



# Connecting special needs parents through a small group mentor program

We are never meant to walk life's journey alone. Joys and challenges often come to us in unanticipated ways. Parents know how best laid plans don't always happen as hoped. Parents of children with special needs likely know this best. These parents were not meant to walk alone.

According to Christian Council for Persons with Disabilities, 80 percent of families who have a loved one with special needs are unchurched. The leading factor is parents have not found a church where they feel welcomed or a church that is willing to create awareness for inclusive ministries for their loved one.

In his book, "Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families: a Practical Guide for Congregations", Dr. Erik W. Carter points out the 71 percent of the families with someone having special needs listed a parent mentor group as the most needed ministry a church could provide. Only 12 percent of the families surveyed had a church mentor group.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6)*

**80%** of families are unchurched

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## Finding support

There are several things initially that a church can do for special needs families. A congregational awareness of who the person with special needs is, what abilities they have, how they take in information and get it out, what sensory issues they may have, what equipment or supports might be important, are all things that will allow for the family to feel welcome and accepted in your congregation. A good resource for helping to accommodate inclusion into the church is written by Barbara J. Newman titled, "Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship".

Now is the time for a self-care opportunity to increase personal and family resiliency, and provide good Christian care.

## Christian mentor networks

help relieve isolation, process emotions and provide understanding of God.

### Starting a mentor group

It is time to **plan and prepare** for your special needs mentor group.

- 1. Have a conversation with special needs parents** to identify the best time and place.
  - Choose a day and time; daytime, weeknight, Sunday school hour, Sunday night.
  - Choose a frequency; monthly, bi-weekly, weekly.
  - Choose location; church, homes, coffee shop. Is there a decision to be made for child care?
- 2. Identify the structure of the meeting;** will it be a book study, guest speakers, devotion and conversation, a periodic social night out? A great book to start with is written by Rev. Dr. Lorna Bradley, *"Special Needs Parenting – from Coping to Thriving."* This book is a seven week study specifically written for launching new small groups. It addresses common emotional and spiritual challenges of special needs parents.
- 3. Appoint a group leader.** Someone who is spiritually mature has a good knowledge and understanding of God's Word, can listen without judging, can lead a group and give guidance, has the time, energy, and motivation to lead. Typically this may be a parent of a child with special needs. More than one person could be designated as leaders.
- 4. Invite, invite, invite.**
  - Create awareness inside the congregation: use articles, announcements, emails, website, and social media networking.
  - Create awareness outside the congregation: press release, social media marketing, therapist offices, and local schools for special needs, public school district, and other non-profits who specialize in special needs.
  - Identify the "special needs bus" in your community, make a personal invitation.
- 5. Create an inviting meeting space.** Arrange for comfortable seating in a circle, comfortable lighting. Have a sign in sheet and name tags for attendees. Provide tissues! Allow adequate time; we recommend 90 minutes. Light refreshments are an option.

## 6. Start the meeting.

- Open in prayer.
- Invite participants to introduce themselves.
- First meeting: introduce a topic, work through and discuss. Consecutive meetings: share updates since last meeting. Introduce a topic, work through and discuss.
- Gather prayer concerns.
- Close with prayer.

## Maintaining a mentor group

Communication is the key; maintain regular contact, use social media, encourage connections outside of the meetings, add periodic outings and fun events, and follow up with anyone who stops attending.

A couple things to keep in mind:

- Identify if the group should be open or closed to new members.
- Studies show 6-15 people (or 7 families) is ideal for a mentor group. If there are additional interested parties, one suggestion would be to have an additional mentor group.
- There will be challenges in sustaining a mentor group; finding a day/time that works, low turnout, no shows, and finding child care. In addition, challenging personalities may come into play; the parent with “all the answers”, the overly negative parent, the parent with an agenda, etc.

In Mark 10, Jesus sees the disciples keeping the children away from him and says, ‘Let the little children come to me.’ Reading further the passage also says Jesus was “indignant.” Jesus was angry. Often families of children with special needs are treated the same way the disciples did. May you and your congregation share the gift of grace with families who have a loved one with special needs.

For more assistance in sharing the gospel with people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, their families and communities, contact us at [www.tlha.org](http://www.tlha.org). For up-to-date information, “Like” Jesus Cares Ministries on Facebook.

## Learning more

Below are a few organizations that can provide additional resources.

- WELS Special Ministries
- Guidelines for Establishing a Special Needs Parents Network
- Snappin Ministries
- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Religion and Spirituality Resources
- Collaborative on Faith and Disability
- Bethesda Lutheran Communities



## Jesus Cares Ministries

*The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. (Psalm 126:3)*

Jesus Cares Ministries (JCM) assists congregations in reaching out to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, their families and communities.

### Worship Services

*Worship at the Cross* service follows a simplified format appropriate for people with a cognitive disability, including people with forms of dementia. Pictures and symbols lead participants through the parts of the service. Simple rhythm instruments allow non-readers or those who are nonverbal to make joyful noise to the Lord. A PowerPoint presentation is used for a responsive worship service for those who are able to participate in that manner. We encourage and support a message that involves multiple senses.

### Fellowship

JCM programs should include fellowship events to bring together your church members, JCM participants and the community. Bowling, a carnival with games, karaoke or a picnic provide fellowship and an opportunity to invite new people who may wish to participate, volunteer or otherwise support the JCM program.

### New Friends

New Friends is a Christian-based friendship network connecting young adults in high school and college with families of children with special needs. The purpose is to build relationships by focusing on abilities, not disabilities, while creating a fun-filled atmosphere where the entire family feels safe, relaxed and happy.

### Bible Study

Specific Bible study materials have been developed for the JCM program. *Dear Christian Friend* was developed for people with limited reading ability by incorporating JCM Word Pictures with the text. A teacher's manual is provided for each lesson, which offers ideas for using flannel board pictures to accompany a story, special music and crafts.



## White paper sources

- <http://www.clcnetwork.org/clc-store/#trainingDVD>
- <http://specialneedsparenting.me/>
- Carter, E. W. (2007, April 12) *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*
- Bradley, Lorna (2015, March 4) *Special Needs Parenting: From Coping to Thriving*

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