



SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

*A MINISTRY WHOSE
TIME HAS COME*

Special Needs Ministries is created by the General Conference
Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department

Charlotte L. V. Thoms, Ed.D.
Design: AdventSource

Copyright © 2012 by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

All rights reserved. You may copy these materials for local church use.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval
system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise for sale or distribution
in any way outside of the local church leadership without the prior written
permission of the copyright holder.

Printed in the United States of America

SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

A Ministry Whose Time Has Come

Ministry is a privilege given by God for the modern-day Christian based on biblical principles, the life of Christ, and the love God shows to, for, and with all people. Ministering to, for, and with people with special needs is the extension of the love that Christ demonstrated while on earth. It allows Christians to replicate the Heavenly Father's supreme sacrifice of service by giving His only begotten Son to an undeserving world.

For decades the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been trying to label a ministry for people with disabilities. Many believe the word *disability* has a negative connotation and avoid the use of the word. Others shun the term *special needs* because they think an impairment that substantially limits daily activities should not be considered special. Some who seek to describe the function of this ministry believe the words *inclusion* or *inclusive* would be more appropriate.

This suggests three options: Disabilities Ministries, Special Needs Ministries, or Inclusion Ministries.¹

Ministries or *ministry* is the term common to all. Regardless of the name, the service is the same. What is needed is a ministry that blends the talents and skills of disabled and non-disabled individuals in a common bond of service to humanity and service to the church and community.

The worldwide church is moving beyond the title to the task. How can the church effectively and efficiently establish a ministry that includes all and omits none—a ministry that truly models the life of Christ? Every person born in this

world, once they accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior, has the right and the obligation to serve Him and humanity to the best of his or her ability.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made an intentional decision to train, challenge, and encourage each division, union, conference, and church in this ministry whose time has come.

Before proceeding to the heart of why and how to establish a ministry for people with special needs, the issue of patronizing must be considered. People with disabilities are people first. The disability does not define who they are, nor does it limit the potential of God's power to use them in His cause.

When a television or Internet broadcast is being scheduled, the producer will inadvertently say, "Can you get me someone who looks disabled?" When an administrator is approached to appoint a Special Needs Coordinator, a common response may be, "We do not have any people with disabilities in our territory." Or "Our personnel are already overburdened with two or three ministries." Or "Our budget won't handle another ministry." Or "Yes, conceptually I understand the need, but really who wants to be connected to a special needs ministry?"

The most serious stigma is twofold: either people with a special need do not want to self-identify or those with a family member with a special need will not, when asked, participate in the ministry. Both conditions keep the stigma alive and prevent God's house from being inclusive. Can the church put aside the stigma and accept the statistics showing that a service is greatly needed for the 650 million people in the world who would love to be included in God's house?

The answer is definitely and wholeheartedly yes. Any attitude that views any fellow human being as less than equal will eventually exhibit patronizing behavior.

A Ministry Is Born

The commission of Jesus Christ compels us to lead others to accept Him as personal Savior, to unite with His church, and nurture them in preparation for His soon return. Once evangelized and nurtured, the individual continues the growth cycle by telling, compelling, and winning others. This is at the heart of the church's mission and is accomplished through ministries of preaching, teaching, and healing.

From its inception, the church articulated and practiced its mission by communicating the message of the gospel throughout the world. The term "global mission" is synonymous with reaching the peoples of the world whatever the context of their lives. Seventh-day Adventists are a global community that believes the phrase: "Do unto others . . ." To accomplish the mission goals of the Christian church, Adventists are promoters of human freedom and responsibility, especially emphasizing freedom of religion for all peoples—those with and without special needs.

Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church has always ministered to people with special needs, its most visible contribution has been the establishment of Christian Record Services (CRS). In 1899 a legally blind young man named Austin Wilson established the Christian Record Braille Foundation. Wilson started producing a Braille magazine titled *Christian Record*. By 1911 the circulation grew to more than 2,000. Today, CRS has provided services to people with visual disabilities with eight periodicals, more than 1,500 talking books, and blind camps and representatives worldwide. In 1980 it began providing services to persons with hearing disabilities.

In 1978 Warren Banfield, director of the North American Division Office of Human Relations (OHR), led the church in its inclusion awareness of people with special needs. He

solicited help from his friend who was blind, Robert Wilson, to help in the training of others regarding the challenges of individuals with special needs.

At the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, a ministry for people with disabilities was voted and approved: “Ministry to People with Disabilities—This ministry functions under the personal ministries council and develops programs for members and others with disabilities. It should create witnessing programs, recommend how to make church facilities more accessible, help solve transportation problems, and recommend ways to involve members with disabilities. The coordinator of Ministry to People with Disabilities serves as a liaison with organizations providing services for people with disabilities, such as Christian Record Services, and promotes Christian Record Services programs.”²

Rosa Taylor-Banks, Ed.D., replaced Elder Banfield and continued the work of the Commission for People With Disabilities through the OHR office. The commission developed strategies based on four components that were later changed to the four goals: accessibility, education, encouragement, and accommodation. In 2005, Charlotte L. V. Thoms, Ed.D., was asked to build a stronger structure for this ministry.

All of this was a response to a higher mandate to love one another. Jesus explained, “ ‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (John 13:34, 35).³ This mandate opens the churches across the world to welcome, accommodate, and include individuals with special needs.

Administrators have the key to unlock a viable ministry for people with special needs. That key includes eliminating all preconceived ideas that thwart the work. In 2010 the

General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department officially included Special Needs Ministries under the leadership of Jonathan Kuntaraf, D.Min. Larry Evans, D.Min., associate director of the Stewardship Department for the General Conference, serves as a liaison for Deaf Ministries for the world church.

The Special Needs Ministries does not include Deaf Ministries, which is a distinct and unique ministry unto itself.

The Mission

The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel in the context of the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14:6-12.

The Special Needs Ministries coordinates its outreach under the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department. It exists to teach and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to people with special needs. As the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department communicates the good news with the objective to win, hold, and train for Jesus Christ men, women, youth, boys and girls throughout the world, the Special Needs Ministries targets those with disabilities. Training and promotion materials are provided through *AdventSource* or the Adventist Book and Bible Houses to support the world missions with techniques to include people with special needs in all areas of church life.

The mission is to encourage church leaders worldwide to give special attention to individuals with special needs. Leaders are advised to develop programs for witnessing to people with special needs and make our facilities and the gospel accessible to all.

The mission of Special Needs Ministries is to encourage the inclusion of all members in the church. Unfortunately, this goal has not been fully met for many individuals with disabilities. To educate the church about the ways that people with special needs can contribute to the

mission of the church, a worldwide Special Needs Ministries Awareness Sabbath can be a useful event. This can be at camp meetings, leadership training events, or any gathering where the four goals can be emphasized: accessibility, education, encouragement, and accommodation.

In planning events and activities for the Special Needs Awareness Sabbath, set a goal for the day. One day is not enough to cover all the issues related to special needs, but positive contributions of individuals with special needs can be highlighted to the church or community.

As much as possible, be sure to invite individuals with special needs to plan and participate in the Special Needs Ministries Awareness Sabbath activities. If individuals with disabilities are to become fully included into the church, the congregation must see those with disabilities involved in all areas of church life. Special Needs Ministries Awareness Sabbath gives the opportunity for people with disabilities to use their gifts for God and at the same time increase the congregation's awareness of individuals with special needs, both their talents and their needs.

“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3).

Ellen White explains, “The only way to grow in grace is to be disinterestedly doing the very work which Christ has enjoined upon us—to engage, to the extent of our ability, in helping and blessing those who need the help we can give them.”⁴ This statement should guide both those serving in Special Needs Ministries and those being served. The Special Needs Ministries team encourages adults and children with disabilities to participate fully in the church and to grow in Christ; and in turn, people with disabilities are able to help and to be a blessing to others.

The mission of Special Needs Ministries is to bring all members into the work of Christ. In order to promote full inclusion of members with disabilities, it is important to focus on each person's abilities, talents, and relationship with God. What can the church family do to encourage and support a member with a disability?

For an adult or child with a disability to be truly included in the church family, she or he needs access to the gospel message whether it is through sermons, Sabbath School Bible study guides, songs, Bibles, education, or fellowship. Individuals with disabilities may not be aware of alternative resources that are available; therefore, a goal of Special Needs Ministries is to help people with disabilities access those resources.

The Ministry

Special Needs Ministries promotes the importance of specialized ministries to foster the spiritual wellbeing for persons with special needs.

The ministry:

- promotes the importance of specialized ministries to foster spiritual growth of persons with special needs;
- educates and trains leaders regarding available resources appropriate for ministering with persons who have a special need;
- fosters the inclusion of qualified persons with special needs as members of various committees and forums as well as their availability for volunteer service opportunities within other ministries;
- ensures the development, adaptation, and communication of resources for nurture and evangelism for those individuals with special needs; and

- encourages the training and employment of individuals with special needs throughout the church structure.

Therefore, Special Needs Ministries blends the services of those with a disability with those who do not have a disability into a bond of ministry each returning to God the talents and gifts He has bestowed.

As a community of believers who share the gospel with all, Christ is our example. Out of Jesus' 35 recorded miracles, 27 touched people with special needs. He healed the boy who was "unable to speak" (Mark 9:17, NRSV); a man who was paralyzed (Luke 5:18-26); and a deaf man (Mark 7:32-35). Jesus gives clear evidence and support that the worldwide church is to be involved in Special Needs Ministries.

There are many references to the church for this ministry. Evidence of Jesus' divine anointing is expressed in the following passage:

"This was [Jesus'] work. He went about doing good and healing all. . . . There were whole villages where there was not a moan of sickness in any house, for He had passed through them and healed all their sick. His work gave evidence of His divine anointing."⁵

One of the most powerful and convincing statements is: "I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested benevolence. *This is God's test of our character.* If we have the true religion of the Bible we shall feel that a debt of love, kindness, and interest is due to Christ in behalf of His brethren; and we can do no less than to show our gratitude for His immeasurable love to us while

we were sinners unworthy of His grace, by having a deep interest and unselfish love for those who are our brethren and who are less fortunate than ourselves.”⁶

In describing His earthly mission, Jesus said, “ ‘The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed’ ” (Luke 4:18).

Often Jesus would encourage the person touched not to tell anyone. In this ministry confidentiality is extremely important. In like manner, no information about a person with a special need should be shared with anyone else without written permission.

An essential part of training is data collecting. When data is shared, as it will need to be from time to time, individual names must be excluded.

What Is a Special Need?

Jesus Christ was untiring in His service to humanity’s needs. “Varied were the circumstances and needs of those who besought His aid, and none who came to Him went away unhelped. From Him flowed a stream of healing power, and in body and mind and soul men were made whole.”⁷ Because He wanted to minister to every need of humanity, Jesus “took our infirmities, and bore our sicknesses” (Matt. 8:17). Since it was His mission to bring complete restoration, He came to remove the burden of disease. He came to give his children health, peace, and perfection of character.

Generally, three criteria identify a person with a special need:

- A special need is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Major life activities include breathing,

communicating, hearing, learning, manual tasks, seeing, walking, or working.

- A person with a special need has a record of such impairment.
- A person with a special need is regarded as having an impairment that is limiting.

Usually, a person with a special need has recovered from a condition, been misclassified with a condition, or is still living with the physical or mental impairment. Regardless, there is a record of the condition. Prejudicial attitudes of others can cause those with an impairment to become classified as having limitations. For example, a person with a facial disfigurement caused at birth may be labeled as having a disability when in actuality there are no limits to his or her capabilities.

The dignity of people with special needs must be maintained. “Mothering” or patronizing is not ministering but menacing. The Holy Spirit is a special guide in blessing all persons with the special need to be a blessing.

Special Needs Ministries is not a standalone ministry. Rather, it supports every other ministry because people with special needs should be involved in every ministry in the church. The church should view Special Needs Ministries as an artery that carries life-giving blood to the entire church body.

Four Goals of Special Needs Ministries

These goals are measurable and attainable as working with people with special needs is a matter of adjustment. The blending of skills, talents, and gifts enrich the service of the church to the community and enhance the worship experience of both people with special needs and those who do not have the need for special accommodation.

1. Accessibility. The goal is to provide a place where everyone feels welcome regardless of his or her physical or mental condition. Every architectural and attitudinal barrier should be eliminated. Church facilities—from the telephone to the entire structure of the building—should be accessible by all. The gospel should also be accessible. This may mean large-print materials or a sign-language interpreter or closed captioning video materials. Accessibility will promote the importance of specialized ministries to enhance the worship experience.

Special Needs Ministries assists world church leaders in learning how to make all structures, buildings, and programs easily available to all by eliminating existing structural barriers and by using the resources provided by the General Conference and other entities to facilitate accessible programs.

2. Education. The goal is to train people who do not have special needs and those with special needs to work collaboratively in building God's kingdom. Resources should be continually developed and made available to promote the development, adaptation, and communication of resources for nurture and evangelism for those individuals with special needs. Special Needs Ministries assists world church leaders in providing guidance for the inclusion of individuals with special needs throughout the church structure.

3. Encouragement. This goal is to promote participation in all aspects of church life. Providing a safe, loving environment within all levels of the church for all people is the privilege of every Christian. Special Needs Ministries promotes the importance of specialized ministries to foster the spiritual wellbeing of persons with special needs.

4. Accommodation. This goal is to help God’s family be inclusive in principle and practice. Transportation, service animals, or a buddy system to relieve a caregiver are ways to accommodate people with special needs.

Special Needs Ministries promotes the inclusion of qualified persons with special needs as members of various committees and forums as well as their availability for volunteer service opportunities within other ministries. Accommodations may include Braille or recorded information for people who are blind.

Attaining the four goals provides the church with a wonderful opportunity for evangelism, discipleship, and inclusion. “The Lord has afflicted ones, dearly beloved in His sight, who bear the suffering of bodily infirmities. To them special care and grace is promised. Their trials will not be greater than they can endure.”⁸

Special Needs Ministries should sensitize and educate the church to the needs of people with special needs, should develop resources for those who are supporting this people group, and should enhance the worship experience of those with special needs.

Seven Major Special Needs Groups

Special needs affect hundreds of millions of families in developing countries. Currently around 10 percent of the total world’s population, or roughly 650 million people, live with a disability. “Those who have pity for the unfortunate, the blind, the lame, the afflicted, the widows, the orphans, and the needy, Christ represents as commandment keepers, who shall have eternal life.”⁹ Because of the enormity of the numbers, the church has categorized special needs into seven major groups:

Cognitive: A cognitive disability affects a person’s ability to comprehend what is seen or heard, and then infer information from social subtleties and body language.

Cognitive disabilities may include, but are not limited to, autism, learning disabilities, Down's syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and traumatic brain injuries.

Hearing: A hearing disability affects a person's ability to hear sounds and, in some instances, the ability to discriminate speech. Hearing disabilities may range from mild to profound hearing loss. This does not include individuals who self-identify as culturally Deaf.

Hidden: A hidden disability is a physical condition that is not readily observed. This term encompasses many conditions including, but not limited to, arthritis, epilepsy, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, sickle-cell condition, chronic fatigue syndrome, cystic fibrosis, and conditions related to obesity.

Mobility: A mobility disability limits an individual's capacity for the performance of the activities of daily living. The individual may need assistance in moving from one place to another by using a wheelchair, walker, or cane.

Psychiatric: A psychiatric disability is a mental disorder that may affect daily living. This may include, but is not limited to, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias.

Speech: A speech disability affects a person's ability to communicate and can be characterized as language and voice disorders, articulation errors, dysfluency, or stuttering.

Visual: A visual disability affects a person's ability to see. Visual disabilities range from limited vision, glaucoma, and cataracts to blindness.

Although employment is not included as one of the goals of this ministry, leaders of special needs can develop and maintain a database that includes job skills of members with special needs.

Suggestions for Training

An important role of the Special Needs Ministries leader is to increase leaders' and members' awareness, understanding, and inclusion of people with special needs. There are many ways to do this. Here are just a few suggestions for training:

- Promote Special Needs Ministries and its mission and goals throughout all the literature that is distributed within your territory, from the pulpit, in the bulletin, and on the website.
- Model inclusiveness both to people with special needs and to those without special needs.
- Start a lending library on resources helpful to building Special Needs Ministries.
- Invite members with special needs either to lead training for leaders and members or to share ways that the church can be more accessible and inclusive.
- Replace offensive, exclusive, or outdated language with word choices acceptable to individuals with special needs.
- Celebrate diversity by having an annual Special Needs Awareness Sabbath.

The appropriate use of language is essential in this ministry. Different words and cultures can become the reason for success or failure. In training individuals to work in Special Needs Ministries, be sure to avoid words that are not appropriate. Although some of these words may be found in the Bible and other spiritual writings, the use has evolved into a negative connotation. Following are examples of words to avoid and possible alternatives.

WORDS TO AVOID

Handicapped

Afflicted, unfortunate,
less fortunate

Retarded

Deaf-mute, deaf and
dumb, deafie

Feeble-minded, nuts,
crazy, fruit cake

Stupid, imbecile, mute

Stroke victim

Sick and shut in

Wheelchair bound

Crippled, withered,
maimed, defective, lame

Blind as a bat, four eyes

Arthritic, epileptic, afflicted
with, suffering from

A BETTER CHOICE

Disabled

Has a disability or
special need

Congenital disease

Deaf

Has a mental or
emotional disability

Person does not speak

Had a stroke

In the hospital or at home

Uses a wheelchair

Unable to walk, or
describe the condition

Wears glasses or
contact lenses

Has arthritis, has epilepsy

How to Prepare for Training Others

Pray. An effective ministry begins and ends with prayer. Since the number of people in the world who need the gospel of Jesus Christ and the number of people with special needs is great, the only effective and efficient way to reach these individuals is through prayer. Ask for wisdom and the heart of Jesus to sensitize workers for this ministry.

Move. As you pray, the voice of God will speak to you through His Holy Word. As the miracles of Jesus are studied, the desire to emulate His behavior will be overwhelming. Remember, the preparation for a new child in the home does not begin when the baby is brought home, but long before his or her arrival. It is the same with this ministry; preparation must begin now. Proceed immediately and the need will surface.

Study. Many resources are available through the Bible, other print material, and the Internet. Knowledge abounds regarding people with special needs. Begin a library for each of the seven major groups. Remember that knowledge is powerful and will provide strength with the discovery of each resource.

Plan. Decide on a master plan for educating your workers. Solicit help from those who have been involved in Special Needs Ministries. Become more observant. Remember that Special Needs Ministries is not a standalone ministry but supports all the ministries of the church. In the planning, be inclusive. Trust God to provide a faithful, caring, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable team to support the master plan.

Pray. Thank our heavenly Father for the successes in breaking down architectural and attitudinal barriers. As you pray, talk with people who have special needs, caregivers, and professionals. Do not be ashamed to voice that prayer is ascending to heaven on behalf of this ministry.

Following are some helpful scriptural passages as preparation is made to move forward and establish a Special Needs Ministry:

Proverbs 11:14; 16:3; 24:3

Matthew 18:20

Luke 12:12

I Thessalonians 5:17

II Timothy 2:15

Revelation 2:7

This is a ministry whose time has come. This is a wonderful opportunity to reflect the character of Jesus Christ. The doors are open and people are waiting to be welcomed into the house of God. Let them come: the blind with their guide dogs, those in wheelchairs, and people with necessary behavior-modifying medication in their bags. Rejoice as some walk slowly but observe as all are moving toward the kingdom of heaven, where there will be no pain or sorrow, where there will be no one with special needs, where we will all be changed into the perfect reflection of our Master, who cautions us today, “ ‘ “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” ’ ” (Matt. 25:40, NRSV).

Conclusion

Ministry is a privilege for those who comprise God's church. "No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All . . . are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption. Christ came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment of the temple, that every soul may have free access to God."¹⁰

For decades, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been making efforts to establish a ministry for people with special needs. Today, the worldwide church is being intentional regarding all the children of God. Those with special needs are being recognized "as equal in the sight of God. The Saviour has a boundless love for every human being."¹¹ That love is extended to those in Christ's service who are called to leadership. Leaders are to "take care of the church" (1 Tim. 3:5) and to "shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28).

We, who will embrace this ministry, pledge to conquer every barrier that prevents anyone from coming to Jesus to become part of His family. We will not patronize or ignore the man, woman, boy, or girl who has a special need because special needs ministry is a ministry whose time has come.

References

Bova, Joan and Harrell, Michael. "Including All, Excluding None." *Southern Tidings*, July, 2009.

Burks, Catherine. "Initiating Efforts at Your Church." *Columbia Union Visitor*, April 2009.

Commission for People With Disabilities. *Disabilities Ministries Handbook*. (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2002)

General Conference Secretariat. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual "Personal Ministries: Ministry to People with Disabilities."* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010).

Johnson, George. "Disabilities Ministries" in the *North American Division Resource Guide*. (2011), 48.

Thoms, Charlotte LV, ed. *A Quick Start Guide: Disabilities Ministries*. (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2010).

White, Ellen G. *Christ's Object Lessons*. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941).

White, Ellen G. *Manuscript Releases, vol. 3*. (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1990).

White, Ellen G. *The Ministry of Healing*. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942).

White, Ellen G. *Steps to Christ*. Retrieved <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/sc/sc1.html>

White, Ellen G. *Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3*. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948).

White, Ellen G. *Testimonies for the Church, vol. 7*. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948).

Endnotes

- ¹ For the purposes of this manual, the term *Special Needs Ministries* or *Disabilities Ministries* will be used interchangeably.
- ² *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 2010, p. 98.
- ³ Unless otherwise noted all scriptural references in this booklet are from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.
- ⁴ *Steps to Christ*, p. 80.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁶ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 511, emphasis supplied.
- ⁷ *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 17.
- ⁸ *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 3, p. 276.
- ⁹ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 512.
- ¹⁰ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 386.
- ¹¹ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 225.

SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH



General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department