

What the Lord Taught This Lakewood Pastor When His Son Was Diagnosed With Autism

Craig Johnson is the director of ministries at Lakewood Church in Houston. He and his wife Samantha have three children, one of whom was diagnosed with autism. Craig recently spoke with Charisma News about the journey, both spiritual and physical, of raising a son with disabilities. He is the founder of Champions Club, a curriculum for children with special needs. His book, Champion, is out next month.

How is the Lord using your son today?

Our new book *Champion: How One Boy's Miraculous Journey Through Autism Is Changing the World*, tells our son's raw but powerful story and how his life has touched so many people. Connor became the inspiration for Champions Clubs for special needs children to be launched around the world. Connor's story has been written about in six different books. Today he is 14 years old and continues to encourage and inspire people. He's drawn to spiritual things and can quote messages and over 50 Scriptures. He loves to tell jokes, play the piano, and he's very fascinated with roller coasters. We are so proud of the person he has become.

What spiritual lessons has the Lord taught your family through this process?

That God uses what the world would term broken for His greater glory. In John 9:1-3 it says,

As Jesus passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But it happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

We look at brokenness as something that needs to be fixed. God looks at brokenness as someone ready to be used. Jesus did all kinds of miracles but the one miracle, the greatest miracle of salvation he could not do in his perfect body. He had to be broken.

Brokenness has a perfume that pride can never produce. These kids, teens and adults with special needs can do great things so God's power might be revealed through them. We have to help them find their destiny and help them navigate how to get there. Look at how God has used our son Connor. If God can use Connor, God can use anyone.

The second thing we learned is that the best thing you can do when you're going through a storm is to be good to someone else. When a majestic eagle is going through a storm, the eagle doesn't stay in the storm and let the wind and the rain batter it back and forth. The eagle spreads its wings as wide as it can, and the wind lifts it out of the storm into the eye where it's calm and peaceful. When you are good to someone else in the middle of your storm, you are like the eagle spreading its wings. God will lift you out of your storm, and He will use your storm to help someone else get through theirs.

What verses have really sustained you?

Proverbs 3:5-6 has been our key verse personally. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and might, lean not on your own understanding but in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.

Our ministry verse has been Isaiah 61:1-3:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to preserve those who mourn in Zion, to give to them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.

What led you to start Champions Club and how have they grown around the world?

After Connor's miracle of speaking his first words, God spoke to us again on how he was going to use his life. I was walking through Lakewood Church, and as I was approaching the children's area, God stopped me and said, "Look at what you are doing for typical kids, it looks like Disneyland. Now, look at what you are doing for special needs children."

We were like most churches; we had very little for those with special needs. God spoke to me and said, "Those kids deserve the very best, just like every other child. When you look into these kids' eyes, who you are looking at is Me. Because when you do unto the least of these, you do unto Me."

Then God told me that favor would follow us when we began to help those with special needs. God said, he was not going to let society or the church forget these children anymore.

At the time I wasn't sure what to do, but I was bold enough to put together a task force with some of the best doctors, researchers, educators and most important, parents of special needs children. For an entire year, we put together what would become Champions Club. Champions Club is a holistic approach to developing those with special needs; mind, body, soul and

spirit. It has four stations: a physical therapy station, a sensory station, an educational station and a spiritual station.

When we launched Champions Club at Lakewood Church, 300 families came and experienced it within the first six months. Now there are more than 60 Champions Clubs around the world. They are on every continent, in public schools, private schools, churches, orphanages and organizations, including a home for homeless mothers with special needs children.

Recently we surveyed families from five Champions Club locations around the world and these were the results of the survey:

1. 86 percent of parents said that Champions Club positively affected their child academically.
2. 96 percent of parents have seen positive changes in their child's behavior since attending Champions Club.
3. 93 percent of parents said that Champions Club positively affected their child's social emotional growth (identifying emotions in self and others, sharing, empathy, making and maintaining friendships, asking for help, helping others, increased eye contact during conversations).
4. 89 percent of parents said Champions Club helped develop their child's gifts and talents in a positive way.
5. 100 percent of parents said that Champions Club positively affected their child's spiritual life.
6. 96 percent of parents said that the four components (sensory, motor, education and spirit) of Champions Club have benefited their child holistically.
7. 100 percent of parents said Champions Club benefited them as a family to share in life experiences (such as

attending church).

8. 100 percent of parents said the services that Champions Club provides (such as church services, respite nights and so on.) helped their marriage or family dynamics.
9. 100 percent of parents said Champions Club positively affected their home life.
10. 75 percent of parents said Champions Club helped their child transition into an inclusive environment.

How can churches be more accommodating for families with special needs? What about small churches that don't have many resources?

At this time, there are more resources, models and tools for churches to reach families with special needs than ever before. Two years ago, Dr. Sandy Robinson and I wrote the first full-scope Christian curriculum for special needs in history.

There are millions of families like mine that want to go to church but are currently overwhelmed; many are shut in. I would estimate less than 1 percent of churches have anything for special needs. Many of these families have been rejected by the church. It's time for the church to respond. You can start a Champions Club developmental center for as little as \$500. You can also make it as equipped as resources will allow. Every church can afford to help those with special needs. We will help you with recruiting, training, the model, tools, fundraising and how to launch. Just go to .

This is part two in a two-part series. Read part one [here](#).