

Blessed are the Disabled

Jaime Castro had a dream. He wanted to see a church where people with visible disabilities and able-bodied believers would worship together.

In September 2009, that dream became a reality in the Toronto-based Abilities Church. Now the church is becoming a catalyst for other North American congregations to fully include people with disabilities in mainstream church activities.

“We’re giving people who feel the church has turned its back on them a chance to be at the forefront,” Castro said. “Only 5 percent of people who go to church have visible disabilities. The rest don’t attend because the church has failed to identify with them.”

The diversity at Abilities Church is visible from the staff down. Castro is an able-bodied pastor with a long history of working full time with Toronto’s disabled, while two of the church’s lead pastors suffer from visible disabilities. Castro and his team strive to have a 50/50 mix of disabled and able-bodied members in the church.

Castro first caught the vision for Abilities Church while working with disabled people in a secular setting during the 1990s. Realizing the need for inclusiveness in the community, he and some others began The Mix Community Club in 2002. The club gave people with disabilities the chance to facilitate social events for the mainstream community.

Abilities Church evolved from The Mix after Lt. Gov. David Onley of Ontario, who is wheelchair-bound, encouraged the group to start a church for people with disabilities. Castro heard the Lord in the call. But when Castro and his team went into other Canadian churches to take the message of inclusion, he says they got mixed reactions.

“We were told complete integration of the able with the disabled couldn’t be done,” Castro recalls. “Unfortunately, too many churches are influenced by our ‘Hollywood’ culture, which favors those who are intellectually and physically strong over the weak. But Jesus was constantly surrounded by the weak and the disabled, and He ministered and related to them.”

A visit to a service at Abilities Church revealed a unique joy and abandonment among the congregants, many of whom suffer from Down syndrome or intellectual disabilities or are in wheelchairs. Several members of the worship team flapped their arms, rocked on wheelchairs and laughed like children while others sang loudly or made exaggerated dance movements. Many of the disabled were accompanied by able-bodied friends and relatives.

Christine Rowntree, a long-time Christian who is in a wheelchair after being born with cerebral palsy, was so fed up with traditional churches that she’d resorted to holding home church with other people in wheelchairs. She was enjoying her fourth visit to Abilities Church and said she plans to continue attending.

“I come here because people just accept you for who you are and don’t judge you,” she said. “In some other churches I attended I felt I was being pushed up to the front for healing because the church leadership felt I needed that. I always wondered, *What is it about this physical thing I have that they don’t like?*

So far, three other Canadian churches have followed Abilities Church’s lead and started an abilities ministry—a Pentecostal church and a Baptist church in Ontario, as well as a nondenominational congregation in Calgary, Alberta.

In the United States, an Ohio congregation recently started an abilities ministry, while two in New York and one in

California are interested in starting such ministries, according to Castro.

Still, Castro finds plenty of resistance remains to actively including disabled people in mainstream worship services. Despite sending hundreds of e-mails and regular letters to other churches in Toronto explaining that Christ's gospel is one of inclusiveness, Castro says he gets few responses:

"A lot of big churches have had special needs ministries for at least 20 years, but when we challenge them to take it to the next level of full inclusion, they scratch their heads and say they'd then have to dissolve their special-needs ministries."