1 CORINTHIANS 12:25

How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry

Rejoicing Spirits®
United in One Body

An inclusive, meaningful Christian community that welcomes, embraces, values and celebrates the gifts of our brothers and sisters with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

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Rejoicing Spirits®

United in One Body

An inclusive worship and fellowship ministry for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities

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How to Start a
Rejoicing Spirits Worship Ministry
September 1, 2010

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Preface

A Mistaken Belief
Historically, there has been a mistaken belief that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities do not have the capacity to experience, express or deepen their spirituality. However, the fact is that our spirit is not dependent on our cognitive abilities, but instead, is an innate part of who we are as human beings. We are all united in one faith by the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ.

We read in Ephesians 4:4-6 NRSV: There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all in all.

It has been observed and written that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities often have a heightened sense of spirituality; and when given the opportunity for it to be expressed, it is genuine, free and unencumbered.

Unfortunately, this population is typically not afforded the same opportunities as the general population to participate, contribute and enhance the quality of their spiritual lives. Admittedly, much progress has been made in the past 30 years to dramatically improve the quality of life for these individuals; but, for the most part, their spiritual needs have been misunderstood and overlooked.

Churches Today
Over the years, thanks to legislation, individuals with disabilities have equal rights in many areas: education, employment, and access to public buildings. But, what about our churches? Have we truly accepted and welcomed individuals with disabilities?

Generally speaking, churches have done little to reach out and actively welcome individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Look around you. These individuals are noticeably missing from our faith communities. Studies show that this is not due to a lack of religious faith. The National Organization of Disability/Harris 2000 Survey of Americans with Disabilities concludes that "something else – likely a barrier of architecture or attitude – is holding people with disabilities back from attending services at a church, parish, synagogue, temple or another place of worship."

Many churches have taken steps to address architectural barriers in order to be more accessible to individuals with "physical disabilities." Ramps, pew cut-outs, special hearing devices and large print bibles are examples of adaptations that help overcome the barriers that individuals with physical disabilities face.

It's the attitudinal and unseen barriers that can be the most challenging to overcome and prevent individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, their families, and caregivers from becoming active members in the faith community of their choice.

Steps Toward Change

In many cases it is fear that prevents congregations from being more welcoming. Many people are fearful or uncomfortable being around people who they perceive are different from them. They may not have had the occasion to get to know a person with a disability. We have seen how once people get to know and develop a friendship with someone with a disability, they are taken beyond their preconceived ideas. One example of how important relationships are in changing these attitudes is provided by Paul, an adult volunteer for an outreach ministry.

"And me? Well, I knew myself well enough to know that I couldn't possibly relate to individuals with specials needs. Wouldn't they and I be very different from one another? What would I say? How would I react? But my family was involved in a new ministry for people with disabilities, and I thought, maybe, just maybe I might-uh-join them? Maybe? Then I stopped thinking and just listened. From somewhere a still, small voice said, "Paul, you've got to do this." "Why?" I answered. "Because you're afraid," said the voice."

"And, so I reluctantly volunteered. And so, I've learned that our guests and I are not really so different one from the other at all. If they are special, they are special in ways that all God's children are special. I see them for what they can do, and not what they can't. Isn't that how we are to see everyone? And isn't this how we would like to be seen ourselves? After all, there are things I can do and things I can't do, just like everyone else."

How can congregations begin to address the issue of fear and break down attitudinal barriers to achieve full inclusion for everyone, and to ensure that all people are welcome and embraced in their faith communities? Churches can reach out and welcome individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and provide support for their families and caregivers in numerous ways. Some options include: mainstreamed religious instruction, bible studies, adapted worship services, respite care, support groups, fellowship activities and special-needs childcare. Sensitivity training and disability-awareness education for the congregation are important steps in helping to integrate the faith community. Both the individuals with development disabilities and the congregations that intentionally reach out equally realize the benefits of full inclusion

***Rejoicing Spirits*: Making a Difference, One Congregation at a Time**

One model that has been successful in breaking down attitudinal barriers and changing hearts is the ***Rejoicing Spirits*** Ministry. *Rejoicing Spirits* is an innovative and inclusive ministry which reaches out to enrich the spiritual lives of individuals with developmental disabilities along with their families, friends, and the local supportive community. This is done by offering a meaningful and adapted Christian worship service and fellowship time. The *Rejoicing Spirits* worship service is uplifting … an environment that is welcoming to *all* children of God. Although the service is modified to more readily engage individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it remains inspiring and meaningful to everyone who attends.

The worship service includes lots of music and joyous singing; brief, concrete and meaningful messages; and plenty of opportunities to participate, serve, lead and learn. The *"no shushing policy*" gives worshippers the freedom to worship as God has intended for them, without fear of judgment or criticism. Rejoicing Spirits also has been gaining popularity as a great worship

opportunity for all families, especially those with young children, since it has lively music; hand-held instruments; and a free expressive environment.

This guidebook entitled "How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry," was written to empower and encourage Christian congregations of all denominations to start a Rejoicing Spirits ministry. The guidebook outlines all the key topics including: setting up an initial feasibility review committee, launching the first worship service and follow-up activities. It includes examples of invitations, letters to provider agencies, newsletter articles, press releases and a sample worship bulletin.

The first Rejoicing Spirits worship service was held and hosted in October of 2003 at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Exton, PA. This host church remains the model site for the National Rejoicing Spirits Ministry in which efforts are made to continue spreading Rejoicing Spirits across the nation.

Rejoicing Spirits can meet the needs of individuals in one of three ways:

- Serves as a stepping stone for those wanting to take the *first step* into a faith community.
- Offers *complementary* worship & fellowship opportunities for those who already belong to a faith community.
- Provides an inclusive faith community that may *fully meet* their current needs and desires.

***Rejoicing Spirits:* A Difference Made Where Everyone Benefits**

If our goal is to welcome and embrace all people in all places, how do we go about making this shift a reality? One of the most natural opportunities to do this is with our children and youth. Since 1975, individuals with disabilities have been educated right along side their typical peers. Inclusive education has provided these children with a better understanding of what it means to be developmentally or physically disabled, and as a result our youth have become more accepting.

Rejoicing Spirits has a multi-generational volunteer base that ranges in age from 5 to 80+, with a large complement of children and young adults. This ministry provides another opportunity for these young people to take their experience of love and acceptance out into the greater community. They are the future adults who will be responsible for making decisions regarding the lives of people with disabilities and are learning to be the accepting and compassionate leaders of the future – the doctors, lawyers, legislators, teachers, neighbors, and pastors. They are learning to love and accept all for who they are.

Stephanie, 9 years old, is a member of the youth choir. She says, *"I am really happy that I became a part of Rejoicing Spirits. One reason is because whenever I get home from church I always feel wonderful that I helped someone. Another reason is because I love to sing and dance."*

One teenage volunteer, Ally, has this to say, "*Rejoicing Spirits has opened my eyes to a different field in health than I initially planned to pursue. My involvement in the Rejoicing Spirits Community has contributed to my desire to become an occupational therapist. Volunteering for Rejoicing Spirits has inspired me to make more of a difference by providing professional care in order to help them achieve independence, be productive and lead a satisfying life."*

Not only has Rejoicing Spirits had an impact on our children, but it also has transformed and enhanced family and individual worship experiences as expressed by Chuck and Karen who attend with their two children. Freddie is 15 years old and has Down syndrome. *"The modified structure of the Rejoicing Spirits service has enabled Freddie, as well as his six-year old sister, Jennifer, to have many opportunities to interact in a meaningful way throughout the service. He has enjoyed singing with his peers in the front of the church, leading the congregation in prayer and bible readings, and has participated in the bible lesson skits. These opportunities have gained his attention and maintained his interest so that he is no longer dependent on our support to help him remain focused throughout the service. The relaxed structure of the Rejoicing Spirits service has allowed Freddie to feel free to be himself. As a result, he is more responsive during the service, and more open to receive the messages of God's love. He is very eager to attend each service and often surprises us with his initiatives to participate, even though occasionally he doesn't realize what he has just volunteered to do! One of the unanticipated benefits to our family is how Freddie's Rejoicing Spirits experiences have helped him to become more involved during our home church service. Freddie now participates more during our service, and is much more interested in being there."*

Susan and her son, Joshua, regularly attend Rejoicing Spirits and have this to say, *"Having a child with developmental and physical disabilities has limited our participation in some public situations. Not only is Rejoicing Spirits a wonderful opportunity for us to worship in a very caring, concerned, and loving environment, but it also provides an opportunity for us to 'network'. After Joshua was born, I found that I was not attending church. Rejoicing Spirits has provided a warm and welcome way for me to get back to church on a regular basis.*

Bettina, a Rejoicing Spirit worshipper, says, *"I look forward to coming to church. The congregation is made up of very kind and good people who have shown me joy and love since the first day I worshipped with them*". Samantha, another worshipper says, *"I love coming to Rejoicing Spirits. It makes me feel so happy. I have so many friends there and I love to sing with them."*

Moving forward

Continuing to educate and empower our churches is the key to breaking down attitudinal barriers and realizing full spiritual inclusion for our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There are many grass roots organizations throughout the country that are assessing and addressing these issues. Progress is definitely being made, but so much remains to be done.

Mission Statement

The Rejoicing Spirits ministry reaches out to enrich the spiritual lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities along with their families, friends and other supportive community members.

God's message of love is shared through a meaningful and adapted Christian worship service and fellowship time. Individuals are free to be themselves while actively participating as contributing members in an inclusive faith community.

The ministry shares the Rejoicing Spirits model of spiritual inclusion with disability and faith-based organizations.

Vision

To ensure all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have the opportunity to explore and express their faith in an inclusive worship community.

Values

Good News. We believe that the good news of love and hope found in Jesus Christ is to be shared in a way that is meaningful to all of God's people.

Education. We believe that we are called to encourage and teach other organizations how to nurture the innate gift of spirituality present in all God's people.

Acceptance. We believe that through inclusive ministries, congregations become aware, educated and accepting of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As attitudinal barriers are removed congregations find themselves to be more welcoming, more nurturing and growing to be truly one body united together in Christ.

Inclusive Community. We believe that all individuals have the right to worship and participate in the faith community of their choice.