

THE SPECIAL GATHERING

Several denominations work together to spread the gospel to the special needs community of Brevard County, Florida

BY RICHARD STIMSON
& PAT MEACHAM

Every Sunday morning approximately 80 to 100 people who are developmentally delayed arrive at First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida. They are a part of The Special Gathering, a ministry whose mission is to evangelize and disciple people with intellectual disabilities. Several denominations unite and work together to proclaim and honor the gospel in a cooperative setting. The Special Gathering aims to evangelize the intellectually disabled community in the same way Youth for Christ targets teenagers and Campus Crusade targets college students.

On any given Sunday, vans from different local churches drop off members of The Special Gathering. Vans come from Assembly of God, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Christian, and Lutheran churches. The Assembly of God van is driven by a Presbyterian; the Presbyterian van, by a Pentecostal; the Christian van, by a Roman Catholic; and the Lutheran van, by a member of Calvary Chapel.

Most of the members of The Special Gathering live in the community with their families. Each van picks up the people who live in a specific geographic area rather than each church sending a van to transport its own



About 30 churches in Central Brevard County make this ministry possible through their financial support. They also contribute their facilities and vehicles. Most importantly, each church equips and sends volunteers who keep the ministry up and running.

members. Some members arrive by public and group home transports. Families also provide rides. A few members drive themselves to church.

About 30 churches in Central Brevard County make this ministry possible through their financial support. They also contribute their facilities and vehicles. Most importantly, each church equips and sends volunteers who keep the ministry running. The church community is working hand in hand to meet the spiritual needs of people with developmental disabilities.

Classes and Services Once they arrive, members of The Special Gathering form several different Sunday School classes based on their interests and abilities. Two classes focus on expository Bible study using an easy-to-read translation of the Bible. Other classes use LifeWay's Access study materials.

After the 30-minute Sunday School classes adjourn, everyone convenes in the chapel for a 45-minute worship service. The order of worship reinforces the lesson taught during Bible study. Through visual, auditory, and tactile experiences, the service embraces a wide range of worship styles.

Eighteen volunteers staff The Special Gathering of Central Brevard. A paid director serves as their pastor, supported by funds from the participating 30 churches. This pastor also serves a second Gathering in the neighboring town of Titusville. Nine Gatherings are an outgrowth of these two. Combined, the programs serve as many as 700 individuals. More than 450 people attend one of The Special Gathering events each

week. Through this ministry, people with intellectual disabilities are accepting Christ and being discipled. In turn, they are enriching and blessing the churches that sponsor The Special Gathering.

Richard Stimson is director of The Special Gathering. He is also southeast director for Disabled and Alone. Pat Meacham teaches one of the Bible study classes for The Special Gathering. She also works with preschoolers and children at First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida.

A RICH HISTORY

The Special Gathering of Central Brevard started 25 years ago with four members, using a lodge in Cocoa, Florida as their meeting place. Since then they have met in various places, including The Arc of Brevard and Cocoa United Methodist Church. Rockledge Presbyterian Church provides their office space. A bookkeeper from Calvary Chapel of Merritt Island administers their finances. The Special Gathering

does not seek funds from individuals. The Special Gathering's philosophy is that God ordained the local church to minister within the local community and they should not bypass congregational authority to solicit money directly from church members. People give their tithes and offerings to the local church. Sponsoring churches then fund The Special Gathering through their annual budgets. For more information, go to www.specialgatherings.com.