

EQUIPPING CONGREGATIONS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN,
ADULTS, AND FAMILIES WITH DISABILITIES

Social Change, Relief, and Justice Assignment

Presented to

Dr. Shane Parker

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 92040

by

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17 July, 2015

“I WANT TO GO TO CHURCH”

One Sunday morning, Payton, a 21 year-old young lady with non-verbal Autism, proclaimed, “I want to go to church.” Her mother was in disbelief as they had not attended a church for over ten years. Payton’s discomfort in crowds and change in routine made it exhausting for her as a single mom and challenging for the teacher at the churches they would visit. While Payton is now able to make transitions, read, and does not have behavioral issues, she did not know of a church in town that would be open to having them attend. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon story.

Is *everyone* welcome in the church? Luke 14:13-14 states “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” When looking around the congregation on Sunday morning or at a potluck dinner, do you see people in wheelchairs, with Down syndrome, Autism, or intellectual disabilities? There are approximately 54 million people in the U.S. that are affected by disability, with estimates of 80% who are un-reached and do not attend a Christ-honoring church. Yet, less than 10% of the churches in the U.S. have an intentional disability ministry or outreach.¹ The World Health Organization and the World Bank released a report in June 2011 stating that 15 percent of the world’s population— some 785 million people— has a significant physical or intellectual disability.² 90 percent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school and 80 percent of people with

¹ Tada, Joni, *The Father’s House* DVD, <https://beta.rightnowmediaatwork.org/Content/Series/514>

² Tada, Joni; Bundy, Steve. *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry: A Cultural Adaptation* (10-2014 Kindle Locations 447-449).

disabilities are, in many countries, unemployed. In warfare countries there are 3 children sustaining a permanent injury for every child killed.³ The United Kingdom's Department for International Development reports that the mortality rate is 80% higher for children born with disabilities, as many are abandoned and killed.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to describe a framework for Equipping Minds (EM) to equip and partner with churches in the United States and internationally as they minister to families of persons with disabilities. The primary mission of EM is to work with children and adults to help them overcome learning, emotional, and social challenges by equipping their minds to reach the full potential God has for them. EM provides educational services, namely online and in-person cognitive assessments and training programs that help identify and improve cognitive abilities of an individual; conducts classes, seminars, conferences, and workshops in the field of cognitive development and understanding learning challenges, and distributes training material, *Equipping Minds Cognitive Development Curriculum* and DVD. EM agrees with current research that confirms the importance of families with disabilities participating in spiritual formation and a faith community for a higher quality of life.⁵ The following components

³ Ibid, Kindle Locations 798-802.

⁴ Ibid, Kindle Locations 815.

⁵ Ault, Melinda Jones, Collins, Belva, and Carter, Erik, "Congregational Participation and Supports for Children and Adults with Disabilities: Parent Perceptions," *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 51:1 (2013):48–61. The parents who completed the survey were primarily Protestant or Catholic (89.5%) and (97.6%) reported their faith was somewhat important to them. The authors found that 55.8% of the families had kept their child from participating in a religious activity because support was not provided, 46.6% had refrained from participating in religious activity because their child was not welcomed, and 32.3% had changed their place of worship because their child was not included or welcomed. The majority of these parents were not satisfied with the levels of support provided by their faith communities with only 42.5% describing their congregations as *supportive*, 41.1% describing their congregations as *sometimes supportive*, and 12.7% indicating they were *not supportive*. They found 67.3% of parents responding to the survey wanted additional support so their children could participate in regular activities. The five activities the child participated were religious services (85.3%), religious education (60.8%), recreational activities (24.8%), volunteer work (16.2%), and small group meetings (14.2%). The majority of the children participated in regular activities with (21%) not participating.

will be addressed to provide support for families with a child or adult with a disability include:

1) assess the needs, 2) develop recommendations based on the assessment and include church leaders, 3) implement the program, and 4) evaluate and follow up.

ASSESSMENT

First, it is necessary to make an assessment to determine the needs, current programs, and how EM could partner with the churches. The following groups will be contacted through a letter, email, or interview: individuals with disabilities, families of children and adults with disabilities, and church leadership. The following questions will be asked: (a) What are the individual's strengths and learning and support needs? (b) What are the family's strengths and learning and support needs? (c) What are the existing programs the church offers for children and adults with disabilities? (d) What needs are being neglected? (e) What are the levels of expertise in the areas of disability in the congregation? (f) What are the attitudes of the church toward those with disabilities? (g) What programs would you like to see offered? (h) Would you be interested in receiving support from EM to meet your needs in the following areas: 1. Attend a seminar conducted by EM; invite EM to be a guest speaker or conduct training workshops on understanding Autism, intellectual disabilities, ADHD and other learning challenges for parents, children and youth ministry leadership and other church members and staff in your church, 2. Recommend and provide educational materials and resources for developing a special needs ministry in your church 3. Design an after-school or summer program for children and adults to

integrate spiritual formation and cognitive formation to be implemented in the church, at our center, or in a community facility. 4. Hire EM to provide consultation and observation of the disability programs, students, and teachers to determine any learning needs, teaching strategies, and needed adaptations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the United States, fewer than half of the children and youth with disabilities such as autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities participated in religious activities in the past year. When two hundred parents of adolescents and young adults with autism were asked about their child's attendance at religious services, less than one-third reported their child attended on a weekly basis; only 11 percent attended religious social activities. One-third of children and adults with intellectual disabilities who live in foster care or small group homes rarely attended religious services; only one-fourth "sometimes" attended religious services. In a survey of ninety-one Christian, Jewish, and Muslim congregations, 71 percent said they had a general awareness of the barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities; 69 percent said they had not yet started or were just beginning to transform their church family into a place of inclusion; 53 percent said they were in the process, and only 28 percent had explored partnerships with community agencies or organizations serving people with disabilities.⁶

The next step involves analyzing the data from the assessment. Research indicates the need for the following: training to understand the best way to include and teach individuals with disabilities, educating church leadership in disability theology and support, and congregations accepting that all people are created in the *imago dei* valued, and can contribute to a faith community.⁷ The following recommendations would be offered by EM:

1. EM will be a guest speaker for training workshops on understanding Autism, intellectual disabilities, ADHD and other learning challenges for parents, children and youth ministry

⁶ Tada, Kindle Edition 1887-1889.

⁷ Ault, 60.

leadership and other church members and staff. EM can also host a workshop at its center, or in a local church.

2. EM will provide a list and examples of educational materials and resources for developing a special-needs ministry in the church. A list of resources is included at the end of this paper.

3. EM will partner with churches in providing an After School or Summer Program for children and adults to integrate spiritual formation and cognitive formation.

4. EM will provide consulting services to include observing the current disability programs, students, and teachers to determine any learning needs, teaching strategies, and adaptations needed.

IMPLEMENTATION

After assessment and recommendations, it is necessary to implement a plan. To make the implementation of the program successful it is important to meet with the church leadership and discuss their theology of disability and prioritize the recommendations.⁸ EM executive director, Carol Brown, is an ED.D. student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Kyle Brown, her husband, an educational specialist at EM, is an ordained teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. Kyle served as a youth and family pastor in the US from 1994-2002 and as an international pastor, teacher, and missionary in France from 2002-2004 before becoming a full-time teacher from 2004-2009 and educational specialist in 2009. He would be an excellent facilitator to discuss disability theology with church leaders.

⁸ Beates, Michael, *Disability & the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012). Beates (DMin Reformed Theological Seminary) works through key Bible passages on brokenness and disability. He answers difficult questions that are helpful for churches and believers. He shows how to embrace our own brokenness and embrace others with disabilities which are visible and invisible.

There are common misunderstandings that can keep churches from acting on their biblical values and beliefs. Some of these include: fears and concerns, is this the mission of the church, and do volunteers need disability-related experience or a background in special education.⁹ These misunderstandings need to be addressed before the recommendations can be implemented. “This approach will best be facilitated by support of inclusiveness from the leadership; knowledge, expertise, and volunteerism of the members; and accepting and welcoming attitudes for the value and importance of all persons from the congregation as a whole.”¹⁰

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Now that a plan has been made, it is necessary to support the program through evaluating the progress. It is necessary to communicate with the leadership, teachers, parents, and individuals with disabilities to assess the effectiveness and whether goals are being met. Assessment can be done through verbal and written correspondence, visiting the church, and follow up interviews with the families.

As churches minister to families with disabilities there will be challenges. As we fulfill Christ command in Luke 14 and bring in the blind, the lame, the deaf, the leper (individuals with Autism, Down syndrome, intellectual and physical disabilities...) may the world see and hear our proclamation of the gospel which is to *all* people. May it truly be said, “All are Welcome” and Payton’s mom will have a place to worship with her daughter.

⁹ Tada, Kindle Edition 2031.

¹⁰ Ault, 60.

RESOURCES

Books

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- Brown, Carol. *Equipping Minds Cognitive Development Curriculum*. Danville, KY. 2015.
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Articles

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- Collins, B. C., & Ault, M. J. "Including Persons with Disabilities in the Religious Community: Program Models Implemented by Two Churches." *Journal of Religion, Disability, & Health*, 14, 2014, 113-131. doi:10.1080/15228961003622195

Websites

<http://www.adnetonline.org> The Anabaptist Disability Network works to support families of people with disabilities while giving churches the necessary resources to promote inclusion in their congregations.

www.equalconcern.org The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) Mission to North America website for the special needs ministry.

www.pcusa.org/phewa The Presbyterian Health Education and Welfare Association works to support social justice ministries within the church, including the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns ministry.

www.joniandfriends.org Joni and Friends is a global outreach center that works with ministries worldwide to find ways for people with disabilities and their families to participate in the Christian faith.

www.blhs.org Bethesda Lutheran Communities works with Lutheran churches to reach out to members of the church with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

www.ncpd.org The National Catholic Partnership on Disability work to involve people with disabilities in all aspects of church life through a broad range of ministries and resources.

<http://www.nafim.org/> The National Apostolic for Inclusion Ministry supports the full inclusion of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the Catholic Church.

<http://www.jgateways.org/> Gateways is a Jewish organization based in Boston that works toward making Jewish education accessible for students with disabilities.

<http://www.jsped.org/> The Jewish Special Education International Consortium works to provide services to both children and adults with special needs in Jewish communities across the United States and Canada.

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