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Graceview offers new perspective for special-needs families

By John Hall

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TOMBALL-Graceview Baptist Church is giving disabled people and their caregivers freedom to worship by offering them a little joy.

For about eight years, trained church members have cared for disabled individuals during Sunday School and worship services through the church's Joy program. It enables parents or caregivers to join the rest of the congregation for spiritual enrichment.

Volunteers lead the disabled people-whose afflictions include cerebral palsy, autism, retardation and Down syndrome-in Bible studies and recreational activities.

Some of the people attend mainstream Sunday School classes at a level they can understand, but special classes for the disabled also are offered.

The outreach enables caregivers to attend the church, said Denise Briley, mother of a child with cerebral palsy and founder of the program.

Many parents feel uncomfortable taking their disabled children to worship services because of their special needs, she said.

The attention directed toward parents when their children require a feeding tube or breathing apparatus makes them feel unwanted, she added.

But unless workers are trained to help disabled people, the church cannot handle them, she said.

“If you think about it, you can't take a baby on a feeding pump into the nursery and say, 'Here you go,'" Briley said. “They're stuck at home.”

Briley encountered similar feelings as she searched for a church with her son, she said. Soon after joining Graceview Baptist Church, she shared her vision for a place where disabled people could safely study the Bible in classes designed for their needs.

To her surprise, 16 people volunteered immediately after she testified about her desire, and the Joy program was born. The program continually expanded until about 80 volunteers provided a weeklong Vacation Bible School for 15 disabled people this summer.

Millie Bass, a volunteer in the program, said she is amazed at how the people responded to Bible studies during the years. Music and pictures especially are effective in communicating the gospel to them, she noted.

Parents and children have become closely connected to her paintings of the people “as God sees them,” without disabilities, she noted. Disabled individuals comprehend the love and many times the message of the outreach, she said.

But the students are not the only people who are blessed, she continued.

“The greatest reward is the hugs and smiles from the kids,” Bass said. “The kids are so honest and open with their love. It's unconditional. You couldn't run me off with a stick.”

Special-needs individuals are a segment of the population that primarily

has not been touched by the gospel, but the church is discovering this mission field, Briley commented.

“It is an untapped mission field,” Briley said. “There are so many families who give up. They don't want to be rejected anymore. Churches just don't know how to reach out.”

The outreach has caught the attention of other congregations, and Graceview leaders gladly have helped 300 churches start a special-needs program and hope to assist many more.

“My vision is that one day it won't be a question; there will be something there,” Briley said.

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