

User Friendly Churches:

*Ministering to People With Disabilities*

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*For years he sat by the Gate called Beautiful. It was just a stones throw away from the Temple. He watched the pilgrims come and go to the grand edifice that represented the faith of the Jews. He had never actually been inside the House of Worship. As a crippled man, he was not allowed. Occasionally the smell of the sacrifice, mingled with the smoke of incense, would drift to where he lay begging. He could hear the distant sounds of singing and chanting, and the bellowing of an animal being sacrificed.*

*"Alms, alms for the poor," he cried, as two burly fisherman approached. The man really did not want silver--He wanted to go into the Temple. He wanted to feel god's presence.*

*"Look at us!" the fisherman shouted. "We don't have any silver or gold! But what we do have we'll give you. In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!"*

*As the rough hand of Peter was extended, the lame man felt a strange sensation come over him. The useless limbs he had pulled along for years instantly came to life! He was flooded with an indescribable joy! Without thinking, he ran for the Temple, leaping and praising God with every step. This was not just a day of healing. It was his chance to go into the very House of God!*

Although we preach a message of healing and hope, we cannot heal every blind eye, deaf ear, and impaired limb. Many broken bodies are healed beneath Calvary's flow. But even in Jesus day there were many who did not get instantly healed. However, the church can do one thing--it can make the House of God accessible and open to everybody, regardless of their infirmity.

People with disabilities make up a large number of Americans. Recent changes in laws and policies have opened up doors of opportunity for them in schools, the community and at the workplace. This group, however, is still underrepresented in our efforts at evangelism. We have zeroed in on minorities, prisons, unchurched cities, and foreign fields--yet there is an enormous number of physically and mentally challenged people all around us that are waiting to be reached. Jesus Himself claimed that He had come to

*"...set at liberty them that are bruised." (Luke 4:18)*

When ministering to people who have disabilities, there are a few basic guidelines that we need to follow. The Indiana governor's Planning council for Disabilities makes the following recommendations:

- *Maintain eye contact. Talk directly to the person with the disability, even if he or she is using an interpreter. Even if parents or friends are present, encourage the person with the disability to express his or her own opinions.*
- *Ask if assistance is needed, rather than assuming it is.*
- *Use a normal tone of voice. If the person cannot hear or understand you, he or she will let you know. Raising your voice causes more confusion.*
- *If you do not understand what the person with the disability is saying, you should say so. This will be appreciated. Ask the person to repeat or use an alternative phrase if necessary.*
- *When talking with a person who has a mental disability, speak simply, not loudly. Remember that simple language is not childish language.*
- *Be careful not to assume that a person with one disability also has others. A person in a wheelchair does not necessarily have a mental disability, nor is a person who is blind particularly likely to have a hearing impairment.*
- *Be sure to make public events accessible by considering the needs of people with disabilities when planning these events.*
- *When first meeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and introduce anyone else who might be present.*
- *When offering a seat to a person with a visual impairment, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat.*
- *When talking with a person using a wheelchair, don't lean on the wheelchair. The chair is considered part of the body space of the person who uses it.*

- *Do not try to avoid using common idioms like "see," "walk," or "hear" around people with disabilities. Being overly conscious of a person's disability can cause discomfort and awkwardness.*

We need to always remember that our first and foremost task is to minister to spiritual needs. Although we want to pray for physical healing (and trust that it will come), salvation and the unique spiritual issues of people with handicaps are far more important considerations. In Matthew 6:25, 33 Jesus admonishes us to "...Take no thought for your life...nor yet for your body. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

This certainly does not mean that we ignore the physical suffering. Along with prayers for healing, we can help in many other ways. We should provide accessible buildings and alert our staff to ways they may help. Consider just a few ideas:

1. *Inclusion in activities such as choir, Bible Studies, and recreation*
2. *Help to the altar when appropriate*
3. *Overhead projections of songs*
4. *A seating area where wheelchairs can be placed*
5. *Interpreters for the hearing impaired*
6. *Members of youth group trained to provide special help as needed*

Most important to people with physical and mental challenges is the need to first be seen as a person. The disability is a part of them, but it does not come first. They need to be respected and appreciated in life just as anyone else. Even if they walk, talk or look differently than many other people they have the same basic needs that we all share. For the church, this is the need for salvation from sin and the spirit of God in our life.