



THE IRRESISTIBLE CHURCH SERIES



Beyond OUR CHURCH WALLS

Bridging the Gap to Those
AFFECTED by **DISABILITY**



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AFFECTED by **DISABILITY**

KAREN ROBERTS

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 Jmi
and Friends

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Beyond Our Church Walls

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Introduction

I have the privilege of knowing a young mom with three beautiful children—two sons and a daughter with special needs. One of her deepest desires was to find a place of belonging for her family at a local church. She had the opportunity to share her story with the leaders of a local church. As she spoke with them, she candidly said, “If you invite us, don’t send us away.” Her family had experienced rejection from the local church more than once, creating a gap between her family and the church, and as a result, a gap between themselves and Christ.

The pastors and elders were humbled by her plea and responded, saying, “Yes, you’re welcome here! But could you help us learn? We may make mistakes and will need your help.” This young mom was cautious but hopeful as she began to meet with the Sunday school teacher; she desperately wanted her daughter to know the love of Jesus. True to their word, the church did their best to embrace this family and learn how to serve them well. Eventually the little girl with special needs was able to express her understanding that “Jesus loves me.” She even sang a worship song

with a group of friends at a talent show put on as an outreach event to the community. The gap was being bridged. The youngest son was making new friends. The oldest son found a place in the youth group where he accepted Christ and was baptized at church camp. The young mom started attending a women's Bible study. Every member of this family found a community where they experienced the love of Jesus.

This book is about how we as God's redeemed people are called to help bridge the gap—the gap that all people experience between themselves and Christ (evangelism), and the gap between the church and individuals affected by disability in our community (accessible outreach). It is an exciting journey filled with kingdom values, commands, and blessings!

The Great Commission, given by Jesus to his disciples, starts with the word “go”: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). Most believers are familiar with this passage, and yet many people don't consider the fact that this verse also applies to people with disabilities.

Harvie Conn, a seminary professor and missionary to Korea, once wrote:

One cannot be a missionary church and continue insisting that the world must come to the church on the church's terms. It must become a "go" structure. And it can do that only when its concerns are directed outside itself toward the poor, the abused, and the oppressed. The church must recapture its identity as the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of its nonmembers.¹

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are one billion people affected by disability in the world.² Although statistics vary regarding people with disabilities and the church, there seems to be common agreement that many people with disabilities are not connected to a local church. This difficult reality creates a critical ministry opportunity as the body of Christ strives to bridge the gap. Steve Bundy, Senior Vice President of the Christian Institute on Disability at Joni and Friends, puts it this way: "Those of us who know the forgiveness and grace of a loving God through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, must lead the way in reaching people with disabilities and including them in our communities of faith. Our sense

of urgency comes from him and must be lived out through his body, the church.”³

As we reach out to individuals affected by disability in our communities, we should expect to make some sacrifices. For example, there is a young man at my church named Richard who is a wheelchair user. He is an integral part of the young adult community. The young adults meet for Bible study in an older house that is not wheelchair accessible. So, each week Richard is carried up the stairs by his friends. It takes a willingness on his part to be carried as well as some effort by his friends, but everyone involved is happy to do so because they are in community. Their desire to help each other grow in the Lord outweighs any inconvenience they may encounter.

Outreach is not a duty or something that we can check off our to-do list, but rather it is something that flows out of our relationship with Christ. As Christ-followers, we are called to lay down our lives to evangelize and minister to the marginalized—the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, and people of all abilities. I love how Ed Stetzer describes outreach: “The church has made a conscious decision that their existence is directly

related to God's mission of seeing people reconciled to God through Christ. A cross-centered and resurrection-powered life no longer lives for itself. It dies daily for the kingdom mission."⁴

Most church leaders desire to help their congregations move from caring for themselves to caring for others. This outward focus can take place in churches of any size. Churches that are smaller may not have the resources to hold large community outreach events, but they typically have great relational strength. Smaller churches may not have a "structured" disability ministry, but if they are making the gospel accessible to people with disability in their congregation and their surrounding community, they are engaging in outreach and evangelism. Larger churches generally have the ability to offer a wide range of support and ministry, something that can be very attractive to families impacted by disability. Regardless of the size and structure of your church, God has called you to share the good news of the gospel and make disciples of all nations.

So, how can a church begin to invest in their community through accessible outreach and evangelism? In the following pages, we will consider three perspectives:

1. The Purpose—bridging the gap between people with disabilities and Christ (evangelism).
2. The Posture—cultivating an attitude that will aid us as we share the love of Christ with individuals affected by disability.
3. The Path—strategies for bridging the gap between your church and individuals impacted by disability in your community (outreach).

Notes

1. Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1982), 23.
2. http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/.
3. Rev. Steve Bundy, *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry* (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2011), 3.
4. Ed Stetzer, “Four Steps to Community Engagement,” *Outreach Magazine* May/June 2013.

The Purpose

What Is the Gospel?

The goal of connecting with our communities is the gospel! As we evangelize, we are sharing the truth of Jesus Christ and trusting God to work a miracle in the hearts of those who hear. The essence of the gospel is described well in the Joni and Friends' *Beyond Suffering* curriculum: "Salvation only comes through a correct belief in and about Jesus. Whether affected by a disability or not, the preaching of the gospel is the same for all. All must come to Christ in repentance and faith."¹ We all share the same salvation in Christ (see Jude 1:3).

Although the means and methods of communicating the gospel differ in context and time, the message of the gospel remains the same. The gospel is meant for all ages, all cultures, all abilities—it is universal. God reached down to meet our greatest need—our sin—which separates us from God. And as Joni Eareckson Tada explains:

Grace is always coming at us, looking to enter our lives at our points of brokenness. In fact,

the cross of Christ where Jesus was crucified in all His weakness was His access to grace. Grace is never bestowed upon the strong who boast of their strength; or the gifted who pride themselves in their gifts. Grace always, always meets us at our point of brokenness.²

The good news of the gospel is more than avoiding separation from God due to our sin. The greatest gift of salvation is Christ himself. The gospel is the good news of the coming kingdom (see Matthew 4:23). It is God's perfect grace to us, in us, and through us (see 2 Corinthians 5:19-21)! It is truly a privilege and a gift that we are called to share this life-changing truth.

Accessible Evangelism Is Relational

Evangelizing is simply inviting others into a relationship with God through Christ. Along with this comes an invitation to fellowship with the body of Christ. At the end of the day, evangelism, and especially accessible evangelism, is relational. The early church experienced the presence of the Lord and engaged in ministry as they lived in community (see Acts 2:42). The good news of the gospel is good news

to an individual, but it is often shared and lived out through community. In recent years, many evangelical leaders have recognized the importance of community in sharing the gospel outside the walls of the church.

For some individuals and families, coming to church is not a realistic possibility. But we can go to them. One of my friends is the mother of two sons with disabilities. The nature of her sons' disabilities typically prevents them from attending church, but she longs for the church to come to them and form relationships with her family. She once told me, "Some of us don't fit into the four walls of the church. I hope that someday a small group from my church would be willing to meet in our home while one or two people are with my adult children with disabilities." This family is longing to be in relationship with Christ but also in relationship with a community.

The story of the paralyzed man and his friends found in Mark 2:1-12 is a beautiful example of bridging the gap: "And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And [Jesus] was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because

of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay” (Mark 2:2-4).

Notice that the four friends were willing to do whatever it took to bring their friend to Jesus. The action of bringing the paralyzed man to Jesus was a communal effort. The four friends were creative, committed, and compassionate. They needed each other. Similarly, we need to be engaged in community to effectively share the gospel.

When reading this passage, I used to focus mostly on the action of the four friends until my friend Mary Beth Gahan helped me see this story from the perspective of the paralyzed man. In her book *Irresistible Invitation*, Mary Beth writes, “As a person with a lifelong disability, I know how scary it can be to be carried in precarious situations! His willingness to go is impressive.”³ Mary Beth goes on to describe how the paralyzed man probably had to overcome what may have been years of isolation to venture out into the crowds of mainstream society, to risk rejection and ridicule. Perhaps it was his companionship with the four friends that gave him confidence and helped him set aside his apprehensions.

In verse 5, we see how Jesus focused on the spiritual need of the paralyzed man rather than his physical disability: “And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” The man’s encounter with Jesus brought spiritual and physical healing through which God was glorified. God does not always choose to physically heal an individual in this lifetime, but as with this account, God eternally restores and redeems all who come to him with a heart of repentance and faith in Christ.

The paralyzed man longed to meet Jesus and receive healing. He had friends who were committed to bringing him to Jesus. Like this man, there are many individuals and families impacted by disability who long to meet the Savior.

Hope Church and DoForOne Ministry in New York City provide us with a great example of the church meeting individuals where they are for the sake of the gospel.

With the goal of dignity and purpose for people with disabilities through the power of genuine relationships, DoForOne brings people who are marginalized into a place of belonging through strategic partnerships. By selectively matching one person with disabilities who is in need of guidance,

companionship, or advocacy, with a person who enjoys the ordinary privileges of life, they form life-changing relationships sustained through education and community support. Volunteers, or advocates, who serve are encouraged to become involved in the life of a person with a disability outside of the “normal” programming of the church. A one-on-one friendship often begins through mutual interests such as music.

This simple ministry concept has been quickly embraced by Christ-followers who are looking for a genuine way to respond to the needs of the community. The ministry hosts monthly meetings for people interested in becoming involved. They also host community gatherings such as movie nights and game nights where advocates and people with disabilities from the community can meet and interact.

As relationships are built, many people with disabilities choose to become part of the Hope Church NYC community as well. All the Hope Church locations strive to be welcoming communities where people with disabilities are valued and fully belong. Through this ministry, they have seen many come to know Christ and find life-giving community through the local church.

As we seek to introduce individuals with disabilities to Jesus, we can look to the friends of the paralyzed

man and DoForOne as examples. Through our actions we communicate that those who are “seemingly weaker” are an “indispensable” part of our faith communities (1 Corinthians 12:23).

Sharing the Gospel in Word and Deed

The church has been placed on this earth to proclaim Christ and to be an example of God’s redeeming work. Jesus’ mission is ours. And not only is it our calling, but it is our delight. Luke 4:18-21 records when Jesus stood up and read scripture (quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2) in the synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good
news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the cap-
tives and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

In the same way that Christ declared the truth of salvation through his life, death, and resurrection, he has tasked the church with proclaiming this truth. What an honor! But how do we do this?

More specifically, how do we evangelize those in our community who are affected by disability?

We are called to do this in both word and deed. We proclaim the good news through the Word (see Romans 10:13-15), and we share the love of Christ through our deeds (see Matthew 10:42). Sharing the gospel through deeds does not mean we abandon sharing the gospel in word, and sharing the gospel through the Word does not mean we abandon sharing the gospel through deeds. Both are needed. So, when a church provides respite care or practical support to parents and caregivers, they are sharing the gospel through their actions, but they should also be looking for opportunities to build relationships that will allow them to share the gospel in word.

There is a wonderful ministry in Chicago through the Pui Tak Center, a center that strives to support the families of Chinese immigrants in a variety of ways. One way that they engage with this community is to provide support for parents who have children with disabilities. As is true in many cultures, there is little help for these parents who struggle with a sense of shame over their child's disability.

Through their relationship with the Pui Tak Center, one family impacted by disability decided

to attend a Joni and Friends Chicago Urban Family Retreat. At Family Retreat, the gospel was shared in word and deed. On the last day of worship, a gospel invitation was given and the father, who is from a Buddhist background, stood. It was a big step for him. Several leaders from a local Chinese church who were serving at the retreat rejoiced in the father's willingness to stand and committed that their church would continue to disciple him.

This story provides us with a great example of several important principles of evangelism:

- Relationships—This family was willing to come to Family Retreat because of the relationships that had been built at the Pui Tak Center. They felt safe to try something new because of the love and support their family had experienced through this ministry.
- Word and Deed—The gospel was shared through the actions of the body of Christ—both at the Pui Tak center and at Family Retreat. But the presentation of the gospel didn't stop there; the retreat pastor also took time to share the Word of God.

- **Community**—The gospel was shared and experienced in community. This community was manifest through the Pui Tak Center as well as Family Retreat. And then, a local church stepped up and offered continued community.
- **Local Church**—The local church is the best way to meet the ongoing needs of families affected by disability. As this brave man continues to grow in his faith, it will be his friends at the local church who will help disciple him and provide him with a sense of community.

Sharing the gospel with individuals affected by disability in our communities is an exciting opportunity. It is not only our duty as believers, but it is also our delight. We not only have the chance to impact one individual for eternity but their whole family as well. There is no greater calling in this life than to share the hope of Christ with others. I hope that as you read this book, you find yourself growing in excitement and confidence to engage in evangelism, thereby helping to bridge the gap between people with disabilities and Christ.

Notes

1. Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Bundy, *Beyond Suffering* (Christian Institute on Disability, 2011), 205-206.
2. <http://www.joniandfriends.org/radio/4-minute/divine-power-and-weakness/>
3. Mary Beth Gahan, *Irresistible Invitation* (2017, ©Mary Beth Gahan).

The Posture

Repentance and Prayer

As we engage in evangelism and outreach, it is important to pause and assess the state of our hearts. In Philippians 2:3, the apostle Paul instructs us to humbly consider others as more significant than ourselves. A great way to cultivate a heart of humility is to practice the art of repentance. Dr. Jeff McNair, university professor and Director of Church Relations for the Christian Institute on Disability, often suggests that the first step in sharing the gospel is to ask forgiveness from people with disabilities. We need to be willing to say, “Would you please forgive us for the way we [the church] have treated you?” Social rejection, in the community and in the church, has left many families impacted by disability with deep wounds.

Emily Colson is a writer, a disability advocate, and the mother of Max, a young man with disabilities. She shared with me, “Many look at disability and question the goodness of God. We have it backward—we must look at God to see who man is. The church belongs to God. God places value on every life. He calls

us to affirm that value.” Every life is precious because it bears God’s mark. Every life is his.¹ We can also exercise repentance by asking forgiveness from the Lord for not seeing each person as an individual created in his image with value and purpose. A posture of humility naturally flows from the recognition that we are all created in the image of God and we are all spiritually disabled.

Embracing a posture of humility allows us to interact with others with true and deep respect. As theologian John Swinton says, “[D]isabilities in all their different forms are not problems to be solved, but rather authentic ways of being human that need to be understood, and respected.” Joni Eareckson Tada often talks about how God is using people with disabilities to plough up the landscape of the church. Truly, the body of Christ is not complete without people with special needs, and an attitude of humble repentance will open the door for God to transform us individually and collectively.

One of the best ways we can adjust our mindset is through prayer. We can pray that God would heal the wounds that people with disabilities have experienced from our society and even in our churches. We can pray for unity in the church—that we would be reconciled with one another as we share the gospel with people

affected by disability in our church and community (see 2 Corinthians 5:19). We can pray that we will be bold in proclaiming the gospel (see Romans 1:16).

I like keeping a personal “impact” list—a list of people that I pray for who are not yet followers of Jesus Christ. You might consider creating your own list and asking if your list includes any people with disabilities. If not, who could you add to your list? You could also consider becoming a prayer partner with a person impacted by disability. This intentional partnership is based on mutual care and concern as you approach God’s throne together. This does not need to be a complicated partnership or a lengthy prayer time; it could be as simple as praying, “Help me.”

In His Image, the special needs ministry of Calvary Chapel Oxnard in Southern California, provides us with a beautiful example of how prayer can prepare our hearts and turn our dreams into actions. In 2007, Scott and Susan Hewer noticed a young man with special needs in their church and recognized his need for fellowship and support. They began meeting with a small group of like-minded people to pray about how their church could welcome and embrace this young man. As this group of individuals prayed, they sought opportunities to welcome their new friend and others like him. They

were encouraged to see a disability ministry begin to form and grow. Through every season, they have remained committed to prayer, asking the Lord, “What would you have us do next?”

Over the last decade, this ministry has expanded greatly and now provides a place of belonging for people with disabilities of all ages. They offer mentor support as needed in age-appropriate classrooms on Sundays and during their Wednesday night services for junior high and high school youth. A Friendship Bible Club meets in their church building twice a month for adults over the age of 18 with developmental disabilities. They also host an annual spa day for moms of special needs children and for foster moms.

The support of their lead pastor and elders has been a key factor in the growth of a ministry that began with one family. And the consistent factor through every season was prayer. Their commitment to prayer prepared their hearts for ministry and propelled them to engage in life-changing ministry!

Understanding God’s Role in Disability

Life is often hard, and sometimes without hope, for individuals and families impacted by disability. But

fortunately, the good news of the gospel is not just for eternity; it is for every moment of every day. Having a disability can make an individual feel like the exception, which can be very lonely, but God's Word reassures us that he is always with us. Deuteronomy 33:27a says, "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms." And, like the psalmist, individuals living with disability can say, "[T]he Lord takes thought of me. You are my help and my deliverer" (Psalm 40:17).

Believers, especially those with disabilities, look toward the day when they will experience no more pain and suffering (see Revelation 21:1-7), but they also find great strength for today because of the hope that comes from Christ and his presence in their daily lives. As I have previously shared, the greatest gift of the gospel is Christ himself. As the church, we have the calling and joy of intentionally sharing this gift with people affected by disability.

But sometimes individuals may struggle to accept this incredible gift of grace because they do not understand how a good God could allow hard things to happen. Having a biblical understanding of God's role in disability is foundational to our mission of evangelizing and discipling people affected by

disability. When an individual or a family experiences disability, questions naturally arise concerning God's sovereignty and why God allows and uses suffering in our lives. We find verses that speak to these questions woven throughout the Bible. These verses help us understand God's purpose and plan for each person as we are all created in his image.

I was personally challenged to grow in my understanding of God's role in suffering when I took the *Beyond Suffering*² course through *Joni and Friends*. As I did each lesson, I began to understand how hope in Christ can be found amid challenging circumstances. I learned that every book of the Bible has verses related to suffering and disability. Allow me to share with you a few verses related to God's role in disability that have influenced my posture. The summary written beside each verse was taken from *Beyond Suffering Bible*³, a valuable resource I encourage you to read!

- Genesis 1:26-27—Human beings were created in God's image to have a relationship with him and to represent him in the world.
- Exodus 4:1-12—None of Moses' excuses are satisfactory, but his protests of inadequacy prompt this strong claim of sovereignty from

God. The Lord is the creator and sustainer of all things—no disability or impairment is beyond his control, and he can use those apparent weaknesses to his glory.

- Psalm 22:1-31—We all face the why question; ultimately, our best answer is to intentionally praise and put our hope in God.
- Luke 14:7-14—Jesus addressed our human tendency to bless others who can respond in kind. Instead, we are called to serve the poor, crippled, lame, and blind with an eye toward heavenly rewards.
- Romans 12:1-8—God has uniquely gifted each one of us, including people with disabilities, to serve the body of Christ.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27—Paul’s description of the church as the body of Christ reframes what we value. The parts of the body we consider to be “weaker” are actually indispensable—and people with disabilities are almost universally considered to be weaker. This means that the body of Christ is incomplete without people with disabilities. Given the larger context of different spiritual gifts working together for the common good, people with disabilities need to

be exercising their spiritual gifts for the sake of the church.

If you are struggling to understand why God allows suffering, I strongly encourage you to pick up a copy of *Beyond Suffering Bible* or check out some of the resources recommended in the appendices of this book. ☞ Resources like these can help us find biblical answers to questions we all face this side of heaven.

Believing Our Friends with Disabilities Can Embrace Saving Faith

Because there are many questions and myths about sin and disability, it is important to have a strong understanding of scripture when engaging in outreach and evangelism. The question of “Who sinned that this man is born blind?” (John 9:1-3) was asked by Jesus’ disciples. And I believe that our understanding of the answer to this question will affect how we share the gospel with people affected by disabilities. Do we cast blame or shame, as the crowd did in this

☞ This symbol indicates that there are supplemental resources that correspond with this topic at <http://irresistiblechurch.org/library/>

Bible story? Or do we see, as Jesus did, how God's glory can be revealed through a person with disability? The man was not blind because of sin, and yet he was a sinner in need of an encounter with Jesus. While it is true that we are all made in God's image (see Genesis 1:27), it is also true that each person is born into sin (see Romans 5:12). The man born blind saw Jesus for who he truly was and responded in worship—this is ultimately what each of us must do, regardless of our abilities and disabilities. While we will not be exploring this topic in full within the context of this book, I believe it is helpful to gain a basic understanding of how it might look to share the gospel with children affected by disability as well as adults with special needs.

The Gospel and Children Affected by Disability

“Do children with disabilities get a free trip to heaven?” This is a question I am sometimes asked. People may also refer to children and adults with disabilities as *holy innocents*, or *special angels*, incapable of sin and therefore they will not suffer the consequences of sin. When answering a question like this, we should look to scripture as our guide. Romans 3:23 tells us that *all* have sinned and fallen short of

the glory of God. And on top of that, most special needs parents that I talk with would agree that their kids show plenty of evidence of being sinners. Just like everyone else, they need the opportunity to hear the gospel and receive salvation.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when sharing the gospel with children affected by disability is that it is possible! It may take some creativity and intentionality, but we can be confident that God desires every individual to know and love him (see 1 Timothy 2:4). We can trust the Holy Spirit to work, even in ways we don't see or understand. First Corinthians 2:12-13 reminds us, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual."

In other words, God does not need to use a person's intellectual ability to reveal himself—sometimes a person's thoughts are too inflated with their own importance, their own intelligence. Sometimes God doesn't even need a person's heart through which to communicate his truth—hearts are often so dry and

calloused. God expresses spiritual truths and spiritual words to our spirit so that we might understand what God has to say. And that's good news!

Children often respond well to a variety of learning styles, and children with disabilities are no exception. It can be a great idea to use music or act out stories. Repetition is helpful for children of all abilities (and for adults too). You might consider telling the same Bible story in different ways—once with pictures, once by acting it out, and once with a DVD. Using Bible verses that are short or paraphrased as well as making use of simple, concrete language and object lessons can help make a biblical truth easier for children with disabilities to understand and retain. Teaching children is an amazing opportunity to engage in creative thinking! There are several other appendices  and books in the *Irresistible Church* series that share more specific ideas on teaching children affected by disability, including *Pathways to Belonging* and *Responding with Compassion*.

The Gospel and Adults with Special Needs

God has called us to share the good news of the gospel with all people. And we can do so knowing that faith is not “primarily a matter of intellect: it involves our

entire self, including our hearts and wills—our whole relationship with God. While salvation is individual, faith development involves the whole community and continues throughout the Christian life as God more fully transforms us into the image of Christ.”⁴

Earlier we looked at the story of the man who was paralyzed in Mark 2 and noted in verse 5 that Jesus saw the faith of the friends who brought this man to him. In this example, the gospel was made known and experienced in a community. Individuals with disabilities, especially our friends with low cognitive ability, often come to know the love of Christ as they experience being loved by others.

We are called to confidently share the truth of the gospel and trust that the Holy Spirit is at work, even if we cannot see it or fully understand it. Corrie ten Boom once wrote:

They [adults with developmental disabilities] are grown-ups and they must be treated the same way as grown-ups. The language must be plain and clear—no dogmatic talk, no arguments, only the old, old story in plain language. The best way to reach them is by love. Love means understanding (Rom. 5:5). God

must lead, for without the Holy Spirit no one can bring the message to anybody. The human spirit fails, except when the Holy Spirit fills.”⁵

Every single person on this earth needs the gospel. Just because a person is unable to respond verbally or fully articulate the gospel, we cannot doubt that the Holy Spirit is working in their heart. We do not have the privilege of understanding how the Spirit is at work in an individual’s life; we must simply share the gospel. So, how can we engage adults affected by disability with the gospel? Perhaps even without using words?

Individuals with profound cognitive disabilities generally experience things relationally rather than cognitively. In this context, sharing the gospel becomes less of a transmission of knowledge and more of an experience. The gospel is experienced by belonging and being deeply loved. It is not a one-sided conversation, where one person transmits knowledge and the other receives. Rather, the transforming power of the gospel changes both individuals. People with disabilities call us to a deeper understanding of God’s love as we give and receive love from one another.

Theologian and scholar John Swinton describes his friendship with Stephen, a young man with multiple disabilities, in *Building a Church for Strangers*. In this article, Swinton writes about how Stephen loves to worship God even though “he doesn’t know the words of the liturgy and he finds little meaning in the words of the prayers and the hymns. He simply knows chapel is a place where he can go to sing and be with his friends. He knows the word ‘Jeeshuss.’”⁶

Swinton reflects on how the mystery of God’s presence in Stephen’s life has changed his personal understanding of the gospel:

Something is happening in the life of this young man, God is moving in him, and I have no idea how to explain it. “Jeeshuss” is with him, but not in the words of Scripture that are spoken, or the complexities of the liturgy that is being worked through. God is with him in a way that transcends my intellectualized worldview. . . . In fact, my hopeless dependence on my intellect for making sense of the world actually prevents me from even beginning to understand how God might be with him in any kind of meaningful sense.

The truth is that God is more mysterious and unpredictable than I am comfortable with imagining.⁷

When the body of Christ includes people with disabilities, we witness holy moments where God's Spirit is at work, and we are in awe as God's glory is revealed through those whom we often consider the weakest among us (see 1 Corinthians 12:22).

When sharing the gospel with adults with disabilities, please remember that while you may need to present ideas in a way that is simple, the ideas themselves do not necessarily need to be simple. You can use vocabulary that is accessible but does not treat them as children. For example, the gospel message could be shared using simple phrases:

- We are sinners.
- Christ died for us.
- I will receive Him.
- I am forgiven.
- I have a place in heaven.

It is important to use age-appropriate visuals and materials. And I would encourage you to focus on

the person's faith rather than on their knowledge. Simple drawings can also be helpful to illustrate the gospel message. 

As we humble ourselves and posture our hearts to share the gospel with those around us, I have confidence that God will equip us and present us with opportunity. We can and should adapt the gospel presentation so that individuals affected by disability can comprehend it, but at the end of the day we must trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives. It is a privilege and joy to see the faith of others take root and flourish!

Notes

1. Emily Colson, interview with Karen Roberts, October 2017.
2. Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Bundy with Pat Verbal, *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry* (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2011).
3. *Beyond Suffering Bible*, New Living Translation (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016) A16-23.
4. *Beyond Suffering Bible*, A19.
5. Corrie ten Boom, "Common Sense Not Needed: Some Thoughts About an Unappreciated Work Among Neglected People," no copyright, first published 1957, Christian Literature Crusade, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, available at <http://www.gotothebible.com/HTML/commonsensenotneeded.html>.
6. John Swinton, "Building a Church for Strangers," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, Vol. 1. 4 (4) 2001, 28.
7. Ibid.

The Path: Accessible Outreach

A church that desires to evangelize people in their community should consider looking outside their four walls to meet individuals and families affected by disability and begin building relationships. Our outreach efforts will generally yield greater fruit if we intentionally put ourselves in the path of the people we want to reach. Our paths will naturally lead us to individuals in places where we are already involved, such as our neighborhoods, our schools, and our children's sports team. But to reach a new audience, we should intentionally place ourselves on paths where we don't ordinarily go. You might consider visiting a workplace that employs adults with disabilities or volunteering once a month at a group home.

This approach tends to be less programmatic and more relational in nature, allowing you the opportunity to get to know a person's name, their dreams, and their passions. You will probably also gain an understanding of how God uniquely created

that person with a plan and purpose, their struggles, and their joys.

Matthew 20:29-34 records Jesus' encounter with two men who were blind:

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And stopping, Jesus called them and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

The disciples and others traveling with Jesus naturally encountered people with disabilities. The crowd surrounding Jesus made an effort to ignore the men who were blind. And yet, through his words and actions, Jesus taught everyone to stop and listen. Jesus saw the two men. He reached out, put his hand

on them, and brought them healing. This passage is an excellent example of how we ought to reach out intentionally to people with disabilities so that they might encounter the incredible grace of Jesus Christ.

Research

A good place to begin sharing the gospel is with the individuals in the community surrounding your church. Many people who are not somehow personally touched by disability will never intersect with individuals affected by disability in their work or neighborhoods. But with intentionality and awareness, families affected by disability can be readily found. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, one in five individuals, or 19 percent of people, have a disability.¹

The worldview of people with disabilities and how they perceive themselves is often shaped by their social environment rather than their impairment. Because of this, it can be a great idea to familiarize yourself with the unique culture and social context of your community.

You could start by taking a small group, including people with disabilities, on a prayer walk over the various neighborhoods and businesses surrounding

your church. Afterward, take time to discuss anything the Lord put on your hearts as you became acquainted with the people or places on your walk. Did you learn anything about God's heart for your community? Were there any services or ministries that could benefit your friends affected by disability? Do you have any ideas on where and how to begin building relationships?

As you are surveying your community, don't forget to learn from individuals in your congregation who already have experience or are employed in fields related to disability, such as special education teachers, counselors, and physical therapists. You can also become a student of your community by learning about the general demographics, employment types, ethnicities, and more. While these types of information are not specific to disability, it can be helpful to learn these facts about your community as they have an impact on people living with disability near your church. There are many helpful resources available online to assist you as you dive into this demographic research. 📖

Gathering all this information will undoubtedly assist your church as you reach out to your community. But it also has the potential to help you serve

families impacted by disability already in your congregation as they may turn to you for information and support. As you learn about your community, you may even consider creating a resource center at your church with books, pamphlets, and information about the resources available in your community.

In his book *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, Erik Carter describes how a church can begin to know its neighbors through a community mapping process. 📖 Carter encourages churches to choose from a variety of approaches, such as visiting local organizations, mailing out surveys, interviewing community members, and driving through your neighborhood. He recommends that this process take place over a matter of months and be continuous, allowing you to gain an accurate understanding of the community surrounding your church. He also suggests gathering a team from your church, including people with disabilities, to research what agencies, associations, and networks are already present in your community. As you learn what services are being offered and what resources are available to people with disabilities, you will become a valuable resource for individuals with disabilities in your church and in your community.

Regardless of how you choose to collect your information, gathering it will assist your church in outreach. Isolation and lack of church involvement are common struggles among families affected by disability. Understanding this reality can help motivate us as we make an effort to reach individuals and families affected by disability in our communities and in our congregations.

Preparation

As you research your community with the goal of bridging the gap, you should also take time to consider whether your church body is ready to welcome new friends who may seem different. Preparing your congregation to welcome individuals and families affected by disability can look many different ways. I personally love the concept of “social ramps” that authors Jeff McNair and Brian McKinney describe in a 2015 edition of the *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability*. A physical ramp may allow access to physical environments, but a social ramp allows people access to social environments. McNair and McKinney describe three steps of building a social ramp, including preparing the social environment,

educating the social environment, and coaching the social environment.²

At a recent disability ministry workshop, Dr. Ben Conner, Professor of Practical Theology at Western Theological Seminary, shared a story about a young woman named Megan. Megan has cerebral palsy and a significant cognitive impairment. She was enthusiastic about church, and although she generally attends with a friend, she decided to attend church by herself one Sunday morning. It soon became apparent how important the steps of preparing, educating, and coaching the social environment were. Megan sat in the balcony where she typically sits but ended up by herself without anyone even sitting near her. During worship, no one helped her find the correct pages in the hymnal. At one point during the service, her phone began to buzz, and she was unable to turn it off. People around her shushed her and looked at her in a way that she interpreted as harsh and angry. Megan began to cry but no one comforted her. She quickly left church, went home, and cried.³

Megan's experience helped the church realize that they needed to prepare the congregation to receive Megan and others like her. So the church leadership started taking definitive steps to introduce their

congregation to individuals with disability. These efforts helped the congregation understand the value of individuals with disabilities and created a more welcoming environment.

Some churches will hold a church-wide disability awareness Sunday; others may gain awareness through their pastor's doing a sermon series on something related to disability. And all of us will continue to learn as we go, welcoming families as best as we can with an open heart. By doing things such as building social ramps, we can help our congregations gain understanding as well as a practical level of comfort so that they are more prepared to welcome individuals affected by disability.

Engaging (Practical Tips and Strategies)

So far, we have addressed some of the big issues regarding evangelism and community outreach, but I'd also like to take time to consider some specific ways that churches have invested in their communities. There are many ideas and strategies that can be utilized outside the church walls as well as within. Please know that the following ideas are only a sampling of suggestions.

Please do not feel as though you need to do all of these, but instead take time to consider your community and what opportunities might be the best fit for you as you reach out. I encourage you to be creative and to brainstorm other ways that you can engage with your community for the purpose of the gospel.

Outside the Church Walls

Some individuals, particularly those who have been hurt by the church, will be more open to engaging in activities if they take place in the community rather than in your church building. By building relationships through community events, you may gain the opportunity to regain their trust and share the gospel in a non-threatening way.

- **Community Sports**—You can gather a team of volunteers to serve with the Special Olympics in your area. Check out their website for locations and schedules. Your community may have other special needs recreation programs as well that you can volunteer with. Organizations like these provide a great opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of an individual and get to know a family in your community.

- **Parenting Clubs and Blogs**—These local and virtual communities can be a great source of support for parents of children with special needs. You might be able to connect with the leadership of local clubs and offer to help with child care during their meetings. Your willingness to serve them is a beautiful way to show love and support. Blogs can also be an important part of parent support strategies. It is often a place where parents share openly about their struggles, and I have personally learned a lot about the day-to-day blessings and challenges of special needs families by reading their blogs. Blogs can be a great place of encouragement whether they are Christ-centered or secular. As you engage with parent support groups, whether local or virtual, I encourage you to do so with a posture of listening and humility.
- **Governmental and Community Agencies**—Governmental and community agencies are often open to collaborating with churches. One model for connecting churches, people with disabilities, governmental and community associations, and agencies is through open meetings. You can invite a diverse set of community

members together to collectively brainstorm strategies and resources that can be used to address a specific topic. The Waisman Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison calls these “Community Conversations” and offers a thorough description of this strategy online.⁴

- **Social Media**—You can leverage social media platforms to promote disability ministry events outside of your church, to engage in conversations, and to invite individuals to join you at church. If you are not comfortable navigating social media platforms, this can be a great opportunity to engage young volunteers.
- **Sensory-Friendly Events**—You can coordinate with local movie theaters, music groups, and theatrical companies to host events that are sensory friendly. This generally means that the lights are left on, the overall volume is reduced, and chatter from the audience is welcomed. AMC theaters regularly offer sensory-friendly film showings. There is a college in my area of Chicago that offers a concert each year for children and teens with sensory needs. I encourage you to reach out to groups in your local area to see if they would be willing to partner with you on an inclusive event.

- **Tutoring or Mentoring**—You might consider offering to tutor students or volunteering to read at special education classes in your area. Offering to mentor an adult with a disability at a vocational training program may also be an option depending on the local programs available in your community.
- **Serve a Meal**—You and a group of volunteers from your church could serve a meal at a group home. This type of service opportunity easily lends itself to more engagement through things such as a game night. When my church started serving meals at an area day program for adults with disabilities, volunteers were hesitant and pretty much stayed behind the serving tables. But as we kept coming, we began to meet people and soon everyone was enjoying sitting together around the tables.

Inside the Church Walls

As you engage with your community, you can also consider how your church facilities can be used to build relationships and meet the needs of individuals affected by disability. The following are a few ideas on how you might accomplish this:

- **Host Disability Organizations**—You can open the doors of your church and offer to host disability organizations for their meetings by providing them with a room and refreshments. Pastor Yungnam of Life Community Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has a dream that their church will be a hub for families impacted by disability in their community. They hope to collaborate with community agencies and companies to offer a space for tutoring and music therapy. They also plan to host a sensory-friendly movie night and possibly expand to have an autism center.
- **Host a Luke 14 Banquet**—This event is based on the parable found in Luke 14 where people of all abilities and stations of life are invited to eat with the Master. You can recruit volunteers to prepare food and decorate tables. You can even create small gift baskets to place at each table setting. Then, invite a set number of people with disabilities and their families to attend. After dinner, give away door prizes or gift certificates and hold a short program highlighting someone's testimony. At the end of the banquet, take time to share the gospel

so that all the attendees have the opportunity to know the truth and hope of Jesus Christ.⁵

- Proms—Many churches choose to host a gala night, like a prom, where teens and adults with disabilities and volunteers enjoy a fun evening of dancing and food. If you are a smaller church, you might find a couple other local churches that are willing to collaborate with you in your effort to make this a truly special night for each person attending. This type of event creates a wonderful opportunity to connect with people affected by disability, not just for one night, but to invite them to come to your worship service, youth group, or other ministry events.
- Respite—Offering parents and caregivers a time of rest and refreshment from their day-to-day responsibilities is a great way to show the love of Christ. There are many models and ways to do this. I have encountered quite a few churches who provide respite by offering a day of pampering for mothers of children with special needs and wives of husbands with disabilities. Doing so can provide refreshment physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, hosts a day

of fishing for dads and their children with special needs each summer—an opportunity most of them would otherwise never have. *We've Got This*, a book in the *Irresistible Church* series, is full of practical tips on how to offer respite to families in your community.

- **Family Fun Nights**—Creating events where the whole family can be themselves is a great way to support families affected by disability and cultivate community. These events can take on many forms, such as a game night, a fall festival, or a BBQ. Hosting events based on holidays can be a great idea as well, such as an accessible Easter egg hunt or trunk-or-treat event.
- **Support Groups**—Special needs parents often long to spend time with others who understand their daily challenges. Isolation is a common struggle among parents raising children with special needs and among caregivers of adults with disabilities. As your church seeks to serve families affected by disability, you might consider offering some sort of support group or life group that will help them combat isolation, build community, and nurture their souls. *Doing Life Together*, a book in the *Irresistible Church*

series, offers more ideas and information on support groups.

As I mentioned previously, the options for community engagement are virtually endless! I hope these suggestions will provide you with a place to start and the encouragement you need to begin. These outreach strategies, along with many others, can provide a great platform for sharing the gospel.

Conclusion

I hope this book has equipped and encouraged you to reach your community for the sake of the gospel. But if you are still not sure where to start, consider doing one thing for one family. Emily Colson often shares the story of how a man from her church noticed her son, Max, and invited him to join the cleaning crew as they stacked the chairs. It was a simple invitation God used to help Max and Emily feel welcome. The church is part of what Emily calls their “victory story.” She challenges people to “invite someone to stack chairs, and then watch where God is working.”⁶

The gospel leads to changed hearts, discipleship, and ultimately a continuation of the Great

Commission (see Matthew 28:19-20). Every believer has a role to play in the body of Christ, and as Joni Eareckson Tada asserts, “*all* people with disabilities in the church have a kingdom role.”⁷

The importance of this truth struck me deeply when I had the privilege of meeting Mark, a young man who was serving as a volunteer at a Joni and Friends Family Retreat. Mark has limited mobility and uses a walker, but he made the effort to approach me, take out a cloth and eye glass cleaner, and ask me if my glasses needed cleaning. Always eager to serve others, Mark often goes to a shelter for homeless people in his community and offers to clean people’s glasses. The response he gets is usually one of surprise followed by delight at how much better they can see once Mark has cleaned their glasses. He then uses this opportunity to share about how he was once spiritually blind but now he sees! Mark uses this small, simple act of kindness to show the love of Christ and begin a conversation about Jesus.

Just as Mark and Max are serving the church and acting as Christ’s ambassadors, we are all called to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people. We all have a role to play in the kingdom of God.

Go Make Disciples, a book in the *Irresistible Church* series, takes a much closer look at this concept if you would like to learn more.

There are thousands of families in our communities that have not found a way to get over the threshold of the church. And I believe God is calling us to help bridge the gap—the gap between people and Christ and the gap between people with disabilities and the church. I pray that you will invest in your community with the *purpose* of sharing the hope of Christ with people of all abilities. And I pray that you will embrace a *posture* of humility and prayer as you intentionally choose *paths* that lead to opportunities for evangelism and outreach.

We, as the body of Christ, must answer the call to reach individuals in our communities impacted by disability. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 9, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38). Many laborers are needed to share the good news of the gospel with a world that desperately needs to know the love of God and the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. All believers in Christ, regardless of our abilities or disabilities, are empowered to

be evangelists (see Acts 1:8). We can be co-laborers, working together to share the Good News.

Note

1. Q. Wang, *Disability and American Families* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).
2. Jeff McNair and Brian McKinney, “Social Ramps: The Principles of Universal Design Applied to the Social Environment,” *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability (JCID)* 2015, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring/Winter, 43-68.
3. Benjamin T. Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring mission theology through the lens of disability studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).
4. <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cedd/pdfs/products/community/LaunchingInclusiveEfforts.pdf>
5. Beyond Suffering, 134.
6. Emily Colson, interview with Karen Roberts, October 2017.
7. Joni Eareckson Tada, “Kingdom Matters in Disability,” *Beyond Suffering*, 71.

Becoming *Irresistible*

Luke 14 commands Christ followers to “Go quickly . . . find the blind, the lame, and the crippled . . . and compel them to come in!” While this sounds inspiring and daunting, exciting and overwhelming, motivating and frightening, all at the same time, what does it actually mean? How do we live and function within the church in such a way that families affected by disability are compelled to walk through our doors to experience the body of Christ?

We can certainly *compel* them by offering programs, ministries, events, and other church activities, but what if the compelling aspect was more about heart, culture, acceptance and embracing? What if our churches were overflowing with the hope of Jesus Christ . . . a hope not simply for those who “fit in” or look the part, but rather a hope to all, including the marginalized, downtrodden and outcast?

Becoming *Irresistible* is more than programs and activities—it is about a transformational work in our hearts . . . first as individuals and then as the body of Christ. *Irresistible* allows us to see each individual as he or she truly is: created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), designed purposely as a masterpiece (Psalm 139:13-14), instilled with purpose, plans and dreams (Jeremiah 29:11), and a truly indispensable member of the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 12:23). An *Irresistible Church* is an “authentic community built on the hope of Christ that compels people affected by disability to fully belong.” It is powerful for a person to know that

he or she is fully welcomed and belongs. *Irresistible* captures the heart of the church as it should be—how else do we explain the rapid growth and intense attraction to the church in the book of Acts? The heart of God was embodied through the people of God by the Spirit of God . . . and that is simply *Irresistible*!

The *Irresistible Church Series* is designed to help not only shape and transform the heart of the church, but also to provide the practical steps and activities to put *flesh* around the *heart* of the church—to help your church become a place for people to fully belong. Thank you for responding to the call to become *Irresistible*. It will not happen overnight, but it will happen. As with all good things, it requires patience and perseverance, determination and dedication, and ultimately an underlying trust in the faithfulness of God. May God bless you on this journey. Be assured that you are not alone—there are many on the path of *Irresistible*.

For more information or to join the community,
please visit www.irresistiblechurch.org.



Joni and Friends was established in 1979 by Joni Eareckson Tada, who at 17 was injured in a diving accident, leaving her a quadriplegic. Since its inception, Joni and Friends has been dedicated to extending the love and message of Christ to people who are affected by disability whether it is the disabled person, a family member, or friend. Our objective is to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of this group of people in practical ways.

Joni and Friends is committed to recruiting, training, and motivating new generations of people with disabilities to become leaders in their churches and communities. Today, the Joni and Friends International Disability Center serves as the administrative hub for an array of programs which provide outreach to thousands of families affected by disability around the globe. These include two radio programs, an award-winning television series, the Wheels for the World international wheelchair distribution ministry, Family Retreats which provide respite for those with disabilities and their families, Field Services to provide church training along with educational and inspirational resources at a local level, and the Christian Institute on Disability to establish a firm biblical worldview on disability-related issues.

From local neighborhoods to the far reaches of the world, Joni and Friends is striving to demonstrate to people affected by disability, in tangible ways, that God has not abandoned them—he is with them—providing love, hope, and eternal salvation.

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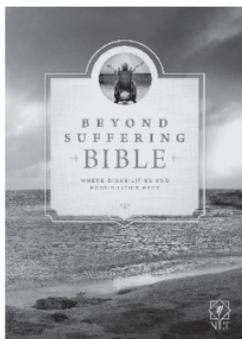


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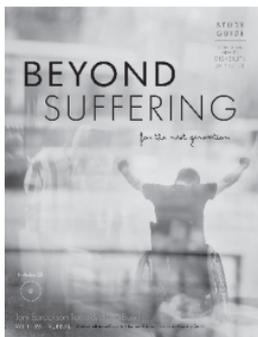
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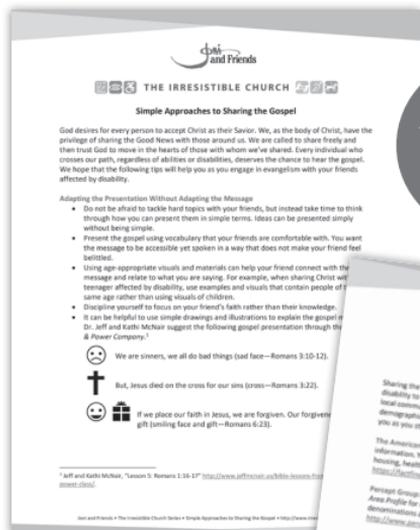
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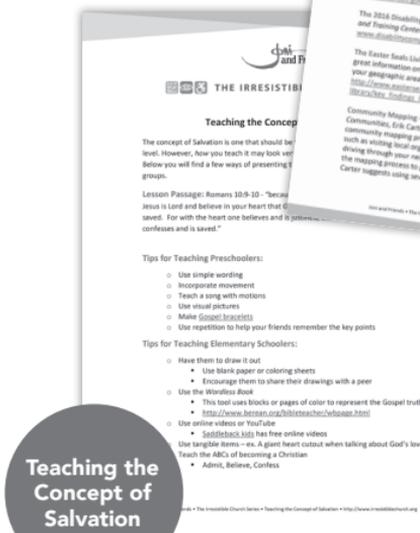
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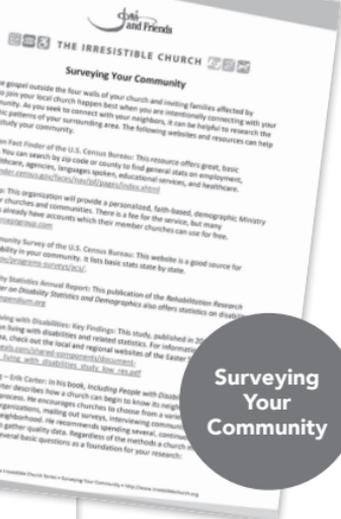
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