

Chapter 1

Why

If we are going to minister to mentally challenged persons (persons who are mentally retarded), we must look at our motives. There are three reasons that are not acceptable. These reasons are:

1. The professional Good Samaritan motivation.
2. This is a good thing to do; the church should be open to this population.
3. We can get their families into church.

The professional Good Samaritan syndrome can be recognized by a sudden emotional need to help. Often this is in response to a TV show, or a story read by the infected. Mentally challenged persons do not need our pity; they do deserve our respect. They do not need someone to barge into their lives to do wonderful things, just to disappear in a few months when they have discovered a new interest.

Ministering to mentally challenged persons is not merely a good thing to do. We are called to preach the gospel to all creatures (Mark 16: 15). Mentally challenged persons' spiritual needs are as valid as anyone else's needs.

It is important for the church to reach out and minister to parents of mentally challenged persons. Often they have felt left out and neglected, not only by the church, but also by society as a whole. There is pain and suffering that parents of a mentally challenged person goes through similar to that of grieving after a death. These parents need to know and experience God's peace and grace, but this is not why we minister to mentally challenged persons. We must see the validity of their spiritual needs in and of itself.

The reason we minister to mentally challenged persons is to bring them into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Mark 16:15 tells us that it is our job to preach the gospel unto every creature. It is God's job to reveal that truth. We are only fooling ourselves if we think that any of us are smart enough to understand God.

God has accommodated Himself to us in order for us to understand Him. That is part of what Jesus Christ is all about. None of us comes into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ because of our own intellect, but because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We must believe that God can reveal Himself to mentally challenged persons also.

This truth was made real to me by a severely mentally handicapped student in our first Special Gathering. She was 11 years of age and had an IQ somewhere between 25 and 35. She could not read or write and she could hardly speak. She could use no more than two word couplets. She could barely walk.

One day as she was playing in her backyard, her father killed a poisonous snake near where she was playing. It frightened her mother to realize the obvious danger. The mother took the girl to where the snake was and said, "Snake bad. Will bit you, and you will die." The mother kept repeating this to the daughter, hoping she would understand the danger. Finally the young girl looked up to her mother, shaking her head yes and said, "Go heaven." She had an understanding of her future hope.

Historically, there have been different degrees of prejudice. Simply classified, they are:

1. The discriminated against person is believed to be subhuman, without a soul, and without valid spiritual needs. This was evidently an issue with the American Indians.
2. The discriminated against person is believed to have a soul, but should be kept in separate living and work areas.
3. The discriminated against person has the right to work in the same area, but not live in the same area.
4. The discriminated against person has the right to live and work in the same area, but not to intermarry.
5. The discriminated against person has the right to intermarry.

I would submit to you, that to not believe in the validity of the spiritual needs of mentally challenged people is the worse form of prejudice. I would also submit to you, that we will not do a good job of integrating mentally challenged persons into living and work areas until we overcome our bias regarding their spiritual needs.

The reason we minister to mentally challenged persons is the same reason we minister to anyone. That reason is to bring them into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord, and to nurture them spiritually.

Chapter 2

How

Many of this nation's large institutions have been closed, and there is an increased emphasis on community based programming. There has also been the development of special education Sunday school classes within local churches. I have started and operated three special education Sunday school classes. I have spoken to and observed numerous other special education Sunday school classes. During my years of experience with special education Sunday school classes, I have noted four problem areas.

1. Wide ranges of functioning and/or support need levels in one classroom.
2. Shortage of teachers.
3. Lack of classroom space.
4. Need for funding.

The norm of special education Sunday school classes that I have operated or visited has been somewhat discouraging. There is usually one lonely teacher in a closet of a classroom with students ranging from severely mentally handicapped to educably mentally handicapped persons.

During my study for the ministry within my denominational school, I started my third Sunday school class. Within a short period of time, I had five students ranging from one who was 9 years of age, profoundly mentally handicapped, and still in diapers, to a young lady who could read and play the guitar. The other students functioned in between. My students were not only different in their chronological age and intellectual functioning levels, but also in the way they socially interacted.

Running this special education Sunday school class that ranged from infants to junior high students all at the same time was a very frustrating situation. Therefore, I took a couple of months to visit and observe other special education Sunday school classes within our area. Without exception, I found situations similar to the one in my own class.

As a result, a number of the teachers started meeting together to brainstorm and to give each other mutual support. One of the first concerns we addressed was the lack of fellowship for our

group members. There were few social outlets for mentally challenged persons in that area. In order to meet this need, we started a bowling league on Saturday, a summer church camping trip, and a variety of seasonal parties.

When we needed money to buy supplies for a party or social event, we would take turns asking our respective churches for the finances. We also discussed how to deal with common programming problems. Useful curriculum, the wide range of functioning levels among students, the lack of classroom space, and the need for more volunteers, as well as teachers, was discussed.

It became apparent to us that what we needed to do was to combine our special education Sunday school classes to one program, thus becoming an interdenominational community based ministry for mentally challenged persons. We would sit down together, choose a spiritual truth, task analyze that truth, and then teach that truth. The classes were small and they were designed for each person's support needs.

We would have three to five classes working on the same subject, then we would bring the group together for a joint worship service. This joint worship service started off being like junior church or children's church. It evolved into a more age appropriate worship service. It took on the feel of a youth group meeting that was churchie.

Worship Service

We designed our worship service and Sunday school classes to work together on the same subject. What happens in the Sunday school class should help the members to understand the homily in the worship service.

Teaching an understanding of God's Word is the most important thing we must use an educationally solid approach in our teaching. We have members who come from a wide range of denominations. We encourage them to worship God with whatever traditions that are meaningful to them.

If you come to a Special Gathering, you will see a collection of different traditions merged into one. The following is my reason for this approach:

1. Traditions became traditions because they were meaningful to someone somewhere down the line.
2. Most traditions are psycho-motor, visual, or auditory in nature and can be helpful in making worship more concrete for mentally challenged persons.
3. Many theological implications do not need to be an issue in a specialized ministry. An example of this is genuflecting. The theological implication of genuflecting is that you are kneeling out of respect to the embodiment of Jesus Christ in the reserved sacrament. Now you may not believe in that theological position. That is not the point. I don't think that the theological positions of consubstantiation, transubstantiation, and representative communion are meaningful and understandable to mentally challenged persons. They are no reserved sacraments at The Special Gathering. Mentally challenged persons do not carry the theological baggage that we may carry. When I had a member who wanted to kneel to show his love to Jesus Christ. I let him kneel.

Now it is not our purpose to take the place of the local church. We are the local churches' ministry for mentally challenged persons. None of the groups that first made up this ministry stopped being part of their local churches. The members of The Special Gathering did not stop being members of their churches. They continued to take part in their churches. The Special Gathering is somewhat like a youth group, singles' group, or women's circles, except it is for mentally challenged persons. It is not just a special education Sunday school class, but a dynamic, holistic ministry (within the mentally challenged community). The Special Gathering ministers to the spiritual, physical, and social needs of mentally challenged persons. We use the term chapel for what we do. The dictionary defines chapel as a religious service that is subordinate to the church.

Chapter 4

Leadership

In The Special Gathering model, we believe in the need for paid leadership. Due to the time involved, the responsibility, and the needed planning for activities, there needs to be someone who is legally accountable.

It is likely that the paid persons will be part-time like many youth leaders in smaller churches. They do need to have a clear job description, and they should understand their responsibilities.

It is important that paid staff understand what they get paid for. We do not pay people to minister. That is an honor and a privilege. We do not get paid to teach Sunday school classes, to preach, to drive vans, or to do any other ministry function that our volunteers perform without cost.

We do not get paid for being at a local chapel of The Special Gathering. We do not get paid for ministering at a local chapel of The Special Gathering. We do not collect a salary for preparing to minister at a local chapel of The Special Gathering.

We get paid for being responsible during a local chapel of The Special Gathering. Our salary is for handling problems and crises. We clean up messes. We are paid for setting up for ministry, for getting supplies, for setting up chairs, for making sure everything is happening correctly and on time. We get paid for following up on ministry. We get paid for taking care of spills and spats. We get paid to find out if there is anything one of our volunteers or members might need.

One of the realities of being employed by a church ministry is the sense of call on our lives. It is the understanding of being part of that living dynamic organization. In the church, there are responsibilities we are paid to do; and there are services that are done for the Lord. You should not be employed with a ministry if you do not sense a call to be part of that living dynamic organization.

Glenn was employed by a local congregation. He would say he worked a seventy-hour week. When I asked him what he did in a week, he included eating dinner on Tuesday night at a church member's house. When he watched a movie, played tennis, ate lunch, or played golf with a

member, it was work. Whenever there was a church member associated with any activity, he counted the activity as work. In that he was from a different area, everyone he knew was part of his church. Everything he did had some contact back to his local church. Therefore, everything he did was work. Hence, he *worked* seventy hours a week.

There is a fine line between where your employment with The Special Gathering ends and your personal life begins. You are paid to make contact with your teachers to see what they need in relation to the local chapel. However, if you end up talking for two hours because you enjoy each other, that is personal. If you develop friendships because of being part of a living dynamic organization, that becomes personal.

You should have your own ministry within this living dynamic organization, that's personal. None of your volunteers get paid to teach a class, drive a van, give a message. As a paid employee, you are saying you sense a call to do this. You should be as dedicated as your volunteers. No one in this organization from the pastor to the chapel supervisor gets paid to do classical ministry. We get paid to be gofers for those who minister God's Word and facilitate the evangelism and discipleship of mentally challenged persons.

A youth pastor of a mega church once told a group of conferencees, "You either feel guilty about taking a salary as a youth pastor because you love the work so much; or you could not be paid enough to do what I do." Ministry with The Special Gathering is like that. It could be classified as hard work. Or it can be looked upon as the dream job where you get paid to attend amusement parks, have lunch, talk on the phone, and visit in people's homes.

Chapter 5

Funding

The Special Gathering is not a non-denominational ministry. By definition, non-denominational means not part of any denomination. The Special Gathering is an extension of the local church, not independent of the local church. Most local churches do not have the number of mentally challenged members, or the finances, to operate a full range specialized ministry. So a number of churches need to commit financially, organizationally, and emotionally to a joint ministry. The rubber hits the road on your philosophical approach when it comes to finances. The Special Gathering policy allows us no public fund raising.

Danger of Exploitation

The Special Gathering has a traveling choir. They sing and/or give their testimonies at churches or to anyone else who invites them. We refuse to take up an offering. How can we respect mentally challenged persons, and use them to pull emotional strings to raise money.

You are not respecting mentally challenged persons when you take pitiful pictures of them and put those pictures on a poster or mail out for the purpose of raising money. You are not respecting mentally challenged persons when you stand them up in front of a church, get them to sing, and then take an offering.

You are not going to develop trust levels with mentally challenged persons doing this. You must also ask, why are you going into churches with the choir? Are you doing it for the sole purpose of raising money? If so, then you are using and exploiting mentally challenged persons. We go into churches to educate them to the validity of the spiritual needs of mentally challenged persons. Mentally challenged persons can have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Not only that, but they can express this relationship publicly. Within their group, the choir members refer to the choir as Our Ministry. They hope to be a blessing. They know Jesus!

God Ordained the Local Church

It is our firm belief that God ordained the local church to minister. We are to function as an active part of each local congregation. Just like you have youth groups, children church, prime timers, and singles, there is a need for a specialized ministry for mentally challenged persons.

If we are truly going to be an extension of the local church, then we cannot bypass them by using direct and mass appeal fund raising techniques. When you become a budgeted item within a church budget, you are not only an extension in word only; you have truly become an extension of that church. It is the custom of some churches to take up special offerings. If this is the tradition, then it should be followed, but let me make few suggestions:

1. The offering should be taken at a time other than when a Special Gathering group is at the church. There will be less of a chance of anyone thinking that you are exploiting mentally challenged persons. Also, members of The Special Gathering will not have to sit through a situation or discussion that may make them feel awkward.
2. Try to influence the church to make you a budgeted item. I really do feel that this helps the church to internalize their belief that you are an extension of their ministry. The church takes up special offerings for things outside of the local body. We want to be part of the local church.

Time Effective

It is very easy to fall into the fund raising trap. You spend more time and effort in raising funds than you do in ministering to mentally challenged persons. If you do not have fundraisers, then fundraisers will not consume your time. If you have become an extension of the local churches and if you are written into their budgets, then you will have a stable financial base.

Many of the things you do will help generate financial support. When a local specialized ministry visits a local church, meets with pastors, speaks to church groups, have members minister at

local churches (music, testimonies, etc.), this will result in increased income. However, that is not why we visit churches.

We visit church groups to educate the local church on the validity of the spiritual needs of mentally challenged persons.

Chapter 6

Trust Levels with Mentally Challenged Persons

There are many people who work with mentally challenged persons. They dedicate themselves to the betterment of the lives of mentally challenged persons, but they do not necessarily become identified with the mentally challenged community. This is probably correct and healthy for most professionals, but we are not professionals. We are ministers.

You cannot minister to those with whom you are not willing to be identified with. It is also true that you cannot minister to those to whom you feel superior. The full realization of this needs to come to anyone who is going to effectively minister within the mentally challenged community. It may happen to different people in different ways, but my experience may be helpful.

While studying for the ministry, I took night courses at a local college in special education. It was about a year before I would graduate. I had taken a number of special education courses, and I was really looking forward to being a part of the professional special education community (as a minister).

One Saturday, I was in charge of taking a group of 30 mentally challenged persons to a local amusement park. I had gathered all of my retarded participants into a group and I was leading them to the ticket booth. Dressed in professional looking leisure clothes, I stood up very straight, looking very professional, standing out to the side, and being obviously in control.

I was feeling very good about this opportunity we were providing for these retarded people. As we got closer to the theme park, I started looking at the layout to determine how best to handle getting into the park. Then it started crashing in on me, how superior I felt to those poor retarded people. How altruistic I felt about helping them. It made me feel good to be seen with them and seen as helping them, but I did not want to be confused with being retarded.

I had learned (unconsciously) to speak loud and clear with my body language so people would not confuse me with these retarded people.

God used this revelation to teach me that I had to become confused with the mentally

challenged population. I could not minister to people to whom I felt superior. I needed to live in and become part of the parish in which God was sending me. My parish would be the mentally challenged community. As we got closer to the entrance of the amusement park, I merged into the center of our group, started dragging my foot, and started drooling out the side of my mouth. When I got to the ticket booth, I handed the lady my ticket (as our other members were doing). The lady in the booth took my ticket, but she was looking through me as she was trying to get the attention of one of the other supervisory persons who was looking obviously normal.

If the ministry God has called you to is within the mentally challenged community, then you will not be working with the mentally retarded; you will be working for mentally challenged persons. The difference between working with the mentally challenged persons is something you need to learn if you are going to develop trust levels within the mentally challenged community.

A story is told about a high school football player who developed cancer. He was assured that with chemotherapy, he would recover. After weeks of intensive hospitalization and treatment, the young star returned home. However, something had changed. He had lost his hair. This was a grave humiliation for the young man in the prime of his life. On the way home from the hospital, he made his parents promise to get him a baseball cap to wear the next day to school'

When he arrived home, he found out it was too late. He was not prepared for what greeted him. His friends were at his house ready to throw him a party. His teammates had learned of his hair loss. They had seen this as an opportunity to show him how much they appreciated him. Every member of the team had his head shaved as a sign of oneness with the ailing young athlete. This kind of action goes beyond sympathy. It is empathy, unlike mere pity.

None of us can fully experience how our members live each day but we must attempt to be fully identified with them. Then and only then can we become effective to evangelize and disciple people who are mentally challenged. This, of course, is the essence of the gospel, infinite God became one with finite man in order to become our redeemer and friend.

Chapter 7

What Really Makes Us Different

I had just started my second Special Gathering when I met James. James did not always appreciate all of the great things I did for those coming to The Special Gathering. My arts and crafts tables for those who came early were one of those things he did not fully appreciate. Now to really understand you must realize why this early arrival arts and crafts table was such a great idea. We set up the tables with puzzles, activities, and arts and crafts so those member who came early (and most of them did) would have something to do. This would help us maintain appropriate supervision (control), keep people interested, and over-all help us to keep things running smoothly. James had not been coming for too many weeks when he came up to me. Pointing to the arts and craft table, he asked, "How come people like you think people like us, always want to do stuff like that?"

I asked James what he wanted to do. He told me he wanted to stand around and talk to his friends. The fact of the matter was, he wanted to do what everyone does when they go to church--fellowship. This started in motion one of the strongest components of this ministry. This component is the self-determination of our membership.

Each Special Gathering elects a deacon board that is elected by the membership to represent their wishes. This is not a governing board, but an advisory board.

Mentally challenged persons have input on what we are going to do. More than once we have had special activities that were not my preference but were decided on by our membership. One example is a lock-in. Since my bedtime is 9:30 p.m. I would veto that idea if I could. The Special Gathering T-shirt design is picked and developed by Special Gathering members. The campground we use for Camp Agape was chosen because of camp activities our members wanted.

The list could go on and on, but the point is that the active participation of our members in the decisions making stages of our ministry is what makes us different.

Chapter 8

Normalization

In the religious world, the term *charismatic* means different things to different people. Billy Graham has been called the most *charismatic* Christian leader living today. By contrast, many *charismatic* churches would consider a person to be *charismatic* only if she practices *glossolalia*.

Normalization is that kind of word in the rehabilitation (or habilitation) world. It seems to mean different things to different people. I have talked to professionals who use, and apply the term, normalization in differing--even conflicting--ways. To add to the dilemma, it is a term whose definition is evolving and changing.

At a state disabilities conference I attended, Special Olympics was complimented by one of the speakers for its role in helping to bring normalization to the lives of mentally handicapped persons. On the other hand, I know people who have nothing to do with Special Olympics because of their belief in normalization. Obviously, these people have differing understandings of what normalization means.

Perhaps the most amusing examples come when the term, normalization, is front loaded to a specific concept or program that has nothing to do with normalization. It must be assumed that the program's originators believe that using the politically correct terminology magically provides credence for their concept.

At times, people who, in practice, were much more restrictive and protective have accused me of being anti-normalization than I am. I do not deny, however, that I have concerns with the principles of normalization, particularly for those of us in ministry.

My internal alarm beeps when I perceive any practice has taken on the status of a sacred cow. I care when normalization becomes the paramount principle by which everything is judged. In evaluating the effectiveness of any ministry, we can never afford to measure how effective we are by the current philosophy preached in the professional community. Our ministry goals must only be measured by how effectively we are leading people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as

Lord.

The measuring rod of discrimination

Fundamentally, we all want mentally challenged persons to be treated with respect. We abhor discrimination. We do not want developmentally disabled people to be segregated or personally diminished by not being allowed to become all God created them to be.

Yet it cannot be denied that not everyone believes that mentally challenged persons have valid spiritual needs. This is the worst form of discrimination. Historically, there exist different stages and degrees of prejudice. Simply classified they are:

1. The discriminated-against person is regarded as subhuman, without a soul, and without valid spiritual needs. This was evidently an issue with regard to the American Indians.
2. The discriminated-against person is believed to have a soul, but, nevertheless, should be kept in separate living and working areas.
3. The discriminated-against person is given the right to work in the same area, but may not live in the same area.
4. The discriminated-against person is afforded the right to live and to work in the same area, but may not intermarry.
5. The discriminated-against person has the right to intermarry.

Believing that the spiritual needs of mentally challenged persons are not valid is the worst form of prejudice. Therefore, we will not do the job of integrating mentally challenged persons into living and working areas until we overcome any bias which relates to their spiritual needs.

If meeting the spiritual needs of mentally challenged persons is our paramount interest, then it does not matter how much 35-year-old Robert enjoys the 11:00 worship service. It does not matter how broad Robert smiles during the hymn time or the lighting of the candles. If the gospel is not presented to Robert in an understandable way, then for Robert, the approach is faulty.

Do not misunderstand this to mean that mentally challenged persons should not be part of the local church service. The church needs all of its members and the gifts which each brings. At the

same time, the church has the responsibility to disciple all of its members. Expecting mentally challenged persons to comprehend and to personally incorporate the Sunday morning sermon given by the pastor makes as much sense as expecting mentally challenged persons to learn math in an Algebra II class.

Again, the conclusion should not be drawn that mentally challenged persons are never to be part of a local worship service. The church is impoverished without mentally challenged persons as part of the local worship. It is good for Robert, who is a mentally challenged person, to attend these services for any number of reasons. The church needs times of collective worship when the whole community comes together to adore God.

However, if you really believe that mentally challenged persons need to be discipled, these community experiences cannot take the place of a systematic, organized study of Christian doctrine and scriptural principles on the educational level of the person who is mentally challenged. If you know that people who are mentally challenged need and are able to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord, then nothing else is as important as meeting those spiritual needs.

What is Normal?

Another concern about the principles of normalization with which I wrestle is, what is normal? This is not a philosophical consideration where we conclude that there really is no such thing as normal. This is not a theological construct about Christians being called to be a peculiar people. It is not even a Christian sociological consideration about whether our values for living can be based on the norms of society. I am disturbed when adults who are mentally challenged are taken to bars to get drunk on their 21st birthday because it is the normal thing to do. I am concerned that when a man and woman cohabit some professionals view this as the ultimate of normalization. Nonetheless, that does not answer the question regarding what is normal.

The real point is that it is not normal to associate with a group that is proportional in types to society as a whole. If you took America, or your geographical area, and had a demographic study done about what percentage of that population was made up of certain types of people (i.e. X percent

are teenagers, Y percent are senior citizens, etc.), how many people could say their social group is made up of a reflection of that demographic study? It is; in fact, *normal* to have your social group made up of your peer group.

A classic example could be drawn from bowling. Jokes abound around the idea that all retarded people need to bowl. Experts in the field of mental retardation have proposed that it would be desirable to stop having special bowling leagues for mentally challenged persons. Tongue in cheek, the question has been asked about whether bowling is a special gene retarded people have. The conclusion has been drawn in the professional community that if a retarded person wants to bowl, he should not bowl with other retarded people.

However, no one takes note of the fact that on Friday or Saturday evening the bowling alley parking lot is crammed with pick up trucks in which axe handles are displayed in the back window. In the bowling alley, there will be a host of "Bubbas" wearing baseball caps, swigging beer and bowling. No jokes are made that bowling could be a "red-neck gene." It is considered *normal* for those men to want to gather at a bowling alley in order to enjoy common interests and companionship.

It is not normal to go to a women's circle group and find 30 percent of their members are high school girls, even though that is the average of female high schoolers in society as a whole. In the church we have singles, youth, seniors, baby boomers and many other specialized groups. It is normal to gather into groups of common likes, interest and needs. If we do not do this for mentally challenged persons, it is only because they are mentally challenged; thus in a strange way, this is a form of discrimination.

Pushing normalization is not normal

I have found it interesting that no one tries to force the principles of normalization on the deaf community; at least we have stopped trying. The deaf community is vocal regarding the fact that they view themselves as a culture. They want the right to congregate. They prefer to be with deaf people. Yes, they want equal access, but they refuse to be forced into involvement with things

with which they do not want to be a part.

Is it possible that the deaf culture has insisted on treatment which should be equally true for the mentally challenged community? For persons who are deaf, the concern is not an architectural barrier but a communication barrier. When you are in a wheelchair, or blind, the barrier to social integration is structural or attitudinal. When you are deaf, the barrier to social integration is the inability to communicate. Isn't there also a communication barrier for most mentally challenged persons?

If this is true, why do we feel free to force present principles of normalization on mentally challenged persons? Often this force takes the form of insinuated suggestions rather than overt action, although overt actions do and are occurring. In our area, the agencies are starting to do what they call, Personal Future Planning. This is a program where the agency gathers people chosen by the client, into a relaxed setting, such as the client's living room. Using diagrams and pictures, the client is able to access what he is doing and what he wants to be able to do. This tool helps determine what the client personally likes and dislikes.

Activities are color coded to mean different things. Red is used for bad or distasteful things the client does not like, things the client wants to change. Red is also used for all segregated activities. Hence, when Special Olympics or the segregated bowling league are written on the diagram, they are in red.

During the inservice on how to do Personal Future Planning, the instructor was showing us a plan that had already been completed. Special Olympics and bowling were in red. I asked if Special Olympics and bowling were things the client wanted to stop doing. The instructor said in this case the client wanted to do these activities.

The whole process was designed to be understood by the client. The client can tell that those activities in red were perceived as unwanted. It appeared that the bias of the *professional* community was being subtly programmed into the evaluation of the client.

I believe it is important to allow a mentally challenged person the right to make his own choice. I oppose segregation and discrimination against anyone. Yet, I fully support an individual group's right to *congregate* in pursuit of special, mutual interest.

People First is a self-advocacy group which is well accepted. It is a group of mentally challenged persons who choose to congregate, to discuss their common needs and to advocate for what they need. In Florida we have trailer parks, apartment buildings, even smaller communities where by contract and rule only senior citizens can live. People under a certain age are not allowed. By default, we have apartment buildings where only young single people live. We have areas in which people from Canada winter. The military provides their personnel with barracks and military housing. In many segments of society, people choose to congregate with people with whom they share a common interest because of personal need or preference.

Al Condeluci, the author of, *Interdependence, the Road to Community*, asserts that if you did a survey of any group of people and asked them who was closest to them, you would get the following answers, "My wife, Sue; my child, Sam; my best friend, Tom." As you move further away from intimate relationships, you would have answers such as: my doctor, my lawyer, my dentist.

However, when Condeluci did this survey with mentally challenged persons, he found them naming people closest to them as: "My supportive living coach, my supportive work coach, my case manager." These are people *paid* to interact with them. Few of us pay people to interact with us. Our closest friends are people who want to be with us, they do not have to be paid for that privilege.

I have found that what we have often called independence has become isolation for mentally challenged persons. Their closest relationships are people who are paid to interact with them. Marsha's academic skills are on a second grade level. However, she is emotionally and socially on a junior high level. Her independent living coach finds her a low paying job washing dishes at a local restaurant and puts her in a low rent apartment in a poorer section of town. Hopefully, the apartment is within walking distance of work and a grocery store. After the arrangements have all been made and Marsha is settled into her apartment, we compliment ourselves on what a good job we have done.

Haven't we put Marsha in a lonely, isolated situation, in a job with no future, living in an area that is not safe? It is no wonder we are seeing a rise in the number of people like Marsha who

are becoming involved negatively with the criminal justice system. If this were being done to a portion of the population other than people who are retarded, it could be called irresponsible social work.

The need for community

One of the greatest needs people have is the need for community. Loneliness and isolation are things faced by most, if not all people. We all need a close group of friends with whom we share a kindred spirit. Church growth experts such as Peter Wagner tell us that the most effective way to see church growth is through homogeneous groups. This allows the church to meet the social need to be with and interact with people who have common likes and dislikes. This is normal.

Integration is a reality for mentally challenged persons just as it is for other people. However, isolation and loneliness are also becoming important factors which must be addressed in this community. Therefore, it is possible that the most effective way to evangelize the mentally challenged community is by meeting many of their social needs to congregate.