

Imitating Jesus' Inclusive Ministry

Including Persons With Disabilities in Your Teaching

by Jim Pierson

Jeff Jackson (not his real name) is included in his Sunday school class at First Church. That may sound unremarkable unless you understand that Jeff has mental retardation and physical disabilities. That, however, has not prevented him from being accepted by the members of his class. They take turns caring for him. They call him each day, drive him to church activities, and take him to his doctor's appointments. They share in his life in many significant ways.

Today there are some 54 million Jeffs living in the United States. In fact, in every community one will find people who have mental, sensory, physical, emotional, and communication disabilities, which may prevent their participation in many life functions. These people need to be included in the Sunday school, in the church, and in the lives of church members. Such inclusion mirrors Jesus' inclusive approach.

Jesus regularly encountered people with disabilities. Matthew 9 describes a series of such encounters. He healed a man with a physical disability (v. 2). He cured a woman of a disease she had endured for 12 years (v. 20). He restored the sight of two men (vv. 29, 30); then he met and rehabilitated a man with a speech problem (vv. 32, 33). Whatever the disability, Jesus made a difference.

Your adult class can also make a difference in the lives of students with disabilities. Consider the following suggestions, and imitate Jesus' inclusive approach in your own particular setting.

Sensory and Physical Disabilities

If a student's disability is deafness, find a volunteer interpreter to communicate the lesson. Ask the interpreter to conduct some sign language classes for the class members. Learning a few basic signs will make the student feel more a part of the group. If the student is not completely without hearing,

other means of help are in order. If the person lip-reads, she must have a clear view of the teacher's face. Instruct class members not to talk louder or shout to her, for doing so can interfere with her normal processes of communication.

If the disability is blindness, invite the person to the class. Orient him to the classroom and the path he will need to take to get there. Ask class members not to move furniture or other objects without telling the blind person. Provide a Braille Bible and other materials. Address the person by name. Tell class members that it is important to let the person know who they are (also, remember that blind people may find it difficult to recall names, since they cannot match a face with a name). Give explanations of items being written on the chalkboard. If the person uses a guide dog, explain why other members of the class should not pet the dog. Be sure to offer transportation to the person when necessary.

It is also helpful to know some basic skills for guiding a person who is blind. For example, the folded arm provides the basic point of reference for the person. Moving the elbow back suggests that the person is to sit behind you. Stopping indicates that you are nearing a step or a curb.

The teacher may have special concerns about copying materials for a student who is not completely blind, but is visually impaired. You do not need special permission to enlarge the pages of one book for such a student. Whenever you need more than one copy of a page, contact the publisher for permission.

If the disability involves other physical limitations, make the building and the classroom area accessible. When social activities are planned, try to take care of accessibility barriers ahead of time. Familiarize yourself with any special equipment such as wheelchairs and/or braces.

Often some of the physical problems that classes of older adults must address are those experienced by people who have had strokes. If someone who has had a stroke has been an active part of the class, keep her involved. Offer to provide transportation or assistance with activities that may now be difficult for the person to handle independently. Even if communication is difficult, continue to try. Look the person in the eye. Make statements instead of asking questions. Visit the person at home. Let her know she is still an important part of the group.

A friend of mine used to play golf every Thursday with three other men from his Sunday school class. Then he had a stroke, and his former golfing buddies at first didn't know what to do. But with a little creativity, the problem was solved. A new fourth person was added to the group, and my friend continues to be a part of the group—only now he enjoys the action, along with the fresh air and sunshine, from his golf cart. He is still in Sunday school as well.

Other Types of Disabilities

If an individual's problem is emotional, be understanding and supportive—both of him and his family. Ask the family or the person about the nature of the problem, the treatment, and what the class can do to help. You may want to ask a mental health professional to come to a class function and discuss the nature of mental illness.

If the problem is a learning disability, be cautious and be sensitive to the person's needs. Never ask a visitor or new member to read aloud in class without checking with him or her ahead of time. Often poor reading is a noticeable symptom of a learning disability.

If the disability involves communication (and this is common), develop a successful means of communicating with the person. Never pretend that you understand. Ask the person to repeat a statement or say it in a different way. A home visit may lead to workable communication solutions involving both the classroom and class members. It might not hurt to have pencil and paper handy; if the person is able to read, she can indicate by nodding or by other signals whether or not her message is being understood.

If the disability is mental retardation, the process of inclusion will require more attention. If this involves only one or two people, include them in the regular class. Encourage class members to take turns sitting with them, assisting them with finding Scripture references, making interactions with other class members easier, looking out for them at class parties, and getting to know what nice people they really are.

Additional Avenues of Service

If more than two individuals with mental retardation are attending your church, the church should consider organizing a special class just for them. This class would have its own teacher and lesson, but the opening prayer time, refreshments, and social activities could be a joint endeavor. Such an arrangement provides an opportunity for mutual ministry and fellowship, while offering a program of Bible study and learning activities geared specifically to your special adults.

Class members can also volunteer with organizations that help persons with disabilities. A call to the appropriate organizations in your city or town will reveal a variety of needs.

Finally, the adult class can minister by being sensitive to the needs of a family dealing with a disability. If such a family is part of your class, take time to learn their needs. If this disability involves a child in the family, keep in mind the four occasions when this family may require special attention: (1)

when they learn the diagnosis, (2) when the child starts to school, (3) when the child leaves the school system (because the parents will no longer have access to the services provided by the school), and (4) when the parents realize that they can no longer provide care for their child. Often the most critical service parents need is respite care. In its simplest form, this means having an extra pair of hands to help with specific tasks. Parents will also appreciate the kindness of someone who will offer to watch their child so that they can go out for special occasions.

Be There!

Perhaps the best advice is just “Be there!” One Sunday our minister announced that Mrs. Johnson’s daughter would be moving to a residential facility. On moving day, a member of Mrs. Johnson’s Sunday school class arrived at her house and spent the day. She said, “If my daughter were moving away from home, I would want someone to be with me. That is the reason I am here.” After helping to arrange the furniture in the daughter’s new residence, she drove Mrs. Johnson back to her apartment. Later that day, another member of the class took Mrs. Johnson out for dinner.

People such as Mrs. Johnson and Jeff Jackson represent unique opportunities for your adult Sunday school class to mirror Jesus’ compassion and his ministry of inclusion. By doing so, your class members will receive much more than they give; and they will be ministered to in ways they never imagined.