



**Special Needs Children: part 1 of 3—**

# Reaching Families No One Is Reaching

by Larry Sauter

**W**here are the children with disabilities? According to the National Office of Educational Research<sup>1</sup>, there are approximately 26,138,000 children enrolled in grades K–6 in the United States. Approximately 3,300,000 of these children are receiving special educational services. These figures might seem irrelevant until we understand that approximately 12 percent of elementary children in public schools have some type of disability. (No statistics are available from Christian school associations.)

Most of these 3,300,000 children do not attend evangelical churches. A survey of Sunday School classes, children's church, midweek children's club, or kids camps will probably reveal that 12 percent of the children in our churches do not have disabilities.

The church is the perfect place for children with disabilities and their families. Where else can families find unconditional love, unconditional acceptance, and hope for tomorrow? Why are these families and their children not flooding our congregations each week?

## Families and Disabilities

Families are introduced to disabilities in four ways:

- **At birth**—cerebral palsy, cognitive delay, autism, visual/hearing impairment, spina bifida, Down's syndrome.
- **Accident/abuse**—traumatic brain injury, para- and quadriplegia.



- **Physiological conditions, sickness or disease**—polio, infection, muscular dystrophy, stroke, and cancer.
- **Temporary disability**—broken limbs, surgical recovery. Raising children today is a

full-time responsibility. Factor in the complications associated with disabilities and we begin to understand that the difficulty is exponentially compounded. Families dealing with disability need what the church has to offer because:

- Four out of five marriages that either produce a child with a disability or include a spouse who becomes disabled through accident or disease end in divorce.
- Children with cognitive problems are subject to 10 times more abuse than typical children.
- The incidence of abuse in families with a disabled child is twice that of typical families.
- Nine out of 10 women who find through amniocentesis that their unborn child has Down's syndrome choose to abort.
- Siblings of a child with a disability are four times more likely to be maladjusted than their peers who have typical siblings.<sup>2</sup>

Most people and families need to come to grips with the compelling question—"Why?" We need to avoid clichés, even biblical ones. But we can be the conduit of God's mercy, love,

and salvation. Perhaps we will never help families answer the why, but we can love and assist them into the kingdom of God.

## **Ministering to Those with Disabilities**

Following is a scenario that involved my wife, Penny; our senior pastor, Gary Allen; our church, First Assembly of God, Elgin, Illinois; and myself. This is an example of how God used a church to make a difference in a family.

Chuck and Debbie began praying for their neighbors. They did more than pray; they became friends. As their relationship developed with their neighbors Carin and Mark, they became aware of the mental and physical disabilities of Emily, Carin and Mark's daughter. This family was unchurched and unsaved. They had tried several churches in Elgin but never felt they fit in. None of the churches were willing to accommodate

Emily's needs.

Chuck and Debbie enlisted our church to pray for Carin, Mark, and Emily. Because I was minister of Christian education, Chuck and Debbie contacted me. I presented the case to senior pastor Gary Allen, who empowered me to do whatever it took to win this family.

As the pastoral staff began to pray for this family, we waited on the Lord for direction and timing. I called the family to arrange a home visit to explain about our church and to evaluate Emily's needs. (Professional training and an M.A. in special education were useful, but the success of this story did not depend on my professional skills.)

After meeting with Carin and Mark, I visited the school where Emily attended and learned what I could from her teachers. We then presented the needs of this family to our Christian education staff as an opportunity for evangelism.

With the support of our staff, we developed a plan that included extra aids assigned to Emily, visits to the classroom with Carin, training for her teachers, and Penny was to be on call for emergencies. What we saw was miraculous. Carin and Mark accepted Christ as their Savior, a younger sister enrolled in our Christian school, and an entire family was reached.

Now, under senior pastor Larry Bradshaw, First Assembly of God has recently received the Caring Church Award by the Christian Council on Persons with Disabilities (CCPD). First Assembly of God has two buses equipped with power lifts for transporting people in wheelchairs. The church is also affiliated with Special Touch Ministry.

Emily taught us more than we taught her. We learned about compassion and were blessed because we were willing to do whatever it took.

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### **Questions for Further Study—**

1. If there are people with disabilities in your church, evaluate how you can better serve them.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. If there are no people with disabilities in your church, discuss how you might reach out to that community and minister to them.



**Special Needs Children: part 2 of 3—**

# Reaching Families No One Is Reaching

*by Larry Sauter*

## Don't Make Assumptions

In 1984, my wife Penny, and I attended our first Special Touch Summer Getaway—a Christian retreat/vacation for people with disabilities. As caregivers, we learned the hard way the most important lesson in disability ministry—never presume. Penny and I were introduced to an unreached people group that we had never noticed. We did not know that people with disabilities lived with such pain and rejection.

At this retreat I had the privilege of caring for Buck. He had sustained extensive damage to his spinal cord and had quadriplegia. I was taught how to take care of his daily needs (dressing, personal hygiene, feeding), and we became friends. I purposed in my heart to return the next year and spend another week with Buck.

For the next year, our church and friends prayed for Buck's healing. We fasted, proclaimed, petitioned Christ to bind Satan, and praised God for what He was able to do. I was so excited. I knew God would

heal. As the week progressed at the next year's retreat, my faith grew.

Thursday night arrived, and I asked Buck if he wanted to be healed. I wheeled Buck forward. As we anointed him with oil, I prayed and expected Buck to walk. When nothing happened and tears began to drip from my cheeks, I heard that still small voice of the Lord ask,



“Why didn't you ask Me what Buck needed?” I presumed Buck's need was healing, when what he needed was a right relationship with God.

A few years later, Buck told me that if God had not spared

his life, he would have died and gone to hell. Buck said that a lifetime in a wheelchair could not be compared to an eternity with his Lord.

Many people in the church today make the same wrong assumption. It is disastrous if we assume that people with disabilities only need physical healing. They also need a right relationship with God.

The General Presbyters of the Assemblies of God, in August 2000, adopted a position paper entitled “Ministry to People with Disabilities, a Biblical Perspective.” The first two paragraphs give us tremendous insight into disability ministry.

“Pentecostal evangelicals, believing that miracles still happen today, sometimes have difficulty dealing with people with permanent disabilities and with those who are not healed after much prayer. But does our theology include, along with our belief in supernatural miracles today, a biblical explanation for those who are not immediately healed or made whole? We accept death by old age and even by accident; but constant

reminders of many with mental and physical disabilities, who are not restored to full health and activity, seem to suggest that our belief or our faith is faulty.

“Our theology makes place for pain and suffering because we have hope for healing and

an end to pain. But how does our theology, our faith, and our practice handle the person who may never walk again or the mentally challenged child who may never participate in normal social interaction? A proper understanding of the gospel must

boldly proclaim, even though we do not have all the answers, that the God who created the universe and all human life in it is aware of the tension His children feel. He expects us to be people of compassion as well as people of power.”<sup>3</sup>

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### **Questions for Further Study—**

1. Evaluate your own theology. What are your beliefs about those with special needs whom the Lord does not heal?
2. In what ways do you show compassion to those with special needs in your church?
3. What are the greatest needs of the people with disabilities in your church?
4. What steps are you taking to care for the spiritual needs as well as the physical needs of people with disabilities?



**Special Needs Children: part 3 of 3—**

# Reaching Families No One Is Reaching

by Larry Sauter

## What do I do if God does not heal me?

The church must be ready to answer this question if it is to minister effectively to people with disabilities.

In 1993, Assemblies of God minister, Ken Dignan, published *Til Healing Comes*. Ken deals with the result of polio.

"I am very thankful for the grace of God and for the promise that either here through a miraculous healing, or when I get to heaven, I will be able to run, jump, and smack a home run. All the inconveniences in my life cannot take away the joy of that promise.

"Yes, I went from polio to praise. But along with my praise to God for His wonderful gift of new life, many questions still linger about healing."<sup>4</sup>

Every child who has a disability needs to know God loves him and the church loves him too. Some children are more easily loved into the kingdom of God than others. The little boy or girl who has Christian parents, is being raised in a Christian home, and attends church regularly might be relatively

easy to disciple. These kids are a joy to minister to and fun to watch as they mature in the Lord. They make ministry easy and fun. But are we willing to work hard at ministering to kids who will require a lot of work?



## Reaching Those with Disabilities

Assemblies of God U.S. Missions is raising an army of well-trained missionaries who are being sent into the vast subcultures of the United States. Realizing that subcultures have unique needs, languages, customs, beliefs, and values makes

evangelizing them more effective. Most churches are good at ministering to people like them, but they have not been very successful at ministering to people who are different.

Children with mental or physical disabilities are part of a huge, unreached people group. They are a unique subculture, but one that is within reach of most of our children. This subculture has its own language (at least vocabulary), needs, customs, and values. Like any unreached people group, successful evangelism and discipleship depend on understanding the culture and a willingness to accommodate the children who deal with disabilities.

The philosophy of mainstreaming, or inclusion, puts this people group into daily contact with the children of your church. According to the Disability Statistics Center,<sup>5</sup> at least 70 percent of school-age children with disabilities spend most of the school day in classes with nondisabled peers. This makes it easy for our kids to invite them to church.

We must be ready to receive these kids with the attitude that

we will do whatever it takes to win them to the Lord and reach out in love to their families. If we welcome them into our church, accommodate their special needs, and show unconditional love and acceptance, we will be on our way to fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Assemblies of God Position Paper on Disabilities concludes with these statements:

“People with disabilities are essential to the wholeness of the Christian community. In a culture that worships physical perfection, devalues human life, and takes pride in disposability, the church must protect the helpless, vulnerable, disenfranchised, including people with disabilities. They are people created in God’s image, possessing dignity, value, and purpose.

“The church must extend open arms of invitation and fellowship. Those with mental disabilities can respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul reported the answer he received when he asked that his thorn in the flesh be removed: ‘[The Lord] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” ‘ (2 Corinthians 12:9). We can trust God to reveal His power through the weakness of those with disabilities.”<sup>6</sup>

*Larry and Penny Sauter are nationally appointed home missionaries to persons with disabilities and works with Special Touch Ministry, Inc.*

## ENDNOTES

1. National Office of Educational Research, 800-424-1616.
2. Jim Pierson, James O. Pierson, Rodney Pate, *No Disabled Souls* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1998), 90.
3. Assemblies of God Position Paper, “Ministry to People with Disabilities, a Biblical Perspective” (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 2000).
4. Ken Dignan, *Til Healing Comes* (DeBary, Fla.: Longwood Communications, 1993), 17.
5. Steven Kaye, “Education of Children with Disabilities,” Abstract 19, Disability Statistics Center, July 1997.
6. Assemblies of God Position Paper, “Ministry to People with Disabilities, a Biblical Perspective” (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 2000).

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### Questions for Further Study—

1. This article begins with the question, “What do I do if God does not heal me?” How would you answer that question?
  
2. What steps can you take to understand the “subculture” of people with special needs?