

DISABILITY AND SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE CHURCH

*... those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,
and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.*

1 Corinthians 12:22-23a

The Evangelical Free Church of America has a mission to honor God by multiplying transformational churches among all people. As the EFCA Disability and Special Needs Ministry Team, we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ and the family of God are open to all, regardless of any person's characteristics, background, or ability. And more than simple openness, we believe that each member brings value to the body through their unique gifting, their perspective, their influence on others, and the simple fact that they are a beloved child of our Father.

For some members of the body, their path to participation and leadership in our churches is straightforward. Their values, relationships, means of expression and communication, leadership styles, and appearance easily correspond with the culture and preferences that have grown in our churches. Others require more intentional effort. This is the effort we saw from Jesus as he risked the credibility of his ministry to reach out to shepherds, tax collectors, Samaritans, demon possessed, lepers, the blind and deaf, zealots, prostitutes, and Pharisees, contextualizing the eternal truth of the gospel for each. This is the effort of the shepherd who leaves the 99 to pursue his one lost sheep. This is the effort we must make as the body of Christ.

Ministry alongside the twenty percent of our population living with a disability or special need calls for that kind of intentional effort from our churches. This group includes people with mental and physical impairments and long-term illnesses. We have seen the effects of lack of effort: this community, along with their families and caregivers, are overwhelmingly unlikely to attend church and prone to leave inaccessible or unwelcoming churches. As a result, this is one of the largest unreached people groups both across the world and within the United States.

We believe that every local church, with the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit and in partnership with others, can reach, care for, disciple, and equip for ministry those affected by disabilities and special needs. Doing so will multiply disciples, transform families and communities, and fulfill the mandate of Scripture.

We affirm these principles from Scripture:

- **All humans are created in the image of God.** Every person bears that intrinsic value that cannot be diminished or erased, regardless of disability or impediment. Every person is therefore worthy of love, compassion, protection, and care. (Gen 1:26-27; Ps 139:13-14; Phil 2:4; Gal 6:2)
- **God requires special care and attention for vulnerable people.** We do this because of the Lord's example, because it is necessary for a diverse and inclusive body, because it is a demonstration of the gospel, and out of gratitude for the mercy and grace



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shown to us. (Prov 21:13, 31:8; Job 29:15; 1 Cor 12:22-26; Gal 2:10; James 1:27; 1 John 3:17-18)

- **The Great Commission applies to all people, regardless of ability.** Most people with disabilities can know, accept, and grow in Christ and share him with others in word or deed. The church has an obligation and opportunity to share the gospel with and disciple these people. (Zep 3:19; Matt 9:27-23; Acts 4:8-10; Luke 7:21-23)
- **Disability is part of God’s sovereign redemptive purpose.** Despite our broken world, “God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His glory.” No disability excludes a person from God’s care and God’s work. The church cannot participate in God’s full plan for his family and the world until we fully engage with this community. (Ex 4:10-12; Jn 9:1-3; 2 Cor 12:6-10; Gal 4:13)
- **Diversity is an essential part of God’s design for the church.** The Body of Christ is not complete without all its members. Often those with perceived limitations have a unique perspective or access to advance the gospel. (Gen 32:25; 1 Cor 12:15-20; Gal 4:12-14)
- **Inclusion and accommodation are modeled by Jesus and the early church.** Jesus went out of his way to meet marginalized people where they were, even as they were despised by those around him. The early church, in turn, made sure the most vulnerable had special care. (Matt 15:30; Mark 5; 7:32-35; Luke 14:13-14; Acts 6:1-7)

We affirm these principles of ministry:

- Discipleship of a person with a disability or special need is a core gospel call for any church. It is no more optional or peripheral than discipleship of any other person.
- Discipleship involves growth in the person’s relation to God, themselves, their community, and their environment. It also involves growth in the community’s relation to God, itself, the individual, and the environment.
- Effective discipling among people affected by disabilities or special needs leads to multiplication and transformation. On the other hand, ineffective discipling limits the reach, impact, and credibility of our churches.
- The goal of ministry should be inclusion, as much as possible, in the spiritual and social life of the church. This includes leadership and service opportunities, encouraging relationships between people of different abilities, and making the necessary accommodations to allow participation in corporate worship and other programs.
- Barriers to inclusion are both physical and cultural. Cultural barriers are often more important and more difficult than physical. Cultural barriers may include failure to see people with disabilities or special needs, negative perceptions or stereotypes, incomplete theology, and fear of taking on the challenge. However, every church can begin to take steps to address these barriers and increase their ministry effectiveness.



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