

# Where Churches and Disability Meet

One of the greatest passions in my life is to see the church embrace adults and children with disabilities—not out of pity or out of service but out of a genuine understanding, acceptance and celebration of their life.

This church, this body of Christ—with all of its broken pieces along with its many gifts and talents—is beautiful. But it can also be so ignorant that it pushes away the most vulnerable.

When I recently wrote about the church forgetting us—families impacted by disability—I knew it was a real need. The church needs to see us, embrace us, include us. The last few days, many of my readers shared their stories, their experiences, their heartbreak, their disappointment. I have prayed for each one of them. I've seen their pain. I've felt it.

But they also shared the beautiful side of the church and how it come alongside them to embrace, encourage and love their children and families.

And church leaders responded too. They admitted they don't know where to start or that they didn't realize it was a need. Before I became a special needs mom, I was also unaware of the need, but let me encourage you if that's you: Now that you know, you can do something about it! If you wonder what you can do, my husband and I want to help you find your starting point.

As we continue to have these conversations, let's remember to extend grace and forgiveness. We all need it. And as we work together, we can help the church recognize and embrace disability. What a beautiful body of Christ we can be!

## **The 80 Percent**

Some of my readers asked about the 80 percent statistic of families and adults impacted with disability that do not regularly attend church. This statistic came from Joni and Friends. A few years back, I had a series of phone conversations dreaming with them how to bring disability awareness to our Christian denomination. I wrote down a lot of information, and the 80 percent came from their statistics (I was shocked to hear it). I searched their website to link it here, but they do not have the statistics posted. They do, however, provide those if requested, and I have requested their disability information and statistic resource.

Someone mentioned that this statistic is also found in the Center for World Missions in California. I was unable to find that on their website as well.

But here is another way to look at this: 20 percent of the population has a disability (and this is a true statistic; you can find it in government sites). So at the average church, are 20 percent of members people/children with disabilities? No? Where are they? They are certainly not sitting in church!

## **Awareness**

Like all things, change begins with awareness.

“Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, ‘Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?’

“Jesus said, ‘You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do’” (John 9:1-3, MSG).

## **Disability Is Not a Result of Sin**

Even back in Jesus’ day there was an inaccurate perception that disability was a result of sin. But what did Jesus say?

“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins, this happened so the power of God could be seen in him” (John 9:3, NLT).

## **People With Disabilities Don’t Need Healing**

Is God in the healing business? Absolutely! And He oftentimes does choose to heal. I believe that wholeheartedly.

But there is a fine line between sickness and disability. They are not the same. For example, my daughter is not sick with Down syndrome; she is actually a pretty healthy girl. Down syndrome is part of her genetic makeup, much the same as the color of her eyes, hair and skin.

I know in the John 9:1-3 story, Jesus goes on to heal the blind man. What I don’t understand is why we have decided that God wants to heal everyone with a disability while we journey in this life. The only time God actually promises complete healing is in heaven. While Jesus walked among us, He gave us a little taste of what that will be like; perhaps we decided by those examples that this is the way God chooses to always work.

And God’s power is not dependent on our faith. Let’s be thankful for that!

## **God Has a Purpose for Disability**

Jesus said it: Look for what God can do. God wants to show us His power. We just need to be willing to see it.

I wonder sometimes if our view of God is so small that we fail to recognize how and where He is working. Perhaps we have forgotten that He can see the full picture of our lives, from beginning to end, and we struggle to accept that His greatest blessings often come through our hardships and challenges.

We are part of one body, the body of Christ. And I can assure you, people with disabilities are important members of the

body. We need them as much as they need us. We all need each other.

## **Now What?**

We know that a disability focus is much needed within the church. This is our unreached people group in our own backyard, so what can we do?

**1. Organizations.** There are great organizations out there committed to help churches reach out to the disability community.

### Joni and Friends

Joni and Friends is built on biblical truth and the foundation of Jesus Christ. They are about advancing disability ministry and changing the church and communities around the world. They help equip churches for a disability ministry (for all ages).

### The Inclusive Church

The Inclusive Church believes that every church needs a plan for inclusion. It's an amazing resource for church leaders, from creating sensory rooms to creating intake forms to training volunteers. You can also check out their Facebook page.

### Key Ministry

Key Ministry is committed to help every child with a disability find a church. They seek to come alongside pastors and volunteers with relevant tools and resources to enhance their ministries. They have created an online resource kit with a variety of articles, forms, ideas and how-to guides to take your ministry to the next level. You can explore their Key Ring Binder, Inclusion Fusion Library, Workbench, FreeRespite, special events, Party with a Purpose, and Key TV modules to find new ways to reach families affected by

disability in your own community!

## Nathaniel's Hope

Nathaniel's Hope is dedicated to sharing hope with kids with special needs (VIP kids) and their families. They help churches establish buddy breaks, or free respite, for families with VIP kids.

**2. Books.** Here are some great book resources you can read on the subject:

*Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* 

by Amy Fenton Lee (founder of the Inclusive Church)

This book serves as a practical “how to” handbook for the family ministry team working to welcome one or 100 children with special needs. Easily referenced guidance is offered for expressing care for parents who are learning that their child has a diagnosis, all the way to developing programs, policies and education for volunteers working with children with disabilities. Example ministry documents are provided throughout this resource guide.

*Walking With Tension*

by Jenny Hill

From the book: “What kind of God hears the desperate cry of a little girl to be physically healed ... and says no? Learning how to walk with cerebral palsy was hard, but learning how to walk alongside God was harder. In *Walking with Tension*, Jenny Hill shares her journey to seek healing from her disability. When healing doesn't happen, she begins to wrestle with God over some big questions. ‘Is God really good?’ ‘Where is He in the midst of our struggles?’ and ‘How do we love God when we don't understand Him?’”

## Where Do I Start?

If you are a church leader (or someone who wants to start a special needs ministry), you need to first recognize where your church is at in the process.

Do you need to first educate, bring awareness and show there is a real need for the church to focus on disability? You might want to start by reading *Same Lake, Different Boat* by Stephanie Hubach.

Is there just one or two kids in your congregation that have special needs? The Inclusive Church can be a great resource for you, with lots of different ideas of how to meet the individual needs of the child.

Is your church ready to start a special needs ministry? Dig into Key Ministry.

Are you still not sure or just need to talk to someone? Amazing how God works! My husband and I have been passionate about this, and God used the many recent stories shared with us to make us move forward in the next step in our ministry. We are excited to help your church find the right solutions for your specific situations. For now, and until we have this better established, send me an email: ellen at ellenstumbo dot com.

## For Families and Adults Living With Disability

Joni and Friends helps families and adults impacted with disability find the right church. They have a large database of churches that are actively serving the disability community. Check out their "Find Churches With Disability Ministries" link.

Not Alone: Finding Faith and Friendship for the Special-Needs Journey is a blog written specifically for you! It's full of encouragement, understanding and community and is written by special needs parents for the parents. Check out their

Facebook page too.

And friends, keep your stories coming. Your voice is important, and your experience matters. And our voices united can make a difference.

This beautiful church will get it.

*Adapted from **Ellen Stumbo's** blog at . Ellen is a pastor's wife and writes about finding beauty in brokenness with gritty honesty and openness. She is passionate about sharing the real—sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly—aspects of faith, parenting, special needs and adoption. She has been published in Focus on the Family, LifeWay, MomSense, Not Alone and Mamapedia among others.*