

Rejoicing Spirits Celebrates 8 Years of Blessings

The past 8 years have been an amazing journey for the Rejoicing Spirit's Ministry team. We have been blessed to be part of the Holy Spirit's plan, which has far exceeded our human vision. Rejoicing Spirits started as a 6-month-trial program in 2003, to determine if we could make a difference in our local community.

The founding team realized that many of our brothers and sisters with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families were noticeably missing from most congregations. We felt called to reach out and invite these individuals, along with their families, friends and caregivers, to worship at St. Paul's. We wanted them to have the opportunity to hear God's word, to feel His love and to be part of an accepting and welcoming faith community.

In order to achieve this, we realized that we needed to do something innovative to encourage people to come to this new service, which we named *Rejoicing Spirits*. We developed an adapted worship service, which welcomes active participation, and we implemented a no-shhhing policy. We designed the service to include lots of joyous singing and music; concrete and meaningful messages; plenty of opportunities to serve and lead; and time to share, embrace and celebrate all gifts and talents.

After 6 months of planning, the first Rejoicing Spirits worship service was launched in October 2003. We were very excited and nervous that day. We wondered... *would anyone come?* Our prayers were answered, and many people came to worship with us. Our first service was glorious; everyone was touched by the presence of the Holy Spirit!

We soon learned that God had bigger plans than just a trial ministry. Several churches immediately showed interest in following the Rejoicing Spirits model. A large residential service provider requested a Rejoicing Spirits service in an adjoining county. Because of these requests and the growing population of faithful worshippers at St. Paul's, we felt called to inspire, encourage and teach other faith communities to follow our model. In response, we wrote a guidebook entitled *How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry*, which provides practical information to equip and empower Christian congregations of all denominations to start Rejoicing Spirits.

We have established a formal process to help churches successfully prepare for their Rejoicing Spirits launch and on-going ministry. Once a church has committed to starting a Rejoicing Spirits ministry, they will have access to the online library of 150+ files and templates along with the support and mentoring of the national team. Churches will continue to receive the on-going mentoring and support throughout their ministry launch and even beyond, as they continue to grow their Rejoicing Spirits ministry.

Rejoicing Spirits addresses the spiritual needs of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities in a variety of 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.

The Holy Spirit has truly been on the move as the Rejoicing Spirits vision continues to spread regionally and nationally. There are currently 28 Rejoicing Spirits ministries in ten states and of five denominations. Many seeds have been planted; we are currently working with a couple of churches that are in the planning process and several other churches are prayerfully considering their call to Rejoicing Spirits.

Through this wonderful experience, we have learned much about disability ministry and the disability community. As an outcome of this knowledge and experience, we have been invited to lead seminars, present at conferences, sponsor and organize workshops, serve on disability boards, and have been featured on PBS and at the SEPA SYNOD Assembly. We have been honored to receive several very gratifying awards and to be included in the soon-to-be published book by Mark Pinsky “*Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability and Inclusion*”.

Above all, the most significant contribution that the Rejoicing Spirits experience brings to the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is the opportunity to hear the word of God and worship as God has intended them to. We celebrate the giftedness of all God’s children and in doing this we have empowered these individuals in ways that previously have not been afforded to them. Every song they sing, every prayer they lead, and every prayer petition they bring forth all serve as the building blocks for growth, improved self-esteem and an overall sense of well-being. The sense of community that has been created by this ministry also has fostered a sense of real belonging...something many people with developmental disabilities over the age of 21 have lacked.

The most important lesson we have learned is that we are not doing this ministry *for*, but rather *with*, our Rejoicing Spirits friends and we have been exceedingly blessed by this opportunity and by each of them. Our brothers and sisters with intellectual and developmental disabilities tend to be more comfortable and expressive while worshipping and praising the Lord. They become our role models and show us the true meaning of faith and how to be more Christ-like. Rejoicing Spirits worshippers teach us how to be true community members by verbalizing prayer petitions and thanksgivings for all to hear. They greet us with such warmth and joy that we feel compelled to follow their lead. The eagerness to serve the Lord is contagious. Through the actions, words, and facial expressions of our Rejoicing Spirits friends, we see their faith shining through.

We have found that congregants’ eyes are opened and hearts are changed, breaking down the attitudinal barriers, which can prevent faith communities from welcoming these very special individuals. One of the best outcomes of a congregation having an Rejoicing Spirits ministry is the evolution from awareness to complete acceptance and inclusion. We have witnessed how a Rejoicing Spirits ministry creates visibility, raises awareness and fosters education, which in turn leads to acceptance. This lesson is carried from our faith communities and into our daily lives and the impact of this very powerful lesson will have far reaching implications. It will forevermore change the way congregation members (young and old), view our brothers and sisters with disabilities.

We truly believe that our loving God has a much larger vision for Rejoicing Spirits. We ask for your prayers as we continue on this amazing journey that the Lord has blessed us with.

Rejoicing Spirits Mission

The Rejoicing Spirits ministry reaches out to enrich the spiritual lives of individuals with 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 religious inclusion with other disability and faith-based organizations.

