

# Disability Ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church

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# Disability Ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church

2 Corinthians 12:10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

## Summary

With gratitude to God for all that He has already done and will do to glorify His name through Bethlehem Baptist Church (BBC), we respectfully request that the Elders affirm and participate in an emerging vision for serving and being served by individuals with disabilities.

The importance of this ministry is difficult to overstate simply because of the numbers of people involved: nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population have a disability, including nearly 12 percent who have a severe disability. Fortunately, this ministry opportunity is consistent with Bethlehem's values and vision:

- The official documents and emphases of BBC (Mission, Church Covenant, Elder's Affirmation of Faith, Constitution, Staff Emphasis) all support or encourage such ministries.
- BBC's existing activities, notably Children's Ministries, have already demonstrated a desire and openness to new ways of including people who learn, behave or respond differently due to disability.
- BBC's emphasis on God's sovereignty provides hope and meaning to families and individuals experiencing disability, in contrast to an American culture which would rather individuals with disabilities did not even exist. This is particularly expressed through BBC's strong stand supporting the lives of the unborn and the otherwise vulnerable, and against the short-term and immature lifestyles of a materialistic, arrogant American culture.

The emphasis for a ministry for and with individuals with disabilities has both short- and long-term goals and objectives. Beginning this fall, we will initiate several activities, including inclusion of children with disabilities in regular children's activities when possible, a special class for those children whose disabilities do not allow for inclusion at this time, 'adoption' of families/individuals with disabilities into small groups, disability awareness from the pulpit and other informational opportunities such as books and materials in the library, and development of a course on disability and the Bible.

Long term, we intend that individuals with disabilities of all ages and abilities would find their 'place' at BBC, strengthening the body through their faithful service to our sovereign God. Because of the multiple-campus configuration, and the potential connection to other churches that have joined Treasuring Christ Together, we anticipate that the full expression of a ministry to individuals with disabilities will have different configurations at different sites.

## Disability Ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church

Matthew 15:30-31 And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

### Introduction

The verse above is classically understood as a demonstration of Jesus' divinity; a clear confirmation that Jesus is the Son of God. Note, however, how the verse begins: and great crowds came to him, **bringing with them** those who lived with disabilities. Are those of us who are not disabled "bringing with us" to Christ those who are disabled? Are those with disabilities being told of the eternal healing available exclusively through Jesus Christ, or are we focusing solely on this temporary, material life? Are those with disabilities being equipped for their service role to the church?

Disability is dangerous in America. Couples with disabled children are far more likely to divorce. Improved technologies allow genetic or other disabling conditions to be known much sooner, resulting in extraordinary rates of abortion. "Quality of life" is both more narrowly defined than in the past, and increasingly an acceptable determination as to what constitutes who should live and who should be 'allowed' to die. The expenses related to disability, financially and relationally, can be devastating.

Disability is also dangerous to cultures and lifestyles. It challenges standards of beauty and perfection. It confounds those who expect an easy life. It reminds us that we are finite, weak and unable to control the destinies of our own lives.

Most of all, disability brings glory to God. This is the most dangerous and confounding reality of all. An infinitely sovereign God chooses to use disability, the very symbol of weakness and vulnerability, to bring glory to Himself.

To fulfill the mission of Bethlehem Baptist Church (BBC), we respectfully request that the Elders affirm and participate in an emerging vision for serving and being served by individuals with disabilities. This ministry is consistent with the mission and values of BBC, and addresses a significant ministry need in this community. What follows is the need for such a ministry, our understanding of how this ministry is consistent with the mission and values of BBC, the long-term objectives of such a ministry, and the immediate expression of this ministry beginning fall 2004.

# **The Need for a Disability Ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church**

Bethlehem Baptist Church has appropriately made all buildings physically accessible through new construction and renovation. The numbers of people with obvious physical disabilities is still small, but we firmly believe that the people of Bethlehem, in joyful expressions of gratitude to God, will rise up to see people with disabilities as an indispensable part of the Body. They need to know what to do and that the church leadership is firmly behind such an effort.

Most people know or know of someone with a moderate to severe disability, suggesting that there are many people with disabilities in our community. Yet it is appropriate to ask, how many people with disabilities are there? Is a disability ministry just for a small and expensive niche of people?

## **Disability Demographics**

### **Census Data**

Statistics on the number of people with disabilities varies a great deal, usually based on how disability is defined. More than 32 million Americans, or approximately 12% of the total population, have a physical, mental, sensory, or self-care disability that is considered severe.<sup>1</sup> Other estimates have ranged as high as 53 million Americans having some disability, or nearly one in five people in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The rate of disability rises as people grow older, with approximately 6% of children ages 5 to 15 having a severe disability in the United States, about 9.7% of 'working age' adults ages 16 – 64 experiencing disability, and nearly 37% of adults over the age of 65 experiencing disability.<sup>3</sup> The state of Minnesota has a slightly lower rate of disability among all three age groups, with 5.4%, 7.9% and 32.3% respectively.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Table 1. Selected Types of Disability for the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population 5 Years and Over by Age: 2000." Census 2000 PHC-T-32. Disability Status of the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population by Sex and Selected Characteristics for the United States and Puerto Rico: 2000.

<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau, Americans with Disabilities: Household Economic Studies. February 2001, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Table 1. Selected Types of Disability for the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population 5 Years and Over by Age: 2000." Census 2000 PHC-T-32. Disability Status of the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population by Sex and Selected Characteristics for the United States and Puerto Rico: 2000.

<sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Table 1. Selected Types of Disability for the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population 5 Years and Over by Age: 2000 - Minnesota." Census 2000 PHC-T-32. Disability Status of the Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population by Sex and Selected Characteristics for the United States and Puerto Rico: 2000.

Geography also plays a role in these ratios. Minnesota overall has a lower incidence of disability because of the state's relatively better access to adequate health care, proper nutrition and education. In those areas of the state with concentrations of poverty, such as the urban core around BBC, rates of disability rise dramatically.

## **Church Participation by People with Disabilities**

The Barna Group reported on its web site that 43% of adult Americans typically attend church on a given weekend.<sup>5</sup> The Barna Group's demographic summary does not include numbers or ratios of people with disabilities. This is not unusual. Even though disability may have a disproportional impact on a person's ability to participate in community functions (such as church attendance) as compared to other factors like income, race or educational status, it is much less likely to be measured than these or other characteristics, including age, marital status, or denomination.

The National Organization on Disability: Religion and Disability Program collaborated with Harris Poll in 2000 to try to measure participation rates of people with disabilities in congregations. The NOD/Harris Surveys of Americans with Disabilities discovered that about 47% of people with disabilities attended a service at least monthly, as compared to 65% of people without disabilities who attended a church service at least monthly.<sup>6</sup> (The difference between The Barna Group and Harris Poll may be explained by the time periods measured).

An interesting notation in the survey was that the participation gap in church attendance between those who are disabled and those who are not is growing, increasing 63% since 1986. People with disabilities are disappearing from churches.

## **Bethlehem Baptist Church Demographics**

According to "The North Campus Vision and Expansion Funding Plan," BBC attendance in 2004 has averaged 2,974 through March 2004.<sup>7</sup> If people with severe disabilities were represented according to national ratios, **nearly 350 people with severe disabilities would be in BBC's midst**. Even granting that many people choose not to reveal a disability, it appears that BBC does not have a representative proportion of "the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others." It may be worth trying to measure this in an appropriate way.

Census Tracts within one mile of BBC Downtown have rates of disability ranging from 28% to 53%, reflecting both the age and relative incomes of populations

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<sup>5</sup> The Barna Group, [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org), Topic on Church Attendance.

<sup>6</sup> 2000 National Organization on Disability/Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities. See [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org) for a summary of this report.

<sup>7</sup> Bethlehem Baptist Church, "The North Campus Vision and Expansion Funding Plan." Treasuring Christ Together: The Next Step. March 23, 2004, p. 2.

living near BBC Downtown. In contrast, the immediate area around the Mounds View campus is more reflective of rates of disability in Minnesota as a whole, ranging from 5% to 22%.<sup>8</sup>

Anecdotally, the participants in the Disability Ministry have observed many churches, and almost none of them has a visible presence of people with disabilities in their midst. It is not just an issue for BBC, but of the entire evangelical community.

## **Disability and Abortion**

As might be expected, we strongly oppose abortion, and find selective abortion due to disability to be particularly abhorrent. Because the Disability Ministry is currently dominated by parents of children with disabilities, we believe we bring special credibility to the issue of allowing pre-born children with disabilities to be allowed to live. Parents of pre-born children who find themselves facing disability will be encouraged by the example of ‘veteran’ parents who are relying on the sufficiency of God in suffering.

Disability in the pre-born and abortion are inextricably linked, and abortion of disabled children is increasing. In England, the Press Association News reported in May that “There were more fetuses with Downs syndrome aborted than babies born with the condition in 2002 – 372 abortions compared with 329 births.”<sup>9</sup> Some non-scientific surveys are finding that upwards of 90% of parents who discover their child has Down’s syndrome are choosing to abort. Kaiser Permanente reported that among its northern California patients who opted for a test for cystic fibrosis, 95% ‘terminated the pregnancy’ when they found their child was affected.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, this is ‘just’ a consequence of couples making individual (though socially sanctioned) choices. Others are now advocating that aborting pre-born children with disabilities is in the best interests of society as a whole:

“Preventing a severe disability is not for the sake of the child who will have it. Rather, it is for the sake of less suffering and loss of opportunity in the world.”<sup>11</sup>

Tests for genetic disabling conditions are becoming more and more sophisticated. Imaging technologies able to identify non-genetic disabilities in

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<sup>8</sup> United States Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, “TM-P045. Percent of Persons 5 to 20 Years With a Disability: 2000, Minnesota by Census Tract.”

<sup>9</sup> Lydsay Moss, “Most Downs Syndrome Foetuses Being Aborted.” PA News, May 30, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Amy Harmon, “In New Tests for Fetal Defects, Agonizing Choices for Parents.” The New York Times, June 20, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Rivera y Carlo quoting Daniel W. Brock, a bioethicist at the National Institutes of Health, who gave a presentation entitled “Genetic Testing and Selection: A Response to the Disability Movement’s Critique.”

utero are also improving. More pre-born children will be identified with disabilities and therefore more children will be at risk of being aborted.

While we take a strong stand in support of pre-born children, we take no particular position on the use of technologies in discovering disability among the pre-born. Even amongst the parents of the current Disability Ministry, different couples chose different routes. One couple did not have any testing to determine if their subsequent children would have a disability. Another couple chose to know as much about their pre-born children as possible to prepare themselves in case their additional children had a disability. In both cases, the children were going to join their families as God allowed, regardless of what was known or not known.

Abortion, however, is just one avenue on an even more dangerous path that includes killing children who are already born. Dr. Peter Singer, well-known for his views on abortion and infanticide, is just one of many voices. His words are chilling:

At present parents can choose to keep or destroy their disabled offspring only if the disability happens to be detected during pregnancy. There is no logical basis for restricting parents' choice to these particular disabilities. If disabled newborn infants were not regarded as having a right to life until, say, a week or a month after birth it would allow parents, in consultation with their doctors, to choose on the basis of far greater knowledge of the infant's condition than is possible before birth.<sup>12</sup>

A disability ministry will make a strong, visible stand for God's supremacy over life, and against the increasing acceptance of murder of those with disabilities. It is consistent with BBC's strong pro-life position.

## **Disability and the Family**

### **Disability Is a Family Issue**

While a single person in a family may have a disability, the impact extends to every member and into every area of the family's life. Siblings see that the care of a brother or sister takes up huge amounts of time, time not spent with them. Medical and therapy expenses overwhelm family budgets. Communication between husband and wife can become a rote exchange of observations and instructions necessary to keep a child alive. Vacations can become impossible, opportunities to advance in a career unlikely because of time spent in a hospital, and family social connections can disintegrate.

It is not unusual for disability to become the sole family issue on which everyone focuses attention, both inside and outside the family. A church which encourages something as simple as the opportunity for a husband and wife to

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Singer, Practical Ethics. Cambridge, 1993.



worship together, focusing on the glory of God and instruction in His Word rather than the overwhelming issues related to disability, may be saving that marriage and family from coming apart.

## **Divorce When a Child Has a Disability**

Statistics on the impact of disability on marriages are difficult to find and to summarize. Many books and magazines quote statistics without providing any background on who did the data collection or interpretation, suggesting that some of the 'facts' about divorce and disability are merely assumptions supported by unscientific observation.

That said, for couples who have a child with a disability, the rate of divorce is higher than for couples whose children are not disabled even if the specific numbers are not known. There also appears to be a correlation between the severity of the child's disability and the likelihood for divorce.

Anecdotally, many of us who spend time with families with disabled children can see the effects not just of disability, but of trying to deal with all the systems related to a child's unique medical or educational needs. A couple separated by hundreds of miles and weeks or months of time because a child is in a specialized medical facility experiences unique and extraordinary stresses not typical of most families with disabled children.

What is clear is that the presence of support systems provides couples with disabled children more opportunities to maintain positive marriage relationships. These support systems include genuine faith in God, access to information on the disability, connections to others also experiencing disability, appropriate medical care, child care, housing, respite care, and authentic friendships with other adults. The church body can be a vital, practical presence in such a family, helping to maintain an entire family structure and demonstrating the love of God.

And there are at least a few of us who now know that God meant for a hard, but better, path to knowing Him by giving us children with disabilities. People need to know that caring for a child with a disability is frightfully hard, but with God's all-sufficient help it is possible to maintain a marriage.

## **Divorce When a Spouse Has a Disability**

Far more likely than having a child with a disability is the likelihood of having a spouse with a disability. As was already presented, more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the United States population over the age of 65 has some severe disability. Thus, those who are fortunate enough to grow old together are likely to have at least one partner experience a significant disability.

The statistics on divorce when one spouse has a disability is not entirely clear. Adrienne Asch, a past president of the Society of Disability Studies, said: "The

data are that marriages do break up more often when there is a disability than when there isn't. We also know that men leave wives more often than wives leave husbands."<sup>13</sup>

As with children who are disabled, different disabilities seem to correlate with higher divorce rates. Also as with children who are disabled, a marriage is more likely to stay together when support systems – family, friends, community agencies – are consistently available to assist.

## **Disability and the Bible**

Many people assume that the best possible thing for people with disabilities (or their parents) is physical healing, and point to the ministry of Jesus as proof. "God does not cause disability," rather than providing comfort, is an affront to the sovereignty of God. 'Faith healers' and other frauds prey on vulnerable people for their own gain, using the Bible as their tool of deception. In our combined experiences, we have been prayed over in a wrong spirit more times than we can count, assuming that physical healing was what we needed most.

Of course prayers for healing are appropriate and Biblical. And if given the opportunity, nearly everyone with a disability or the parent of a disabled child would gladly accept such healing. We know from the Bible, however, that God uses suffering of all kinds to glorify His name. Thus, a more visible presence of those with disabilities brings opportunity for a fuller expression of confidence in God. We must desire God more than we desire comfort in this present age.

Possibly the most important need for a disability ministry at BBC is to protect immature believers, whether experiencing disability or not, from unbiblical interpretations of the Bible regarding disability and suffering. Below are examples of viewpoints about the nature and purposes of God from people who have some knowledge of the Bible, asserting either that God is limited or God is worthy of human judgment. These examples are particularly important because people with disabilities or parents of disabled children are making the below arguments.

- "God didn't cause me to be short. He allowed it to be. It's a difficult thing, but he didn't cause it. He loves me as I am, he's sorry for my pain, and he gets me through. He is a loving God, but he loves you so much that he doesn't control everything." Reverend Paul Stevens Lynn, Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, DuBois, Pennsylvania.<sup>14</sup>
- "Therefore, scriptural exegesis of the disability passages begins with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion,' asking a question not unlike the question posed by many feminist theologians when they inquire if Scripture, with its

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<sup>13</sup> Peter T. Kilborn, "Divorce Rate Is Higher Among Disabled, Experts Say." The New York Times, May 31, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Kennedy, Little People: Learning to See the World Through My Daughter's Eyes. Rodale Books, 2003, p. 101.

decidedly patriarchal bias, can be relevant and meaningful to women. Likewise, disability advocates must ask difficult questions such as: Do the Scriptures have an 'ableist' bias that ultimately oppresses people with disabilities?" Jennie Weiss Block, Copious Hosting, p. 101.

- "Disability is part of everyday existence for millions of people and their loved ones in this world. Does God cause it to happen? No. That does not mean, however, that God is not present for us in the midst of it, willing each person's well-being even in the situation of permanent disability. The power of the resurrection image is that God can transform our lives through the healing touch of an interdependent community of faith." Kathy Black, A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability, p. 42.

We, however, want BBC to be 'prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.' - 1 Peter 3:15. There are numerous ways we could respond to the above, but will limit ourselves to just three:

Exodus 4:11 Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?

Job 38:2-4 Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

Colossians 1:15-17 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

## **A Disability Ministry's Harmony with Official Documents and Standards of Bethlehem Baptist Church**

The need for a disability ministry would be irrelevant, of course, if the ministry was not consistent with the Biblical values and standards of BBC. Fortunately, this ministry is consistent with the documented and approved vision and standards of the church.

### **Vision**

### **Mission**

As quoted in the vision statement for Bethlehem Baptist Church, the mission of BBC is "to spread a passion for the supremacy of GOD in all things for the joy of all peoples."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> From Bethlehem Baptist Church web site, [www.bbcmpls.org](http://www.bbcmpls.org).

This mission statement has two components which are of particular importance for a ministry dedicated to disability. First, it acknowledges that BBC exists ‘. . . for the joy of all peoples.’ In the simplicity of ‘all peoples’ is also the gravity that some of those peoples may require differing models of service and ministry preparation. BBC has lived out this mission in a variety of ways, maintaining core Biblical principles while initiating many dynamic and differing programs for missions, children, racial harmony, vocational pastors, etc.

The second and equally important component is the phrase ‘in all things.’ We can effectively glorify God by seeing and clinging to His authority over all creation, including His authority to create for His glory some who are disabled. Disability begs the question of the sovereignty of God for most people touched directly by disability; it is vitally important that BBC acknowledge God’s sovereignty by being visibly active in serving and being served by individuals with disabilities. This core belief runs counter to American culture (and many churches’ understanding).

### **The Spiritual Dynamic**

A disability ministry will join and celebrate all the elements of BBC’s Spiritual Dynamic:

We join God the Father in magnifying the supremacy of His glory through our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit by TREASURING all that God is, LOVING all whom He loves, PRAYING for all His purposes, MEDITATING on all His Word, sustained by all HIS GRACE.

### **Fresh Initiatives**

Disability nearly always includes some element of suffering. It can range from mild irritation that a function easy for most people is difficult for the person with the disability, to extraordinary, debilitating pain and anguish in addition to the loss of a function. Some of the most common suffering associated with disability is loneliness, often because people are afraid of the disability, or in saying or doing the wrong thing.

Thus, we are grateful for the opening paragraph to ‘Fresh Initiatives’ and see it as a confirmation that BBC is ready to risk great things for God in service for and with people with disabilities:

Our Mission and Spiritual Dynamic declare that the all-satisfying supremacy of God shines most brightly through sacrificial deeds of joyful love. The cry of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our people is for a fresh, decisive emphasis on Relationship of Love.

Therefore we eagerly embrace God's call for new, visible manifestations of love toward each other, our guests and our neighbors. With a fresh openness and outgoing spirit to each other and to all new people, we henceforth put understanding above accusation, forbearance above faultfinding, and Biblical unity above the demand for uniformity.

Similarly, most of the purpose statements under the 'Fresh Initiatives' encourage a disability ministry:

- The value of relationships. We will take new practical steps to develop an atmosphere where personal, deepening, supportive, faith-building relationship of love are highly valued as expressions of our passion for the supremacy of God's love.

Service relationships are common for individuals and families experiencing disability. Mutual relationships of love will be a welcome, God-affirming change.

- Urban-suburban partnership. We will strive to forge a mutually enriching urban-suburban partnership, in which a significant range of racially, educationally, and economically diverse people feel at home, as they grow in their passion for the supremacy of God.

We ask consideration for including people with disabilities into this diversity.

- Interracial reconciliation. Against the rising spirit of indifference, alienation and hostility in our land, we will embrace the supremacy of God's love to take new steps personally and corporately toward racial reconciliation, expressed visibly in our community and in our church.

People with disabilities also experience indifference, alienation and hostility.

- Good news to the poor. We will develop new strategies for proclaiming the all-satisfying supremacy of God's love and justice to the poor through 1) personal involvement; 2) a more welcoming atmosphere; 3) local missionary strategies of urban disciple making; and 4) equipping missionaries for unreached urban peoples.

People with disabilities are some of the poorest, most disenfranchised people in the world. Access to education and employment, even in western cultures, is not universally available for those who are capable. All four strategies are appropriate for people with disabilities.

- Challenging church and culture with the truth. We will challenge our culture and the wider Christian movement in fresh ways with the biblical truth of God's all-satisfying supremacy, by courageous Christian action and speech in the secular world.

Disability challenges American culture to its core even apart from God and Biblical standards. A disability ministry which proclaims absolute confidence in a sovereign God, even in disability, will confound not just secular culture, but other churches who have not yet grasped God's supremacy and sufficiency.

## **Constitution and By-laws**

We are grateful that the Constitution and By-Laws outline Biblical principles for guiding and administering BBC. The disability ministry is fully consistent with Article II: Foundation, Object and Priorities of Ministry. The Church Covenant, in particular, provides a basis for a disability ministry.

## **Church Covenant**

Every member of BBC agrees to the Church Covenant, which is reaffirmed on a regular basis. This Covenant includes the following paragraph:

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.<sup>16</sup>

To achieve this aspect of the Covenant, members and regular attenders should be provided the opportunity to understand the needs and issues faced by individuals with disabilities and their families. Disability can be invisible to those not directly affected by it, so it is also incumbent that these issues be made visible in ways that provide opportunity for effective engagement. Education alone without opportunities for personal involvement can create a self-satisfied church, secure in knowledge but without a change in heart, behavior or effective outreach.

Disability also provides nondisabled members unique opportunities to grow in Christian maturity and grace as they seek "to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech." Knowing what to say or what to do can be very difficult, even for people with some experience with disability. But experiencing the benefits of 'Christian sympathy' and 'courtesy in speech' is particularly important for individuals with disabilities or their families because of the treatment they routinely receive elsewhere, such as schools, government

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<sup>16</sup> Bethlehem Baptist Church Covenant, can be found at [www.bbcmpls.org](http://www.bbcmpls.org).

agencies, businesses, medical facilities, or even churches. God will receive greater honor when His people respond in confident love to those with disabilities rather than fearful duty.

People affected by disability must also be held to the same standards of being slow to take offense and ready for reconciliation. Of course, Christian kindness dictates that anyone experiencing the emotional, physical, relational, financial, medical and legal impact of disability should be granted extra measures and seasons of grace. But those called by God into His kingdom who are also experiencing disability, either directly or through a loved one, should be encouraged to develop a mature relationship with Jesus, wholly dependent on God and ready to respond graciously to brothers and sisters who may say or do things which could be considered harmful or hurtful. A church which responds in proactive love to those experiencing disability is much more likely to encourage such a maturity in faith and behavior.

### **Leadership and Organization**

We gratefully submit to the leadership of the offices of Elder and Deacon of BBC as documented under Article IV of the Constitution and Article II of the By-Laws. There are several issues that are appropriate for consideration under these Articles:

- That the issue of disability requires special emphasis under the governance of the church and therefore rightfully requires consideration and approval by the Elders.
- That “tending the flock” requires a specific consideration for those who live with disability and their families.
- That BBC would benefit from one or more elders having expertise on the issue of disability.
- That this ministry will eventually require additional financial and volunteer investment, potentially including altering the physical structures of both the downtown and Moundsview campuses to increase accessibility.

### **By-Laws – Membership**

We embrace the by-laws governing membership in the Church. We ask for reasonable accommodation for those individuals whose disability would prevent baptism by immersion for some reason.

### **By-Laws – Organization of Members for Ministry**

We are asking that the disability ministry of BBC be recognized as an official ministry of the Church. This ministry is consistent with Article II of the Constitution. Further, the primary members, including leadership, are members or regular attenders of the Church.

## The Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Affirmation of Faith

A disability ministry is consistent with the Elder Affirmation of Faith. While the entire Affirmation of Faith is instructive, the following areas are worth consideration in terms of impact of a disability ministry at BBC:

- God's Eternal Purpose and Election: "We believe that God upholds and governs all things – from galaxies to subatomic particles, from the forces of nature to the movements of nations, and from the public plans of politicians to the secret acts of solitary persons – all in accord with His eternal, all-wise purposes to glorify Himself, yet in such a way that He never sins, nor ever condemns a person unjustly; but that His ordaining and governing all things is compatible with the moral accountability of all persons created in His image."

This paragraph makes two particularly important statements when considering a disability ministry. The first affirms that God upholds and governs all things, which is inclusive of disability. The second statement is that all persons have a moral accountability, including those with disabilities. This avoids the error that individuals with disabilities are granted a special or differing spiritual status simply on the basis of their disability.

- God's Creation of the Universe and Man: "Having no deficiency in Himself, nor moved by any incompleteness in His joyful self-sufficiency, God was pleased in creation to display His glory for the everlasting joy of the redeemed, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

Disability can be found in every culture and among every people group. BBC's efforts and credibility in missions and evangelism will be supported by a disability ministry.

- Man's Sin and Fall from Fellowship with God: "We believe that, as the head of the human race, Adam's fall became the fall of all his posterity, in such a way that corruption, guilt, death, and condemnation belong properly to every person. All persons are thus corrupt by nature, enslaved to sin, and morally unable to delight in God and overcome their own proud preference for the fleeting pleasures of self-rule."

"We believe God has subjected the creation to futility, and the entire human family is made justly liable to untold miseries of sickness, decay, calamity, and loss. Thus all the adversity and suffering in the world is an echo and a witness of the exceedingly great evil of moral depravity in the heart of mankind; and every new day of life is a God-given, merciful reprieve from imminent judgment, pointing to repentance."



Minimizing the corrupt nature of people with disabilities is an error that must be avoided in a disability ministry. Adam's fall introduced disability into the human race. Unlike sin and death, not every person will experience disability in this present age. However, since every person has the potential to experience disability and disability (or physical superiority) occurs at God's pleasure, there is no basis for feelings of superiority or pride by those who are not disabled over those who live with disability, or the other way around. Similarly, every person with a disability is subject, to their level of moral accountability, to the consequences of Adam's fall.

- The Saving Work of the Holy Spirit: "Thus, for God's elect, the Spirit triumphs over all resistance, wakens the dead, removes blindness, and manifests Christ in such a compellingly beautiful way through the Gospel that He becomes irresistibly attractive to the regenerate heart."

A disability ministry will help the members of BBC better understand their standing before God apart from Christ, and the miraculous event of an effectual call as one of God's elect. God uses terms such as 'blindness' to reveal our actual spiritual states in very graphic ways. He further confirms these terms by creating some who are physically blind. Just as a man who is blind cannot 'will' himself to see, we have no capacity to bring ourselves to saving faith. Thus, disability is mercy from God to help us appreciate our true natures and the miracle of saving faith.

- The Saving Work of the Holy Spirit: "Therefore we do not believe that there is salvation through any other means than through receiving the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit, except that infants and severely retarded persons with minds physically incapable of comprehending the gospel may be saved."

A disability ministry will affirm God's sovereignty and that He creates and effectively calls any to Himself through means entirely of His doing. We are confident that God deals justly with people with disabilities who do not have the capacity to comprehend the gospel, be it because of severe mental retardation or because of some other disabling condition. However, we will also encourage members of BBC to avoid the mistake that all people with disabilities are therefore incapable of comprehending the gospel. The number of individuals with disabilities who meet the above exceptional criteria is very small.

- God's Work in Faith and Sanctification: "We believe that all who are justified will win this fight. They will persevere in faith and never surrender to the enemy of their souls. This perseverance is the promise of the New Covenant, obtained by the blood of Christ, and worked in us by God

Himself, yet not so as to diminish, but only to empower and encourage, our vigilance; so that we may say in the end, I have fought the good fight, but it was not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

A disability ministry will affirm these promises while recognizing the impact of disability. Certain disabling conditions, such as traumatic brain injuries or the long-term impact of Alzheimer’s, may not allow individuals with such conditions to persevere in the faith in the same way as before their conditions manifested themselves. However, we are confident that all of God’s promises remain true and that God will persevere for them just as He does for those who are not disabled in these ways.

- Living God’s Word by Meditation and Prayer: “We believe that faith is awakened and sustained by God’s Spirit through His Word and prayer. The good fight of faith is fought mainly by meditating on the Scriptures and praying that God would apply them to our souls.”

“We believe that the promises of God recorded in the Scriptures are suited to save us from the deception of sin by displaying for us, and holding out to us, superior pleasures in the protection, provision, and presence of God. Therefore, reading, understanding, pondering, memorizing, and savoring the promises of all that God will be for us in Jesus are primary means of the Holy Spirit to break the power of sin’s deceitful promises in our lives. Therefore it is needful that we give ourselves to such meditation day and night.”

“We believe that God has ordained to bless and use His people for His glory through the means of prayer, offered in Jesus’ name by faith. All prayer should seek ultimately that God’s name be hallowed, and that His kingdom come, and that His will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. God’s sovereignty over all things is not a hindrance to prayer, but a reason for hope that our prayers will succeed.”

A disability ministry at BBC affirms all of the above and will seek to encourage such activities as individuals with disabilities are able to participate. In this area in particular, accommodations requiring financial resources may be necessary to fully accomplish this goal, such as providing a Brailled Bible, large-print Bible or Bible on cassette for those who are blind or have other visual impairments, or specially trained and oriented workers to work with those who have learning disabilities that make reading and memorizing difficult.

Because God is sovereign and creates for His glory, we are confident that every human creation of God will ultimately glorify His name, even if that ability is not readily apparent in this present age because of disability.

- Christ's Church and Her Ordinances: "The Church is a body in which each member should find a suitable ministry for His gifts; it is the household of God in which the Spirit dwells; it is the pillar and bulwark of God's truth in a truth-denying world; and it is a city set on a hill so that men may see the light of its good deeds – especially to the poor – and give glory to the Father in heaven."

A disability ministry at BBC will affirm that all people, those with disabilities and those without, should find their suitable ministry and be appropriately prepared for such ministry. Because people with disabilities are typically the poorest and most disenfranchised people anywhere in the world, we would also suggest that the term 'especially to the poor' should be amended to include people with disabilities.

- Christ's Commission to Make Disciples of All Nations: "We believe that the commission given by the Lord Jesus to make disciples of all nations is binding on His Church to the end of the age. This task is to proclaim the Gospel to every tribe and tongue and people and nation, baptizing them, teaching them the words and ways of the Lord, and gathering them into churches able to fulfill their Christian calling among their own people."

As was presented earlier, people with disabilities are not represented in our churches at the same rate they appear in the general population. In other areas of the world, disease, violence and lack of proper food and clean water results in greater numbers of children and adults either dying or becoming permanently disabled. A disability ministry at BBC can address the former in the Twin Cities and more effectively educate and prepare missionaries who will experience the latter in the people they are discipling in other parts of the world.

## **BBC Staff Emphasis**

A disability ministry is consistent with the BBC Staff emphases. We are grateful and encouraged to be guided in faith by vocational leaders who consistently promote the emphases articulated in the BBC Staff Emphasis.<sup>17</sup> While the entire statement is beneficial, we are particularly encouraged by the following statements:

- The Sovereignty of God: From all eternity, He freely and unchangeably, in His most holy wisdom, ordained whatsoever comes to pass. To use the words of Paul, God does "all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11), having sovereign control of all events from the events of

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<sup>17</sup> From Bethlehem Baptist Church web site, [www.bbcmpls.org](http://www.bbcmpls.org).

rulers and nations (Daniel 4:25, 32, 34-35) to the flight of a sparrow (Matthew 10:29).

- The Obedience of Faith: God is shown to be glorious when we trust Him, especially in suffering.
- Christian Hedonism: The Christian is the one who by the grace of God has discovered that God is the only source of satisfying and enduring joy. Thus God is honored as the only one who can fully meet our needs.

## **Disability Ministry: A Vision for Service for and with Individuals with Disabilities**

Our vision is that people with disabilities and their families would be found in every area of Bethlehem Baptist Church. In fact, 'disability ministry' is not truly a separate ministry in the same sense as a men's ministry or a children's ministry. Rather, a disability ministry is an avenue to including people with disabilities and their families in the very fabric of the church.

That avenue will include many different types of ministry expressions, including alternatives when appropriate. For example, it may include a support group for parents of children with disabilities, transportation options for those who cannot drive, or alternative communication tools, such as Brailled words for the music portion of worship, or real-time captioned sermons. The emphasis will be on inclusion into existing activities of the church as much as possible.

The concluding section includes specific plans that, under God's provision, will begin in the Fall 2004. That is only a beginning, however, and we would ask that the Elders would join with us in going hard after God in whatever He would have for BBC's future.

In the meantime, we ask that certain considerations be made for people with disabilities, particularly concerning accessibility. Often, this means pointing out that an activity is or can be made accessible. Off-site activities may require additional thought and preparation, even if the numbers of people affected are small.

The following listing is for illustrative purposes only and is not intended as a listing of what BBC 'should' be doing. God already has a vision for BBC which He will ultimately bring to full expression regarding people with disabilities. Even as we imagine, though, we are excited about the potential opportunities for glorifying God in new ways:

- Preaching from the Word: specific references to disability appropriately woven into the sermons. Even though BBC has many fine ministry opportunities, we know that many people only participate in the weekly corporate worship service. This is the best opportunity to reach the most people with a God-exalting, life-affirming word about people with disabilities.

- Men's and Women's Ministries: The new opportunities emerging in adult ministries for men and women are exciting. Adults with disabilities can have a profound impact, both as participants and as leaders/speakers.
- Children Ministries: including children and youth in activities of the church promotes participation by the entire family. Inclusion in routine activities such as Sunday School, Children's Choirs and Kids Connections promotes benefits for everyone – leaders, disabled children and non-disabled children. Inclusion will not be possible for every child nor desired by every parent.
- Youth Ministries: Including teens with disabilities in regular programs and special activities, such as service projects where disabled teens are able to serve others. Teens can also serve by: assisting families by providing babysitting and/or childcare for young children with disabilities; visiting people in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities who cannot come to church.
- Small Groups: 'adopting' families or individuals with disabilities to provide support and to encourage full participation in ministries at BBC.
- Missions: supporting specific ministries that serve people with disabilities in other areas of the world, such as Wheels for the World teams, affiliated with Joni & Friends.
- Desiring God Ministries: promoting materials, sermons and other resources that maintain a Biblical worldview regarding disability.
- Counseling: Disability has a profound impact on individuals and families. Preparing lay members for how to appropriately respond to disability in counseling, both the short-term and long-term impact, would have a profound effect.
- Campus Outreach: young people with disabilities on college campuses desire the same opportunities to develop friendships and participate in activities.
- Senior visitation: older adults experience disability at far greater rates than people under the age of 65. Opportunities for benefiting from their wisdom and helping them to persevere to the end are numerous.
- Leadership Development: vocational ministers will need to be prepared for addressing the needs and ministry gifts of their disabled members. People who have a disability need to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the Word and evangelism as well.
- Strategic Mobilization: people with disabilities already stand outside a culture that is either openly hostile or paternalistic to them most of the time. Their testimony to the faithfulness of God in disability provides a powerful opportunity for changed hearts and glorifying God.
- Urban Ministries: people with disabilities can be found everywhere, but tend to be concentrated in urban areas where transportation and access to services is more readily available.
- Collaboration with Other Para-church Organizations: focused support such as scholarships to Joni Camp (a week-long Christian camp for

- individuals with disabilities or families that include a disabled child) or sending volunteers.
- Budget: Some of these activities will require financial as well as volunteer resources.

Each of the above examples has numerous opportunities within them. We need God's direction into what should happen and when.

## **Disability Ministry: An Action Plan for Fall 2004**

The people of Bethlehem Baptist Church have already shown kindness and willingness to serve and be served by individuals with disabilities. Pastor David Michael, in particular, has provided pastoral leadership in this area, working personally and through Children's Ministries' staff to ensure families that include a child with a disability are able to participate in BBC activities.

Our desire beginning in Fall 2004 is to expand and make visible opportunities for ministry for and with people with disabilities. We know too well our limited capacities to appropriately address the issues related to disability that will come to BBC. We must go hard after God because only He can provide all that is required in serving people impacted by disability.

With God's help, we will begin the following work this fall:

1. Disability Awareness

- a. Preaching from the Pulpit

We respectfully request that at least one Sunday in the fall be dedicated to the issue of disability. Romans 12 has many practical connections to the issue of disability.

- b. Small Groups/Sunday School Classes/TBI

In addition to preaching from the pulpit, the Bible is full of references to disability which would be instructive for further study.

- c. Training for Staff and Volunteers

'Front-line' volunteers and staff (ushers, greeters, information booth, library, bookstore) usually have the first opportunity to be 'church' to new people. Knowing what to do when first meeting someone who is blind, in a wheelchair, or has a cognitive disability can make the difference between a good first experience BBC and never having a second experience.

These staff and volunteers will be given materials to help prepare them to appropriately interact with someone who has a disability. Given BBC's orientation to evangelism and meeting needs, we already know that people who work in these areas have a high desire to bless everyone who comes through the doors.

d. Library and Bookstore

For those who desire to learn more about issues related to disability, the Disability Ministry is gathering materials for the library and will occasionally recommend resources that might be appropriate for sale in the bookstore.

e. Special events

The Disability Ministry will coordinate disability awareness events and information for the church. The Disability Ministry will also take advantage of opportunities to raise awareness, such as Joni Eareckson Tada's visit to Minneapolis in Fall 2005.

f. Communications

We are grateful that we have already been given the opportunity to communicate with the people of BBC through the back page of the Star and through Jan Lacher's article being printed and distributed. We also have an email network of interested people, sharing opportunities for meeting, prayer requests, and anything else related to disability at BBC. As appropriate, we will seek out additional opportunities to raise awareness through these and other mechanisms.

2. Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

The majority of children with disabilities can be included in their age-group activities with appropriate accommodations. The Disability Ministry will work with parents, the child with the disability and the Sunday School or other child activity leaders to include the child with his or her peers. This will normally include one worker for each child who needs specific accommodations.

The benefits extend beyond the child with the disability. Usually, the adults and the other children who worship, play, and learn with the child with the disability experience more change in attitude, knowledge and comfort than the child does. Research has also demonstrated that when teachers introduce alternative learning styles as accommodations, nearly all the children benefit.

3. Special Needs Class for Children with Disabilities

Inclusion will not be appropriate for all children with disabilities. It is difficult to predict the kinds of activities that will be implemented since we do not yet know who will need such a class. A child with severe autism may not be able to tolerate noise, for example. Another child may be so physically fragile that she would be in danger in a class of active children, but entirely capable of learning the Children's Desiring God curriculum. The special needs class will probably have a ratio approaching one adult per one child. The need for volunteers willing to be trained and investing large amounts of time is great.

4. Other Alternative Arrangements for Children with Disabilities

Occasionally, an entirely alternative arrangement is appropriate. For example, Paul Knight, aged nine, is attending a nursery class with a rotation of aides because his size and limited ability to learn benefit from that class structure. Krista Horning, 17, serves children (notably as an aide for Paul Knight) in the nursery and in the Sunday School program rather than participate with her peers in youth activities.

5. Monthly Prayer for Disability Ministry

Already begun this summer, anyone who is interested in the issue of disability is invited to come pray for one hour every third Thursday of the month. The hour has a standard agenda that includes an opening reflection from the Bible, prayer for healing (primarily spiritual), prayer for BBC, and specific prayer requests from participants.

6. 'Adoption' by Small Groups

BBC is a large church located at two sites with potentially more in the near future. While worship and teaching is vitally important, long-term individual connections build mutually encouraging relationships (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Small groups provide a much better opportunity for families experiencing disability to become connected and known.

## Conclusion

Disability is a very difficult issue that tears families apart, makes people question their faith, and is often kept invisible to those not affected. We are asking Bethlehem Baptist Church to rest in God's sovereignty over disability to encourage new programs and awareness that bring glory to God.

Other churches have implemented activities like these and more, but they are in the minority. This is an opportunity to glorify God in practical ways. In the end, individuals with disabilities and their families are just as desperately in need of a sovereign Lord and Savior as those who are not disabled.