

Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion is a new publication by noted religion writer Mark I. Pinsky and Rejoicing Spirits is one of the featured stories in this book



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CHAPTER 13: REJOICING SPIRITS GETTING INVOLVED

January 2003 marked a turning point in Susan Crawford's life, she told *Breakthrough* magazine. "I was a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Exton, Pennsylvania, for about two years and only peripherally involved, helping with a few activities here and there. I wanted to be more active, but didn't know how to best serve the Lord." Then she attended a class held at the church, titled "Identifying Your Spiritual Gifts." While praying for her spiritual calling, Crawford felt an inspiration from the Holy Spirit—a strong desire to explore the idea of developing a worship service adapted for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Crawford confided in her pastor, who encouraged her and suggested she contact Cynthia McCurdy, whose daughter, Katie, had Down syndrome. Since birth Katie had been an active part of her family's faith life. She attended Sunday school and Vacation Bible School at St. Paul's, made her first communion and confirmation, and was active in the teen theater group. "I carry the banners, kind of like a spirit does, too," Katie explained in the documentary *Creating Room in God's House*, which aired on PBS. "And the Gospel—I have to read the Gospel. I have to study for it. Then I read the Gospel to everyone."

McCurdy was aware, however, that many of Katie's peers and their families were not having the same positive church experiences at other churches. She said, "Over the years, I heard stories from families that they were asked to leave, were told not to come back, or that they just didn't receive the kind of support needed and necessary while navigating the challenges of raising a child with a disability. Many families felt, if we can't get the love and support we need at church, where can we get it? This left many of them feeling even more isolated and disillusioned with organized religion. In other families that I've talked to, there have been numerous instances of 'We don't know what to do with your kind' or 'Please don't come back.'"

Crawford agreed. "I realized that people with disabilities were missing from communities of faith. It isn't that people with disabilities don't have spiritual needs and desires—they certainly do! They just weren't being invited and welcomed into houses of worship."

Both women felt moved to action and with their newly recruited team they founded the Rejoicing Spirits Ministry, which has grown to twenty-eight churches in five denominations, spread across ten states. "Originally," said Crawford, "our efforts were focused on our local community. However, a few months into this outreach we were contacted by another church that wanted to follow our model, and then another. We began to realize that God had bigger plans for Rejoicing Spirits."

St. Paul's pastor, Mark Singh-Hueter, embraced the Rejoicing Spirits service concept. "Everything is presented in a way that is really much more interactive," he said, "whether worshippers are in the choir, or part of the skit, or doing Bible readings—everybody gets to use their gifts and get involved."

Others soon became involved and spread Rejoicing Spirits to other congregations. Susan March first brought her son Joshua, who has a developmental disability, to the St. Paul's service, where, like many others, he found a caring, concerned, and loving environment—including a "no shushing policy." What March also found was an opportunity to network with other families affected by disabilities. Rejoicing Spirits brought her

back to her own church, too, which she had stopped attending after Joshua was born. That church now has a Rejoicing Spirits ministry of its own.

“We’ve been very fortunate to make some new friends and rekindle friendships with some old friends,” March said. “We are so blessed that Joshua was born in a time and place when people with ‘differences’ are better accepted in the community and that there are programs in place that give each and every one of us the chance to be everything we can be.”

“I would not feel comfortable just walking into any church for a service because of the noisiness,” continued March. “We usually make some kind of a scene, but here at Rejoicing Spirits we really don’t have to worry about it. A lot of times when we’re out in public, Joshua does experience a lot of stares. So we find that we really don’t go to many public places or events. Rejoicing Spirits is wonderful, because not only does Joshua get time to come and be exposed to worship, but I get to come back to church, too.”

Karen, the mother of a young teenage boy with Down syndrome and autism spectrum, sometimes wondered whether her son, Freddie, was developing spiritually at their home church on Sunday mornings. She and her husband had to take turns engaging their son to keep him from being distracted. Then they heard about the Rejoicing Spirits ministry at St. Paul’s, and they were not disappointed.

Freddie enjoys singing with his peers in the front of the church, leading the congregation in prayer and Bible readings, and participating in Bible lesson skits. These activities engage his attention and interest to the point that he no longer needs his parents to keep him focused throughout the service. The relaxed structure of the service enables him to feel free to be himself during worship. As a result, Freddie is more responsive during the service and, his parents are convinced, more open to receiving the messages of God’s love. Freddie is eager to attend each service and often surprises his mother and father with his initiatives to participate, even though occasionally he doesn’t understand what he has just volunteered to do.

One unforeseen benefit to Karen’s family is the way their son’s experiences at Rejoicing Spirits services have helped him to become more involved at the family’s home church services, where Freddie now participates more and is much more interested in attending. “It’s a joy to watch him grow in this way and become a fuller participant in his community,” Karen said. With his family by his side, he “has an opportunity to develop his own unique spirituality and relationship with God.”

One volunteer, a teenager named Ally, said her experience with Rejoicing Spirits had inspired her to pursue a career in occupational therapy. Before she formed friendships with Rejoicing Spirits worshippers, Ally had been considering a different career path. Others at St. Paul’s, who had no previous personal relationships with people who had intellectual and developmental disabilities, have experienced changes in attitude because of their involvement with Rejoicing Spirits.

Paul, now a faithful volunteer, was drawn to the ministry because several of his family members were participating—but he had his doubts. “I knew myself well enough to know that I couldn’t possibly relate to our special guests,” he recalled in a newsletter testimony. “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, 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.”

Tentatively, Paul agreed to supervise parking for the services. But it soon dawned on him that he was more than a traffic attendant—he would be the first point of contact for people attending the services, the first person to greet and welcome the worshippers. Over time, Paul grew more comfortable attending the services.

“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 this how we are to see everyone? And isn’t this how we would like to be seen ourselves?”

Crawford and her team developed a guidebook, *How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry*, to encourage and equip Christian congregations of all denominations to start their own disability outreach ministries. The guidebook outlines key topics such as setting up an initial feasibility review committee, launching the first worship service, reaching out to the community, and carrying out follow-up activities. It includes examples of invitations, letters to provider agencies, newsletter articles, press releases, and a worship bulletin. Additionally, Crawford's group mentors new Rejoicing Spirits host churches, sharing the many lessons the team has learned.

"Ideally, all people of all abilities should be invited and welcomed into the fabric of a faith community of their choice," Crawford said. "However, the reality is that most houses of worship are simply not equipped to do this for a variety of reasons. First, many people don't believe that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are spiritual people. These doubters just need to join us at one Rejoicing Spirits service and they will realize that a person's cognitive abilities have no relationship to their spiritual capabilities. Second is their fear, fear of the unknown, and their lack of knowledge and experience with people with disabilities.

"With all the other issues that face our congregations, the easiest one to put off and avoid is full inclusion. It's been our experience, though, that congregations are willing to take on an outreach-evangelism ministry such as Rejoicing Spirits, and when they do, everyone realizes 'that we are not so different from each other at all and that God loves each one of us equally.' Rejoicing Spirits, as an intentional, inclusive outreach ministry, has created visibility, raised awareness, and fostered education, which has led to acceptance and friendship."

The ministry believes that religious communities provides some of the few opportunities people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have to develop friendships and interact independently with others outside of their individual or group homes. Too often, people with disabilities spend their lives feeling as if they are being shadowed, told what to do and how to do it. Rejoicing Spirits encourages free expression and full participation. Worshipers who are nonverbal and may have the ability to communicate only in noises are given handheld instruments to convey their spirituality and joy. All are accepted and celebrated.

"We created a welcoming environment for all children of God, filled with lots of music and joyous singing along with brief, meaningful messages," Crawford said. "Participants feel accepted and part of a love-filled community. We want everyone to learn about God and his love for each of them. The service provides fellowship with other Christians and the opportunity for friendships to develop.

"Rejoicing Spirits can be a stepping-stone for worshippers who want to transition into a fully integrated church community, which we believe is the ideal situation. For others, the Rejoicing Spirits worship service may fully meet their current needs and desires. But no one is excluded from this worship experience; anyone who is already integrated into a church community is also invited to this unique worship service."

"When I see individuals of all abilities feeling free to be themselves and to worship as God has intended them to be," Cynthia McCurdy said. "I feel the Holy Spirit moving within everyone."