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All In This Together

Lesson Adaptations to Reach Every Child

Special needs ministry is simply the local church's effort to acknowledge that barriers to the accessibility of the gospel—in word and deed—exist in every congregation and to act with intentionality to remove those barriers.



Special Needs Ministry

What It Is and Why It Matters

What is “Special Needs Ministry” or “Disability Ministry”?

When people hear the terms “special needs ministry” or “disability ministry” various images may come to mind. Some think of a large programmatic ministry that can only be operated by a mega-church with professional staff members. Others think of outreach ministry to a focused portion of the population of people who have disabilities, such as people with intellectual disabilities. And these are good examples of special needs ministries that can be found in some churches.

But special needs or disability ministry, as we think of it at MNA Special Needs Ministries is much broader than either of the examples cited. We view it as “*making the gospel—the good news of the coming of Christ’s kingdom—accessible to all, in word and deed.*” From this perspective, special needs ministry is not program-based, but relational by nature. It means recognizing that, for all people—no matter what combination of God-given abilities or disabilities we possess—our deepest need is for God himself. And this central need can only be met through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The gospel in word needs to be accessible to all in order to proclaim the good news in ways that the Deaf can hear it, the blind can see it, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can understand it, and those individuals who have physical disabilities can enter the church building to be present for the preaching of the Word.

The good news of the coming of the kingdom not only has a spiritual dimension, but also a practical dimension—the gospel in deed. The gospel in deed is the power of God released through the hands and feet of his people—bringing his restorative power to bear on difficulty and brokenness in the world, wherever we encounter it. Those who live with the relentlessness of disability know that it brings its fair share of difficulty in this life. When Christians reach out to people with disabilities and their families with practical supports and encouragement, the coming of the kingdom is demonstrated as God’s power and goodness are proclaimed in tangible ways. Jesus’ disciples are his agents of restoration—sharing the good news in word and bringing the good news in deed.

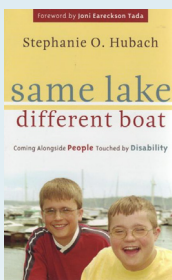
In a nutshell: ***Special needs ministry is simply the local church’s effort to acknowledge that barriers to the accessibility of the gospel—in word and deed—exist in every congregation and to act with intentionality to***



RECOMMENDED READING

Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability

by
Stephanie O. Hubach



remove those barriers. These obstacles are not usually intentional. Instead, they generally exist because of a failure to value, to see and to respond to people with disabilities. Often we do not even notice people with disabilities or genuinely value them as the glorious image-bearers that they are. When we do notice people with disabilities, we tend to fail to see their needs for accommodations or, worse, we define them exclusively by their needs. Finally, even if we see the person and see the needs, we often hesitate to respond. For an established church, beginning a special needs ministry is a transformative process. It means applying the gospel to church life by allowing repentance and faith to change **us** and how we operate as a body. For a new church being planted, it means building in “gospel accessibility” to the church planting process from the beginning.

Why Does Special Needs Ministry Matter?

Ministry to and alongside people with disabilities ought to matter to us, first, because it clearly mattered to Jesus. Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus very intentionally engaging people touched by disability with the good news of the coming of his kingdom. Not only did he model this for us, but he also proclaimed it as central to his message when he inaugurated his ministry in Luke 4.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Luke 4:18,19

Second, not only does special needs ministry matter to God, but it matters to his Church. Not once (Romans 12), not twice (1 Corinthians 12), but three times (Ephesians 4) Paul explains the significance of the diversity of the body of Christ and the value of **all** of its members. When the Church attempts to operate without all of her parts, it is as if the body of Christ itself is disabled. How tragically ironic this is! People with disabilities not only need the blessings of the local church—but the local church needs the blessings, gifts, and abilities that people with disabilities and their families bring to the community as well. One of the great benefits of special needs ministry in the local church is that it is akin to “pushing the refresh button on the computer screen of the gospel” in the life of a congregation. It reminds us that it was because of the **profoundly disabled** condition of **our hearts** that Christ came to make access to the Father on **our behalf**. In other words, special needs ministry serves as a three-dimensional reminder of the heart of the gospel for all of us. And that the gospel is to be shared with everyone, in word and deed.

Last, but certainly not least, special needs ministry matters to those who live with disability as part and parcel of their daily lives. As a popular Christian song from some years ago stated it so clearly, “People Need the Lord.” Yes, people need the Lord. All of us do. All of us need his saving grace, his abiding presence, and the hope of his good and sovereign plan for each of our lives. And all of us need the practical assistance of Jesus’



agents of restoration found in the hands and feet of the local church. In other words, all of us need to experience the coming of his kingdom in word and deed. For families affected by disability, this can mean the difference between surviving or thriving on every level of life—spiritually, emotionally and physically.

As the Church, we need to broaden our perspective of what it means to be pro-life. Being pro-life is much more than just being against abortion. It also means being **for** the life of my neighbor—from conception to natural death. It means putting the gospel into practice in the way we live and relate to others around us. It means rolling up our sleeves and making intentional efforts to bring flourishing to the lives of our neighbors—on every level. And this includes our neighbors touched by disability.

Finally, it is not only important **why** we minister to people affected by disability, it matters **how** we minister. Paul writes:

*But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have **equal concern** for each other. 1 Corinthians 12:25*

We believe special needs ministry shouldn't be a "disability rights" group within a church. It should be a "bless all the body of Christ" ministry. While it is not always **easy** to address the barriers to gospel accessibility that exist in a congregation, it is **possible**. Not only is it possible, but those solutions need to be enacted in ways that demonstrate "equal concern for each other". That doesn't mean that "perfect solutions" can always be achieved. But when love and grace are our motivations, not fear and self-protection, "win-win" solutions can usually be found.

A church where all are equally valued and demonstrate mutual concern for each other is a loving community. A community where everyone is welcome and everyone belongs. A community that is genuinely making the gospel—the good news of the coming of Christ's kingdom—accessible to all, in word and deed!

The mission of MNA Special Needs Ministries is to engage, educate, equip and encourage congregations in the "whys and hows" of ministering to and alongside people with disabilities and their families. For further information on how your church can advance in "making the gospel—the good news of the coming of Christ's kingdom—accessible to all, in word and deed", contact MNA Special Needs Ministries via www.equalconcern.org.

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