

“LIFT UP YOUR EYES”: A CASE STUDY OF JOURNEY CHURCH, TUCSON, AND THE GOSPEL-RECEPTIVE PEOPLE AT OUR DOORSTEP

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Abstract

The receptivity principle of church growth discerns who in the local population is generally responsive to the gospel. The biblical warrant for this principle is seen in Jesus' instructions to his disciples (Mark 5:11) and in Paul's ministry (Acts 14:19-20). Donald McGavran emphasized, "Evangelism can be and ought to be directed to responsive persons, groups, and segments of society.... Correct policy is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly."¹ *The experience of anxiety typifies gospel-receptive groups; when their anxiety dissipates, their gospel receptivity diminishes. The special-needs population and those who are close to them experience unrelieved chronic anxiety that predisposes them to gospel receptivity, and yet most churches and pastors either do not perceive that fact or know how to serve them in ways that demonstrate the love of Christ. This article chronicles how The Journey Church (EFCA) of Tucson, Arizona, has experienced dramatic church growth as a result of identifying and ministering to this*

¹ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 187-191.

highly receptive group of needy people. The article concludes with eight steps any church can undertake to minister to the special-needs community and thereby enjoy church revitalization through conversion growth.

INTRODUCTION

The One Thing We Must Do: Immediately before leaving the earth, Jesus gave his followers a missional mandate to participate in his disciple-making movement. “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” (Matthew 28:19-20, ESV). Of all the good things that a church could do, this is the one thing that a church must do. C.S. Lewis said it like this:

This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. . . . The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.²

How can we maximize our lives, ministries, and churches to make disciples for Jesus? This should be our objective as pastors.

Yes, many churches across America are experiencing exponential growth, but two questions must be asked: Who is coming to these growing churches? Are they transferring consumers or are they becoming disciples of Jesus Christ who engage in making more disciples?

Many church leaders are tired, frustrated, desperate, and confused. They wonder why their efforts to reach or to keep people fail. Their churches languish. Making disciples seems all but impossible, but regardless of the difficulty, it is still Christ’s mandate. As Comer says, “If your church or ministry does not have a steady stream of living, breathing new believers coming into faith, growing disciples, and reaching ever-extending networks

2 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1952), 199.

of people, you have veered off course.”³

Is it possible to revitalize dying, inward-focused churches? Many more churches should be experiencing conversion growth; the fact that few of them do and that most “growth” is transfer growth suggests that pastors and churches should revisit a fundamental principle of church growth through conversions: identify and minister to reachable people. This is the *receptivity principle*. It seems many pastors don’t believe this and have not tried to implement this principle in their churches. Hunter laments, “Most churches do not reach out to their neighbors, nor do they expect, plan, budget, or pray to reach pre-Christian people.”⁴

CHURCH REVITALIZATION

Churches that identify and minister to gospel-receptive people are far more likely to see them converted to faith in Jesus and embark on the life of discipleship. These churches experience the wonderful journey of renewal and revitalization. Making evangelism top priority revitalizes churches more effectively than anything else. Hunter states, “Church growth people have discovered that nothing renews a lethargic congregation like getting involved in a wider mission and receiving a stream of converts entering their ranks.”⁵ Gary McIntosh agrees:

Most churches I’ve observed believe they must get better inwardly before they can reach out to those in the community. . . . In my experience, when churches focus inwardly, they never focus outwardly. They never reach a point where they sense they are healthy enough to evangelize and therefore never do. On the other hand, when leaders shift the focus from those already in the church to those in the community, the church is revitalized and the people in the church experience spiritual growth.⁶

Donald McGavran (as cited by Zunkel) stated, “It is futile to imagine

3 Gary Comer, *ReMission: Rethinking How Church Leaders Create Movement*, (New Kensington, Whitaker House, 2018), 122.

4 George Hunter, *Radical Outreach* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 26.

5 George Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 7.

6 Gary McIntosh, *There’s Hope for Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 63.

that one can build a wall around an ingrown Church, ‘go deeper,’ and then break out. . . . The Church lives faithful to her Master when she disciples and perfects in a single continuous motion—the discipling helping the perfecting and the perfecting helping the discipling.”⁷

The Receptivity Principle: The receptivity principle encompasses identifying, targeting, and focusing outreach and evangelism efforts on those who are open. This does not mean that Christians should abandon or ignore resistant populations, but that most of our evangelism efforts should focus on “fields ripe unto harvest.” John Michael Morris states, “As good stewards, however, missionaries should not do the major emphasis of their gospel proclamation where it is not received; rather, they should test potential areas of service and do the majority of their gospel proclamation where it is likely to produce good results.”⁸ Jesus was the first to teach the receptivity principle. Morris explains,

Within the Jewish group, Jesus acknowledged variations in subgroup receptivity (Luke 10:8-12). If a Jewish city received two of the seventy disciples, the two disciples were to eat there, heal the sick, and discuss the Kingdom of God. In contrast, if the city did not receive them, they were to shake off the dust of the city. Jesus taught them to leave resistant areas after adequate efforts were made.⁹

The receptivity principle is often ignored by pastors and churches. They rarely leverage the power of this principle to determine whom to target with their outreach efforts.

The principle was researched and explained by the twentieth century’s premier missiologist, Donald McGavran. He wrote, “Our Lord took account of the varying ability of individuals and societies to hear and

7 Donald McGavran, quoted in Wayne Zunkel, *Church Growth under Fire* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 1987), 230.

8 John Michael Morris, “The Receptivity Principle: A Tried-and-True Guide for Missionaries,” April 1, 2011, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://missionexus.org/the-receptivity-principle-a-tried-and-true-guide-for-missionaries/>.

9 Morris, “The Receptivity Principle.”

obey the gospel. Fluctuating receptivity is a most prominent aspect of human nature and society. It marks the urban and the rural, advanced and primitive, educated and illiterate.”¹⁰ According to McGavran, gospel receptivity fluctuates; it waxes and wanes. Wise Christians leverage these fluctuations to maximize the harvest of disciples. In any given context, there are people at all points along a receptivity continuum. The missionary must discover and understand people in his ministry area. Who are they? What is their worldview? What are their arts and music? What are their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs? How do they communicate? Stetzer says this process is difficult but necessary to fulfill the mandate to make disciples.

So, while many pastors have struggled with “doing church” in their contexts, other pastors have discovered God’s unique vision for their local churches. They became missional churches where God had placed them. They broke the missional code in their own neighborhood instead of applying proven strategies of innovative pastors around the country, instead of focusing on church growth or church health gurus.¹¹

A CASE STUDY

I’ve learned this principle the hard way. In 2003 my wife and I moved our young family to Tucson, Arizona, where I’ve been both the associate and the lead pastor at The Journey Church. Tucson is hard ground. It’s very difficult to reach nonbelievers for Jesus and grow a church. The church’s location compounded the problem. The population within a two-mile radius is rather sparse. Large homes on multiple-acre lots are inhabited by people who want their “space,” their own little piece of the desert. They’re not warm and welcoming. The median age is ten years older than the rest of Arizona, so there are relatively fewer families with children as a percentage

10 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 179.

11 Ed Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, Its Missional Roots,” paper presented at the annual conference of the American Society for Church Growth in 2008, accessed February 29, 2020, through this online article: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2008/november/american-society-for-church-growth.html>.

of the population than the rest of Tucson.

I am from a larger, faster-paced city. I am goal-oriented. I wanted our church to grow, but it wasn't. So, by my fifth year as the lead pastor, I was frustrated. In a conversation with a friend and mentor, I asked him when I should consider practicing the command of Jesus to "leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet" (Matthew 10:14, NIV). He simply said, "I don't think you've really tried yet."

That hurt. I had been working hard and praying my heart out for years, but nothing seemed to work. When I asked what he meant, he explained the receptivity principle. He noted that while most Tucsonans might not be currently receptive to the gospel, there would always be people who are ripe for the harvest. My job was to identify them and lead the church to target them with our evangelistic efforts.

Four years later a church that was stuck in the low 200 range is now a church in the low to mid-300 range. We have baptized over 75 new believers. This happened because we identified, targeted, and focused outreach on gospel-receptive people. It took a lot of prayer, research, hard work, and trial and error, but we've discovered several groups of people who are open to Jesus and his path for their lives.

Receptive People Groups We've Found: One group we targeted is impoverished. There are individuals and families nearby that live below the poverty line. We targeted neighborhoods and apartment complexes known for having impoverished residents. Our van ministry now picks these people up every Sunday. We continue to make additional attempts to serve in these communities. Six new believers were baptized in the months following one apartment outreach we did. Eight more new believers were baptized after ministering at another apartment complex.

The second group we identified are people caught in addiction and life wounds. Hunter explains, "The recovery movement is already the 'Underground Awakening' of this generation; more people are discovering the grace of God for the first time in Twelve Step groups than in evangelism programs! Whether churches choose to run with this movement or not will determine whether some churches have a future worth having."¹² We

12 Hunter, *Radical Outreach*, 144.

recently launched a Celebrate Recovery ministry and have already seen positive results and several baptisms.

The third group is the most interesting. It consists of adults with special needs, especially those with cognitive or emotional disabilities. Many churches would like to serve the special-needs community, but the welcome mat grows short when they are seen as disruptive or when they dominate the church's public image. Very few churches serve this gospel-receptive group.

The rest of this article will discuss what we have learned about ministering to adults with special needs and the church growth and church revitalization benefits we've experienced as a result.

Our Journey into Special-Needs Ministry: It's Sunday morning at The Journey Church. About 450 people are in attendance at a church that averages in the 300s. The atmosphere is electric; everyone is on pins and needles anxiously awaiting the start of the worship service. People are smiling and greeting one another. Although The Journey is a genuinely friendly church every Sunday, it outdoes itself this Sunday. Many of the special-needs people joining us this morning aren't only our guests; they are greeters, worship leaders, and children's ministry workers.

This is a church growth pastor's dream come true.

This was the third Sunday after Tim Tebow's "Night to Shine" event. Ours was the only church in Southern Arizona to host this special prom for special-needs people held at 655 churches worldwide. About 750 guests, parents, leaders, and buddies jammed the auditorium as we crowned our special guests as the kings and queens of the prom. Then the pastor invited all 750 attendees to join The Journey three Sundays hence to celebrate the event and honor the kings and queens.

Night to Shine wasn't The Journey Church's first effort to serve Tucson's special-needs population. Our emphasis on reaching them was years in the making. It was the result of discerning God's leading for our church which came to our attention by many converging stories. As the father of a son with special needs, I was keenly interested when the co-directors of Tucson's Young Life Capernaum ministry approached me with their vision of a new ministry for adults who had aged out of Young Life

Capernaum. Young Life is an international parachurch ministry focused on reaching unchurched teens with the gospel. Capernaum, founded in 1980 by Nick Palermo, is a subministry of Young Life that focuses on reaching young people with special needs. Due to a change in policy by Young Life's national leadership, these two area co-directors asked me if The Journey Church would consider a partnership in order to take in these precious souls who had aged out of Capernaum. I immediately recognized an opportunity to reach a gospel-receptive group, so I jumped at it.

As a result, The Journey Church is widely known in Southern Arizona as the church that loves, welcomes, honors, and includes people with special needs and those who love them. Before we focused on this gospel-receptive group, the church had four families with children with special needs. Today, eighteen families attend regularly, join in worship, participate in small groups, and serve in various ministries. Seventy-six special-needs adults attend a mid-week ministry that has led to many of them being baptized as an expression of their desire to live as disciples of Jesus.

Most churches have within reach some people who are especially responsive to the gospel. Churches that develop gospel-effective ministries for these people are more likely to experience revitalization and conversion growth. These ministries don't have to be complicated. They don't require money; in our experience, these ministries are so inspiring that they raise more money than they spend. It is possible to lead your church to reach out, love, serve, and include all kinds of people with special needs.

REACHING THE SPECIAL-NEEDS COMMUNITY

There are seven reasons why the special-needs ministry is strategic, employs fundamental church growth principles, and catalyzes revitalization.

1. Everywhere: People with special needs are in every town of every nation on earth. They surround us, but we overlook them. They fall on a broad spectrum of all who are physically, cognitively, emotionally, or socially atypical. Joni Eareckson Tada says, "15% of the world's population—some 785,000,000 people—have a disability, according to the latest reports from a study by the World Health Organization and the World Bank."¹³ Nick

13 Joni Eareckson Tada, *Beyond Suffering* (Agoura Hills: Joni and Friends, 2011), 64.

Palermo explains, “If that group were a nation it would be the world’s third-largest and would lead the world in both homelessness and poverty.”¹⁴ This enormous segment of the global population is significantly underserved by churches, governments, social institutions, and society. Most cultures ostracize people with special needs to some degree.

2. Gospel-Receptive: In John 4:35b (ESV) Jesus told his disciples, “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” You can almost always find gospel-receptive people, even in tightly closed communities. The millions affected by special needs are open to Jesus. They flourish in a healthy church experience.

In Matthew 10:14 (ESV) Jesus told his disciples to leave those who were closed to the gospel when he said, “And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.” Good stewardship of limited resources, obedience to Christ, and common sense tell us we are responsible for discovering and focusing the church’s efforts on gospel-receptive people.

Some leading indicators of gospel receptivity are dissatisfaction with life, significant change or transition, and chronic or increasing stress.¹⁵ Hunter notes, “People are frequently open to the Christian possibility when they are deeply dissatisfied with themselves and their lives. . . . Persons experiencing stress, especially increasing stress, will increasingly look for new ways to cope with or reduce that stress to a tolerable level.”¹⁶ A high percentage of those with special needs struggle with stress and dissatisfaction. Wilton Bunch (cited by Phil C. Zylla) states, “People with disabilities are five times more likely to say that they are dissatisfied with their lives, primarily because of social isolation.”¹⁷ The special-needs community is receptive to Jesus and his people because most of them have

14 Nick Palermo, *Missing Stars, Fallen Sparrows* (San Jose: Goehner Publications, 2013), 51.

15 Gary McIntosh, “Finding Receptive People,” *The Good Book Blog*, Talbot School of Theology, May 22, 2012, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2012/finding-receptive-people>.

16 George Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 113-114.

17 Wilton Bunch, quoted in Phil C. Zylla. “Practices of Acceptance, Understanding and Reciprocity: Caring for Children with Disabilities and their Families,” *Pastoral Psychology* 65, no. 5 (October 2016): 712.

been left out or left behind for most of their lives.

Wolf Wolfensberger (cited by Marc Tumeinski and Jeff McNair) states, “Given the predominant values of our contemporary culture, children and adults with significant physical and/or intellectual impairments tend to be societally devalued, negatively perceived and mistreated, cut off from these good things, which we all want.”¹⁸ This relational vacuum can be dangerous as it makes them vulnerable to exploitation. It can also be a golden opportunity for the church to befriend them with the life-giving love of Jesus. This population represents an unparalleled opportunity to revitalize our churches through conversion growth by implementing the receptivity principle. Why don’t more churches and pastors see the opportunity?

All three receptive people groups that The Journey Church identified and targeted—the impoverished, the addicted, and those with special needs—share two common denominators. All three have profound unmet needs, and they are underserved and marginalized.

These are the sorts of people churches should seek. They deal with chronic anxiety and are constantly searching for ways to cope with or reduce stress. This opens doors for churches to meet tangible needs and share Jesus’ love. Acts of mercy and kindness soften them to the gospel and open them up to spiritual conversations. We are responsible to show Jesus’ love and proclaim the gospel to them while they are receptive. Hunter says, “When leaders do learn the principle, however, and take it seriously, they typically identify more reachable people than they can get to. The principle can be stated in one sentence: identify, and reach out to, the people who are most likely to be receptive.”¹⁹

3. Under-Targeted and Underserved: The church should make the opportunity to believe in and follow Christ a live option for those affected by special needs. They need redemption. It is up to us to make Jesus’ message of forgiveness and his invitation to follow him available to them in terms they will readily understand. People with special needs have souls.

18 Wolf Wolfensberger, quoted in Marc Tumeinski and Jeff McNair, “What Would Be Better? Social Role Valorization and the Development of Ministry to Persons Affected by Disability,” *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability* 1, no. 1 (2012): 13.

19 Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 64.

And when it comes to Jesus, salvation, eternity, and heaven, a soul is a soul. Forgiveness of sins and following Jesus need to be real options for them, and it is up to us to make them available to them. Wright and Owiny state,

The reality is that individuals with special needs can learn and grow spiritually, while deserving to participate in community programs, including the church. They may have disabled minds or bodies, but their souls are not disabled. All people learn and comprehend, thus it is imperative that church workers commit to including all members of society and learn how to include them, and to modify and adapt methods to reach each individual with the gospel.²⁰

According to Carter, churches often exclude people with special needs. “Unfortunately, too many people with disabilities do not experience the same opportunities as others to grow spiritually, enjoy community, and experience relationships. . . . Parents struggle to find a faith community that will embrace their child.”²¹ This is not because the special-needs community is closed to the Gospel. Carter continues,

Religious faith is as important to people with disabilities as it is to the rest of society. In 2004, 84% of adults with disabilities and 84% of adults without disabilities considered their religious faith to be “somewhat important” or “very important” to them. . . . Clearly, lack of interest is not what is preventing people with disabilities from participating in congregational life. . . . Perhaps they were never extended an invitation, they lack reliable transportation, residential staff members have not supported their involvement, or they have never been guided in exploring their own spirituality and desired level of congregational participation.²²

According to Avis, the church is failing to reach these people:

American churches are failing to meet the needs of children with

20 Peter L. Wright & Ruby L. Owiny, “Special Needs Goes to Church: A Special Education Primer for Ministry,” *Christian Education Journal*, series 3, vol. 13, no. 1 (2016): 98.

21 Erik Carter, *Including People with Disabilities* (Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing, 2007), 2.

22 Carter, *Including People with Disabilities*, 8-9.

cognitive and conduct disorders, a study by the National Survey of Children's Health found last year. In fact, children with autism are twice as likely to never attend religious services compared to kids with no chronic health conditions. As researcher Andrew Whitehead concluded, "This population is unseen because they never show up, or when they do, they have a negative experience and never return."²³

Zylla agrees,

After years of trying to fit in and explain their situation, families resign themselves to misunderstanding and even neglect. The common response to children with disabilities is one of sympathy but not necessarily understanding. There is some effort to demonstrate care, but this care does not necessarily reshape our practices and our responses to those who present themselves to us in all of their neediness.²⁴

Research tells us that this problem only increases as these special people reach their twenty-first birthday. Donovan and Zucker warn,

Just as that future arrives, the cliff happens. School-funded support – all that work and investment – ceases on every student's 21st birthday. That is when many of these same individuals find themselves, as in earlier generations, once again invisible. They're home with their parents, with nothing to do; or bivouacked in small group homes, watching TV, with no say in who [*sic*] they live with, when they go out, or what they eat. All the aspirations for something better than that – employment, independent living, self-determination – would require continuing support for many of these adults, at or near the same level of intensity delivered during the school years. But funding for that level of support – and it would be billions – is missing.²⁵

23 Heather Avis, *THE WEEK*, July 21, 2019, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://theweek.com/articles/852956/american-churches-are-failing-congregants-disabilities>.

24 Zylla. *Practices of Acceptance*, 708.

25 John Donovan and Caren Zucker, "We Love Autistic Children – Until They Grow Up," *AZCen-*

There is a huge gap in support that churches can step into and remedy without spending billions doing so.

4. Jesus' Focus: Jesus served the hopeless and helpless. He instructed his followers to do the same. According to Hunter, "The very earliest Christian movement began this way. Jesus of Nazareth engaged a range of people that included lepers and people who are blind, deaf, possessed, or mentally ill, as well as prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans, Gentiles, and zealots. What did all of these groups have in common? None of these groups were permitted in the temple."²⁶

In Matthew 25:34-36, 40 (TLB), Jesus identified with the plight of the needy so closely that he said that he is them and they are him. "Then I, the King, shall say to those at my right, 'Come, blessed of my Father, into the Kingdom prepared for you from the founding of the world. For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me water; I was a stranger and you invited me into your homes; naked and you clothed me; sick and in prison, and you visited me. . . . When you did it to these my brothers, you were doing it to me!'" Jason Greig Reimer states, "The church must pay particular attention to the weakest, most vulnerable members of society, and enter into risky solidarity with them, not because it is the right thing to do, but because it is where Jesus chooses to reveal himself."²⁷ Medi Ann Volpe (quoted by Zylla) agrees, "Christians are called to embrace the stranger and . . . a person with an intellectual disability presents to us the stranger par excellence."²⁸

Jesus instructed his followers to target the special-needs community in Luke 14:13-14 (ESV) when he said that "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." Hunter observes, "Jesus Christ calls his churches to love and believe

tral, February 19, 2016, updated February 21, 2016, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2016/02/19/autism-adults/80528874/>.

26 Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 34.

27 Jason Reimer Greig, "Shalom Made Strange: A Peace Church Theology for and with People with Intellectual Disabilities," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 30.

28 Medi Ann Volpe, quoted in Zylla. "Practices of Acceptance," 713.

in, serve and reach out to, and welcome and receive, those people and populations that ‘establishment society’ regards as hopeless, incorrigible, unredeemable, ‘unlikely,’ or even ‘impossible,’ and to deploy their converts in witness and ministry.”²⁹

Jesus’ command is sufficient to make ministering to people with special needs a priority. Pleasing Jesus, modeling our lives and churches after him, and representing him should be the heart of all we do. Jesus will bless churches that obey. Dingle states,

We follow the Lord who taught the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7, Matt 18:12-14) in which the shepherd leaves ninety-nine others to pursue one lost sheep. If we modeled our ministry after that parable, one family would be enough to make special needs ministry worthwhile. However, the prevalence is much greater than that: a study published in the journal *Pediatrics* in May 2011 indicates that one in six children in the United States has a developmental disability. If it is worthwhile to pursue the one missing sheep out of a flock of a hundred, how about the one family in every six who is affected by disability?³⁰

5. Strategically Attractive: According to Hunter, ministering to disabled people, such as the deaf, attracts three different groups.

It is almost impossible to find churches with visible ministries to the deaf that are not growing. Seekers are typically moved when they visit a church that cares enough to sign its worship experience, and to engage in other ministries, for the people among them who are deaf. Such churches typically reach three groups: the deaf, their families and friends, and many other people who are attracted to a church that loves people who are deaf.³¹

In my experience, this is true. A church that serves people with special

29 Hunter, *Radical Outreach*, 37.

30 Shannon Dingle, “Equipping the Generations: Maintaining the Message, Modifying the Method with Special Needs Families,” *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 2.2 (Spring 2012): 84-85.

31 Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 78-79.

needs will attract family members, friends, and others with the tangible love expressed and meaningful care given by Christ and that church. Hunter shares his personal experience with one family when he says, “I recently interviewed a couple who transferred from one church to another. They still more strongly affirmed the first church’s doctrine, but their new church loved them and their handicapped child much more, and they said, ‘For us, that made all the difference.’”³² One mother of a special-needs child, after experiencing The Journey Church said, “I think this is the first church that I’ve been to that has real Christians in it.” Although from a Catholic background, this family has now become committed to and involved in The Journey Church for more than two years.

One unanticipated blessing that falls on a church that meets real needs is an influx of mature Christians who are ready to serve on the spot. Many plateaued and declining churches have in their membership mature Christians who, wanting to make a tangible difference in this world, have grown weary of inward-focused churches and ministries.³³ When the Lord works in and through a church on mission, mature believers who are seeking service opportunities do take notice.³⁴ Steve Sjogren said, “Don’t go to start a church... go to serve a city. Serve them with love, and if you go after the people nobody wants, you’ll end up with the people everybody wants.”³⁵

6. Spiritually Catalytic: Ministries targeting hopeless people such as drug addicts, alcoholics, and criminals have the potential to prepare others to hear the gospel. Hunter discovered that when “hopeless” people received the gospel, they experienced spiritual transformation. When those around them saw Christian love and the gospel’s power to change lives, they also opened up to the gospel. Seeing others transformed sends a message to the hearts and minds of pre-Christian people: If God can love, forgive, and

32 Ibid., 78.

33 I do not advocate stealing, of course, but mature believers who find themselves excluded from or unable to find meaningful ministry in one church often seek opportunities for greater levels of service elsewhere. Perhaps this is an instance of one who is faithful in little becoming faithful in much.

34 Lavern Brown, idea expressed during a personal conversation with the author.

35 Steve Sjogren, quoted in Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland: Group, 2004), 29.

transform “those” people, perhaps he can help me.

When the gospel transforms the lives of special-needs people, other people notice. They also note the church God used to bring about that transformation. They are more likely to consider the gospel for themselves. Ministry to the special-needs community catalyzes receptivity in gospel-resistant people. Hunter states, “Most church leaders have not discovered that reaching ‘unconventional’ people is the catalyst to reaching unchurched ‘conventional’ people.”³⁶

Jesus was the first to suggest such an approach to catalyzing and reaching pre-Christian people through visible acts of goodness when he said in Matthew 5:16, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (ESV). Paul would say something similar to Titus, the Bishop of Crete “that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Titus 2:10, ESV). James would cite caring for those who cannot care for themselves as being a central by-product of the Christian faith when he said, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27a, ESV). Ministering in this way authenticates Jesus-centered Christians and Jesus-centered churches. Non-spiritual people in our world see it as a beautiful expression of God’s love and find it attractive.

Some biblical evidence and practical research support the strategy of reaching the masses by first reaching the powerful and influential. There is far more biblical evidence and practical research supporting ministry to “down-and-outers” as a better approach. Such ministry has the power to open previously closed hearts and minds to the gospel. “Donald McGavran would later observe, from an extensive number of mission cases, that ‘the masses’ are usually more receptive than ‘the classes,’ and that the Christian contagion usually spreads in a society from the lower classes to the middle and upper classes.”³⁷

The world expects the church to serve the needy and disenfranchised. American society generally values caring for marginalized people. The church created Western society’s high view of charity. Carter’s words

36 Hunter, *Radical Outreach*, 44.

37 Ibid., 103.

challenge us to renew ministry to those whom society marginalizes.

It is not enough for congregations to simply mirror the rest of society when it comes to including people with disabilities. Rather, they are called to be leaders in transforming the culture – to graciously, lovingly, and actively influence their communities. When congregations push toward a higher standard than the rest of society; when they demonstrate leadership, rather than lagging behind; and when their efforts stand in stark contrast to those of others in their community, it sends a powerful message. When a welcome is compelled by deep love and a sacred call, rather than by legal decree, it speaks powerfully to a watching world and provides strong evidence of one’s faith commitment.³⁸

7. Enhancing and Edifying: Disability studies professor and theologian Jeff McNair believes that an inclusion model of special-needs ministry has the most potential for catalyzing church revitalization. Instead of segregating them into their own groups, we should include them in every aspect of the life of the church. Inclusion gives them the place of honor that they deserve. It also brings numerous blessings to the entire body of believers. Carter states, “When an entire segment of the population remains absent from the body of believers, that community not only remains less than it could be, it remains less than it was intended to be.”³⁹

McNair explains, “Paul says that in reality, people who seem weaker are indispensable. They must not be labeled and dismissed. . . . They are powerful in that they are needed by all for something critical to the whole body.”⁴⁰ They remind us of our own special needs. They help us slow down, relax, and remember what is truly important in life—relationships. Jesus is present with them and in them, and Scripture promises blessings on churches that love and include them. Greig, commenting on Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, states,

38 Carter, *Including People with Disabilities*, 17.

39 Ibid., 18.

40 Jeff McNair, “The Power of Those Who Seem Weaker: People with Disabilities in the Church,” *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability* 3, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2014): 97.

The Greek word translated “weaker,” *asthenestera*, could refer to those with some kind of sickness, but it could also correlate with our modern term “disabled.” Paul’s mentioning of the weaker members’ place in the body is thus surprising, for it assumes they have not been pushed out but have a home in the fellowship. Not only do they have a place, they have one of “greater honor.”⁴¹

Jean Vanier spent his life living with those who have severe disabilities. He speaks of the life-changing power of living in community with the disabled:

People with disabilities have taught me so much over the past forty-two years as we have lived and shared together in L’Arche as friends and companions, as brothers and sisters, as people brought together by God. In fact, they have not only taught me; they have transformed me and brought me into a new and deeper vision of humanity.

They are helping me discover who I am, what my deepest needs are, and what it means to be human. They have led me into a new and meaningful way of life quite different from what society advocates. They have revealed to me the need for community in our societies and that those who are weak and vulnerable have something important to bring to our world today.⁴²

It is no secret that many of these special people carry with them a special blessing and special ministry in and through the church. Carolin Ahlvik-Harju says, “So while people with disabilities might not be able to attain fame or success in the sense most people do, the stories of people who have lived in L’Arche testify to a secret power that people with disabilities possess, a power to touch and open people’s hearts.”⁴³ How many churches miss these blessings because the special-needs community is absent?

McNair and McKinney identify other, less obvious benefits of having those with special needs present in the life of the church:

41 Greig, “Shalom Made Strange,” 31-32.

42 Jean Vanier, quoted in Carolin Ahlvik-Harju, “The Invisible Made Visible? The Ethical Significance of Befriending People with Disabilities,” *Studia Theologica* 68, no. 2 (2014): 134.

43 Ahlvik-Harju, “The Invisible Made Visible,” 137.

However, when you spend significant time with people who do not understand typical social behavior, you come not only to find it not particularly disturbing but also at times actually quite refreshing. It is not unusual that what got people interested in people with disabilities in the first place was actually this quality. For example, in interactions with adults with intellectual disabilities, there is openness, a lack of guile, which is totally engaging.⁴⁴

Those who are concerned about possible disruptions in public worship services by people with special needs overlook the possibility that God is delighted with their presence and their expressions of worship. God loves people. He is patient and kind with us and he wants us to be patient and kind with each other, especially in worship (1 John 4:7). Churches that welcome and include them will be blessed. Jane Bonne, the former director of the special-needs ministry at Mountain Bible Church in Payson, Arizona, states, “As people in our congregation watched the joyful and unhindered expressions of worship from our special-needs group during worship, they were challenged to worship God more fully. They would often find me after church to let me know how blessed and challenged they were by the example of the special-needs group.”⁴⁵ Other churches report positive congregational self-esteem stemming from a vibrant and integrated special-needs emphasis in the church.

Reaching them for Christ rescues them from an eternity separated from God, softens the hearts and minds of other pre-believers, and produces in our churches great joy and positive morale, while removing many roadblocks to revitalization.

Back to Our Story: Seventy-six adults with special needs call The Journey Church “home.” There is nothing unique about The Journey Church. What worked there has a high probability of working in other churches. Churches that target the special-needs population are, on average, more vibrant than churches that overlook this gospel-receptive

44 Jeff McNair and Bryan McKinney, “Social Ramps: The Principles of Universal Design Applied to the Social Environment,” *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability* 4, no. 1 (Spring/Winter 2015): 66.

45 Jane Bonn, Special-Needs Ministry Director, Mountain Bible Church, Payson, Arizona.

population.

A PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR LAUNCHING A SPECIAL-NEEDS INITIATIVE

Targeting this group and reaching their families don't have to be difficult or expensive propositions. A church doesn't have to host Tim Tebow's Night to Shine or even have a special class or ministry devoted to ministering to the special-needs community. All that needs to happen is for a key influencer who is passionate about reaching those with special needs to take the lead. The key influencer's first task is to recruit the lead pastor to the vision. If the pastor doesn't own it, it will never reach its full potential.

1. The Lead Pastor: The lead pastor's voice is strategic because of the culture change that must take place in the church. People with special needs have, well, special needs. They can unintentionally exhibit what many would consider to be disruptive behaviors. Patiently loving them, dignifying them, and offering them grace become essential in these situations. The pastor has the authority to enforce these mandates of Jesus. Attitudes must be adjusted, and vision must be clear. The lead pastor must examine carefully the existing church culture and members' underlying assumptions about what is pleasing or not pleasing to God. Many times he will have the privilege of simply framing the conversation with scriptural truth, and at other times he must challenge the status quo. McNair and McKinney cite many preconceived notions about what how a church service should look.

Must the Word of God be shared in a silent room? Does noise in a room indicate a lack of respect for what is being shared? Do the practices that lead us to being able to achieve the silent room during worship show a lack of respect for what is being shared? Does sitting still and doing nothing indicate a lack of respect for what is being shared? It could be that our social structure assumptions need to be revisited.⁴⁶

The lead pastor has great influence to shape this conversation and frame the experience of having those with special needs present. McNair and

46 McNair and McKinney, "Social Ramps," 65.

McKinney explain,

It may begin with a word from the pulpit, modeling welcome and acceptance, while recognizing someone making noise. The first author once gave a sermon where a man with autism would periodically make a moaning noise. After the first occurrence, he stated, “Did you hear that sound? That is a sound we don’t hear enough in our worship services. It is the sound of someone with autism being accepted among us. I wish we heard that sound more often in our worship services.”⁴⁷

The lead pastor must address this topic from the pulpit several times per year, developing a practical and biblical theology of special needs.⁴⁸ Failure to do so may lead to needless conflict. Nancy Eisland says, “The primary problem for the church is not how to ‘accommodate’ disabled persons. The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God’s children.”⁴⁹

2. Interview Parents and Care Givers: Wright and Owiny state, “Part of becoming a prepared church is developing an understanding of disabilities, the impact they have on the lives of those who have them and on their families, and services available in school and beyond.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the best way to do this is to get to know the families, caregivers, and social workers who live with and work with those with special needs. Asking questions and listening attentively communicate genuine care. Zylla explains, “Our practices of care for the disabled must move beyond sympathy to compassionate action. It is crucial to begin a conversation with the family asking them in what ways they can be of help. . . . Spend time with the families identifying the needs of the disabled child and making a commitment to collaborate for the long haul on these needs.”⁵¹

3. Gather a Coalition: God has already prepared people to care, serve,

47 Ibid., 47.

48 David and Mephibosheth, the parable of the wedding feast, or Jesus’ command to throw parties for people with disabilities are good texts.

49 Nancy Eisland, quoted in Zylla, “Practices of Acceptance,” 711.

50 Wright & Owiny, “Special Needs Goes to Church,” 85.

51 Zylla, “Practices of Acceptance,” 710.

volunteer, or lead. Get the word out. Shop the vision. See what God is already up to. Henry Blackaby made this point: “Because he loves you and wants to involve you in His work, He will show you where He is working so you can join Him.”⁵²

There may be a church family that has been touched by special needs. Perhaps a member works in special education; this person could be an advocate and ministry leader. If there aren’t any special-needs families in the church, perhaps there is a partnership in the community or even with another church. Young Life Capernaum, Joni and Friends, and Special Olympics are three helpful partnerships that church leaders can develop. It is important to build this coalition.

So long as a few motivated people will join the key influencer and the lead pastor, anything is possible. This group of advocates should meet, brainstorm, share ideas, and most importantly, pray.

4. Do Something Rather Than Nothing: One must admire Young Life Capernaum’s can-do attitude about ministry for adolescents with special needs. Their attitude is that adolescents with special needs should be allowed to try anything that other children do. They will “rip the roof apart” to get those with special needs to the feet of Jesus. Zylla agrees with this approach as he quotes David Capps:

He [David Capps] advocates for the role of the minister as the “minor miracle worker,” noticing that “the miracle stories in the Gospels have most if not all of the characteristics of the minor miracle: small, relevant, specific, achievable, focused on the start of something, treated as new behaviors and perceived as resulting from effort. . . . Cutting a hole in the roof was an unorthodox but effective way to get something started.”⁵³

5. Consider A Possible Mid-Week Outreach Ministry: While we advocate for an inclusive approach to special-needs ministry, starting something specifically for them in the midweek sends a strong message that they are wanted and are worth putting something together specifically for them. George Hunter states, “Churches often experience more growth

52 Henry Blackaby, quoted in Morris, “The Receptivity Principle.”

53 Zylla, “Practices of Acceptance,” 707.

from such ministries than they expected.”⁵⁴

6. Consider an Outreach Sunday: Why not schedule, plan, and invite as many people as possible to a special Sunday service in honor of our friends with special needs and those who love them? We’re going to gather as the church fifty-two Sundays each year. Why not honor Jesus by focusing some of these Sundays on outreach to the special-needs community? Why not invite these guests of honor? The sermon can be drawn from the many passages that speak to the issues of concern to those with special needs and those who love them. The Journey Church does three of these per year. Attendance spikes by over 20 percent on these Sundays, including many first-time visitors.

7. Do a Book Read with Staff and Elders: This was part of The Journey Church’s path into special-needs ministry. We were given a book by Nick Palermo, the founder of Young Life Capernaum. Several on staff read it together and discussed the idea of reaching out to these people. This was the beginning of the church’s culture shift. It was inspiring and helpful.

8. Pray: Jesus told us that “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2, ESV). We should not only pray like this for the “white unto harvest” special-needs community, but we should be willing to be the answer to our own prayers. In other words, we should pray, “Here I am! Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

CONCLUSION

At the end of it all, we must ask whether we’re serious about joining Jesus in the greatest search and rescue mission of all time to reach people who, though they may be far from God, are open to the gospel, and then make disciples of them for the glory of God. Paul Rader probes the heart of the matter when he asks, “Do we want to know them? Are we willing to go where they are? To spend time with them? Do we want them in our churches? And most difficult of all: are we willing for our church to become their church too?”⁵⁵

54 Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 63.

55 Paul Rader, quoted in Hunter, *Radical Outreach*, 10.

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