put all those people together, they would comprise the world's third largest nation after China and India, and they would have the highest rates of homelessness, joblessness, divorce, abuse, and suicide.² Only 5 to 10 percent of this people group is effectively being reached with the gospel, making them one of the largest under-reached groups in the world.³ If the church is going to take the Great Commission seriously and act on it intentionally, it must engage this group that surrounds every community in America.

The parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14 describes an irrefutable call for the people of God to fulfill the Great Commission by reaching out to those on the margins of society by inviting them to the great banquet of God. Jesus even specifically references those who are disabled ("poor, crippled, blind, and lame") as an illustration of the all-encompassing scope of the gospel and the resulting kingdom. He says, "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:13-14). Daniel C. Markham states, "There is no more fervent call to evangelism to be found throughout the Bible than in this text. God, with passionate anger, is exhorting us to grab on to and bring people with disabilities into the Church so it will be

¹World Health Organization, "World Report on Disabilities," http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/factsheet.pdf (accessed March 13, 2013).

²Joni Eareckson Tada and Jack S. Oppenhuizen, "Hidden and Forgotten People: Ministry among People with Disabilities: Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 35 B," http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP35B_IG6B.pdf (accessed March 13, 2013).

³Ibid.

full!”⁴ Darrell Bock summarizes this parable by saying, “God makes himself available—even to those whom many reject. Often it is the rejected who respond favorably to God. Disciples should seek such people. In warning the Pharisees, Jesus also instructs his own. God’s people must be sought and found in surprising places.”⁵

While Jesus is likely using the descriptions of physical disability as analogous to spiritual disability in this text, surely those with actual physical disabilities are at the very least included in those Jesus intends to save and therefore are part of the commission this parable substantiates. Those who are often rejected and found on the fringe could certainly be an apt description for people with intellectual disabilities. Markham states,

The disability community is understood to be a specific under-reached people group of one billion people. With the assertion that Luke 14:1-24 is an “irrefutable mandate” by Christ to the Church, it is fair to conclude that perhaps the greatest challenge and embarrassment to the Church in regards to world evangelization is its ignorance, and in some cases, willful disregard of this clear Great Commission directive.⁶

In 2004, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism convened for a nine day forum and subsequently produced a document entitled “Hidden and Forgotten People: Ministry among People with Disabilities.”⁷ The primary authors, Joni Eareckson Tada and Jack S. Oppenhuizen, state, “It was our desire to provide for a pastor basic information, tools and models which will help every Christian to reach out and share God’s love with the disabled community.”⁸ Utilizing the parable of the Great Banquet as their primary text, the thirty-four Christian leaders from twenty-three countries drew the following conclusions:

⁴Daniel C. Markham, *The Lost Mandate* (Lee’s Summit, MO: First Edition Design), 2045-46, Kindle..

⁵Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1278.

⁶Markham, *The Lost Mandate*, 966.

⁷Tada and Oppenhuizen, “Hidden and Forgotten People.”

⁸Ibid.

1. The whole church must obey the Master's mandate as stated in Luke 14:21-23 to go out with the whole gospel and, with love, compel all people with disabilities to come in.
2. That the Father's house may be full.
3. That they might know His awesome power in weakness.
4. That all people may worship Him together.
5. That the rule and reign of the Kingdom of God would be established in all the earth.⁹

These conclusions address the challenge to share the gospel with all disabled people. People with intellectual disabilities present an even greater challenge, however. While those with physical disabilities are often under-reached or even unreached by the church because the church fails to consider their physical needs, accessibility issues, or possess wrong attitudes towards them, people with intellectual disabilities are often challenged with understanding and responding to the very content of the message itself.

In his book, *The Cross and Salvation*, Bruce Demarest offers both a clear and comprehensive treatment on the doctrine of salvation. Demarest describes the work of salvation in very personal terms:

How blessed is it to realize that Christ took *my* place on the cross and was forsaken of God for *me*. For *my* sins he bore in his body the penalty required by a holy and just God. He appeased the divine wrath directed against *my* transgressions. By his death Christ delivered *me* from slavery of sin and Satan, and his shed blood cleansed *my* sins. Through his cross, the Savior reconciled and consecrated *me* to the waiting Father. By his death and resurrection Christ gained the victory over the spiritual foes that tormented *me*. No matter who else was loved, God in his grace laid down his life for *you* and for *me*.¹⁰

Per Demarest, essential to receiving salvation is a realization of those truths, including confidence that Christ died for you, a recognition that his death is a final and effectual sacrifice for sins, and a personal response to that work of Jesus on the cross

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 194.

through faith.¹¹ The challenge, of course, is determining what the church should believe and instruct regarding those who cannot “realize,” “recognize,” or “respond” to the gospel.

Demarest also defines the nature of saving faith and describes the necessary response to the gospel:

Commitment to Christ’s Lordship is an intrinsic part of saving faith. Faith is not only mental assent to truths about Christ; it is also trust in and commitment to his person and kingdom values. Many people who hear the Gospel assent to its truths without being genuinely converted. Faith requires submission and commitment to Christ and his sovereign authority.¹²

The challenge then in sharing the gospel with people who have intellectual disabilities is recognizing those who are able to submit and commit to Christ and treating them accordingly, while also recognizing that a certain percentage will likely not be able to do that, and treating them accordingly.

The 89 Percent and the 11 Percent

Gene Newsome, a pioneer in disability ministry, claims that 89 percent of the “mentally retarded” population in the United States is “educable,” 6 percent are “trainable,” and 5 percent are profoundly disabled. While Newman refers to this group as “mentally retarded,” his definition is close enough to the definition of intellectual disabilities for the purpose of this discussion. Newman defines “mental retardation” as “the lack of powers associated with normal intellectual development, resulting in an inability of the individual to function adequately in everyday life.”¹³ He describes those in the educable category as able to learn to read, write, and process information. Those persons in the trainable category are described as able to learn basic self-help skills, to recognize and write own name, to learn behavioral skills, but unable to live independently. Those in the profound

¹¹Ibid., 194-96.

¹²Ibid., 271-72.

¹³Gene Newsome and Joni Eareckson Tada, *All God’s Children: Ministry with Disabled Persons* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 39.

category have minimal capacity for learning and require constant care and supervision.¹⁴

Assuming Newman's statistics are still reasonably accurate, somewhere near 90 percent of people with an intellectual disability have the capacity to both understand and respond in faith to the gospel. Newman compares the intellectual development of the "89 percent" with that of children or young teens, stating, "Statistics show that 89 percent of retarded people fall into the educable category. They will reach a peak mental age of nine to thirteen years of age; therefore, it is quite possible they will reach an age of spiritual accountability."¹⁵ For comparison sake, a review of recent baptism statistics in the Alabama Baptist Convention reveals that in 2012, nearly 35.3 percent of all baptisms were of children ages 11 and under. If one includes children ages 17 and under, that rate balloons to 57 percent.¹⁶ If churches are targeting children—often very young children—with the gospel message, surely they can also see the need to share that message with a large population of intellectually disabled persons who will be able to understand and respond to it with a comparable degree of understanding.

Barbara Newman also speaks to the subject of those who, in spite of intellectual disability, do have the capacity of understanding and response when she recalls the words she spoke to a mother who has a daughter with autism. Newman states, "God made your daughter. Your child's heart is fully wired to be connected with God. God now reaches out through Jesus to your daughter. When she receives Jesus as her Savior, that connection won't be weaker because of autism."¹⁷

The real challenge, however, is to address the spiritual condition of those

¹⁴Ibid., 38.

¹⁵Ibid., 42.

¹⁶Mickey W. Crawford, State Missionary, Demographics and Statistics, Alabama Baptist Convention, e-mail to writer, August 30, 2013.

¹⁷Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian, 2006), 16-17.

disabled to the degree that knowing responses are unlikely or impossible. The God-given mandate of the church is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. This mandate is inclusive of people with intellectual disabilities. The challenge in presenting the glorious plan of God's salvation in Jesus Christ to people with disabilities is that some are not able to understand the message, and many others will not be able to respond to that message in a manner that demonstrates understanding and/or faith in God. The typical expectations of a positive verbal response to the gospel or even a clear non-verbal response to the gospel are unrealistic when dealing with persons with significant intellectual disability.

What then should the church's response be? Should the church try, and can the church succeed at reaching intellectually disabled people with the gospel?

The Big Question

How should the church reconcile its clear mandate to make disciples of all people with the reality that a certain group of people may lack the ability to understand or respond to that message? In order to address this question honestly, the church must have a biblically founded soteriology as well as a developmentally appropriate evangelistic strategy for persons with intellectual disabilities. Jeff McNair, professor of Special Education at California Baptist University, writes,

When asked about the ramification of disability on a person's relationship with God, church leaders are at best unable to figure it out, but at worst, don't give a damn. Where is the theological discussion to try to flesh out these issues? Whenever I meet someone who is trained as a pastor, or in theology, who has even the remotest of interest in disability, I literally beg them to write about the issues for unformed rank and file Christians, an unformed clergy, unformed seminary faculty, unformed seminary leadership and so on. The fact that many of these issues are unclear could be due to the issue itself, but I would doubt that the average church pastor could explain the nuances of salvation for intellectually disabled people because THEY HAVE NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT! As a result, you have people like me, some better, some worse who are out there trying to make sense of disability from a Christian perspective because those who should be doing the heavy theological lifting are not.¹⁸

¹⁸Jeff McNair, *The Church and Disability* (Lexington, KY: self-published,

The big question then becomes, “Is there a biblically justifiable category that can be considered “safe” for persons who lack the capacity to give any measurable, discernible response to the gospel? If so, what scriptures substantiate this?”

Gene Nabi is among the most influential writers in the area of disability ministry and the local church. His book, *Ministering to Persons with Mental Retardation and Their Families*, is one of the earliest and most referenced works in the field. Of particular interest is Nabi’s assertion that there are three categories that describe the spiritual condition of all people: lost, saved, or safe:¹⁹

Mentally retarded persons can be categorized in three spiritual groups, just as can anyone else: Lost—those who have the capability to understand what it means to become a Christian but have not been taught or have not responded to the message of the gospel are lost. They need the gospel message. Saved—Those who have the capability to understand what it means to become a Christian and have been taught and have made a profession of faith. Safe—Persons who are profoundly retarded and have extremely low levels of comprehension are safe within God’s saving grace.²⁰

Nabi gives a rather specious biblical defense for his belief that there is a category of “safe.” Nabi quotes Mark 9:36-37, “And he took a child and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.” His summary statement is that “while the fact of salvation is a mystery in itself, what we do know about God is sufficient to know that His love encompasses those of a childlike nature.”²¹ Surprisingly, Nabi simply leaves it at that. While the passage does reveal God’s love for and acceptance of children, it hardly speaks to the issues of capability to understand and to respond.

2009), 16-17.

¹⁹Gene Nabi, *Ministering to Persons with Mental Retardation and Their Families* (Nashville: Convention, 1985), 99.

²⁰Ibid., 102-03.

²¹Ibid., 103.

Theological Positions

Nabi's response does reflect, however, a rather common approach to the question and the first of three common theological errors. For many, sentimentalism seems to be at the root of the answer. That is, it seems right to their understanding to believe that the intellectually disabled will of course go to heaven. Feelings of compassion, pity, or simply a sense of fairness contribute greatly to this conclusion. This attitude has prevailed in the church for centuries. Brett Webb-Mitchell, author of *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet*, demonstrates that this understanding goes back at least as far as the Middle Ages: "In medieval Europe, people with mental retardation were often perceived as 'Holy Innocents' and 'children of God,' being well received by all religious sects."²² As God's innocents, they were not in need of justification or sanctification, and thus were not included in evangelism or in the ordinances of the church. While the sentimentalist may occasionally be correct in his assessment based on the capabilities of the individual in question, the church needs more than emotionalism when determining its position on this issue. A discerning person will surely wish to know if the Bible substantiates this belief.

A second theological position is sacramentalism. Sacramentalism holds that salvation is transmitted and received through the sacraments of the church.²³ According to Millard Erickson, the clearest and most complete expression of this view is that of traditional Roman Catholicism.²⁴ Wayne Grudem concurs, stating that Roman Catholics hold the belief that the actions of baptism and communion in themselves convey grace to people (without requiring faith from the persons participating in them).²⁵ John MacArthur notes that The Council of Trent, in 1563, based the salvation of infants upon

²²Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (New York: The Crossroad, 1994), 15.

²³Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1007.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 966.

Roman Catholic baptism. In 1951, Pope Pius XII taught that “no other way besides baptism is seen as imparting the life of Christ to little children.” The new Roman Catholic catechism teaches that “by Christian baptism one enters into the kingdom of God and into the sphere of the saving work of Christ.”²⁶ Erickson states,

What all of this amounts to is that salvation is dependent upon the church. For, in the first place, it is argued that the sacraments, which were entrusted to the church by Christ, are requisite to salvation. And second, the presence of a qualified administrator, namely, an individual ordained by the church, is required. The essential point in this view is that salvation is actually effected by the sacraments. They are the means by which salvation is brought about. If we desire to receive salvation, we must receive the sacraments.²⁷

Roman Catholics are not alone in sharing this view or a derivative of it.

Ronald Nash notes,

A number of Protestant denominations either teach baptismal regeneration explicitly or approach the subject in such a way that large numbers of their communicants believe the doctrine. Lutheranism, the church in which I was raised and baptized as a child, has historically affirmed baptismal regeneration. The doctrine can be found on Martin Luther’s Catechism: “It worketh forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe, as the Word and the promise of God declare.” It is also taught in Lutheranism’s *Augsburg Confession*: “Of baptism, they [Lutherans] teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that by baptism the grace of God is offered, and that children are to be baptized, who by baptism, being offered to God are received into God’s favour.” While British Anglicanism and American Episcopalianism contain diverse streams of theological thought, members of this branch of Christendom who follow high-church sacramentalism affirm baptismal regeneration. The belief is also shared by members of other denominations in America and Great Britain.²⁸

Any group that baptizes infants or very small children runs the risk of this same confusion among their members. The practical effect of this misplaced theology is a general lack of concern regarding the salvation of people with intellectual disabilities for the same reason there is little to no concern for those without these limitations—because they were baptized or received communion as a supposedly grace-giving sacrament. The

²⁶John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 74.

²⁷Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1010.

²⁸Ronald H. Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 44.

assumption is often that they are “saved” or “safe” by virtue of the performance of one of these sacraments (typically baptism) for them when they were children.

A third error is simply that of soteriological ambiguity. While several authors make compelling cases to be inclusive of disabled persons in the ministries of the church and even to share the gospel with them, they typically fail to address the question of their ability to respond to that message. Of sixteen disabilities ministry manuals or guides reviewed in this study,²⁹ only one specifically addressed the need of intellectually disabled people to express personal faith in Jesus.³⁰ Ronald C. Vredevelde, a pastor and coordinator for a program for persons with cognitive disabilities, demonstrates this soteriological ambiguity. On one hand, he expresses the need for those with intellectual disabilities to respond affirmatively to the gospel message in rather traditional manners:

Children with faith communities are encouraged, as they get older and learn more about the Christian faith, to express their faith in Jesus. Some churches refer to this ceremony as *confirmation*; others call it *profession of faith* or *adult baptism*. We

²⁹I reviewed the following sources: Jim Pierson’s *No Disabled Souls: How to Welcome People with Disabilities into Your Life and Your Church*, Barbara J. Newman’s *Autism and Your Church*, Earl Bleke’s *Building a Developmental Disability Ministry*, Erik W. Carter’s *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, Jim Pierson and Robert Korth’s *Reaching Out to Special People: A Resource for Ministry With Persons Who Have Disabilities*, Sharon Kutz-Mellem’s *Different Members, One Body: Overcoming the Diversity of Abilities in God’s Family*, CCFH’s *By Faith: Beginning a Disability Ministry*, Ginny Thornburgh and Janet Miller Rife’s *From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations with Disabilities*, Kathleen Deyer Bolduc’s *A Place Called Acceptance: Ministry with Families of Children with Disabilities*, Cynthia Holder-Rich and Martha Ross-Mockaitis’ *Learning Disabilities and the Church: Including All God’s Kids in Your Education and Worship*, Joni Eareckson Tada’s *Through the Roof: Assisting Churches in Developing An Effective Disability Ministry and Outreach*, Ginny Thornburgh and Ann Rose Davie’s *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities*, Amy Rapada’s *The Special Needs Ministry Handbook: A Church’s Guide to Reaching Children with Disabilities and Their Families*, and Jim Pierson, Louise Tucker Jones, and Pat Verbal’s *Special Needs—Special Ministry*. While most mention the gospel, there is no specific mention of what responses are salvific and what we should believe about those who cannot respond.

³⁰Ronald C. Vredevelde, *Expressing Faith in Jesus: Church Membership for People with Cognitive Impairments* (Grand Rapids: CRC, 2005).

need to make sure to include our friends with cognitive impairments in the same milestones on their faith journey.³¹

While he seems to affirm their need for the gospel and for salvation, he is anything but clear on how that salvation is achieved for or by intellectually disabled people.

Describing the range of possible personal expressions of faith, Vredeveld notes, “One friend might be able to stand answer questions following the usual practice in a faith community. Another may not be able to communicate with words but may be able to make a joyful noise as another person sings. For another, the response may be a smile or a delighted squeal.”³² A “joyful noise” or a squeal are hardly definitive responses when it comes to measuring a person’s response to the gospel. For Vredeveld, the gospel apparently requires neither discernible response nor even comprehension of its contents for it to save. He states, “Our salvation does not depend upon our knowledge. Although infants and children are not yet able to understand the truths of the gospel, they are included, along with their parents, in God’s grace.”³³ The remainder of Vredeveld’s statements suggests the belief that people with intellectual disabilities are “safe” from the judgment of God by virtue of their disabilities: His words are, “God does not ask anything of us that we cannot give.”³⁴ While Vredeveld at least addresses the subject of necessary response to the gospel, his ambiguous statements still leave us lacking theological clarity. The other fifteen guide-type resources leave the issue of salvation apparently assumed.

Added to these theological errors is a degree of evangelical variation. Lewis

B. Smedes writes,

³¹Ibid., 10.

³²Ibid., 16.

³³Ibid., 12.

³⁴Ibid.

Christian traditions bring a variety of perspectives to the matter. Baptists speak of an “age of accountability” to describe the point at which a child is old enough to make a responsible decision to accept Christ as Savior and to be baptized. Until that age, the child is innocent. Some might extend this doctrine to cover the spiritual state of mentally disabled individuals as well. Reformed-minded Christians, who think in terms of covenant theology, might assure believing parents that God’s promise (in Gen. 15, for instance) to Abraham and his descendants applies to their disabled children, but they would plead ignorance when it comes to children of unbelieving parents. More individualistic Calvinists might say that the mentally disabled child who had been predestined for salvation would be saved for sure—we just cannot know for certain who those children are.³⁵

Bruce Demarest follows that same line of thought. Regarding soteriology, Demarest compares the fate of infants with that of the mentally incompetent and demonstrates the great variation in Christian thought on the subject. He states, “For most liberal theologians, the question is moot. . . . Modernists claim that the loving God accepts into heaven all people, who are His children by birth. Traditional Roman Catholics, on the other hand, maintain that infants inherit from their parents the contagion of sin.”³⁶ Demarest states that Roman Catholics hold a sacramental view, believing that baptism administered to children is salvific. Thus, Infants who are not baptized are lost. He describes Arminians with their confidence in prevenient grace and universal grace causing them to believe in free acceptance of infants into heaven. High Calvinists take a strict view of election. Those such as John Owen believe that infants born into a Christian family are covered by a covenant of grace and are therefore elect, whereas infants born into a non-Christian family are damned. More moderate reformed Christians, while acknowledging original sin, deny premeditated acts of rebellion and personal, volitional sin. They also deny that infants have reached an age of moral accountability. Thus, God affords them the benefits of the saving work of Christ.³⁷ The effect of these disparate viewpoints on church members is often confusion or apathy.

³⁵Lewis G. Smedes “Can God Reach the Mentally Disabled?” *Christianity Today*, March 5, 2001, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/march5/31.94.html> (accessed March 7, 2013).

³⁶Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 304.

³⁷*Ibid.*

Finally, the challenge to the church is to combat any reasoning that would suggest that people with intellectual disabilities are saved or safe because they are disabled. This idea of a “free pass” is certainly not a biblical one. In *Let All the Children Come to Me: A Practical Guide to Including Children with Disabilities in Your Church Ministries*, the authors state, “To believe that children with disabilities are saved simply by virtue of their disability robs these children of the richness that a relationship with Jesus brings.”³⁸ Where that leaves the church then is with the need to think both biblically and practically regarding soteriology and people with intellectual disabilities. As the church forms its doctrinal position, the following must be considered:

1. The position the church holds must be biblically tenable and consistent with the whole counsel of scripture.
2. The position must affirm the sovereignty of God in all things (including but not limited to creation and salvation).
3. The position must address the issue of sin honestly.
4. The position must affirm the centrality of the gospel and the necessity of the saving work of Jesus Christ.
5. The activity of the church must include the clear proclamation of the gospel to all people.
6. The position must reflect a deep appreciation of grace as the basis of our salvation.
7. Because the Bible does not refer to intellectually disabled people specifically, but rather refers to infants and young children, the church must make the correlation between the two groups because of similar developmental stages and ages.
8. The church must approach this subject with humility, as we cannot know for certain when it comes to identifying those who are saved.

Why “Safe?” Six Biblical Principles

When searching the Scriptures for applicable texts to defend the position of Nabi and others, six principles stand out. These principles help us have a sense of the

³⁸MaLesa Breeding, Dana Hood, and Jerry Whitworth, *Let All the Children Come to Me: A Practical Guide to Including Children with Disabilities in Your Church Ministries* (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway, 2006), 9.

intentions of God regarding intellectually disabled people.

The first biblical principle requires a consideration of God’s judgment for sin. Psalm 51:5 (“I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me”) suggests that all people are born with a sin nature inherited from the first person Adam. Ephesians 2:3 also describes man’s sin nature from birth. Though mankind possesses a sin nature, the judgment for sinners in Scripture is not a judgment for possessing that nature but for committing sinful actions. Adam Harwood, author of *The Spiritual Condition of Infants* states, “The Bible seems to present the view that guilt before God is a result of willful disobedience against him rather than simply inheriting guilt or being represented by a guilty person.”³⁹ He goes on to say, “Infants inherit from Adam a sinful nature. From the moment of conception, every thought, attitude, and action they make flows out of and through that sinful nature. But God does not judge people for their inherited sinful nature. He judges people for acts of sin they commit as a result of that sinful nature.”⁴⁰ If intellectually disabled people are unable to comprehend the sinfulness of an action or deed, then they are not guilty of the sin. In an article entitled, “Why We Believe Children Who Die Go to Heaven,” authors R. Albert Mohler, Jr., and Daniel L. Akin state,

In James 4:17, the Bible says, “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” The Bible is clear that we are all born with a sin nature as a result of being in Adam (Roman 5:12). This is what is called the doctrine of original sin. However, the Scriptures make a distinction between original sin and actual sins. While all are guilty of original sin, moral responsibility and understanding is necessary for our being accountable for actual sins (Deuteronomy 1:30; Isaiah 7:16). It is to the one who knows to do right and does not do it that sin is reckoned. Infants are incapable of such decisions.⁴¹

³⁹Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 160.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹R. Albert Mohler and Daniel L. Akin, “Why We Believe Children Who Die Go to Heaven,” <http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/08/why-we-believe-children-who-die-go-to-heaven.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2013).

Per that description, many with intellectual disabilities are similarly incapable of moral responsibility and understanding. Additionally, 2 Corinthians 5:10 states, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” Of that passage, Mohler and Akin say,

The Bible teaches that we are to be judged on the basis of our deeds committed “in the body.” That is, we will face the judgment seat of Christ and be judged, not on the basis of original sin, but for our sins committed during our own lifetimes. Each will answer according to what he has done, and not the sin of Adam.⁴²

For those with significant impairment due to intellectual disability, this level of understanding and reasoning is simply not possible. For the “11 percent,” the concepts of choice, responsibility, and accountability are simply not present. David E. Garland comments on the 2 Corinthians 5 passage: “What humans do in the body has moral significance and eternal consequences. Everyone who is mindful of their mortality must be mindful of their morality.”⁴³ Those with significant intellectual disability demonstrate no such self-awareness when it comes to sinful behaviors.

A second and related theological consideration is the apparent absence of any knowing unbelief and rebellion. A person must possess the mental capacity to make moral decisions before he is accountable for his lostness or rebellion against God. If a person lacks the capacity to respond to moral choices, he cannot be held accountable for his actions or inaction. The key passage for this consideration is Romans 1:18-32:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor

⁴²R. Albert Mohler and Daniel L. Akin, “The Salvation of the ‘Little Ones’: Do Infants Who Die Go to Heaven?” <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/the-salvation-of-the-little-ones-do-infants-who-die-go-to-heaven/> (accessed October 16, 2011).

⁴³David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 266.

him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

For a person with intellectual disability, there is no “suppression of truth” for to them, that truth is inaccessible. They are not suppressing truth. They simply lack the ability to receive it. There is then no wrath of God resulting from that suppression.

There is also no “active unbelief” because there is no active choice. In his commentary on Romans, Thomas Schreiner writes, “God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world . . . the rejection of God is concurrent with the knowledge of him.”⁴⁴

Thus, if a person is incapable of knowing God, this interpretation would surely suggest that they are also incapable of rejecting God. While natural revelation is sufficient to reveal something of the reality of God to a typically developing person, for an intellectually disabled person, nature and creation do not convey the same message.

They are not able to see God made manifest. Thus they are not choosing not to honor him or worship him.

John Piper, in an article entitled, “What Happens to Infants Who Die?” states, “I think that babies and imbeciles—that is those with profound mental disabilities—don't

⁴⁴Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 86.

have access to the knowledge that they will be called to account for. Therefore, somehow in some way, God, through Christ, covers these people.”⁴⁵ Denny Burk says Romans 1 contains the key passage for answering the big question:

I do believe there is a biblical basis for believing that infants and mentally disabled people are “safe.” For me, the most important text is Romans 1:20: “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*” This is Paul’s teaching about people who never hear the gospel. They are still under condemnation because there is enough information about God in the created order to condemn a person, even though there is not enough to save them. They are ‘without excuse’ because they refused to respond to general revelation. Infants and the mentally disabled are unable to receive and respond to this general revelation and are not therefore under the condemnation of Romans 1:20. That is why they are safe.⁴⁶

In a sermon entitled “The Salvation of Babies Who Die, Part 2,” John MacArthur says those who are “mentally retarded or handicapped” are

incapable of understanding the moral essence of sin and are incapable of understanding God. They are incapable of understanding the gospel. They are incapable of exercising a true repentance toward God and a saving faith so that they are with excuse. Whereas the pagans in Romans 1 are without excuse because they are capable of knowing and understanding the revelation God has given them in creation and conscience and they are capable of faith. So unbelief for them is a willful choice.⁴⁷

A third theological consideration is what MacArthur refers to as a “condition of accountability.”⁴⁸ MacArthur suggests that the church remove age from consideration and instead focus on the qualifications of accountability:

Who, dying instantly, goes to heaven? Who are we talking about? Answer: Those who have not reached sufficient mature understanding in order to comprehend convincingly the issues of law and grace, sin and salvation. This is certainly the infant in the womb. This is certainly an infant at birth. This is certainly a small

⁴⁵John Piper, “What Happens to Infants Who Die?” <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/what-happens-to-infants-who-die--2> (accessed March 5, 2013).

⁴⁶Denny Burk, e-mail to writer, May 20, 2011.

⁴⁷John MacArthur, “The Salvation Babies Who Die, Part 2,” <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-242/the-salvation-of-babies-who-die-part-2> (accessed March 22, 2013).

⁴⁸Ibid.

child. And this is certainly a mentally impaired adult at any age. . . . It's not an age. It's a condition. And it varies from child to child. And you have to include in this those who grow up mentally disadvantaged, mentally disabled, mentally retarded so as never to be able to have a sufficient mature understanding and a convincingly comprehensive grasp of law and grace and sin and salvation.⁴⁹

Two particular biblical passages illustrate this principle. The first is Deuteronomy 1:35 and 1:39. The nation of Israel is preparing to enter the Land of Promise. Because of their multiple sins while in the wilderness, however, God's anger is kindled against them and he pronounces that they will not be allowed to enter the land as a consequence: "Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give your fathers" (Deut 1:35). Yet, those too young to have participated in willful acts of sin and rebellion are exempted from these consequences: "And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it" (Deut 1:39). Their safety from God's rightful judgment was their inability to know right from wrong. Mohler and Akin write, "Knowing neither good nor evil, these young children are incapable of committing sins in the body—are not yet moral agents—and dies secure in in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵⁰ Again, the cognitive inability of young children can be compared to the inability of intellectually disabled people. Eugene Merrill describes the group that entered the Promised Land as "the youngest and weakest of the people, the babies that the rebellious generation had predicted would perish as Canaanite prisoners, infants so young they did not know the difference between good and bad."⁵¹

This inability to know right from wrong was also the criterion for innocence in

⁴⁹John MacArthur, "The Salvation Babies Who Die, Part 1," <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-242/the-salvation-of-babies-who-die-part-1> (accessed March 22, 2013).

⁵⁰Mohler and Akin, "Why We Believe Children Who Die Go to Heaven."

⁵¹Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 84.

the story of Jonah. God sent Jonah to preach a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, but Jonah resented the Ninevites and instead wished for judgment and destruction. God rebuked Jonah harshly, teaching a timeless lesson at the same time regarding sin and innocence. Per MacArthur,

Also as discussed previously, when Jonah complained to God about His sparing Nineveh, the great enemy city of Israel, the Lord replied, “Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left?” (Jonah 4:11). The Lord was referring to the sparing of 120,000 children, little ones incapable of knowing right from left, much less right from wrong. God had great compassion on those incapable of understanding truth. Little children are called innocent in Scripture for precisely this reason: They have no willful rebellion against God. They have no deeds of disbelief. While they may be conceived with a sinful nature, they have never had willful opportunity to exercise that nature with full understanding or deliberate rebellion. And therefore, they are innocent of any deeds of unbelief against a holy God. When people say, These little ones aren't saved because they didn't believe, my response is this: They couldn't believe. They are incapable of making a conscious, willful, rational, intentional choice to believe.⁵²

In that city, there were 120,000 people—children and intellectually disabled—who were not liable for judgment and destruction because of they lacked the ability to understand and respond.

A fourth theological consideration is the justice of God. In Genesis 18, Abraham pleads to God to show mercy to Sodom. Believing there to be some good left in the city, he openly reflects on the justice of God: “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25). Kenneth A. Matthews describes this verse as a defense of God’s integrity and an affirmation of his righteousness. As “Judge of all the earth,” God demonstrates his fairness and benevolence.⁵³

The justice of God in all things is the basis of hope and security, for God will

⁵²MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 711-18.

⁵³Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 228-29.

in every situation and with every person do what is right. Millard Erickson writes,

The righteousness of God means that his actions are in accord with the law he himself has established. He conducts himself in conformity with what he expects of others. He is the expression in action of what he expects of others. Thus, God in his actions is described as always doing right.⁵⁴

This concept of the justice and fairness of God has particular application to the spiritual condition of both infants and the intellectually disabled who cannot respond to the gospel. Paige Patterson, President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary establishes this application,

No doctrine of Scripture is more solidly attested in the Bible than the doctrine of the justice of God. While every baby is born with a sin nature, God as a just God would never condemn anyone unjustly. To condemn a child who dies in infancy or who is unable by way of intellectual development to meet the demands of Romans 1 regarding the act or rejecting that which God has shown him, would be on definition unjust. The only possible conclusion is that God has made redemptive provision for them in His atonement, this based on the universal affirmation of the Bible regarding the justice of God.⁵⁵

The final theological consideration is the mercy and love of God. Jesus said in Matthew 18:14, “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” Surely God’s love for the people He has made is the greatest source of hope and spiritual security for those who cannot understand or respond to the gospel when it is presented to them.

Conclusion

The gospel of the saving work of Jesus Christ is for all people. It is the responsibility of the church to communicate that message as consistently and clearly as possible. Therefore, the proper motivation for a church developing and implementing a ministry for intellectually disabled people is to lead them to Christ. A vast majority (perhaps as high as 89 percent) of intellectually disabled people are able to understand the basic concepts of the gospel and are capable of a faith response if the message is

⁵⁴Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 286.

⁵⁵Paige Patterson, e-mail to writer, May 21, 2011.

communicated in a developmentally appropriate way. For those capable of response, the church should seek and expect a response, much as one would when sharing the gospel with a child.

Unfortunately, some people with disabilities (perhaps as many as 11 percent) apparently lack the capacity of understanding and response. For this group of people, the church should still communicate the gospel creatively and consistently and demonstrate the gospel in loving actions. John Knight, Director of Disabilities Ministries at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, writes,

God uses humans to deliver his word, and he delivers it to humans. Human minds hear and understand the word from God, and then another set of human minds receive it from those human mouths and again hear and understand it. From the perspective of having a child with severe cognitive disabilities, this appears to raise a problem. My son Paul can “hear” from the sense that his ears work, but he cannot understand or make sense of most of what he hears. And he also cannot communicate much of what he actually understands. Is the Gospel closed to him? I may be going out on a limb with this, but if it is necessary for God to make this understanding possible for people with “normal” cognitive abilities, is it not also possible for God to do so for those with limited cognitive abilities? After all, he knows everything about every human being that he has made, and when compared to God, all of us live with pretty impaired cognitive abilities!⁵⁶

Recognizing the vast differences in people and the inability to know with certainty what they are able to understand and respond, Amos Yong writes,

People with intellectual disabilities (much like people without intellectual disabilities, I would add) vary across a wide range in their capacities to theologize. . . . We can now say that each person with intellectual disability stands in a unique relationship of moral and spiritual responsibility before God, one dependent on the degree to which the various intellectual, moral, or social dimensions of life are emergent in that life.⁵⁷

Thus, the church shares the gospel with all people while recognizing their unique abilities to understand and respond, while trusting in God to make plain his own words.

⁵⁶John Knight, “Should We Teach the Bible to Those with Severe Cognitive Disabilities?” <http://theworksofgod.com/2012/01/10/should-we-teach-the-bible-to-those-with-severe-cognitive-disabilities/> (accessed March 3, 2013).

⁵⁷Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 237.

As the church shares the gospel with those with greater intellectual impairment, it should affirm their spiritual and eternal safety in God. This safety is not by virtue of their disability per se, but rather due to their inability to understand general and special revelation, their lack of understanding of rebellion and willful sin, their lack of accountability due to developmental age, and most of all, the justice, mercy, and goodness of God. In this way, the church will be able to model Christlikeness, be faithful to the mission of the gospel, and be a source of hope and encouragement to individuals with disabilities and to their families.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

In June 2011, together with the director of the church disabilities ministry, I led First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach, Florida, to begin a five-day pilot program called Learning Independence University. L.I.U. was designed to fit under the umbrella of the broader disabilities ministry and offer a unique summer life skills program for young adults with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. The goal of the program was to provide opportunities to young adults with intellectual disabilities to learn together, serve each other, and develop spiritually, physically, mentally, and socially.

To accomplish these goals, we offered daily developmentally appropriate gospel presentations and prayer. The participants were also actively engaged in developing and keeping a personal visual or written schedule. Basic life-skill oriented math, reading, and writing were offered. Practical life skills were taught and practiced, such as making a meal plan, creating a shopping list, going to the grocery store, counting money and change, and preparing food and serving it to peers. Personal health and fitness was emphasized with daily trips to the local fitness facility. We offered daily music, singing, and dance class. In addition, we provided the participants with basic computer training that focused on gathering information from a trusted news site,¹ setting up social media such as Facebook accounts, and sending emails. We also included group field trips to the beach and to the library. The L.I.U. pilot program met from 8 AM to 5 PM one day per week for five weeks.

The program was provided without cost to a group of fifteen young people, age 22 and older. The initial group was chosen among participants in our monthly respite

¹“News2You,” <https://www.n2y.com> (accessed June 7, 2013), is a cloud-based learning site designed especially for use in special education settings.

program. Participants in the pilot had to meet three primary criteria: 1) they were too old for summer programming provided by the local school system; 2) they did not receive any other services that would provide a summer program comparable to L.I.U.; and 3) they were not medically fragile, physically aggressive, or self-injurious. The intent was to offer the pilot program to those who we knew personally and who needed the program the most. For the pilot program, we worked with a paid staff of one director, one additional teacher, two full-time assistants, and a rotating group of volunteers.

The Barriers to Beginning

I determined to eliminate as many potential or real barriers to the success of this ministry at the onset. I determined to address each of these actual and perceived barriers via preaching, training, and one-to-one conversations with church staff, deacons, and other key leaders in the congregation. I estimate I had over 40 conversations explaining my intention regarding the development of a disabilities ministry.

My first intent was to evaluate all the physical barriers that existed in the church that would potentially prevent a person with disabilities from having access to all programs and activities offered. As the primary focus of the ministry was to be for those with developmental or intellectual disabilities, this was not initially a huge task. However, believing that if the church was going to take on ministry for those with intellectual disabilities, we would also need to be prepared for those with physical disabilities (and sometimes both), we began to consider all physical accessibility issues. We also began to consider what the potential financial costs of these improvements would be.

My second intent was to eliminate any “people” barriers. Most people in the church were untrained in how to minister to or care for intellectually disabled people. They appeared to be unprepared for the challenges and difficulties. They were largely uninformed about the conditions, the prevalence of these conditions, and often simply what it means to be intellectually disabled. Through observation of people’s interactions with people with intellectual disabilities in our congregation, I began to sense that many

people were simply uncomfortable in the presence of intellectually disabled people. Whether that discomfort was primarily out of fear, lack of understanding, or more, many simply did not know what to do with a person with a disability like autism, Down syndrome, or any of the many other conditions that can be defined as an intellectual disability. In order to remedy this second concern, I knew that a ministry plan with clear teaching would be necessary to birth this ministry.

A third area of concern was the perception barrier. I knew we would need to overcome the wrong perceptions that individuals often have about intellectually disabled people. I knew that wrong perceptions could lead to wrong treatments, such as (1) treating adults with disabilities as children, (2) patronizing guilt-induced behaviors that “feeling sorry for” as a motive for serving, (3) defining people according to their disability rather than as a person first, (4) using inappropriate terminology or even offensive slang (i.e., “retarded,” “retard,” etc.), (5) using “swarming” type behaviors where the person receives too much attention and is made to feel uncomfortably singled out, and (6) projecting illusions about what life would be like if our abilities were suddenly our limitations, or thinking that we understood the supposed “suffering” of people with intellectual disability.

I also felt that we would need to change how those families with disabilities might perceive church and church participation in general. Many of the families I spoke with had tried and been disappointed at their attempts to be a part of a church family elsewhere. Several people in the church who later successfully participated in the ministry had been told by pastors and church members at previous churches that they were “too much of a distraction” or that they should probably be in a “special church” and were made to feel quite unwanted. The perception barriers, particularly those of parents and caregivers, included concerns that there would be no one with adequate training, no one would love and accept them, and the church would simply not be able to care for them.

Most importantly, I wanted to address the theological and spiritual barriers that

often keep a church from successful ministry with people with disabilities. Believing that the church has a primary purpose of sharing the gospel with all people, my intent was to create a gospel-centered ministry, rather than simply a ministry designed to meet social, education, or physical needs. In order to establish a solid, evangelistic base for the ministry, I wanted to make sure that the church possessed a biblical sound theology regarding people with disabilities and the gospel, and about disabilities themselves.

The first aberrant belief to be addressed was the idea that disabilities are punishment for sin. In the case of intellectual/cognitive disabilities, if one accepted this false belief, the likely assumption was that the parents sinned. It is nearly impossible to do ministry with any family struggling with the day-to-day reality of significant disability when they believe that disability is their “fault.” My goal was to address this clearly so that that attitude would not affect our ministry efforts.

A second aberrant belief is that people with disabilities are somehow deviant, unwhole, or in need of healing in order to be what God made them to be, wants them to be, or allowed them to be. I can personally attest to being the victim of Christians who attributed our son’s condition to my lack of faith that he be healed. Another untenable belief attributes these intellectually disabled conditions to demon possession. All of these aberrant theological positions would ultimately need to be addressed.

The most significant issue I addressed was the development of a sound, biblically-based understanding of soteriology for intellectually disabled people. Many church members had never given any consideration to the questions of salvation for people with profound intellectual disability. Some in the church had a more liturgical religious background that suggested salvation via sacraments. Many who came from a Catholic background particularly still tended to connect salvation to baptism. Others in the church had a theology of sentimentality. They simply considered all intellectually and developmentally disabled people to be safe without ever considering what they were potentially able to understand and even possibly to respond to if taught appropriately.

Others, holding to a traditional orthodox position about conversion insist that, in the words of Bruce Demarest, we “. . . must summon sinners to believe, repent, trust, commit, obey, and faithfully follow Jesus Christ. We must call pre-Christians to embrace Christ as definitive Teacher, as unique Savior, and as absolute Lord. Nothing else will fulfill the command of our Lord to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).²

Unfortunately, many with intellectual disabilities will never discernibly meet the criteria of faith, repentance, trust, and obedience. While the expectations of expressed belief and trust are reasonable and necessary for a typically-abled person, most have not considered the implications for people who apparently cannot respond because of their intellectual disability. I used a four-week message series as the primary means of addressing these issues.

Phase 1: Teaching Series

In November of 2010, I began a four-message series entitled “God’s Glorious Plan: Disabilities and the Church.” I preached these four messages on consecutive Wednesday nights at First Baptist Church.³ Prior to the first message, I distributed a 25-question survey to those in attendance. The purpose of the survey was to measure understanding of intellectual disabilities, church members’ attitudes towards people with

²Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 273.

³The limitation to teaching this series on Wednesday nights rather than on Sunday mornings was the attendance of the congregation. While we averaged over 100 attendees each week for the series, that number is considerably less than the 700 we averaged on Sunday mornings. Nonetheless, I chose this time because of the nature of the material and the length of time required for each message and any follow-up questions (typically an hour or more). It is important to note, however, that 1 month prior to the beginning of the Wednesday night series, I preached a single message from John 9:1-5 entitled “A Display of God’s Glory and Goodness.” This message addressed the need to recognize that people with disabilities are part of God’s sovereign plan and that His people are called to minister to them selflessly and sacrificially. This ministry allows the church to display and declare the gospel. This message served as an introduction to the Wednesday series

intellectual disabilities, and the level of commitment the church has to share the gospel with people with intellectual disabilities. At the conclusion of the four-message series, I distributed the surveys again in order to measure any shifts in understanding, attitude, and response. The analysis of those surveys is included in chapter 5.

After administering the survey, I began the teaching series with a message entitled “A Firm Foundation: The Reality, The Rationale, and the Responsibility of the Church.” This message series was intended to serve as a catalyst for the program by describing the surrounding needs and appropriate response of the church to those needs. The reality is that individuals with autism, Down syndrome, and other intellectual disabilities are likely all around. While the prevalence of Down syndrome is diminishing (largely due to pre-natal diagnoses, resulting in an abortion rate as high as 80-95 percent),⁴ Autism Spectrum Disorders are newly diagnosed in 67 children every day.⁵ In addition to the prevalence, there is a great spiritual need to be filled, as most of these people are not receiving any ministry from local churches. Erik W. Carter, Assistant Professor of Special Education at The University of Wisconsin, notes that a large gap exists in church participation between those who do not have disabilities and those who do have developmental disabilities. Carter notes that one-third of children and adults with intellectual disabilities “practically never” attend religious services, and one-fourth “sometimes” attend. Fewer than one-half had participated in church activities “at any point” in their lives.⁶ The reason for that lack of participation is not simply because of

⁴Susan Donaldson James, “Down Syndrome Births are Down in U.S.” *ABC News*, November 2, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/Health/w_ParentingResource/down-syndrome-births-drop-us-women-abort/story?id=8960803#.UbymFRbntUQ (accessed June 7, 2013).

⁵Danielle Dellorto, “Toddler Brain Difference Linked to Autism,” http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/05/04/autism.brain.amygdala/index.html?eref=rss_topstories (accessed March 12, 2013).

⁶Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2007), 6.

the individuals with disabilities or their families. Perhaps it is because, according to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, only 10 percent of churches provide any form of care to people with disabilities in their communities.⁷ Perhaps it is their fears of how they will be received or cared for. Perhaps no one has ever invited them or tried to include them.

In local communities are many families isolated from friends, neighbors, schools, and community life in general because of the difficulty of navigating daily challenges with a person with an intellectual disability. Many of these have either never heard or have not responded to the gospel. That is the primary responsibility of a church: to convey the news of Jesus' saving grace to all people.

The first rationale for this ministry is the foundational biblical truth that God created all people in His image, including people with disabilities, to glorify Himself. Rather than treating disabilities as a sort of curse of God, result of sin, attack of Satan, or something outside the control of a sovereign God, Christians should learn to see all people as part of God's plan and as potential images of God's glory. When Moses declared his inability to speak to Pharaoh on Israel's behalf, God declared to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? (Exod 4:11-12). When the disciples inquired of Jesus who was to blame or what was the cause of a blind man's disability, the Lord replied, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). And when the crowds gathered around Jesus, his ministry to the disabled among them brought glory to God:

Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel. (Matt 15:30-31)

⁷Ibid., 7.

When the church recognizes the sovereignty of God in all things, including the presence of disabilities, and works to bring people with disabilities to Jesus, God is and will be glorified.

The second rationale of the project is the responsibility of the church to reach out to one of the most unreached people groups in the community. The Great Commission, expressed in many texts of Scripture, commands believers to make disciples among all the nations, including baptizing them and teaching them all that Christ has commanded. To be obedient to this primary imperative of the Church requires Christians and the churches they are members of to actively pursue the lost, sharing an ascertainable witness to them and seeking an appropriate response to that message, while trusting God with the ultimate results. Scripture also reminds churches that saving faith, expressed as “calling on the Lord” requires an understandable witness. Specifically the Scriptures teach that those will be saved must “hear” the message and therefore it must be “preached” to them (Rom 10:9-15). The challenge to the local church is how to translate that requirement for “hearing” and for a verbal response to that heard message for those whose disabilities may preclude one or both of those activities. Churches must find appropriate means to convey the Gospel to all persons, including those with intellectual disabilities. On a per-person basis, the responsibility of Christian leaders is to try to discern the responses of those who are capable of some form of response and act accordingly; offering baptism and communion to those give evidence of saving faith. For those who appear to be incapable of receiving or responding to the Gospel message, Christian leaders must trust the sovereignty, justice, and love of God for their salvation.

The fourth rationale is the need of the church to be inclusive and welcoming to people with disabilities in order to function appropriately and biblically as the body of Christ. God’s design for the Church is that it be as a body of many necessary, interdependent parts. The Apostle Paul specifically refers to the “weaker” parts of the body as “indispensable” (1 Cor 12:22). For the church to be biblically whole and healthy, it

must include people with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities. Jesus described doing ministry to “the least of these” as doing ministry unto Jesus himself (Matt 25:40). While not referring specifically to disabled persons in that discourse, the call to ministry to those whom society considers “least” is an important challenge of the church. The church must develop a better theological understanding of its role and function as a spiritual body so that it may properly relate to and include people with disabilities. The presence of people with disabilities in services of worship, small groups, studies, and activities makes churches and congregations closer to wholeness and to the biblical ideal of church as seen in the Bible. As mentioned in the third rationale, this need to be inclusive also requires the church to offer baptism and communion to persons with disability who have responded appropriately to the gospel.

The fifth and final rationale of this project is the need of hurting people to simply experience the love of Jesus Christ. Christians are called to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1). Individuals and families with intellectual disabilities can carry heavy and frequently lifelong burdens. Routine activities such as shopping, going to school, having a meal together as a family, and going to church can at times be extremely challenging, if not nearly impossible. The strain on families is real, profound, and often unseen by most. The church possesses the spiritual and personal resources to help carry these burdens, and must do so. Conversion growth will be an expected and natural by-product of the church reaching out in beneficial ways to demonstrate the love of Christ to hurting people. As I discussed the responsibility of the church in carrying out this ministry, I focused on the gospel mandate.

In the second message, “A Banquet, A Body, and a Throne,” I shared three passages that inform the understanding of disabilities ministry. The Great Banquet in Luke 14:16-24 instructs the reader of the imperative of God to compel all people to participate in the banquet of His kingdom. I taught that without God’s invitation, no one can come to the banquet or sit at the table. I reminded the people that this ministry is

ultimately about bringing people to Jesus to enjoy a rewarding relationship now and an eternal place in heaven later.

The second passage is the description of the church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12:14-26. I described how God designed all “parts” (i.e., people) to fit together. People’s estimations of individual value and worth do not always match His. All Christians are called to be part of a body to give and receive care and to honor Him by loving each other. Finally, I concluded this message with a discussion of Matthew 25:31-40. Using this passage, I shared how Christians give evidence to faith in how they treat the “least of these” all around. Ministry to all people, especially the hurting, needy, and disenfranchised—all terms that could easily describe this special population—is ministry to Jesus himself.

In the third message, “Saved? Lost? Safe?” I discussed the implications of sharing the gospel with people with intellectual disabilities. First, I made the case that a large percentage of people with intellectual disabilities are educable and should be taught the gospel in simple terms, much like one would with a child. However, there are a significant percentage of people with intellectual disabilities who most likely cannot understand and typically cannot respond. For those people, the church needs a clear biblical and theological understanding of salvation that transcends emotionalism and is not based on sacraments such as baptism or communion. I presented the position that those who cannot understand (as far as can be determined) or lack the ability to make a discernible response should be considered safe in the grace of God for eternity. I based that on several biblical premises. First, according to 2 Corinthians 5:10, God judges mankind for sins committed, not just for a sin nature. Those incapable of understanding sin cannot be responsible in the same way that those who can understand are. Second, those who lack the cognitive capacity to make knowing moral decisions or understanding revealed truth cannot be guilty of rebellion or willing unbelief. Romans 1:18-32 describes God’s judgment on those who suppress truth that was clearly perceived. Those

with significant intellectual disability cannot do that. Third, just as the Bible seems to indicate in Jonah 4:11 and in Deuteronomy 1:35, 37 that there is an unspecified age when children are able to understand good and evil and thus become accountable to God, so also must intellectually disabled people reach that understanding if they are to be held accountable. Fourth, Christians should trust in the justice and fairness of God. Genesis 18:25 is a reminder that God will do what is right as the ultimate judge. To condemn a person who is unable by way of intellectual ability to understand sin, truth, or perhaps even God himself, would seem to be an act of injustice.

And finally, Christians must trust in the mercy and love of God who promises in Jesus that he does not will any of the “little ones” to perish. Again, equating the age of children with the developmental stage of a significantly disabled people, one gets a sense of God’s love for them as well. The proper response to this message is to share the gospel with all people regardless of disability. Expect discernible responses from those who are able. Affirm spiritual safety for those who are not.

In the fourth and final message, “Ten Reasons for Developing an Intentional Ministry for People with Disabilities,” I shared a review of the previous three messages in a synopsis: the need is great; the Bible addresses the need; the Great Commission is the ultimate need-meeting mandate and applies to all. I then shared the following ten reasons why to begin the enAble ministry:

1. Biblical love is not just theoretical. It is practical. This ministry allows us to show His love in practical, tangible ways. (1 John 3:17-18)
2. The Great Commission has no if’s, and’s, or but’s. We must include everyone. (Matt 28:19-20)
3. Sharing the gospel helps us know the gospel and live the gospel. It is to our benefit as well as those we share it with to do this ministry. (Phil 1:6, Col 1:10)
4. We will be rewarded. (1 Cor 3:8, Matt 10:42, Matt 25:31-40)
5. We were made for good works. This ministry is a good work and participating in it will bring God glory. (Eph 2:10)

6. God uses our good works to reveal Himself to a lost world. This ministry will convey a powerful message to the community that we know the needs, we care, and we are going to do something to help. (Matt 5:16)
7. The Church and churches are incomplete without people with disabilities. (1 Cor 12:18-22)
8. We will learn to bear each other's burdens. This is primarily a care-giving ministry that will provide practical help to families and caregivers struggling under the weight of disability. (Gal 6:2)
9. We will understand ourselves better and our need for God better. We will see that all are spiritually disabled and in need of a God who loves and heals us. (Rom 3:22-24)
10. We believe we are uniquely called to do this because we are uniquely equipped to do this. God has given us ample people and material resources to accomplish this. There is no acceptable excuse not to begin. (Luke 12:48)

Phase 2: Focus Groups

In January of 2011, I invited leaders and professionals in the community who had experience working with people with disabilities to form a focus group to help us develop a specific plan (see Appendices 2-3). The group consisted of Connie Dahn, director of our Friday night respite program and teacher of students with intellectual disabilities; Tanya Vickers, a speech and language pathologist; Larry Dahn, past president of the board of directors for The ARC of Martin County; Judith Walters, a speech pathologist and assistive technology specialist; Moe Johnson, a vocational rehabilitation specialist; Leah Perlmutter, Job Coach for Martin County School Board; Paula Cunningham, parent of a young adult son with an intellectual disability; Angela Van Etten, Director of Coalition for Independent Living Options; Doris Davis, high school exceptional student education teacher; Sandy Coleman, Director of the Treasure Coast Down Syndrome Awareness Group; Bob Biondich, Elder at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach; and me.

During the month of February, I planned three meeting agendas with a set of questions to guide discussions (see Appendices 4-6). The first meeting took place in March. In that first meeting we addressed the following questions:

1. What is your understanding of the term “intellectual disabilities”?
2. What do you perceive the role of the church to be in ministering to people with intellectual disabilities and their families? (Note: this group was made of Christians and non-Christians).
3. What do you think the most significant needs are of families dealing with an intellectual disability?
4. What specifically do you think we should be doing as a church to address these needs?
5. What are we practically and realistically able to offer in this ministry?
6. What should be our limitations in this ministry? (i.e., What will we clearly not attempt to offer?)

In that initial meeting, we determined that three primary needs exist: respite care for families and caregivers, integration in all typical activities of the church where possible, and a day program for individuals. Respite care was already underway, and a growing sense of acceptance and integration was already enjoyed at First Baptist Church.

We then turned our attention to the discussion of the potential day program. The initial recommendation included making the program for adults age 22 and older. The rationale was that young people can take advantage of high school programs until 21 years of age. At that time, they are no longer eligible. Many have no activities or educational opportunities to replace that. Without personal financial resources or appropriate state funding, many have few to no opportunities available to them. Fundraising was mentioned to cover costs. Thankfully, the church already possessed a fund for this purpose. Recommendations were also made to limit the size of the program and the number of participants, as interest would be high.

We also began to discuss what the components of the day program would potentially include. Among the suggestions were chapel (religious education), academics, life skills training, job training, and personal health and fitness. After determining the basic contents of the program, the question was asked, “What will you call it?” Connie Dahn suggested “Learning Independence University.” Her rationale was to convey something of a next-step program for those just coming out of programs based at the

local high school. She also wanted to instill a sense of purpose and value to the week for those who would participate. We decided that it would not be adult day care or even a simple camp experience. Every part of the day would be purposeful and intentional. We adjourned the meeting until the following week.

In Session 2, we reviewed briefly what we had determined in Session 1. The questions I had planned to discuss were

1. What is one unmet need of persons with intellectual disabilities in our community that the church can reasonably meet?
2. What do we need to consider before attempting to meet this need?
3. What resources will be required to meet this need?
4. What staffing will be required?
5. What training will be required?
6. What space will we utilize?
7. Are there liability and/or legal issues to consider?
8. How do we publicize this program?

In Session 2, we affirmed that the primary need we could meet would be a day program for adults. We planned to include in the program emphases on independent living, getting along well in community, basic job/task skills, enhancing basic abilities, basic computer skills, fitness and nutrition, and spiritual growth and development.

We then turned our attention to the practical needs of the program, including leadership and staffing. It was determined in this meeting that a qualified paid director should lead the program. In addition, we determined that we could afford to hire an additional qualified teacher and two paid assistants. All others would serve in more limited, volunteer roles.

We also discussed accessibility issues including facilities and transportation. After a tour of the facilities, it was suggested by several members of the focus group that bathroom renovations be made in the building we would use to make it more accessible.

We decided that we would not attempt to provide transportation during the initial program. We also discussed what space would be needed to accommodate the group and to allow other church activities to continue at the same time. It was recommended and agreed upon to have a nurse on staff at all times as well.

In Session 3, we turned our attention to the following concerns:

1. Can this program be done on a trial basis as a pilot program?
2. Whom will we include? What will the criteria be?
3. What will this program cost over a 1-year period? Over a 3-year period? Over a 10-year period?
4. How will we fund this ministry?
5. What must the church understand to fully support this ministry?
6. What must we consider before publically launching a disabilities ministry?
7. What do you think the next step for our church should be in this process?

We decided to schedule the program one day per week over five weeks in order to accommodate the availability of our key leaders and volunteers and also in order to give us both the necessary time to plan the beginning of the program and to evaluate between sessions during the week. We also decided that we wanted to begin with a small number of days in the pilot program so that we did not stretch our resources too far or overcommit ourselves with the participants. It was also decided in this meeting to make it a limited participation pilot program so that we could evaluate as we went through the summer. Participants would be chosen based on need and lack of access to other programming.

We also discussed the issue of tuition or program costs. I suggested that by offering the program for free, we would convey a positive message to the community about our willingness to serve those with needs. We would draw from existing funds that had already been raised for the umbrella of disabilities programs (called enAble) at the church with a goal of replenishing those funds with fundraising throughout the year. We also established an initial budget that provided for a director's salary, one additional

teacher, and two paid staff. Other expenses included food and supplies. We did not discuss future costs in any detail, other than to plan for a 5-day a week program for 6 to 8 weeks in the second year. I told them I would check into any issues regarding liability and insurance and that we would prepare to proceed.

Phase 3: Pilot Program

Over the next two months, Connie Dahn and I met periodically to discuss the program. We worked out the details of facilities usage, discussed who should be hired, planned the schedule, and decided how we would present the information to the church. We set the start date as June 13, 2010. The program would meet on Mondays from 8:30 AM until 5:30 PM. At this stage of the project, I was no longer primary to the process. Because of Dahn's experience in working with special education students, and because of her devotion to the Lord and to disabilities ministry in our church, I hired her to be the director of this program. Having been hired and empowered to proceed, Dahn began to plan the rest of the details of the program. I was now in a role of support, encouragement, and recruiting. My primary responsibility once the program began was to provide the gospel message each day.

On the first day of the program, we did a simple intake of all participants, asking their parents or caregivers to fill out a family profile (see Appendix 11). The initial 15 participants (6 males, 9 females) had already been preselected by Connie Dahn and preregistered. She selected the initial 15 on the following criteria: They had no other free day program available to them. They were not medically fragile. They were not aggressive or self-injurious. They were educable.⁸

I spent a portion of each of the days simply interacting with the participants and helping with tasks like computers, meal planning, and exercise. I stayed away from the dance lessons.

⁸The daily schedule may be viewed in Appendix 12.

During the gospel teaching time, I presented five simple messages to the participants. Utilizing the original large artwork on the auditorium walls as my primary visual, I explained the following five truths to the group:

1. God loves us and made us. He wants us to enjoy the world he has made and to love him and follow him. But we have done and thought wrong things (sin) and turned from God's love. The concept of sin proved difficult to explain to some in the group. While some understood on a very basic level sins such as lying or stealing, for others the concept never seemed to be clear.
2. God gave us commands to follow and obey in his law so that we would know what sin is and understand how to live like God wants us to live.
3. Jesus came to the world to take all of our punishment for sin. He did this by dying on a cross.
4. God made Jesus alive so we can love him and follow him.
5. God wants us to believe in Jesus and what he did for us and love him. He wants us to be in heaven with him. Again, for 5-6 of the participants, this seemed to be somewhat understandable. For the remainder of the group, it was impossible to tell what they were able to comprehend. Most were able and willing to recite back to be the basics of the lesson or to answer questions.

Through the five weeks of teaching, I had good interaction with the participants. Some were much more perceptive and inquisitive than others. One girl slept through every session. Another asked questions that were totally unrelated. But most seemed fairly engaged and interested, and most were able to repeat back in some degree the essential parts of the teaching. Several affirmed they were already Christians. A few had also been baptized in other churches. In addition to addressing the participants as a group, we sought out opportunities to speak with each individually.

The plan also included implementing portions of the booklet *Give Them Jesus: Evangelizing Children with Special Needs* by Pat Verbal.⁹ After the final group teaching session on the last day, Dahn and I pulled aside each participant for a few minutes and sat at table with him or her explaining what the group had heard and sharing this outline of the gospel: (1) God loves you. Using John 3:16 as the primary verse, we shared with

⁹ Pat Verbal, *Give Them Jesus: Evangelizing Children with Special Needs* (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2007), 12-14.

each participant that God loves them no matter who they are and what they can and cannot do. He loves them whether they can speak or not, whether they can see or not (we had one blind participant), and whether or not they are healthy. He loves them whether they walk or use a wheelchair. His love for them will never change. I used my wedding band as a picture of God's love that goes on and on without ever ending—just like a circle. (2) Sin hurts you. We explained that sin is any wrong thing we do with our minds, mouths, or bodies. We also explained that to “perish” from John 3:16 means to be separated from God forever because of that sin. We also explained how sins hurt us every day. Some sins hurt other people by making them sad or by disappointing them. Some sins hurt us by hurting our bodies or making us sick. Some sins become habits that are hard to break. And all sins hurt God who loves us and wants us to do what is good and right. And finally, we shared with them (3) Jesus gives you life. We talked about gifts that they have received at Christmas or at a birthday party. We explained to them that God wants to give us the best gift ever in Jesus. When we ask Jesus to forgive our sins and to take control of our lives, he gives the gift of being God's children. He teaches us how to live the best life we can (John 10:10), and then he promises that we will live forever with him in heaven with perfect bodies (1 Cor 15:53-55).

After these individual conversations, the leaders and volunteers helped each participant assemble a “salvation bracelet” consisting of a leather cord and one black, red, white, blue, green, and gold bead for each bracelet. As we were making the bracelets with them we explained that each bead stood for particular aspects of the gospel.¹⁰

Although Dahn and I had individual conversations with each of the students,

¹⁰Black stands for sin and sin is what separates us from God (Rom 3:23). Red stands for Jesus' death on the cross: Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, paying for our sin. He gives us the only way to God (Rom 5:8). White stands for what Jesus did for us by taking away all our sin. We are forgiven by God (1 John 3:5; Isa 1:18). Blue stands for baptism, which is how we obey God and let others know that we are Christians (Acts 2:41). Green stands for how we grow stronger as Christians by praying, reading the bible, and going to church (2 Pet 3:18). Gold stands for God's promise to us of heaven if Jesus is our Savior and Lord (John 14:2-3).

we did not lead any to Christ with certainty. A further evaluation of those individual conversations and responses is provided in chapter 5. And though we had no definitive conversions among participants during the program, one of the high school volunteers did trust Jesus as Savior in the final week.

At the conclusion of the five-week program, we offered evaluation forms to the participants and to the staff and volunteers (see Appendices 9 and 10). The participants were encouraged to give their own responses and complete their own evaluation forms with the help of a family member, caregiver, or one of the volunteers. The participants were asked to rate themselves in the areas of independence, social skills, employment, academic skills, computer skills, fitness, nutrition, and growing in Jesus.

The staff and volunteers were asked the following questions:

1. Was work meaningful to you as a worker or volunteer?
2. Did your students improve in (a) social skills, (b) employability skills, (c) academic skills, (d) physical fitness, and (e) nutrition knowledge?
3. Did you learn about the abilities of people with disabilities?
4. What have you learned about people with disabilities through this experience?
5. Would you participate in a program like this again? Why or why not?

Post-Project Evaluation

Several weeks after the conclusion of the project, I invited the staff, volunteers, and parents of participants to help us evaluate the pilot project. In that meeting, I asked the following questions:

“How well do you think the church as a whole understands the program as presented?” Their responses revealed that while we still needed to educate the church on the ministry, and specifically L.I.U., they were pleased at the support and participation of volunteers who provided transportation, help in the kitchen, and interaction with the participants. We also produced a video that was very well received and was considered to be very helpful in explaining the ministry to the congregation.

“What have you heard about the response of our people to L.I.U.?” Again, overall responses were very positive. As we noted from the parent and caregiver surveys, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Each person surveyed answered affirmatively to each of the following questions: Did this program help you in caring for your son or daughter? Did you see improvement in any areas of their life skills? Was the program challenging to your son or daughter? Was the program beneficial? Did your son/daughter look forward to attending? And to the question, “Would you sign up again next year?” we received 15 “yes” replies.

“How did this project change your understanding of the nature and purpose of the church?” Each affirmed an appreciation of the outreach focus of L.I.U. and that we incorporated the gospel throughout the day in song, prayer, devotions, and the gospel presentations. Throughout the group was a sense of increased understanding of the need to be intentional about communicating the gospel and to seek response whenever possible.

“Has this project motivated you to serve more or differently than you were before?” The members affirmed a desire to continue to participate in this ministry, and all committed to serving again.

“What do you think the next step for the church should be in this process?” We agreed that the successes of L.I.U. coupled with the lessons learned about scheduling, budgeting, planning, and preparing all indicated we should schedule a five-days per week program for the next year. Also, we incorporated some of the components into our once-per-month Friday respite, such as computers, food preparation and serving, and gospel-focused messages.

Conclusion

The project yielded a successful program that continued in the summer following my departure from First Baptist Church. It was held again in the summer of 2013. More individuals with disabilities are being ministered to. More people are hearing the gospel. More families are being helped.

In addition, lessons learned over the past few years have enabled me to lead two other churches into the development of a disabilities ministry. It also afforded me the opportunity to present a model for local church and community organizations as a keynote speaker during the annual Florida Atlantic University Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities conference in April of 2012. I am also utilizing what I have learned as a leader on a local steering committee as part of the Alabama Lifespan Respite Network. My role is leading local churches to develop respite care ministry and partner together for greater effectiveness. All of this grew from the time spent developing and implementing Learning Independence University.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

This chapter concludes the presentation of the project by offering an evaluation of its overall success. First, I share the background and context of the project. I describe how the project was initially intended to develop and how it became something different, yet ultimately beneficial. Second, I evaluate the project's purpose and goals, and the research used to measure them. In the third section, I evaluate the strength of the project and its value for the church and for those who participated in it. In the fourth part of the evaluation, I evaluate the weaknesses of the project along with recommendations for its improvement. In the fifth part of the evaluation I offer some theological reflections that influenced the project and affected its outcome. I also share personal reflections on the project and how it affected me spiritually and professionally. Lastly, I conclude by offering some implications for other churches in their development of a disabilities ministry.

Background and Context

The process and outcomes of this project are personal to me. I have a son with a profound intellectual disability. As a pastor with a special needs child, I want to include him in as much church life as possible. I want that for his spiritual and social benefit, but also for the benefit of my wife and family so that they do not grow disconnected from the church family. I also understand the significant challenges a disability like autism presents to a family at home, in the community, and with church. The desire for other families that are dealing with similar disabilities is for them to have what my family has always enjoyed for our son Mark: a church family that accepts and loves him, and shares

burdens with us. I also wanted to give sound, biblical answers regarding disabilities to my own family, church, and members of the community. Ultimately, our life with Mark became the catalyst to this project and to the two ministries that subsequently began.

In addition to our needs with Mark and desire to meet those needs, God sent another catalyst that helped launch this ministry. In the fall of 2007, a businessman named Mike Morgan joined the church. He was previously a member of McLean Bible Church in Tyson's Corner, Virginia, where he served as a volunteer in their disabilities ministry known as "Access."¹ As Morgan began to volunteer to help with my son, he and I began to discuss the potential of starting a ministry at First Baptist Church like the one he was familiar with from McLean.

Morgan offered two things that made this possible. He sponsored my wife and me to go to the McLean Bible Church's 2008 Accessibility Summit² and then provided a substantial gift to the church to set up the initial enABLE fund. He also began a letter-writing campaign to friends and clients to raise additional funds for the ministry. Ultimately, his efforts would generate nearly \$70,000 for this ministry's use.

As I visited McLean and attended the summit, my intention was to learn about local church disabilities ministry and discover a model for ministry that I might implement at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach. This Summit proved both educational and inspirational. Jim Pierson, author of *No Disabled Souls: How to Welcome People with Disabilities into Your Life and Your Church*,³ led a seminar entitled Disability Ministry 101. From that seminar, I set out to build a program based on the following five necessary components:

¹McLean Bible Church, "Access Ministry for the Disability Community," http://www.mcleanbible.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=92026 (accessed May 13, 2013).

²Accessibility Summit, <http://accessibilitysummit.org> (accessed May 13, 2013).

³Jim Pierson, *No Disabled Souls: How to Welcome People with Disabilities into Your Life and Your Church* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1998).

1. A well-articulated philosophy of inclusion
2. Appropriate Christian education for everyone
3. Responsiveness to the specific needs of the family
4. Assimilation into service
5. Community-wide ministry

Taking cues from what I observed at during the Accessibility Summit, I returned with a rudimentary plan to start. In October of 2008, as a follow-up to the Accessibility Summit, the church invited the Director of Access Ministries at McLean Bible Church, Jackie Mills-Fernald, to lead a one-day introductory seminar on how to begin a disabilities ministry. Mills-Fernald suggested that we begin the ministry by offering a once-per-month respite program for children with intellectual disabilities. She provided an overview of such a ministry along with sample policies, procedures manuals, and volunteer training information in order to help us begin.⁴ A group of about 40 people from the congregation attended this first orientation and training meeting. At the conclusion of that meeting, we registered the names of all those interested in volunteering in a monthly respite program.

One month after the initial training, we gathered all those volunteers for a Friday evening walk-through of the program with no participants present. We discussed the activities that we would attempt and decided on utilizing an inflatable bounce house, playing group games, and offering arts and crafts, music with motions, and computer time. We also planned to have videos available on the large screen to use as necessary. Pizza would be the standard snack offering. The duration of the program was to be three hours. We planned to announce the launch sometime within the next couple of weeks after a name for the ministry was determined.

Having been in the consideration stage of this potential ministry for over two

⁴This material may be downloaded from McLean Bible Church, “Downloadable Materials,” mbctyson.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=105972 (accessed June 2, 2013).

years at that point, I had already determined what I wanted to call it. I chose the name enABLE to represent an intentional counterpart to disabilities. The focus would be on accentuating the abilities of all people in spite of their apparent disabilities. I wrote as the first purpose statement the following: “The Purpose of enABLE is to teach and share Christ’s love while providing opportunities of worship, fellowship, and personal growth to people with intellectual disabilities and their families—all in the context of a caring Christian community.” The first session began on the second Friday night of January, 2009. With that, the beginnings of enABLE were realized.

The goal was to use this once-per-month Friday evening gathering to meet families in the community who had children with intellectual disabilities and offer them encouragement and practical help through respite care. It was also a hope that this simple program would be a springboard to an expanding and more comprehensive churchwide disabilities ministry. The intent was to include these families that we met through respite care into the wider ministries of the church, including worship and age-graded small groups. We hoped to foster an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion within the congregation for families in the community affected by disabilities so that all felt welcome and included in activities and events. We also intended to use respite care as an initial training ground for volunteers so that we might expand the ministry of care to include one-to-one care for children/teenagers who require it in the context of a “typical” classroom setting or group activity or experience.

While I intentionally intended to feature the development of this monthly respite program as the focus of my D.Min. project, I launched it prematurely before the necessary project planning, research, and writing had taken place. As I began to share with people my desire to have such a ministry at First Baptist Church, people began to volunteer, families began to ask when we intended to begin, and I started without proper preparation before I had an approved project prospectus. We continued the program on a small scale (8 to 10 participants on average) until May of 2010.

In the summer of 2010, I began discussions with Connie Dahn, Lead ESE (Exceptional Student Education) teacher at the local high school, about a desire to improve this program with better planning, better structure, and better leadership. At the time, I was unaware that she had been leading a similar monthly respite-based program in an adjacent city in a local church for many years. That particular church was looking to end their program because they lacked funding and volunteers. We offered to effectively merge their program and its participants with ours in a planned launch on the first Friday in September 2010. Connie Dahn agreed to lead that ministry and help facilitate the growth of enABLE.

The program we adopted, “Friday Night Angels,” served a wider demographic than the initial enABLE respite program had. Whereas the initial program was typically attended by 5 to 8 children, Friday Night Angels included children, teenagers, and young adults. Attendance frequently exceeded 30. We decided to accommodate the group as it was, with the hopes of expanding the scope of ministry.

With the assimilation of the other group, the dynamic of the monthly program changed. The participant group was no longer predominantly 12 and younger. The majority of the new participants were ages 18 and above. As we ministered to this young adult population, we began to explore other needs they had. Their former teacher at school, and now director of enABLE, Connie Dahn, had long advocated for a day program to meet the needs of this special group and to give them an alternative to the inactivity, disconnection, and sometimes even regression they experienced when they had nowhere to go and nothing to do. It was in the context of this growing monthly ministry that we first struck the idea of trying to develop a day program. We knew that this would be more taxing on personnel and resources than the monthly 3-hour evening respite, but we also felt that by developing such a program, we could meet a very real need in the community and take the enABLE ministry to a new level. It was from these initial discussions that Learning Independence University was developed.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The first goal of the project, “to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for persons with disabilities and their families and caregivers at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach,” was the most difficult goal to measure empirically. The increasing number of people with disabilities attending the church over the last few years seems to indicate the fruit of a welcoming environment. We also began to assimilate adults with intellectual disabilities into our typical adult life group classes on Sunday mornings with good success. In general, the congregation seemed to grow beyond simple acceptance to genuine affection for people with disabilities.

The second goal of the project, “to present a biblically compelling rationale for disabilities ministry within the local church,” was also met. Through a series of four messages the congregation was introduced to disabilities in general, intellectual disabilities in particular, and the biblical mandate to minister to all people. Their understanding and agreement to this rationale were noted in their responses to the pre and post seminar surveys. The willingness of the congregation to support, and the willingness of many to serve in, two challenging ministries for people with disabilities (L.I.U. and Friday Night Angels) showed that the message was understood and applied.

The third goal was to help the congregation better understand soteriology with specific application to people with intellectual disabilities. Again, this goal was primarily accomplished through the teaching series and with follow-up conversations. The message that the gospel is for all people and that the church must intentionally and creatively share it with people who have intellectual disabilities was well received. Beyond that, the biblically founded (as opposed to emotionally-driven) conclusion that those who cannot understand or respond to the gospel message can be considered “safe” was encouraging both to parents and caregivers and volunteers in the ministry alike.

The fourth goal was to develop a specific evangelistic program that addressed particular needs of the intellectually disabled in our community while affording us the opportunity to share and demonstrate a gospel witness to them and their families. The

specific process and evaluation of Learning Independence University (L.I.U.) has already been discussed at some length. This program has been and promises to continue to be a useful ministry both in terms of its practical benefit and help to families and caregivers. It also has granted the church a means through which the gospel can be communicated in a variety of ways to people with disabilities. During L.I.U., the truths of the gospel are taught through lessons, stories, music, and pictures. The gospel was also demonstrated through the love of the leaders and volunteers who cared for the participants.

The fifth and final goal of this project was for me to develop as a leader in the areas of biblical teaching and leadership. Perhaps harder to measure than any of the above goals is one's personal development. The project challenged me to read and assimilate a large amount of information about disabilities, about other church models, and about soteriology. I was also greatly challenged in presenting that information in condensed, yet accurate forms to the people of the congregation. This distilling of much data and information was at times difficult. The goal of developing as a leader can probably best be measured by the fruit of the leadership. My intention was to help develop a disabilities friendly church. I wanted to lead the people to be known for their compassion and concern for this unique group of people and for us to demonstrate those attitudes with action and worthwhile ministry. The church did that enthusiastically. And, as a measure of leadership and influence, the church continues to do that even though I am no longer their pastor. That the ministry continues is my greatest accomplishment.

Evaluation of Research

The afore-mentioned goals can also be measured empirically. The research conducted demonstrates a growing understanding and application of the principles taught and the attitudes desired. While much evidence of the project's weaknesses and strengths are admittedly subjective (my perceptions or the reactions and responses of the congregation), some can be measured objectively. For these measurements, I offer the following evaluation of the research I employed.

The first stage of the project included the dissemination of a twenty-five-question survey (see Appendix 1) given to all those in the congregation who attended the first teaching session of the four-message series: “God’s Glorious Plan: Disabilities and the Church.” This survey was designed to measure understanding of intellectual disabilities, attitudes towards the disabled in the church and community, and understanding of the implications of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) for disabilities ministry. I administered the same survey prior to the four-week message series and then again at the conclusion. Sixty-nine people participated in the initial survey and 78 participated in the final survey. I compared the responses of both groups and averaged the results. I did not have a means of determining individual changes in responses to the survey because I did not link the two surveys by individuals. The results show the mean responses as a group both before and after. The data suggests that much of the demographic information (age, gender, length of time in church, etc.) did not meaningfully affect responses. All respondents to the survey identified themselves as Christians.

The data also suggests some movement toward my desired goals in all areas. People grew in their understanding of disabilities, developed more welcoming attitudes, and showed a greater understanding of the implications of the gospel for all people. Recalling the Likert scale (1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree), significant movement in the understanding of disabilities can be seen in responses to question 5:

5. I understand the term “intellectual disabilities” and what that term includes.
Mean answer before seminar: 2.22
Mean answer after seminar: 1.64

Regarding attitudes towards those with disabilities, respondents noted in their responses to questions 12, 13, and 14 the following:

12. We should welcome and accept people with disabilities into our services of worship.
Mean answer before seminar: 1.42
Mean answer after seminar: 1.29

13. Our church should welcome and accept people with disabilities into our life groups and other small group settings.
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.47
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.20
14. Our church should welcome and accept young people with disabilities into our children and youth ministry activities and programs.
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.50
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.35

The respondents also showed an increase in their understanding of the need for the gospel to be shared effectively with people who have intellectual disabilities in their responses to questions 9, 10, and 11:

9. Our church has a God-given responsibility to share the gospel with people who have intellectual disabilities.
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.54
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.42
10. People with intellectual disabilities can respond appropriately to the gospel and be saved.
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.81
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.71
11. People with intellectual disabilities who respond appropriately and positively to the gospel should be baptized.
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.80
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.69

The movement in the answers to the survey suggests that understanding of intellectual disabilities increased somewhat. Also a greater commitment to evangelism and prayer for the ministry was indicated. The survey demonstrated a need for continued teaching on soteriology for people with intellectual disabilities, as some ambivalence remained regarding the statement, “All people with intellectual disabilities go to heaven.” I had hoped that message 3 in the teaching series would have brought greater clarity to that question.

There was positive agreement in both pre- and post-surveys for the implementation of a disabilities ministry, and there was a sense of acceptance and openness in both sets of answers. Thankfully, some were motivated to serve who had not before, and the net result was a larger base of volunteers. The average volunteer base went from 4 to 5, to 10 to 12 on a monthly basis. In addition, we had 5 to 6 people

rotating on a regular basis on Sunday mornings to provide care as a mentor for people who needed assistance in a small group (young adults and adults) or in children's ministry.

The primary purpose of the survey was to gauge the congregation's readiness for a disabilities ministry in general and for the implications that beginning such a ministry could potentially have on the church. The expectation was that those who participated in the programs, such as Learning Independence University, would be more inclined to participate in the other ministries of the church. This expectation proved true as 2 volunteers in the program became regular attendees and as many as 5 to 6 participants in the program also came to other church activities on a regular basis.

The most beneficial research took place in the conversations in the three pre-seminar focus groups. Initially, all I knew was that I wanted the church to do something useful and significant for the people in the community, and that there were unmet needs among the people we were already serving. I wanted the church to provide a program that could incorporate real ministry, and I wanted that program not to duplicate any services they were already receiving. The goal was to help families by filling in the gaps where community programs, school programs, or government-funded programs did not meet their needs.

At the beginning stages of enABLE development, my focus was entirely on children up to age 13. It became clear in the first meeting that the neediest people in the community were those who had completed high school. It was the 22-year-old and older people who lacked day programs, educational activities, social activities, and spiritual activities. Connie Dahn, whose love for and familiarity with so many people in the community who were affected by disabilities, led the church to seriously consider an adult day program. She taught many of the participants in the pilot program while they were in high school and knew how their lives changed for the worse on a daily basis when they no longer had school to attend, a group to belong to, or even just somewhere to be.

Once the determination was made to focus on the needs of those 22 years old and older, the members of the focus group steered in the direction of the final outcome. In addition to determining the target demographic, the group also determined that a day program would best fit the needs. Having no prior experience at such a program and no particular model to follow, we decided to make it a limited five-week pilot. This was a great decision as it allowed the leaders of the program to plan one day per week and then to evaluate exactly what was successful and what was not before the following week. By Session 2, the planning group had begun to develop very specific goals and plans for the program.

The most significant decision made was that a paid director would best serve the development of this program. The church already had the financial resources available and the best person possible to take the position over the summer. Hiring Connie Dahn for the summer was the best decision. By Session 3, the planning group was planning a budget and specific schedules and activities. I assembled a fourth focus group session after the pilot program. Instead of reconvening the original group as planned, I determined their contributions were largely complete. The original group helped turn the focus to a particular group of people and their needs for a daily program. They also helped generate ideas for the content of that program. Several offered counsel on the facilities and helped the church to be better prepared physically and practically for the program. But the primary focus and planning group was not part of the implementation.

The first and primary focus group of people served as advisors, but this second group was made up of the actual leaders and volunteers, and their feedback was most necessary. In that meeting, this second group of leaders and volunteers established that the program was successful and could be carried out again and with more participants and for a longer period of time. This group also discussed potential tweaks to the program (schedules, activities, teaching content, and meals) and determined to make Learning

Independence University (L.I.U.) an annual summer program.

The plans made during those four sessions contributed greatly to the ongoing success of L.I.U. today. Now in its third year, L.I.U. is a five-week, four days per week program serving over 30 young adults. In the winter following the first successful L.I.U., I left First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach to join the staff of Calvary Baptist Church in Dothan, Alabama. I am proud to know that this ministry continued successfully beyond my tenure at First Baptist Church, and that it has grown considerably since then. My only regret is that I was not able to continue to participate personally in the ministry we had planned for and prayed for beyond the pilot program.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Project

Though the process yielded a favorable result, the execution of the project itself could have been better. My vacillation over choosing an appropriate project,⁵ along with some indecision at the beginning of the project regarding exactly what I hoped to accomplish made the project far more difficult than it needed to be. In addition, the broadness of the original project, “Starting a Disabilities Ministry,” made it cumbersome.

The strength of the process was in the collaboration of the church with the community in developing a specific program that addressed specific needs of people with developmental disabilities. Through the three sessions of focus groups with professionals in the community who had experience, training, and insight into the needs of the developmentally disabled in our community, I was able to lead the church to direct our good, but broad and non-specific intentions for including people with developmental

⁵My initial approved project prospectus was “Developing a Multi-Site Ministry Strategy at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach.” After submitting my prospectus and receiving approval, I began the biblical study and research that would serve as the basis of chapters 2 and 3. I attended several seminars and gathered many resources on the subject. As I carried out my research, I determined that the model I was promoting (satellite campus with video-venues) was not advisable for our context and not to lead the church in. I became convinced through my research and study that church planting was a far healthier and biblically faithful model. Thus, I abandoned a couple years of research and writing and began again. By this time, I had completed my three years of on-campus work.

disabilities into an actionable project. Also, by consulting and meeting with these leaders in a focus/planning group setting, I was able to discover along with them a project that the church could offer the community that fit an otherwise unmet need.

My desire was to lead the church to do something meaningful that afforded us the opportunity to genuinely help bear the burdens of struggling families or caregivers of people with disabilities while also granting us the connection with the participants themselves that would allow us to share the gospel with them in developmentally appropriate ways. Initially and without research or consulting with others in the community, I assumed that the most meaningful ministry we could offer was respite. While that ministry does address a real need, through our focus group discussions we discovered that a greater need was a day program for those who had no daytime programs or activities. Through this information, along with the realization that the church could meet this real need, was the determination to begin L.I.U.

The valuable lesson that I learned was that the church should intentionally engage the community it desires to serve before it assumes it is offering something the community wants or needs. By humbly asking these leaders and professionals, “What can the church do to minister to the people you serve?” we cultivated cooperation, good will, and support from those people. We also were able to develop a ministry program that was not in place anywhere else.

A significant challenge to me was in the scope of the project itself. I initially intended to make the project about the implementation of a broad-based disabilities ministry or program at my church. It was difficult to assimilate the vast amount of information available into something focused for research purposes. It was also challenging to measure success with such a large goal. Developing a disabilities ministry in a church is an admirable ambition, but is difficult to research, plan, and document all that was needed over a twelve-week period. It is akin to attempting a project on “Developing a Youth Ministry” or “Developing a Sunday School.” By developing a

specific program, we were able to establish a base to build on. L.I.U. also provided a learning laboratory where our people could be trained to better serve people with developmental disabilities and where we could explore different ways we could meet their practical and spiritual needs.

I set out to initiate a disabilities ministry and did. I called this umbrella ministry enABLE. And although L.I.U. was not part of my original concept, it developed into a worthwhile ministry as I prayed, consulted with area leaders, considered specific needs, and responded accordingly. As a whole, per their responses to the survey and observable behaviors of welcoming and kindness, the church moved towards greater acceptance and care for disabled people. I did help create atmospheres of intentional inclusion in the adult, student, and children's ministries as people with intellectual disabilities began to participate regularly in each of those areas. And the church did develop something of genuine value that allowed the church to reach out into the community. Whereas enABLE was too broad to effectively consider for the purposes of this project, L.I.U. was specific, measurable, and reproducible.

As I conducted research, I also found no pressing need for such a generic project as developing an overall disabilities ministry. I found several detailed, high-quality resources and manuals (see Appendix 13) that laid out the steps very clearly for any church interested in beginning a program.⁶ I wanted to do more than summarize

⁶For a church looking to begin a ministry like enABLE, I highly recommend the following resources: Amy Rapada, *The Special Needs Ministry Handbook: A Church's Guide to Reaching Children with Disabilities and Their Families* (Sammamish, WA: CGR, 2007). Rapada also leads training events for local churches, groups, and associations. I also recommend Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services, *Building a Developmental Disability Ministry* (Watertown, WI: BETLU, 2007). This manual provides a simple, clear, step-by-step plan for beginning this ministry. In addition to these resources, materials available by download from McLean Bible Church are excellent: McLean Bible Church, "Downloadable Materials," mbctyson.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=105972, as are the many resources from Joni and Friends, particularly the Process Map for "Developing a Disability Ministry," (http://www.joniandfriends.org/static/uploads/downloads/church_relations_process_map_rev.pdf (accessed June 7, 2013).

books or regurgitate material. In addition to those printed resources, conferences such as The Accessibility Summit at Mclean Bible Church⁷ and The Works of God Conference at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis⁸ provide excellent models to follow, solid training, and plenty of materials to begin a ministry or program.

What did interest me, however, was the discovery that most of the material did not address the most important issue of all: the salvation of people who have intellectual disabilities. I determined that I would make the project more about theology than about methodology. I determined to use the surveys, focus groups, and the project itself to explore issues of salvation with intellectually disabled people. L.I.U. gave me a regular opportunity to interact with, pray with, talk to, and share the gospel with people who have disabilities.

Had I utilized my time better and more carefully planned a clear, workable project on a smaller scale, I would have had a much easier time with the process. However, the project itself was rewarding as it yielded a viable ministry that endures. First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach continues to provide a thriving monthly respite program year-round and is beginning year three of a greatly expanded Learning Independence University.

In the first year, the church accommodated 15 young adults in the pilot program. In the second year, the church served 25 people. The number has grown to more than 30 in the third year. Learning Independence University serves as an example of what a local church congregation can do if it has the proper attitude towards people with disabilities, desires to be used by God to serve the community, and has a willingness to discover a specific need they can meet. The beauty of Learning Independence

⁷Accessibility Summit.

⁸Desiring God, “2012 Works of God Conference,” <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/by-conference/2012-works-of-god-conference> (accessed June 7, 2013).

University is that it allowed the church to meet the goals of (1) creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for persons with disabilities and their families and caregivers, (2) considering soteriology for intellectually and developmentally disabled people and prepare accordingly, (3) sharing the gospel appropriately for the abilities of the intended audience, and (4) creating challenging opportunities for ministry and service for members of the church.

L.I.U. will remain a viable and effective ministry as long as it receives the support of the new pastor and other leaders at First Baptist Church, and as long as it receives the necessary financial support from individuals and corporate donors. Under my leadership, enABLE raised approximately \$68,000 in a two-year period through many small individual gifts, a few generous corporate gifts, and through one primary benefactor. The challenge for the leadership of enABLE in the future will be the ongoing need for fund-raising to cover costs.

Through all of this, First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach remains friendly, accepting, and loving to people with disabilities and has a great reputation as such in the community. The ministry established there has been the catalyst to the ministry training I have provided for two other churches, including the church I now serve.

I was also able to take what I learned and lead a training seminar at Florida Atlantic University's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities on "Leading Community and Faith-Based Organizations to Acceptance, Understanding, and Inclusion of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder." The material I used at the conference was a modified and condensed version of the four-message series I taught in three churches. In addition, that opportunity allowed me to present the gospel in a secular setting.

Also, based on lessons learned at First Baptist Church, I am now working with a group of volunteers to implement a similar ministry at Calvary Baptist Church in Dothan, Alabama. In addition to the program that I have already begun developing, I

serve on a regional steering committee to develop and train other churches in beginning a disabilities ministry in their context.

Theological Reflection

The theological considerations of this project were, for me, paramount. The issues I sought to settle for my own sake, for the sake of other families like mine, and for the sake of teaching to the congregation are all significant. I affirmed through the 4-message teaching series and conveyed at every opportunity and in every planning meeting that the primary purpose of the church was to communicate the gospel to all people. At the same time, I was challenged with a constant sense of “What about . . . ?” What about those who cannot respond verbally, through sign language, or in any written or other discernible form to the gospel? What about those who give no evidence of even being able to understand the gospel when presented in the simplest of terms? These questions are not theoretical for my family and many families like ours.

As I expressed in chapter 3, my conclusions were based on careful biblical study, research, and interviews with other pastors and theologians. And while I feel confident in those conclusions and consider them well founded, I still wrestle with a desire for certainty. One critical point for me is regarding the doctrine of original sin. A key question is, “What did we inherit from Adam?” As Adam Harwood writes,

There is widespread agreement in Christian circles that every person is sinful because of people’s relationship to Adam. But there are two views of how Adam’s sinful actions are imputed (passed on) to us. These are known as the immediate and the mediate views of imputation. Both views teach that all people are sinful and guilty before God due to our relationship to Adam. And both views read Rom 5 as a parallel of Adam and Christ, in which Christ reverses through his obedience the condemnation that resulted from Adam’s disobedience. The difference comes when considering precisely whether a person becomes or is always guilty of sin and thus under the condemnation of sin and death.⁹

⁹Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 34.

My conclusion is based on what Harwood describes as the “mediate view” of imputation. In the words of Harwood again, “This view affirms that everyone is sinful because of Adam, but it denies that we are guilty due to the sin of Adam. Instead, we are guilty and fall and fall under condemnation only when God judges our own sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions.”¹⁰ That God judges humankind for sinful actions rather than a sinful nature is essential to my position. This affirms for me not only the eternal security of infants who die, but also the eternal security of the profoundly intellectually disabled who, like infants, cannot perceive or understand willful sin and rebellion. They have an inherited sinful nature, but are not considered guilty before God. Because this is a debatable position, the church’s only certain solution is to try to clearly and continually communicate the gospel to all people in a manner that is both biblically faithful and as understandable as possible.

Personal Reflection

This project challenged me as a leader, pastor, and student. While I enjoy reading and speaking, I had to learn to discipline myself to sit and write for significant periods of time. My procrastination, coupled with a sense of perfectionism to get things right or put them off until I could, cost me a great deal over the past several years as I worked to complete the project.

I also tend not to be a detailed planner or implementer. I am most comfortable leading with big ideas and persuasion and then delegating the implementation to others. I sometimes lack the patience to see a program through to the end, moving on to something new and more exciting before the previous project is completed. Such was the case with this project. As I worked on it sporadically, I was constantly drawn away to other “big projects” that devoured my time and attention.

In addition, a few major life events derailed the beginning of the project itself,

¹⁰Ibid., 34.

and then later the completion of the writing. In the summers of 2009 and again in 2010, our son Mark required long-term hospitalizations for residential behavioral treatment due to his autism. During those difficult times, and the months between them, most of my energies were spent working and caring for him.

The second major event was my transition to a new church. In January 2012, after seventeen years at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach, I resigned to accept the call to become pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Dothan, Alabama. The first year and a half of that transition was the busiest, most exhausting period of ministry I have ever experienced.

One of the greatest challenges I still face is balancing a busy church and community schedule with the needs of home and family. Through this project, I have learned hard lessons about time management, personal organization, and the simple need to work hard, especially when I do not feel like it. Specifically, I have created a more rigid personal schedule with committed weekly blocks for study, reading, and writing that I rarely compromise. I also realized that I was taking on far too many projects and new initiatives without finishing ones I had already begun. I have learned how to better delegate tasks and responsibilities. I have also become more focused on what I must do to be successful at my calling, and with my family, and to say no to opportunities that would compromise either. Finally, I have learned to better discipline myself to simply sit and write. I much prefer oral communication and had become lazy about writing. This project has helped to refocus me in that area.

Positively, I have learned a great deal about disabilities. I have had great conversations with influential pastors and theologians such as Jerry Vines, Lon Solomon, Paige Patterson, Denny Burk, Tom Schreiner, John Sullivan, and Sinclair Ferguson about the subject. I have acquired and read many books about disability and ministry to people with disabilities. I have met many wonderful people who struggle under a personal weight I am familiar with. Through the life of my son and the developments of this

ministry, I have had more conversations and interactions with hurting people than I can count. God has used this to create a great sensitivity in me for those who are disabled and for those who care for them. He has developed in me a passion for disabled people and a strong desire to reach them with the gospel.

He has also given me a sense of peace about the soul and salvation of my own son, who seems unable to understand and unlikely to ever respond to the gospel message. My study has been a personal blessing to my wife and to several others in similar situations that I have been able to encourage personally with the biblical truths I studied.

Implications for Other Churches

Beginning a disabilities ministry need not be a daunting task. Excellent resources abound. Training via conferences is available annually. More and more churches are jumping into the fray and developing ministries of their own, meaning there are models in many places and contexts to follow.

Disabilities ministry need not be expensive, either. Whereas we were blessed to have rather substantial funding, that funding is not necessary to have hospitable attitudes towards people or to be intentionally inclusive in the ministries a church already has. All it takes is for people to care and to get involved. Any children's ministry, youth ministry, or adult ministry can become a disabilities ministry with just a few adjustments; some caring people, some suitable space allotted, some simple training, and love are the necessary components.

If one combines good understanding of the need, Christ like attitudes to serve, compassion, simple training, and desire, all built on the foundation of solid theology, a church will have all that is needed to develop this ministry. If a church has funding or access to fundraising, that congregation can begin to be creative about what they can do to minister to this population. Perhaps they can begin to interview educators, caregivers, and community professionals who work with people with disabilities to discover unmet, but meetable needs in their own context.

Perhaps another church can do what our church is currently doing in our city. Our regional committee is working to build a coalition of churches that will share in the training and simultaneously develop monthly respite programs. These respite programs will provide real benefits to parents and caregivers who rarely get a break and simply need someone to help shoulder the load. By cooperating with other churches, more can be accomplished for on behalf of those with disabilities than any single church or ministry can accomplish alone. A coalition of churches would potentially enable us to provide services once per week through cooperation rather than once per month that Calvary Baptist Church alone will be providing. Cooperation among churches will also demonstrate a powerful collective witness to the community of the love of Christ for all people.

Ultimately this ministry is like any other in a church. If the church cares about reaching everyone with the gospel, they are going to have to evaluate theology, methods, and attitudes, and adjust accordingly. When it comes to people with disabilities (intellectual or any other type), the fields are, as Jesus said in John 4:35, white to harvest. My prayer is that God sends churches into that harvest for his glory and their eternal benefit.

Conclusion

Ministry to people with intellectual disabilities is challenging. It is sometimes costly and it can be emotionally difficult, but it is powerfully rewarding. Through this ministry, I have seen hope returning to hurting families. I have seen people enjoying doing ministry for others in ways they never could have imagined. I have seen churches becoming more of what the Body of Christ ought to be and how it ought to function. I have seen examples of authentic Christianity as Christians share each other's burdens and love each other selflessly. And I believe the Master of the Banquet is well pleased

because His people are obeying what he says. I see a future standing before God who is ready to reward His church for serving Him:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matt 25:31-40)

APPENDIX 1

PRE-SEMINAR AND POST-SEMINAR SURVEY AND RESULTS

1. What is your gender? (M) Male (F) Female
2. What is your age? (circle one)
Less than 20 20's 30's 40's 50's 60's 70's 80+
3. If you identify yourself as a Christian, how long have you been a Christian?
Less than a year 1-5 years 6-10 years 11 years or more
4. How long have you been a member of this church?
Less than a year 1-5 years 6-10 years 11 years or more

Using the following scale, please circle the number that best represents your thoughts on each of the following statements.

- 1 = Strongly agree
2 = Agree
3 = Undecided
4 = Disagree
5 = Strongly Disagree

1. The primary purpose of the church is to share the Gospel with all persons.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.43
Mean answer after seminar: 1.23
2. There are many people in the Treasure Coast area that are unchurched.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.59
Mean answer after seminar: 1.42
3. I often pray for the salvation of lost people.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 2.19
Mean answer after seminar: 2.01

4. I want to see our church reach more unchurched people.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.52
Mean answer after seminar: 1.32

5. I understand the term “intellectual disabilities” and what that term includes.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 2.22
Mean answer after seminar: 1.64

6. I understand the term “Autism Spectrum Disorder” and what that term includes.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 2.72
Mean answer after seminar: 2.25

7. I know someone in our church with an intellectual disability.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 2.27
Mean answer after seminar: 1.97

8. I know an unchurched family in our community that is affected by an intellectual disability.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 2.88
Mean answer after seminar: 2.59

9. Our church has a God-given responsibility to share the Gospel with people who have intellectual disabilities.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.54
Mean answer after seminar: 1.42

10. People with intellectual disabilities can respond appropriately to the Gospel and be saved.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.81
Mean answer after seminar: 1.71

11. People with intellectual disabilities who respond appropriately and positively to the Gospel should be baptized.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.80
Mean answer after seminar: 1.69

12. We should welcome and accept people with disabilities into our services of worship.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.42
Mean answer after seminar: 1.29

13. Our church should welcome and accept people with disabilities into our life groups and other small group settings.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.47
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.20
14. Our church should welcome and accept young people with disabilities into our children and youth ministry activities and programs.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.50
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.35
15. Our church demonstrates love and acceptance to people with intellectual disabilities and their families.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 2.21
 Mean answer after seminar: 2.25
16. Our church has people who are properly trained to minister to and care for people with intellectual disabilities.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 2.91
 Mean answer after seminar: 2.66
17. I am comfortable inviting people with intellectual disabilities and their families to our church.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 2.06
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.96
18. I am comfortable participating in a service of worship with people who have intellectual disabilities.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.62
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.46
19. I am comfortable participating in a small group setting with people who have intellectual disabilities.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 1.71
 Mean answer after seminar: 1.57
20. All people with intellectual disabilities go to Heaven.
 1 2 3 4 5
 Mean answer before seminar: 3.32
 Mean answer after seminar: 2.86

21. God wants all people who have intellectual disabilities to be healed of their disabilities before they die.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 3.83
Mean answer after seminar: 3.88
22. I would like to serve in disabilities ministry in my church.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 2.86
Mean answer after seminar: 2.37
23. I will pray for families in my *church* affected by intellectual disabilities.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.58
Mean answer after seminar: 1.49
24. I will pray for families in my *community* affected by intellectual disabilities.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 1.63
Mean answer after seminar: 1.42
25. Our church has a clear strategy to minister to individuals and families affected by intellectual disabilities.
1 2 3 4 5
Mean answer before seminar: 3.25
Mean answer after seminar: 2.54

APPENDIX 2

INVITATION TO POTENTIAL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Dear friend of the disabled in our community,

We all share something in common—a love and compassion for persons with disabilities. In different ways, we are each already involved in making life better for individuals and their families affected by the daily challenges disabilities present. As a church, however, we have decided that we want to do more. We feel called to offer programs, activities, training, support, or whatever this community could most benefit from to address the needs that disabilities cause. That’s why I’m writing you. I want to tap into your passion, experience, and knowledge to help us develop a viable plan of ministry and service to benefit the disabled among us – particularly those affected by intellectual/cognitive disabilities.

Will you join others and me on Thursday, February 3 at 7:00 PM at First Baptist Church of Jensen Beach for the first of what I hope to be a series of focus group meetings to help us begin planning together? Your participation and collaboration will provide an invaluable resource. Please let me know if you will be able to participate. My email is Paul@fbjb.com. You may also call me at (772) 334-2202.

Thank you for what you do to love and care for those in need.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Thompson

APPENDIX 3
FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS REGISTRATION

Name: _____ Date: _____

Occupation:

Relationship to or work with persons with disabilities:

Church affiliation:

Best way to contact:

Are you willing to participate in 3-4 additional focus group meetings for the purpose of assisting FBJB in the development of a ministry plan for persons with disabilities?

APPENDIX 4

FOCUS GROUP SESSION 1

1. What is the role of the church in ministering to people with intellectual disabilities and their families?
2. What do you think the most significant needs are of families dealing with an intellectual disability?
3. What specifically do you think we should be doing as a church to address these needs?
4. What are we practically and realistically able to offer in this ministry?
5. What should be our limitations in this ministry? (i.e. What will we clearly not attempt to offer?)

APPENDIX 5

FOCUS GROUP SESSION 2

1. What is one unmet need of persons with intellectual disabilities in our community that our church can reasonably meet?
2. What do we need to consider before attempting to meet this need?
3. What resources will be required to meet this need?
4. What staffing will be required?
5. What training will be required?
6. What space will we utilize?
7. Are there liability and/or legal issues to consider?
8. How do we publicize this program?

APPENDIX 6
FOCUS GROUP SESSION 3

1. Can this program be done on a trial basis as a pilot program?
2. Who will we include? What will the criteria be?
3. What will this program cost over a 1-year period?
 - a. Over a 3-year period?
 - b. Over a 10-year period?
4. How will we fund this ministry?
5. What must the church understand to fully support this ministry?
6. What must we consider before publically launching a disabilities ministry?
7. What do you think the next step for our church should be in this process?

APPENDIX 7

FOCUS GROUP SESSION 4: POST- PROJECT EVALUATION

Workers and volunteers:

1. Was work meaningful to worker and student (individual with disability)?
2. Did the individual improve in: social skills, employability skills, academic skills, physical fitness, nutrition knowledge?
3. Did you (worker/volunteer) learn about the abilities of people with disabilities?
4. Did the individual(s) you worked with meet your expectations in regard to the above areas?
5. What have you learned about people with disabilities through this experience?
6. Would you do this again? Why/why not?

Parents or caregivers:

1. Did this program help you in caring for your son/daughter with disabilities?
2. Did you see improvement in any areas of their life skills?
3. Was the program challenging for your son/daughter?
4. Was the program beneficial?
5. Did your son/daughter look forward to attending?
6. How can the program be improved?
7. Would you sign up again next year?

APPENDIX 8

LIU WORKERS/VOLUNTEERS EVALUATION

Rating: 5=Very Superior 4=Superior 3=Average 2=Poor 1=Very Poor

| | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Was work meaningful to you as a worker or volunteer? | Yes No | | | | | |
| Did your students improve in: | | | | | | |
| Social Skills | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | |
| Employability Skills | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | |
| Academic Skills | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | |
| Physical Fitness | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | |
| Nutrition Knowledge | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | |
| Did you learn about the abilities of people with disabilities? | 5 4 3 2 1 | | | | | |
| Did the individuals you worked with meet your expectations in social skills, employability skills, academic skills, physical fitness, nutrition knowledge? | 5 4 3 2 1 | | | | | |
| What have you learned about people with disabilities through this experience? | Explain: | | | | | |
| Would you participate in a program like this again? | Yes No | | | | | |
| Why or why not? | Explain: | | | | | |

APPENDIX 9

LIU STUDENT EVALUATION

Rating: 5=Very Superior 4=Superior 3=Average 2=Poor 1=Very Poor

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independence | | | | | |
| Check in/out | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Completes work w/ minimal assistance | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Social Skills | | | | | |
| Greets People | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Neat Appearance | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Nice Manners | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Employment | | | | | |
| Following Directions | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Completes work at a good pace | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Cooperates w/ others | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Good Attendance | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Academic Skills | | | | | |
| Comprehension | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Vocabulary | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Computer Skills | | | | | |
| Facebook | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| PowerPoint | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Fitness | | | | | |
| Dance Class | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Weights | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Cardio | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Nutrition | | | | | |
| Identifies foods that are nutritious | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Identifies foods that should be eaten less | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | | |
| Growing in Jesus | | | | | |
| Understand Devotional | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

APPENDIX 10

LIU SUMMARY LETTER TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS, 2011

July 18, 2011

Dear _____,

The Pilot Program Learning Independence University (LIU) was definitely a success. Each individual made progress in each focus area; Nutrition, Fitness, and Community Service. At first we wanted to keep each person in one group for the eight sessions but the individuals were so excited about each activity we decided to give each one a chance to be a part of each group.

Below is a schedule of all the activities of the day

| | | |
|-----------|------------------------------------|--|
| 8:30-8:45 | Check-in | Sign up for groups |
| 8:45-9 | Devotional/Prayer | |
| 9-10 | Calendar, schedule | visual |
| 10-12 | Focus groups; Community Service | Emeritus assisted living, Vacation Bible School, personal home, soup kitchen |
| | Nutrition | Making menu, shopping, preparing meals, cleaning up |
| | Fitness | Snap Fitness; cardio machines, free weights, weight machines |
| 12-1 | Lunch | Nutritious lunches; salads, sandwiches, wraps, quesadillas |
| 1-3 | News 2 You (Current Events paper) | Computer skills, power point w/presentations |
| 3-5 | Varied | Dance w/ a teacher from Florida Arts and Dance Company, teachings from Pastor Paul, praise time w/Steven (worship leader), free time |
| 5 | Check-out | |

Thank you for allowing your son/daughter to be a part of the first annual LIU at First Baptist of Jensen Beach. A DVD of all the activities is enclosed. I apologize for the lack of communication between home and the program. We wanted each person to be respected as an adult. If you do want further communication you may contact me at ccdahn@comcast.net or 772 834-6908. Thank you for your comments and suggestions to make the program better. We very much enjoyed each person that attended!

Conney Dahn, Michelle Bormann LIU Teachers

APPENDIX 11
2011 FAMILY PROFILE

| |
|---|
| New Family _____ Updated Family _____ Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Male: _____ Female: _____ DOB: ___/___/___ Age: _____ Height: _____' _____" Weight: _____ Name of School: _____ Grade _____ |
|---|

| |
|---|
| Mother: Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Address: _____ City: _____ State, Zip: _____ Home Phone: (____) _____ Home Email: _____ Work Phone: (____) _____ Mom Cell Phone: (____) _____ |
|---|

| |
|---|
| Father: Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Address: _____ City: _____ State, Zip: _____ Home Phone: (____) _____ Home Email: _____ Work Phone: (____) _____ Dad Cell Phone: (____) _____ |
|---|

| |
|--|
| Marital Status: _____ Married _____ Separated _____ Divorced _____ Single _____ Widowed |
|--|

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Siblings Living at Home: | |
| #1 (Oldest) | Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Gender: _____ DOB: ___/___/___ Age _____ |
| #2 | Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Gender: _____ DOB: ___/___/___ Age _____ |
| #3 | Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Gender: _____ DOB: ___/___/___ Age _____ |
| #4 (Youngest) | Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Gender: _____ DOB: ___/___/___ Age _____ |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|--|-------|--|-----------|--|-----------|--|
| ADD/ADHD: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Autism: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Cerebral Palsy: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Developmental Delay: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Down Syndrome: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Visual Impairment: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Hearing Impairment: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| Other: | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |
| | | Mild: | | Moderate: | | Profound: | |

Primary Physician:

Name: _____ Phone Number: () _____
 Address: _____ City, State, ZIP: _____

Health / Medical Information

Briefly describe your child's disability: _____

Please list medications that are administered regularly:

| | Medication | When Taken | Dose | How is it administered? |
|---|------------|------------|-------|-------------------------|
| 1 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Please list all allergies to medicines both oral and topical and environmental:

| | Allergy | Severity of Reaction | Action Steps |
|---|---------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4 | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Outdoor Sensitivities

Heat: Best Method of Cool-down: _____
 Sun: List Sunscreen Provided: _____
 Outdoor Allergies: _____
 Bee Stings: Epi Pen Provided? Yes No

Emergency Information

If you cannot be reached in case of an emergency, please name two local contacts to whom you authorize ENABLE to release your child:

Contact 1: Last Name: _____ First Name: _____

Relationship to the child: _____

Address: _____

Home Phone: (____) _____ Other Phone: (____) _____

Contact 2: Last Name: _____ First Name: _____

Relationship to the child: _____

Address: _____

Home Phone: (____) _____ Other Phone: (____) _____

Medical or Special Concerns

Please check any that apply and explain:

Seizures: _____

G-Tube: _____

Positioning: _____

Epi Pen: _____

Other: _____

Toileting / Hygiene

Please check any that apply and explain:

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Uses Toilet Independantly: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | | |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Uses Toilet Assistance: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | | |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Needs Transfer Assistance: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | | |

| | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Follows a Schedule | <input type="checkbox"/> | Times: _____ |
| | | |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Wears Diapers/Pull-Ups: | <input type="checkbox"/> | Special Changing Instructions: _____ |
| | | |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Signs/Gestures Toilet/Change Needs | <input type="checkbox"/> | Describe: _____ |
| | | |

| | | |
|--------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Other: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | | |

Last Name: _____ 2011 Family Profile

Dietary and Feeding

I CAN NOT eat these foods due to allergies or diet restrictions: _____

I enjoy eating these foods/snacks: _____

Please check all that apply and explain: _____

Eats by mouth: _____

Independent with set up: _____

Eats by G-Tube: _____

Feeds self with prompts: _____

Uses special utensils/cups: _____

Requires supervision/physical assistance while eating: _____

Mobility

Please list any mobility requirements or special equipment: _____

Communication

Please check all that apply and explain:

Predominantly Non-Verbal: _____

Predominantly Verbal: _____

Speaks Clearly: _____

Requires Prompts/Clues to Initiate: _____ Example: _____

Expresses basic needs/wants by:

Eye gaze/contact: _____

Gestures: _____

Signs: _____

Assistive Tech: _____

Other: _____

Behavior

Please share behavior concerns we should be aware of (biting, scratching, aggressive behavior):

Please explain behavior management plans being used at home/school to modify any inappropriate behaviors that may be exhibited: (Our goal is to maintain consistency in the implementation of this plan and work with you in the process.)

My Child Really Loves

Please share the activities your child really loves to do: (Indoors/Outdoors)

Last Name: _____ 2011 Family Profile

Are you on the Medicaid Waiver?: _____
Support Coordinator: _____
What Tier or how much money is allotted to you for the year?

Permission for photography or video? Yes No
Signature: _____
Permission to ride in the car of a designated driver/volunteer? Yes No
Signature: _____

Dress Code; clean and neat

Please return to or for further information contact:

| | |
|---|---|
| ENABLE Ministry First Baptist Jensen Beach 1400 NE Jensen Beach Blvd. Jensen Beach, FL 34957 Phone: 772-334-2202 Fax: 772-334-2203 | Conney Dahn 772-834-6908 ccdahn@comcast.net |
|---|---|

Last Name: _____ 2011 Family Profile

APPENDIX 12

DAILY SCHEDULE

DAILY SCHEDULE

| | | |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 8:30-8:45 | Check-in | Sign-up for groups to participate in: (service opportunities) |
| 8:45-9 | Devotional/Prayer | Led by Connie |
| 9-9:15 | Calendar, schedule | Participants would plot out the day using a visual schedule |
| 9:15-12 | Focus groups; Community Service | Emeritus assisted living, Vacation Bible School, personal home, soup kitchen |
| | Nutrition | Making menu, shopping, preparing meals, cleaning up |
| | Fitness | Snap Fitness; cardio machines, free weights, weight machines |
| 12-1 | Lunch | Nutritious lunches; salads, sandwiches, wraps, quesadillas, etc |
| 1-3 | News 2 You (Current Events paper) | Computer skills, power point w/presentations |
| 3-5 | Varied | Dance w/ a teacher from Florida Arts and Dance Company, teachings from Pastor Paul, praise time w/Steven (worship leader), free time |
| 5-5:30 | Check-out | |

APPENDIX 13

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR BEGINNING A DISABILITIES MINISTRY IN A LOCAL CHURCH

- Carter, Erik W. *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2007.
- Hubach, Stephanie O. *All Things Possible: Calling Your Church Leadership to Embrace Disability Ministry*. Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2007.
- Kutz-Mellem, Sharon. *Different Members, One Body: Overcoming the Diversity of Abilities in God's Family*. Louisville: Witherspoon, 1989.
- Newman, Barbara J. *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2006.
- Pierson, Jim, and Robert E. Korth, eds. *Reaching Out to Special People: A Resource for Ministry with Persons Who Have Disabilities*. Cincinnati: Standard, 1989.
- Rapada, Amy. *The Special Needs Ministry Handbook: A Church's Guide to Reaching Children with Disabilities and Their Families*. Charleston, SC: CGR, 2007.
- Rife, Janet Miller, and Ginny Thornburgh. *From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations and People with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 1996.
- Tada, Joni Eareckson, and Steve Miller. *Through The Roof: Assisting Churches in Developing an Effective Disability Ministry and Outreach*. Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2006.

APPENDIX 14

LIU PARTICIPANT EVALUATION

| LIU/Dates | 6/15/2011 | 6/22/2011 | 6/29/2011 | 7/7/2011 |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Independence | | | | |
| Check in/out | | | | |
| Completes work w/minimal assistance | | | | |
| Social Skills | | | | |
| Greets people | | | | |
| Neat appearance | | | | |
| Nice manners | | | | |
| Employment | | | | |
| Follows directions | | | | |
| Completes work at good pace | | | | |
| Cooperates w/others | | | | |
| Good attendance | | | | |
| Academic Skills | | | | |
| Comprehension | | | | |
| Vocabulary | | | | |
| Math/Money | | | | |
| Computer Skills | | | | |
| email | | | | |
| Facebook | | | | |
| PowerPoint | | | | |
| Fitness | | | | |
| Dance class | | | | |
| Weights | | | | |
| Cardio | | | | |
| Nutrition | | | | |
| Identifies foods that are nutritious | | | | |
| Identifies foods that should be eaten less | | | | |
| Growing in Jesus | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Rating 1-5 1 low/5 best
PA/Physical assistance

VP/verbal prompting

I/Independent

APPENDIX 15

MESSAGE 1: A FIRM FOUNDATION

God's Glorious Plan:

Disabilities and the Church

Message 1: A Firm Foundation

The Reality, the Rationale, and the Responsibility of the Church



INTRODUCTION:

Imagine an unreached people group sitting just outside the doors of our church that accounts for as much as 10-20% of the population around us. We do not need to travel beyond our own neighborhoods to find them. We do not need to learn a new language to communicate with them. We do not need to train a team of career professionals to reach them. The skills required to make meaningful connections with them can be quickly learned by any volunteer who has the compassion and desire to do so. While there will be some financial expense to ministering to them, it is probably not more than the average church will spend on outreach to children and youth on an annual basis. This group we need to reach is not typically antagonistic to the church or to its gospel message.

Limitations and Parameters

Specifically, I will address the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities and the families of those people and the effect of those disabilities on the entire family structure. This term has largely replaced the term “developmental disabilities”, though they can often be interchanged.

According to the Advocacy for the Rights of the Challenged, intellectual disabilities include, but are not limited to mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, and Down syndrome. The term intellectual disabilities also includes victims of traumatic brain injury and any other non-specified condition that creates similar symptoms as those described as developmental disabilities.

Effects of these types of disabilities are described by the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act as substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of major life activity: self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, capacity for independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.

And, while I make specific reference to “intellectual disabilities” during this series, the implications for what is discussed carry over into any ministry for any person with any sort of disability. In fact, many of the lessons can and should be applied to any person that for reasons outside of their control are estranged from or disconnected from church life.

Prevalence

Currently, **15 percent of the world's population has a disability**. If one were to put all those people together, they would comprise the world's third largest nation after China and India, and they would have the highest rates of homelessness, joblessness, divorce, abuse, and suicide. Only 5-10 percent of this people group is effectively being reached with the gospel, making them one of the largest under-reached groups in the world. If the church is going to take the Great Commission seriously and act on it intentionally, it must engage this group that surrounds every community in America.

The numbers of people all around us with disabilities is growing – particularly intellectual disabilities. My son Mark has autism. Alabama saw a 517 percent increase in Autism Spectrum Disorder cases alone in residents aged 3 to 21 from the year 2000 to 2010, which was ahead of the national increase of 448 percent. Nationwide, one in 88 children have autism. 1 in 58 boys have autism.

While the prevalence of intellectual disability is high in the community and most communities, the number of churches with intentional ministry to or inclusive ministry with persons with disabilities is low. The US Congregational Life Survey revealed that only 10 percent of congregations provide some form of care to people with disabilities attending their congregation or living in the broader community.

Accessibility

While the theology of the local church might suggest “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” often the facilities suggest that “An Impregnable Fortress is Our Church.” Others have referred to the modern church and its less than stellar record of ministry to the disabled as a “city on a hill—physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.” Thankfully, physical barriers are the easiest to address and remove. Where there is desire to do so, many of the changes required to accommodate the physical needs of people with intellectual disabilities can be easily made.

Barbara Newman, author of *Autism and Your Church* writes, “I’ve observed that many persons with disabilities feel more support and inclusion from public schools and government agencies than they do from the Body of Christ.” She notes that the issue is not always lack of desire on the part of pastors and other Christian leaders. Sometimes church leaders simply do not know what to do. The result is a church that all too often leaves disabled people feeling “uninvited, misunderstood, patronized, and ignored by the community of Christ. They have been set on the margins . . .”

“Active oppression must never, ever be a part of the life of the church toward people with disabilities or any other individuals. It is entirely antithetical to justice – and completely inconsistent with the character of God. But passive oppression can also occur, and this is more often the form of exclusion that takes place in churches. Passive oppression involves holding down of another through what is *not* done – and it generally occurs due to neglect. Reasons for the neglect can vary along a spectrum from ignorance to indifference. Ignorance can result in a failure to provide due to a lack of awareness that a problem exists, or because of an inability to know how to address a specific challenge. On the other extreme, neglect due to indifference is a complex matter of the heart: **‘We know, but we really don’t care enough to act on it’**.”

Rationale

The first rationale for this ministry is the foundational biblical truth that God created all people in His image, including people with disabilities, to glorify Himself. Rather than treating disabilities as a sort of curse of God, result of sin, attack of Satan, or something outside the control of a sovereign God, people should learn to see all people as part of God's plan and as potential images of God's glory. When Moses declared his inability to speak to Pharaoh on Israel's behalf, God declared to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? (Exod 4:11-12). When the disciples inquired of Jesus who was to blame or what was the cause of a blind man's disability, the Lord replied, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). And when the crowds gathered around Jesus, his ministry to the disabled among them brought glory to God:

Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel. (Matt 15:30-31)

When the church recognizes **the sovereignty of God in all things**, including the presence of disabilities, and works to bring people with disabilities to Jesus, God is and will be glorified.

The second rationale of the project is **the responsibility of the church** to reach out to one of the most unreached groups in the community. According to Mephibosheth Ministry, "People with disabilities are the largest unreached people group in the world. Ten-percent of the world's population has a disability, and 90% of that group do not go to church or have a relationship with Christ."

Too many families have been told similar false messages that God desires all to be healed and a child's lack of healing was due to a lack of faith. Many have also been told that the sins of their past were the cause of their child's current disabilities. Messages like these are harmful and destructive to individuals and families alike. These messages are also creating nearly impenetrable handicaps for disabled people to overcome if they are to find a place in churches. Finally, some people may be angry with God for the disabilities in their families or lives. Blaming God for their condition, they may be reluctant to enter a church or participate in any religious activities. These people need to be told of God's love for them as revealed in the Bible, and have God's love demonstrated to them by people who genuinely care about them and their families.

The third rationale is the Great Commission, expressed in many texts of scripture, commanding believers to make disciples among all the nations, including baptizing them and teaching them all that Christ has commanded. To be obedient to this primary imperative of the Church requires Christians and the churches they are members of to actively pursue the lost, sharing an ascertainable witness to them and seeking an appropriate response to that message, while trusting God with the ultimate results. Scripture also reminds churches that saving faith, expressed as "calling on the Lord" requires an understandable witness. Specifically the scriptures teach that those who will be saved must "hear" the message and therefore it must be "preached" to them (Rom 10:9-15). The challenge to the local church is how to translate that requirement for "hearing" and for a verbal response to that heard message for those whose disabilities may preclude one or both of those activities. Churches must find appropriate means to convey the Gospel to all persons, including those with intellectual disabilities. On a per-person basis, the responsibility of Christian leaders is to try to discern the responses of those who

are capable of some form of response and act accordingly; offering baptism and communion to those give evidence of saving faith. For those who appear to be incapable of receiving or responding to the Gospel message, Christian leaders must the sovereignty, justice, and love of God for their salvation.

The fourth rationale is the need of the church to be inclusive and welcoming to people with disabilities in order to **function appropriately and biblically as the body of Christ**. God's design for the Church is that it be as a body of many necessary, interdependent parts. The Apostle Paul specifically refers to the "weaker" parts of the body as "indispensable" (1 Cor 12:22). For the church to be biblically whole and healthy, it must include people with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities. Jesus described doing ministry to "the least of these" as doing ministry unto Jesus himself (Matt 25:40). While not referring specifically to disabled persons in that discourse, the call to ministry to those whom society considers "least" is an important challenge of the church. The church must develop a better theological understanding of its role and function as a spiritual body so that it may properly relate to and include people with disabilities. The presence of people with disabilities in services of worship, small groups, studies, and activities makes churches and congregations closer to wholeness and to the biblical ideal of church as seen in the Bible. As mentioned in the third rationale, this need to be inclusive also requires the church to offer baptism and communion to persons with disability who have responded appropriately to the Gospel.

The fifth and final rationale of this project is the need of hurting people to **simply experience the love of Jesus Christ**. Christians are called to "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1). Individuals and families with intellectual disabilities carry heavy and typically lifelong burdens. Jim Pierson, author of *No Disabled Souls*, notes the incredible toll placed on families who experience disabilities and their subsequent need for ministry that the church offers. His research reveals that **four out five marriages that either produce a child with a disability or include a spouse who becomes disabled ends in divorce**. He also states that children with cognitive disabilities are subject to **10 times more abuse than typical children**. The other members of the family are also profoundly affected. Pierson states that, "**Siblings of a child with a disability are 4 times more likely to be maladjusted than their peers who have typical siblings**". Many families with disabilities are overwhelmed with the challenges these disabilities cause. Routine activities such as shopping, going to school, having a meal together as a family, and going to church can at times be extremely challenging, if not nearly impossible. The strain on families is real, profound, and often unseen by most. The church possesses the spiritual and personal resources to help carry these burdens, and must do so. Conversion growth will be an expected and natural by-product of the church reaching out in beneficial ways to demonstrate the love of Christ to hurting people.

APPENDIX 16

MESSAGE 2: A BANQUET, A BODY, AND A THRONE

God's Glorious Plan: Disabilities and the Church

Message 2: A Banquet, A Body, and a Throne

3 Definitive Passages that Inform our Understanding of Ministry to People with Disabilities



A Banquet: Luke 14:16-24

Luke 14:16-24 (ESV)

16 But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many.

17 And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’

19 And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’

20 And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’

21 So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’

22 And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’

23 And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’

24 For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’ ”

“Here is a story that is not about a restored body but an inclusive community. It is an example of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God and the welcome received by all who are one the margins of society and respond to the invitation to the banquet. Those who come are accepted as they are; indeed that is essential to understanding the parable.”

What keeps a church from actively seeking these unlikely guests at God's table?

Govig suggests **we err in three areas**: 1) **We avoid the “marked” people**. He defines “marked” as having an identifying feature that sets a person apart from what is considered to be “normal” In the case of an intellectual disability, the “mark” can be anything from physical features to distinguishing behaviors and mannerisms, or apparent inability to communicate. Our tendency, he says, is to either pity them or shun them. 2) **We stereotype people**. By labeling them, we are libeling them, often assuming characteristics or limitations that are not there. The one with speech or hearing difficulties is assumed to be dim-witted as well. A person with an intellectual disability is wrongly assumed to be uneducable, etc. Our labels and stereotypes rob us of the ability to treat people simply as human beings. Finally, he suggests 3) **We are in denial**

about chronic disabilities. While we typically rally to the very ill, knowing that the situation is temporary (healing at best, death at worst) we seem much less comfortable with the prospect of living with, helping, teaching, or caring for someone who will, save a miraculous intervention, be disabled for life. We simply don't know what to do. We are called to "bear one another's burdens", but we don't know how.

How important is it that we actively seek and consciously welcome people with disabilities to our churches? "When the church fails to invite and welcome people with disabilities, they have betrayed the very people with whom Christ closely identified during his life ministry. Those with disabilities are the same people whom Jesus was told by God not only to invite, but, in stronger language, to *compel* to come to the Great Banquet Feast of God's Kingdom." Brett Webb-Mitchell in *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* **summarizes the parable** thusly:

"None of those who were first invited – the ones that the host, God, first desired to entertain and welcome – will now be included. They, not God the host, excluded themselves from the banquet. Instead, those empty places will be filled by those seen as the most unlikely participants in this grand banquet. God in Christ takes those with disabilities who have been rejected by the rest of Jewish society, a microcosmic reflection of the rest of humanity, and transforms them from outcasts to honorably invited guests to the banquet of love, the kingdom of God. Who do the people who are poor and those who are disabled symbolically represent in this story? All of us. Those who are disabled also represent us. They represent all of us who come before God to sit at a table of love and life with one another and share in a meal, with all our wounds and sense of brokenness, with all our limitations and knowledge of our inadequacies, with all our sins well known already by God we come to share in the banquet presented before us. The invitation is not determined by a person's good works or good actions, but by accepting the simple invitation God has extended out of love for his children."

It is beautiful and amazing that Jesus would teach **a parable of God's grace in salvation using those with disabilities as his object lesson.** As this parable teaches us that without God's invitation, no one can come to the banquet or even sit at the table, we are reminded that we are all equally dependent upon God's grace and his gracious invitation, without which we would be forever excluded from him. We are reminded that this ministry is ultimately about bringing people to Jesus, to enjoy a rewarding relationship with him now, and an eternal place in heaven later. Thinking evangelistically helps keep our priorities well placed.

The imperative: "**compel**"

A Body: 1st Corinthians 12:14-26

First Corinthians 12:14-26 (ESV)

14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no

need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Six Implications from this passage:

- 1) While some parts may appear to us to have greater value, it is not so, and simply means we don't understand the significance of all interrelated parts and what they offer/the role they play in relationship to the other parts.
- 2) God did not design us with sameness of function/role, appearance, or abilities. But he did place us in the body as he chose. God assigns the parts and builds the body.
- 3) We do not have the right to be dismissive of or unconcerned about any other part of the body. Whether we understand this dynamic or not, we need each other to function in the manner God designed and intends.
- 4) Those “weaker parts”* receive special recognition from God as the “indispensable”* parts. What makes them “weaker” and why are they “indispensable”? It is in our relation to those parts that we learn most about what it is to love and serve God.
- 5) Every member of the body should receive the same loving attention and care from all the members. Members of the body that are selfish/self-centered, unaware of the needs of others, or unconcerned about those needs rob the entire body of the care that God requires. (Note: “care” is an IMPERATIVE here.) Mutual care builds unity in the body.
- 6) Togetherness is the key. To endure suffering and hardship together is the mark of a true church. To honor (demonstrating a sense of equal value and favor) each other as significant and worthy of love and fellowship demonstrates that we are Christians. It was Jesus who said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Professor Jeff McNair lists the following reasons why a person with a disability is worthy of our honor:

- 1) Through their own faith
- 2) Through the way they cause others to try to reconcile disability and faith theologically and philosophically
- 3) Through the service they demand (causing one to decide whether or not he will serve God)
- 4) What are the essential elements of being a human being or being made in the Image of God
- 5) What is that makes a life valuable or well lived

- 6) Why should I or my life be considered more valuable than that of a person with a disability
- 7) God's sovereignty
- 8) Support within/among the Body of Christ
- 9) The ability to teach lessons about faith

While unique, the members of the body in this passage are equally necessary and their gifts are equally valued. This passage affirms both diversity and equality. **The point to the text is that no one is excluded.** "Over and over again, the scriptures stress that in our unity in Christ, we need to value and embrace the uniqueness of each individual."

We must be careful as in our churches to ensure that our welcoming is a full inclusion into the life of the church and that our welcome is reflected in our attitudes and actions. As Stephanie Hubach notes, "Once welcomed into the Christian community, many who are affected by disability remain on the fringes – essentially living as strangers in the midst of all the activity of the local church. The implicit message is, *'Welcome! Come on in! But don't expect us to operate any differently because you are here.'*"

Practically speaking, when the church is willing to make adaptations to be inclusive of all it's members and attendees, a sense of unity is achieved while maintaining a sense of the God-given individuality of each person. The results should include a church family that experiences the Gospel through "Christian education, community life, corporate worship, caring, and contribution."

We must be quick to remember that we are not an aggregate of individuals, but a God-ordained "body" functioning in union to display the Glory of God. It is God who chose the parts and assigned the roles. Each of us are parts of his plan and gifts he has provided to the wider body.

We are invited to His Banquet --- to be made part of His Body --- so that we may gather at his Throne in eternity!

A Throne: Matthew 25:31-40

One of the final and most sobering, thought-provoking, church-evaluating, heart-examining parables Jesus taught was the parable of the sheep and the goats. Consider it's implications for intentional ministry for people with intellectual disabilities:

Matthew 25:31-40 (ESV)

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or

in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

How then should we interpret that phrase, “least of these”? Certainly the “least of these” would apply to those that receive the least attention and effort to reach in our churches. One clear indication of its meaning is Jesus’ embodiment of the people that we so often ignore.

“Clearly, doing nothing for those in need is not an option for the disciple of Christ. Jesus’ teaching mandates entering into the struggles of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.”

Four conclusions:

- 1) How we live as a result of receiving the Gospel matters. We are to be transformed people.
- 2) “The least of these” is not a measurement of value in God’s eyes, but a statement of judgment of our false sense of values and worth we attribute to people. Jesus is referencing our flawed judgment.
- 3) Ministry to all people – particularly those most in need and most ignored – is ministry/service to God himself.
- 4) The obvious correlation is the connection between physical impairments and our spiritual impairments. We are unable (disabled) to reach God save from the loving intervention of Christ.

People with disabilities as an object lesson of grace:

Our ministry to those who are physically disabled is a pure picture of the Gospel and a beautiful object lesson – one used by Jesus himself.

At the beginning of this message series, it was mentioned that it is ultimately a “Gospel mandate” that drives our desires to be intentionally inclusive of persons with disabilities. It is to that Gospel mandate that we direct our attention for message three next week.

APPENDIX 17

MESSAGE 3: SAVED? LOST? SAFE?

God's Glorious Plan:

Disabilities and the Church

Message 3: Saved? Lost? Safe?

The Gospel and the Eternal Condition of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities



Luke 14:12-15 (ESV)

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” ¹⁵ When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

Irrefutable mandate ...

- *To go out with whole Gospel and with love, compel all people with disabilities to come in*
- *That the Father's house may be full*
- *That they might know his power in weakness*
- *That all may worship Him together*
- *That the rule and reign of God be established*

(Note clear connection to the KINGDOM OF GOD)

- 10-11% of world population has disability
- If we were to put these nearly 700 million people together, they would comprise the world's 3rd largest nation (after China and India) with the highest rates of HOMELESSNESS, JOBLESSNESS, DIVORCE, ABUSE, and SUICIDE.
- Only 5-10% of this people group are effectively being reached with the Gospel, making them one of the largest UNDER-REACHED and in fact UNREACHED groups in the world.
- Jesus – knowing they would be OVERLOOKED – made them a target group of the GREAT COMMISSION

But what about this special subset of people who have significant INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES? Should we – Can we – reach them with the Gospel?

The BIG Question:

On his weblog *disabledChristianity* Dr, Jeff McNair, professor of Special Education at California Baptist University wrote:

“... when asked about the ramification of disability on a person’s relationship with God, church leaders are at best unable to figure it out, but at worst, don’t give a damn. Where is the theological discussion to try to flesh out these issues? Whenever I meet someone who is trained as a pastor, or in theology, who has even the remotest of interest in disability, I literally beg them to write about the issues for uniformed rank and file Christians, an uninformed clergy, uninformed seminary faculty, uninformed seminary leadership and so on. The fact that many of these issues are unclear could be due to the issue itself, but I would doubt that the average church pastor could explain the nuances of salvation for intellectually disabled people because THEY HAVE NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT! As a result, you have people like me, some better, some worse who are out there trying to make sense of disability from a Christian perspective because those who should be doing the heavy theological lifting are not.”

One pastor/theologian I read said, “There are three categories of people: saved, lost, and safe.” He was referring to people with significant intellectual disabilities (profound autism, traumatic brain injuries, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, Down’s syndrome, and other intellectual disabilities) as being “safe” if they lacked the capacity to appropriately respond to the Gospel. While many may likely concur with his assessment, he offers no biblical foundation for it.

This is my question: Is there a biblically justifiable category we can deem as “safe” for persons who lack the capacity to give any measurable, discernible response to the Gospel? If so, what scriptures substantiate this?

Common theological errors:

Sentimentalism

Universalism

Sacramentalism

John, Peter, and Paul, for instance, implied that the saving response to the gospel **involves a rational choice**. When John the Baptist told people how to be saved, he said they needed to believe in Jesus (John 3:36). When people at Pentecost asked Peter how they could be saved, he said they should repent and be baptized (Acts 2:37-38). And when Paul set out the human conditions for salvation, he summed them up as believing and confessing Christ (Rom. 10:9).

True, the apostles did not expressly say that people will be saved only if they repent, believe, and confess. But most evangelicals assume—with good reason—that this is what the apostles implied.

Does the Bible, then, have no comfort for parents of children who, through no doing of their own, are not able and may never be able to understand the gospel well enough to repent, believe, and confess the Lord Jesus?

Evangelical confusion:

Christian traditions bring a variety of perspectives to the matter. **Baptists** speak of an "age of accountability" to describe the point at which a child is old enough to make a responsible decision to accept Christ as Savior and to be baptized. Until that age, the child is innocent. Some might extend this doctrine to cover the spiritual state of mentally disabled individuals as well.

Reformed-minded Christians, who think in terms of covenant theology, might assure believing parents that God's promise (in Gen. 15, for instance) to Abraham and his descendants applies to their disabled children, but they would plead ignorance when it comes to children of unbelieving parents. More **hyper Calvinists** might say that the mentally disabled child who had been predestined for salvation would be saved for sure—we just cannot know for certain who those children are.

Arminianism

Hyper-Calvinism

Where does that leave us?

We need to think **BIBLICALLY** and **PRACTICALLY**. Our answer needs to be well-considered and scripturally defensible. And it needs to reflect the goodness of God and the **BIG PICTURE** of His Word and Will. We can't shrink back. We have to wade out into **DEEP WATERS**. Our answers can't be based on sentimentality, aberrant theology, or on what we *hope* is true.

Presuppositions:

1. Our position must be Biblically tenable and consistent with the whole counsel of Scripture. ('Proof texts' not required)
2. Our position must affirm the sovereignty of God in all things (specifically creation and salvation)
3. We must deal honestly with the issue of sin.
4. Our position must affirm the centrality of the Gospel and the necessity of the saving work of Jesus Christ.
5. Our activity must include the clear proclamation of the Gospel to all people.
6. At the foundation of our theology must be a deep appreciation of grace as the basis of our salvation.
7. We must approach this subject with humility as we cannot know *for certain*.

Six Guiding Principles/Concepts:

1. Judgment for SIN

Matthew 7:13-14 (ESV)

¹³“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (PRESUPPOSES ABILITY TO CHOOSE)

‘original sin’ v. deeds committed

Not innocent, YET not under condemnation

ADAM HARWOOD: page 154 of *The Spiritual Condition of Infants:*

Infants are sin-stained, not guilty. Infants are not sinless because they inherit a sinful nature. But infants are not guilty because God judges our thoughts, attitudes, and actions, not our nature. If I were pressed to speculate how God might deal with people who die in their infancy, I would offer this suggestion: All people who die in their infancy will be included in God's restoration of his fallen creation through Christ's work at the cross. Perhaps this is the time Jesus mentioned as "the renewal of all things" (Matt 19:28). Paul said that creation would be set free from its bondage to decay (Rom 8:19–23). Although infants are not guilty of sin, they have been stained by it. Even though they have not knowingly acted in ways that would incur God's judgment, they may be in need of God's redemptive and renewing work. And it is Jesus who promises, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21:5).

2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due **for what he has done in the body**, whether good or evil.

2. KNOWING unbelief and rebellion

- A person must have the mental capacity to make moral decisions before he is accountable for his lostness or rebellion.
- If a person does not have the capacity or the opportunity to respond to moral choices he cannot be held accountable for his actions or inaction.

NOTE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THESE AND THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD ...
From Denny Burk: This is Paul's teaching about people who never hear the gospel. They are still under condemnation because there is enough information about God in the created order to condemn a person, even though there is not enough to save them. They are "without excuse" because they refused to respond to general revelation. Infants and the mentally disabled are unable to receive and respond to this general revelation and are not therefore under the condemnation of Romans 1:20. That is why they are safe.

Romans 1:18-32 (ESV)

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been **clearly perceived**, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because **they exchanged the truth about God for a lie** and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ **They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness**, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

NO SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH

NO ACTIVE UNBELIEF

NO CHOICE

3. Age of ACCOUNTABILITY

Deuteronomy 1:35, 39 (ESV)

³⁵ Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers, ... ³⁹ And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, **and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil**, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.

Jonah 4:11 (ESV)

¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are **more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left**, and also much cattle?"

Romans 7:9 (ESV)

⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. (BAR MITZVAH REFERENCE)

4. Sola Gratia – GRACE alone

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ For **by grace you have been saved** through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Romans 11:6 (ESV)

⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; **otherwise grace would no longer be grace.**

5. The JUSTICE of God

Genesis 18:25 (ESV)

²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! **Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"**

Some issues are established based on the overall teaching of the Scriptures, **No doctrine of Scripture is more solidly attested in the Bible than the doctrine of the justice of God.** While every baby is born with a sin nature God as a just God would never condemn anyone unjustly. To condemn a child who dies in infancy or who is unable by way of intellectual development to meet the demands of Romans 1 regarding the act or rejecting that which God has shown him, would be on definition unjust. The only possible conclusion is that God has made redemptive provision for them in His atonement, this based on the universal affirmation of the Bible regarding the justice of God.

6. The MERCY and LOVE of God

Matthew 18:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

2 Samuel 12:15-23 (ESV)

¹⁵ Then Nathan went to his house. And the LORD afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick.

¹⁶ David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.

¹⁷ And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them.

¹⁸ On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm."

¹⁹ But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead."

²⁰ Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate.

²¹ Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food."

²² He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'

²³ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

1) He confessed his confidence that he would see the child again and, 2) he comforted his wife Bathsheba (vs. 23-24). David could have done those two things only if he was confident that his little son was with God. Any other explanation does not do justice to the text.

Conclusions:

John Newton, the great minister who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace was certain of this truth. He wrote to close friends who had lost a young child: "I hope you are both well reconciled to the death of your child. I cannot be sorry for the death of infants. How many storms do they escape! Nor can I doubt, in my private judgment, that they are included in the election of grace."

Spurgeon turned this conviction into an evangelistic call. "Many of you are parents who have children in heaven. Is it not a desirable thing that you should go there, too? He continued: "Mother, unconverted mother, from the battlements of heaven your child beckons you to Paradise. Father, ungodly, impenitent father, the little eyes that once looked joyously on you, look down upon you now, and the lips which scarcely learned to call you father, ere they were sealed by the silence of death, may be heard as with a still small voice, saying to you this morning, Father, must we be forever divided by the great gulf which no man can pass? Doth not nature itself put a sort of longing in your soul that you may be bound in the bundle of life with your own children?"

Soteriology for the "89%"

- A. Share the Gospel continually, creatively, and clearly
- B. Look for a range of viable responses
 - a. verbal
 - b. other:
- C. Subjective, case-by-case basis
- D. Baptism and communion is appropriate

Soteriology for the “11%”

- A. Share the Gospel continually, creatively, and clearly
- B. Do NOT expect/require definitive verbal response
- C. Affirm spiritual ‘safety’
 - a. Why?
- D. Baptism?
- E. Communion

APPENDIX 18

MESSAGE 4: MY TOP TEN REASONS FOR DEVELOPING AN INTENTIONAL MINISTRY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

God's Glorious Plan: Disabilities and the Church

Message 4: My Top Ten Reasons for Developing an Intentional
Ministry for Persons with Disabilities in the Local Church
(And Seven Reasons Not to)



Review:

The **NEED** is great.

The **BIBLE** addresses this need.

The **GOSPEL/GREAT COMMISSION** is our ultimate mandate.

My Top Ten:

1. Biblical love isn't just theoretical/theological. It's practical.

1 John 3:17-18 (ESV)

¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

2. The Great Commission has no ifs, ands, or buts.

Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

3. Sharing the Gospel helps us know the Gospel and live the Gospel.

Philemon 1:6 (ESV)

and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

Colossians 1:10 (ESV)

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

4. We will be rewarded.

1 Corinthians 3:8 (ESV)

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Matthew 10:42 (ESV)

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”

5. We were made for this.

Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

6. God uses our good works to reveal Himself to a lost world.

Matthew 5:16 (ESV)

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

7. The Church and churches are incomplete without people with disabilities.

1 Corinthians 12:18-22 (ESV)

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,

8. We learn to bear each others’ burdens.

Galatians 6:2 (ESV)

Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

9. We understand ourselves better and our need for God better.

Romans 3:22b-24 (ESV)

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

10. We believe we are uniquely called to do this because we are uniquely equipped to do this.

Luke 12:48b (ESV)

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

Seven Reasons *Not* to:

1. There is a need!
2. I feel guilty!
3. No one else is doing it!
4. This will work!
5. This will be fun!
6. People will like us!
7. This will makes us feel better!

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING A BIBLICALLY SOUND EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF JENSEN BEACH

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013
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Chapter 1 defines and describes the plan and desired outcome of the project. The church must understand the prevalence of intellectual disabilities and the needs those disabilities present. The church must then respond appropriately with effective ministry that addresses needs in an evangelistic context.

Chapter 2 addresses several biblical rationales related to ministry with people with intellectual disabilities. These Scripture passages inform a right understanding of intellectual disabilities and provide the motivation to engage in disabilities ministry.

Chapter 3 addresses soteriology for people with intellectual disabilities. Churches must develop a clear plan of sharing the gospel in creative and non-traditional ways that may be understood and received by people with intellectual disabilities.

Chapter 4 explains the methodology utilized in implementing the project. Evaluations of research instruments, preached messages, and the project itself are offered.

The final chapter of the project addresses personal reflections and lessons learned. Also discussed is the implication of the project for other churches seeking to develop ministry for people with intellectual disabilities.

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