



Language of love: A Special Gathering member and a volunteer study the Bible.

## Called to an Invisible Society

**"What I like about the Special Gathering is that I can do things here. I can be a deacon. Sing in the choir. If someone has a seizure, they want you here anyway."**

**T**he time is a quarter past four on a white-hot Florida afternoon as two cream-colored buses glide to a stop in front of a community center. Brakes hiss, door cranks turn, and the passengers empty onto the pavement. Some walk stooped over, ungainly and loose-limbed, others are almost unnaturally erect. Some are in wheelchairs. Some wear football helmets. Some look ordinary. One wears a large medal on a multicolored ribbon that reads "Special Olympics." These are members of an "invisible" society—mentally disabled adults.

The occasion that brings them together is a rally of the Special Gathering, a ministry to the mentally challenged community in Cocoa, Florida. The Special Gathering is directed by Richard Stimson, a tall, yuppie-looking pastor in his thirties. Right now Stimson is standing by the door, greeting everyone. There is no condescension in his manner, not a trace of paternalism. If anyone suggested that he is like a father to this flock, he would bristle with indignation. To them, he is never Reverend Stimson; he is always Richard, their brother, friend, and spiritual guide.

### A special calling

Stimson was born into a Presbyterian home in Cocoa, Florida. His twin brother, Bill, was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, leaving him mentally disabled. To Stimson,

though, he was simply his twin brother. They even shared their own "twin" language.

When Stimson was in high school, he plunged into the worldly Cocoa Beach lifestyle of surfing and drugs, losing interest in the faith of his parents. After graduation, he and a friend went looking for work in the Texas building boom. They went as far as Louisiana, where he got a job in a plywood plant. Soon he was named union steward. Eventually, he decided to leave the factory and study electronics in Atlanta.

"I never made it there," he recalls. The day he was getting ready to go, he heard God's voice saying, "You will not study electronics, but you will minister in my name to the mentally handicapped."

This experience brought him to his senses, and to his knees. Stimson enrolled in Southeastern College in Lakeland, Florida, where he studied Bible and special education. In Lakeland, he

taught a Sunday-school class for the mentally challenged. "We had one girl who could read and write and even play the guitar, and another in diapers who could hardly sit still."

Out of concern to teach them all, he joined with similar groups to form the Special Gathering of Lakeland.

After graduation, he and his wife, Nancy, moved to Cocoa, where they opened a new branch of the Special Gathering. At the first meeting, only two attended. The ministry today extends to over 200 people in four locations and is supported by 54 churches. It publishes *Networks*, a magazine "for those with specialized ministry."

### "They are not children"

At today's rally, Nancy Stimson is leading singing. She is the Special Gathering's cheerleader, choir-master, and mother confessor. The songs are simple, but not childlike.

"They are not children," Stimson says. "Intellectually, they are on the child's level, but they are socially much more like adolescents. Hormones are raging inside of them. They want to be independent. They do not want to be treated like kids."

Sunday-morning worship services are intensely reverent. The worship style reflects the varied backgrounds of the participants. Stimson wears a robe. He says, "The robe gives them a visual impression of church. They appreciate visual signs."

The choir sings, followed by a time of congregational singing. At regular meetings, members share prayer requests. Those with special needs form a line, and mentally challenged persons who are the church's deacons pray for each one, using the powerful combination of prayer and human touch. There are no pressured invitations, no appeals to easily exploited emotions.

PHOTOS BY TONY GRAY

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Special Gathering choir: All God's children got a robe.

Midway through the rally, a tall choir member suddenly falls like a stone to the concrete floor. "Doug had a seizure," another announces. No one is surprised. Those nearby hover around him like angels, holding his head and hands. There is a bond of shared adversity that binds them. They get out of the way as Nancy comes to Doug. She holds him until he regains consciousness and can take his seat again.

Doug is in his early thirties and a Catholic. He serves on the deacon board of disabled persons who assist and advise. Doug has participated in many ways and has even preached at special deacon services. He says, "What I like about the Special Gathering is that I can do things here. I can be a deacon. Sing in the choir. If someone has a seizure, they want you here anyway."

### Getting involved

Deedee, a bright-faced, 38-year-old black woman who lives with her parents, agrees with Doug. In her parents' church, there would be little for her to do, and few people who would notice her without pitying or patronizing. Here, she has led singing on Deacon Sundays.

Deedee's parents believe the Special Gathering has been good for her. "When we were up North, she didn't get involved in religion," says her father, Roland. "Now, she talks about Jesus all the time. Stimson has helped her to know our Savior for herself. She has to go, even with a headache and fever."

Sandy, whose 24-year-old daughter, Judy, has been with the Special Gathering since it began in Cocoa, is lavish in her praise. When her daughter first came to the Special Gathering, Sandy was suspicious. She is not a churchgoer. But through the years, Stimson and those who work with him have gained her respect and loyalty. "Judy

has such peace today," Sandy declares. "Now, when I have a cold or something, Judy comes over and prays for me. And you know what? It works!"

### What's normal?

Stimson is not without critics. In the world of helping the disabled, there is a debate about "normalization," which seeks to mainstream the disabled into existing schools and churches.

Thomas B. Hoeksema of Calvin College writes, "We cannot always cave into the alleged social need to congregate. Persons with developmental disabilities are necessary to the integrated, normalized family of God. Without them, the Body of Christ is disabled [and] denied the diversity of gifts which people with retardation bring. Total segregation is not good for those with or without disabilities."

Stimson says, "I find at least two principles more important than 'normalization': the importance of evangelizing and discipling mentally challenged persons [and] self-determination. Who are we to say that a church composed primarily of black persons is wrong? As we apply the integration principles learned by Afro-American leadership to the disability community, can we say a ministry composed of the mentally challenged is wrong?"

In the eyes of members of the Special Gathering, Stimson is clearly on the right track. After the rally, they all line up at folding tables for pizza. They laugh. They joke with each other. They flirt. And they even talk about God. Here, they have found the grace of belonging. The Special Gathering has given them, through a language of love that anyone can understand, their own special key to God's great treasury. ☐

By Bill Fleming, a freelance writer from Merritt Island, Florida.

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