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What Does It Mean to Have a Special Needs Ministry?

Part 2 of 3 in a new series on making your church disability friendly

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“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV)

Is the dream for your congregation to be a faith community that loves each other and takes care of each other? Acts 4: 32-35 describes a congregation in which no one had any unmet needs. Fred Craddock, long time Preaching Professor at Emory, noted that there are only two ways to achieve this kind of church: either don’t allow anyone in your congregation with needs (exclude by intention or neglect) or, better still, to meet the needs.

In the Acts church, as any had need, the others in the church would work together to meet the need. In a time of quarantine, social unrest, and economic uncertainty many of our models of ministry find themselves unable to adapt. Many of the ways in which we have traditionally met needs now don’t work or are not possible.

In the secular world of the United States over the last couple of decades, great effort has been made in the area of defining, identifying, and developing strategies to work with people who are identified as being disabled. The Church also has been engaged in this well-meaning agenda item with mixed results. The changes in our culture and ways of relating due to COVID-19 have highlighted the limits of the concept of disability which focuses first on identified diagnosis and then designs a plan to meet that need.

In our country, meeting needs revolves first around a specific diagnosis that carries with it financial considerations, then matching the individual with pre-developed programs and

services, and finally plugging them into these services. All of these services are expensive and, whether provided through schools or government programs, notably Medicaid and Medicare, are dependent upon a formal diagnosis because of the monetary implications. If one's needs don't fit into the programs available, then too bad!

The church, and in particular the United Methodist Church of the post-depression era, has typically pursued a parallel course. Government programs and ministries look eerily similar and develop in much the same way. A group of people, the target population, is identified and a program is developed to be delivered to them. It is no accident that the Methodists were developing and building hospitals, retirement homes, and orphanages at the same time the government was building insane asylums, nursing homes, and facilities for those with mental deficiencies and similar institutions. Often these were even done in "partnership" to speed along the process.

This process of institutionalization meant that people were seen purely as receivers of services and had the effect of removing them from society as a whole. In the early 1980's the movement to reverse this process started what has continued to be a slow process of moving people back into community settings. In this historical process of the government dominating service delivery, the United Methodist Church seems to have lost the ability to discern and meet the needs of special needs populations. Ministry with special needs became seen as simply a specialized, self-contained program that stands apart from the real church in a building out back.

From 2015 to 2017, I conducted a study of ministry with developmental disabilities in the Arkansas Conference and was astounded at the number of ministry leaders who were unable to describe how their congregation had a ministry with developmental disabilities. All of our congregations recognize that we have seniors with mobility issues and working to accommodate for their needs with special visitation and outreach to this group, but for many ministry leaders, if there was not a specialized, stand-alone program for the developmentally disabled, then ministry with this population simply did not exist. Most could not name even one person with special needs (other than seniors) in their congregation.

Part of the problem is that we have been trained to think of ministry as a program(s) rather than a posture. If a person with special needs is part of the life and ministry of your congregation, then you have a ministry with special needs persons.

Every congregation includes persons with special needs whether special medical conditions, advanced age, developmental disabilities, and far too many other needs to list here. There are many among us with special needs, specifically developmental disabilities, behavioral disorders, and medical conditions, and we are not even aware of it. But why do our congregations include these people with special needs and yet we do not believe that we have such a ministry? I believe that much of the issue is that we have lost our understanding of the church as a community of faith in which we take care of each other

and think of ourselves more as a religious service provider that delivers services to clients much as the local school district or human services office.

But the church is not the government and our calling is not to be of the secular world but to be the new testament community as exemplified in Acts. The question arises: what is a disability and what are the special needs we should be addressing?

When the Conference Disability Committee began meeting in 2019, one of the first projects was to define the ministry for which the committee should be advocating. The language in the 2016 Discipline, the committee agreed, is now somewhat dated. Even the title, "disability," is really dated and the more accurate term, "special needs," refers to the reality that each of us are created by God. Due to our unique characteristics and life experiences, we each bring a different set of gifts which means that we all have some sort of special need but also strengths.

The term disability presumes that there is such a thing as normal and that those not meeting that definition are therefore not. As the church, our beginning point is not need but creativeness. The church should be about first identifying each person's gifts and how they contribute to the church as a whole and then identifying needs. If your congregation includes those with special needs, then you are engaged in a special needs ministry. The real issue is, how effectively are you meeting these needs?

About the author

Dr. Stephen Waggoner makes his home in Wilburn, Arkansas with his wife Angel who has worked with people with developmental disabilities for 28 years. They have four children including one with autism. Stephen holds degrees from Arkansas Tech University, University of Arkansas Little Rock, Duke Divinity School, and Asbury Theological Seminary. His dissertation, "No Such Thing as Normal: An Exploratory Study of Ministry with Persons With a Developmental Disability in the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church" was completed in 2017. Stephen is an Elder in the Arkansas Conference, a part-time pastor, and a full-time Director of Human Resources at the Community School of Cleburne County which serves children and adults with developmental disabilities both in clinical and supportive living settings.

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