

The Spirit Within

By Susan Crawford & Cynthia McCurdy

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Each of us has a spirit; an intrinsic force that energizes us and connects us with one another and to the world around us. Our spirit is the heart and soul of our being and it gives us the ability to feel and experience emotions, as well as spiritual connections. We each express our spirituality in our own unique ways. While the role spirituality plays in each of our lives varies, its contribution to our emotional well-being is significant.

In order to fully experience and deepen our spirituality, it needs to be nurtured. We instinctively and intentionally seek out ways to feed and express our spirit. Taking quiet time to reflect, listening to music, playing sports or spending time in nature are some of the many ways we do this. Having the opportunity to nurture our spirit enhances and dramatically improves our quality of life and overall well-being.

Religious spirituality is our connection to God and the opportunity to experience His glory and His intention for our lives. Many people feel energized and uplifted when their "religious spirit" is fed. Participating in worship services, praying, fellowship and service to others are ways we enrich our religious spirituality. For people of faith, being part of a faith community is one of the most valued connections in their lives.

A Mistaken Belief

Historically, there has been a mistaken belief that people with intellectual/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. It has been observed and written that people with intellectual disabilities often have a heightened sense of spirituality; and when given the opportunity for it to be expressed, it is genuine, unencumbered and faith-filled.

Unfortunately, this population typically is 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.

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

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



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Steps Toward Change

What are the underlying reasons for this attitudinal barrier? In many cases people are fearful or uncomfortable being around people who they perceive as being different from them. They may have never had the opportunity to form a relationship with someone who has a disability. We have witnessed a transformation of attitude once people have the opportunity to develop a friendship with a person with a disability. They realize that they are not so different from one another. 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 special needs. Wouldn't they and I be very different from one another? What would I say? How would I react? But my daughter and my wife were 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."

What steps can congregations take to address the issue of fear and break down attitudinal barriers to ensure that all people are welcomed and embraced by their faith communities? The presence of an inclusive ministry or program in a congregation creates visibility, raises awareness and fosters education, which in turn leads to acceptance. Inclusive ministries and programs provide natural opportunities for relationships to develop between congregation members and people with disabilities. There are many ways that houses of worship can reach out to welcome and support people with disabilities and their families. 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 people with disabilities and the congregations that intentionally reach out to them equally realize the benefits of full inclusion.

Additionally, houses of worship have the resources to go beyond fulfilling spiritual needs. Faith communities provide abundant opportunities for fellowship and community involvement. Endorsement of this is beautifully stated by The ARC/AAIDD Spirituality Position Paper: *"Spiritual resources and congregations are an untapped source of community supports and inclusion, beyond the practice of faith and belief. They offer opportunities to express choice, develop relationships and social networks, respect cultural and family backgrounds, and serve others."*

Not until congregations intentionally reach out and welcome all people, will we realize the outcome of full spiritual inclusion and the enhanced quality of life that all human beings desire.



Lots of friends are made at the Rejoicing Spirits worship and fellowship time.





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 people with intellectual/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 people with intellectual 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 both participate and serve. The "no shushing policy" gives worshipers the freedom to worship as God has intended for them, in an accepting and welcoming environment. It 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.

Rejoicing Spirits can help meet the needs of people in various ways.

- After experiencing the love of a Christian community, some people may hunger for more and feel encouraged to move-on to other types of traditional worship services. The Rejoicing Spirits service serves as a **stepping stone** for those wanting to take the first step into a faith community.
- The Rejoicing Spirits service offers a **complementary** worship service and fellowship opportunities for those who already belong to a faith community.
- The Rejoicing Spirits service provides an inclusive faith community that may **fully** meet the current needs and desires of some worshipers.

A guidebook entitled *How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry* was written to equip and empower 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.

Rejoicing Spirits: A Difference Made Where Everyone Benefits

How do we welcome and embrace all people into our faith communities? One of the most natural opportunities to do this is with our children and youth. Since 1975, people 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 intellectually 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+, including many 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. These future adults will be responsible for making decisions regarding the lives of people with disabilities and they 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."

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



John reads a scriptural passage during a Rejoicing Spirits worship service. Worshipers share their gifts and get involved.



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Paul shares, "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?"



Karen expresses, "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... 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."



Susan shares, "After Joshua was born, I found that I was not attending church. Rejoicing Spirits has provided a warm and welcoming way for me to get back to church on a regular basis."

therapist. Volunteering for Rejoicing Spirits has inspired me to make more of a difference by providing professional care in order to help people 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. Their son, 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. Susan says, *"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 welcoming way for me to get back to church on a regular basis."*

Bettina, a Rejoicing Spirit worshiper, 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 worshiped with them."*

Samantha, another worshiper 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 houses of worship is the key to breaking down attitudinal barriers and realizing full spiritual inclusion for our friends with intellectual disabilities. There are grassroots organizations throughout the country that are assessing and addressing these issues.

Progress is definitely being made, but there is so much that remains to be done. Our faith communities have the ability to make a difference in the lives of some very special people. How can your faith community make a difference?



The Rejoicing Spirits Community at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Lionville/Exton, PA.



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