

Churches try to meet need of developmentally challenged kids

October 23, 2008

DAMASCUS, Md. (RNS)—On Sunday mornings at Damascus Road Community Church, when most children are dismissed from the sanctuary for Sunday school, another set of children and adults head to “The Haven.”

Up to four dozen people gather in the church gym to play games and review a Scripture lesson on a sheet with fill-in-the-blank answers.

It’s a calm, structured atmosphere where no one seems to notice if a child is a little quiet, or if another writes outside the blanks or a teen or adult hovers close to comfort or coach a participant.

“The Haven” is a ministry for members with developmental disabilities such as autism, Asperger’s syndrome or other conditions that may make sitting through a typical church service difficult or impossible.

Created about 10 years ago by parents with special-needs children, it’s just one example of how churches are trying to welcome families—who otherwise might stay home—into a faith setting that works for them and their children.

“It’s better than everything else in my life,” said Alec Carlson, 15, who has Asperger’s and joined 10 other people on a multicolored mat during the Scripture lesson.

Participants in The Haven, a ministry for special-needs adults and children, play a game earlier this year at Damascus Road Community Church in Damascus, Md. (RNS photo/courtesy of Juli Feissner)

Across the country, new programs and resources are being made available to families with special-needs children. [LifeWay Christian Resources](#), the Southern Baptist publisher, introduced a Bible study curriculum called “Special Buddies” last fall. Earlier this year, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability hosted an online seminar to offer strategies for catechism teachers to aid developmentally disabled children.

Experts who consult with Christian educators report increased interest in workshops, books and other materials that help them adapt their Sunday school classrooms for children with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other conditions.

Carlton McDaniel, a special-needs specialist with LifeWay, said attendance is up at sessions he conducts at annual Sunday school training conferences, and more churches are inviting him to speak.

“We’re finding more families who are coming into our churches and saying: ‘This is where the rest of my family wants to be. Now, what are you going to do for my child?’” he said. “In years past, a family would come in, find out there was nothing for their child and leave.”

While parents speak up for their children and congregations try to reach out, some churches have said their sanctuary is not an appropriate setting for a special-needs child.

Restraining order

In Bertha, Minn., the Catholic Church of St. Joseph made accommodations for 13-year-old Adam Race for 12 years but obtained a restraining order against the teen, who is now 6 feet tall and weighs about 200 pounds, when safety became a concern. Adam was accused of urinating on a pew and pushing a parishioner.

“I would say that the majority of our parishes do address the ... special needs of people, and certainly try to do all they can to welcome them,” St. Joseph spokeswoman Jane Marrin said. “This has been just an unusual situation.”

Adam’s mother, Carol Race, calls the focus on his growth “ridiculous” and has found a church in a neighboring town that the entire family can attend. She’s also started a ministry called Adam’s Pew to encourage more churches to welcome families with special-needs children.

Her group’s website encourages worshippers to “turn and smile” rather than stare when a child makes a minor disruption in a worship service.

“My sense is that if it’s a really easy way to include someone with a disability, churches are generally open,” said Race, whose son needs to get out of the pew during services and sometimes makes a humming noise when he’s nervous.

But “if it involves educating the congregation, if it involves the congregation needing to be tolerant, these are the areas where I think we have a long way to go,” she said.

Different responses

While some churches offer inclusive or separate Sunday school programs, others are branching out into additional ministries for families with developmentally disabled children.

Terri Kellum, the leader of a disabilities ministry at the nondenominational North Arundel Church in Glen Burnie, Md., conducted the first “Buddy Break” at her church on a recent Saturday. She plans to offer the program, created by a Florida ministry called Nathaniel’s Hope, once a month to allow parents to drop off their special-needs children for three hours of activities with trained volunteers.

“This is a way of reaching out to them, where they can come out and socialize, where they can come and feel accepted, where they can come and know the Lord,” Kellum said.

Ginny Thornburgh, who directs the Interfaith Initiative for the [American Association of People With Disabilities](#), said churches can model the individual education programs that have been developed by public school systems for children with developmental challenges.

Thornburgh said families and churches can determine together what interests, motivates and calms a child, perhaps by incorporating the advice of a teacher who has worked with the child in a secular school setting.

“Do they need a buddy? Do they need a quieter room? Do they need some break time? How is it that we can uniquely serve them?” These are questions Thornburgh says should be asked. “She or he will have particular methods of doing that, and they can easily carry over to the religious school.”