
Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities

BY JACKIE MILLS - FERNALD

If the Church is a place where all are welcome regardless of ability, why is the disability population so poorly represented in our congregations? The resources reviewed here can help us lower the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in the body of Christ.

One in five persons in the United States has a disability, which equates to about 54.5 million people. However, if we were to take a look within our congregations, we probably would not see the disability population well represented, which begs the question, “Why?” Throughout the Bible God calls his people to care for and defend the needy and the sick, to be a voice for those with no voice. We are God’s image bearers and are called to love like God does. The Church is all inclusive, a place where all are welcome regardless of ability.

Often there are physical barriers that make it challenging for a congregation to be inclusive, such as older buildings that do not have elevators or handicap accessible facilities. There may also be communication barriers, such as not providing Braille or large print for the visually impaired, or sign language interpretation or closed captioning for the deaf community.

However, the biggest barriers that keep congregations from seeking and welcoming those with disabilities are not physical or communication hurdles, but those of attitude. Frequently, church leaders, staff members, and volunteers have incorrect information, stereotypical views, or are simply fearful of those who are different from them.

Many resources have been developed to assist congregations in developing a Christ-like view and love for those with disabilities. There are videos, blogs, articles and books on the theology of disability, and step-by-step guides

on development of special needs ministry and outreach. Four excellent books — Barbara J. Newman's *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001, 95 pp., \$29.99), Jim Pier-son's *Exceptional Teaching: A Comprehensive Guide for Including Students with Disabilities* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing Company, 2002, 240 pp., \$19.99), Erik W. Carter's *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families and Congregations* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., 2007, 264 pp., \$27.95), and the anthology *Special Needs, Special Ministry* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004, 176 pp., \$18.95) — are reviewed here.

Barbara Newman's *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* is an excellent resource to equip children's ministry teachers, volunteers, and children without disabilities by providing information and tactics on creating an inclusive community. Newman gives accurate information regarding disabilities so we, as the body of Christ, are able to broaden our perspectives and change our hearts to be welcoming and inclusive like Jesus.

The book features guidelines to help children include those with disabilities. For instance, Newman offers crafts and activities that supplement Bible lessons highlighting the uniqueness of each child created in God's image. She provides a series of template letters, designed for unique disability categories, which children's ministry leaders can distribute to parents to help them create disability awareness in their children. She also gives many relevant tips, such as how best to communicate with children with disabilities, and how to better understand and empathize with them. When understanding and empathy are present, inclusive friendships become possible.

The sections of the book each focus on a disability category such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), visual and hearing impairments, emotional impairments, and cognitive handicaps. Each has a handy fact sheet, lesson plan, and letter to families. Newman does a great job showing that each child is an individual, and that the categories used to label children are only helpful in explaining general characteristics. It is important that our views of disability are not reduced to stereotypes.

The lesson plans are well thought out, full of interactive components and hands-on learning. They include scripture passages to reinforce that God is the master creator and does not produce junk. With great sensitivity, the lessons explain specific disability categories, awareness of those disabilities, and how to include children with those disabilities into the classroom, when appropriate. There are activity sheets, visuals, and a follow-up letter to families. The follow-up letter includes a recap of the child's lesson, opportunities to discuss his or her particular disability further, and approaches to facilitating friendships among all children in the classroom, regardless of a child's ability level. A concluding section of the book has family devotions infused with Scripture to unpack at home; these help families to better understand God's heart and to change their mindsets to be more inclusive.

Newman, who is Director of Church Services for Christian Learning Center Network (www.clcnetwork.org), brings her wealth of knowledge of disability and special education into this concise nuts-and-bolts book. She gives the reader practical, easy-to-understand information about disability and how to embrace those with disabilities in Sunday school classes. Teachers, volunteers, and parents will find her book invaluable.

Jim Pierson's *Exceptional Teaching: A Comprehensive Guide for Including Students with Disabilities* is meant to be read and reread by Sunday school teachers, volunteers, and church leaders as persons with different or new disabilities periodically show up in their churches. Pierson, a special educator and Johnson University instructor, has produced a must-read resource that all can understand without being overwhelmed in the process.

The book covers over seventy of the most common disabilities and special health care needs, including their definitions, suspected causes, and common characteristics. In each case Pierson offers tips on creating welcoming environments and teaching strategies. He is thorough in his approach without going overboard on explanations and medical jargon and terminology. This book is designed for the individual who desires to create inclusion but is not sure how or has limited knowledge or experience in the world of disability.

The chapter on Christian education and spiritual formation has assessment forms that help the teacher understand each student's functioning level and then map out a teaching plan for spiritual truths that takes into account the student's unique strengths and deficits. This type of plan is called an Individual Christian Education Plan (ICEP).

The latter part of the book focuses on practical ways to care for families impacted by disability. This section includes feedback from parents who stress their need to be accepted for who they are and loved like Jesus loves. Several mention they need other church members to refrain from judging or criticizing them, but instead come alongside them in prayer and encouragement. Pierson describes how to develop several different programs of respite for families, so parents are able to receive breaks from the constant care of their children with disabilities.

In the *Exceptional Teaching 2011 Supplement*, Pierson and his co-authors discuss understanding autism, behavior management, and making the congregation fully inclusive, to name just a few sections in this information-packed resource.

Jim Pierson's education and personal experience encompass over forty years of service. His strong passion for and knowledge base of disability enable him to share his story and suggest ways church leaders and their programs can include all God's children.

After meeting Erik Carter at a conference where he and I were speaking, I knew that any book he authored would be a must read. I picked up a copy of his *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families and Congregations* and was unable to put it down.

Carter begins by describing how persons without disabilities can set up reciprocal relationships with persons with disabilities: each has so much to give and receive. He goes on to identify the many barriers – architectural, attitudinal, communicative, programmatic, and liturgical – that prohibit a person with disabilities from developing such relationships and fully participating in the faith life of their congregation. Not only do barriers exist within congregations. Often there are barriers within their surrounding communities as well, such as limited transportation, stereotypes based on past negative experiences, unwillingness of existing support staff to help special individuals get to church, and the barrier of fear from persons with disabilities not knowing what to expect in a new environment.

To open its church doors and create opportunities for persons with disabilities to live out their lives of faith, a congregation must expand its commitment to seek out and welcome individuals and families impacted by disabilities. Carter includes a checklist of “indicators of welcome” to aid a church in increasing its hospitality level. He urges members to use the checklist annually to identify both areas for improvement and continued focus.

The book offers an effective strategy to becoming an inclusive community – from creating planning teams and developing a vision statement to creating messaging for getting the word out to the community. It suggests ways for including persons with disabilities in service opportunities, and other ways for them to use their gifts and skills to support the congregation’s work. It is important for people with disabilities to be giving and not just receiving members, so they may be fully integrated into the body of Christ.

In the chapter titled “Designing Inclusive Religious Education Programs,” Carter covers the first steps of identifying a team and coordinator, choosing or developing a curriculum, initiating parent connections, knowing what questions to ask, and creating individual religious education plans complete with worksheets. He describes what sorts of support are needed and how to create specific roles for volunteers, such as lead teachers and individual buddies. Carter emphasizes the importance of being known by actions and not just the words of a well-written mission statement.

Many congregations get Sunday morning programming for persons with disabilities down pat: they run well, and persons with disabilities and their families feel included and loved. But what happens the other six days of the week? Carter challenges us to create connections seven days a week through leisure, recreational activities, vocational or volunteer opportunities, and providing transportation to adults with disabilities. For special family support the other six days of the week, Carter urges creating a respite program, instituting special support groups, and sharing other resources with families, much like the role of a social worker.

This guidebook ends with a chapter on creating community partnerships that go beyond congregational walls in a collaborative effort to enhance the life of a person with disability. Carter includes a list of inclusive congrega-

tions, as well as a detailed resource list of potential community-based partnerships and training resources.

Special Needs, Special Ministry is written by a group of writers – Jim Pier-son, Larry Shallenberger, Louise Tucker Jones, Mary Ann McPherson and Pat Verbal – with varied backgrounds ranging from professional to volun-tee, parent to ministry worker. It is designed for children’s ministry staff and volunteers as a practical guide on how congregations can include children with disabilities and their families.

The book offers a step-by-step approach to designing a special needs min-istry, including a launch checklist, first steps, volunteer recruitment and train-ing, getting the word out, and liability considerations. Case studies and anecdotal stories are dispersed throughout the book. The reader gets a broad view of ministry development in a book that is well laid out. It is an infor-mative and entertaining read.

To help create disability awareness and facilitate inclusive culture, there are sermons to be used by church leaders, reproducible bulletin inserts, and fact sheets on how persons with disabilities can serve and impact the world. The chapter on volunteer recruiting and training volunteers is information-packed, looking at how and where to find the right people in the church and beyond who have servant hearts and a passion for those with disabilities. The author of this chapter – Pat Verbal, who manages curriculum development for the Christian Institute on Disability at Joni and Friends – does a good job explaining how to identify the right people and equip them to be effective in special needs ministry.

Becoming a fully-inclusive congregation where all persons are welcome regardless of ability level is an exciting journey and may take some time. There are many good resources in addition the ones reviewed here. Many churches also have insights and tools to share as you network with practitio-ners from across the country for a journey that glorifies God and reflects God’s view on his people – all made perfect in the divine image.



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