

# **Special Needs Ministry Handbook**

**Helping special needs youth grow in their faith as  
members of the Body of Christ**

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# Contents

Why this Handbook?.....	4
<b><u>Letter from a Pastor.....</u></b>	<b><u>5</u></b>
<b><u>Part I - The Foundation for Special Needs Ministry</u></b>	
Meet Some of Our Youth .....	6
The Challenge of Special Needs Ministry .....	7
Who are Special Needs Youth? .....	8
What Makes this Model Unique? .....	10
Why is Special Needs Ministry so Important? .....	12
<b><u>Part II - Planning the Ministry</u></b>	
Steps to Getting Started .....	13
Spiritual Planning Form .....	19
Spiritual Plan Annual Review Form .....	21
<b><u>Part III The Results from Special Needs Ministry</u></b>	
What Can You Expect from Special Needs Ministry? .....	23
Stories from Some Parents of Our Youth .....	26
<b><u>Appendixes</u></b>	
Appendix A - List of Resources .....	30
Appendix B – Selections from an actual Ministry Handbook .....	31
Appendix C - Sample Annual Calendar .....	35

# Why This Handbook?

Frequently churches are ill equipped to welcome special needs youth and their families; when we look around our churches on Sunday morning we don't often see special needs youth participating. Sensing that their children do not "belong", families of special needs youth either stay away from church or adapt by attending church services in shifts, causing their special needs youth to remain on the "outside" and lessening their own experience of church life. When the church does not have a plan in place to help them, special needs youth and their families can drift to the periphery of church life.

This handbook provides practical methods for the Body of Christ to include special needs youth and see them grow in their Christian faith as active members.

This handbook can be used by:

- Pastors seeking to incorporate these youth and their families, recognizing them as indispensable to the Body of Christ;
- Parents of special needs youth wanting themselves and their whole family to more fully participate in the life of their church;
- Youth Ministers seeking to have their ministry address the needs of all of the youth in the church;
- Anyone sensing God leading them to reach out to special needs youth and their families in their church.

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## **His Name Was Tommy...I Think**

His name was Tommy...I think. I hope you'll excuse me for not remembering clearly. It was almost forty years ago that Tommy and I were introduced: Tommy, a mentally disabled child, and I a first-year seminarian...Roy Moeller, the pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, St. Louis, my field work supervisor, asked me to assume the responsibility for Tommy's Christian growth during the Sunday Christian education hour.

I was unprepared for this task, unsupervised, and, before it was all over, nearly undone. Each Sunday at 9:15 a.m. Tommy and I met in a little room. I talked. He did all manner of things. I don't know if Tommy got much out of it. I doubt it. But I learned plenty.

I learned what an important and challenging ministry the Lord puts before us by giving us special needs children. I learned, as James Dittes once said, that those who are "in the way" are not impediments to our all important ministries, they are our ministry. And I learned what a gift to the Body of Christ those people are who have the heart and the skills to bring Christ to special kids.

I also learned that my calling as a pastor is not to do all the ministry myself, but, as Paul writes, "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (Ephesians 4: 12-13). I learned to receive with thanksgiving those who can serve special needs kids and who willingly step forward to do so.

So imagine my delight and gratitude when, in the space of several months, the Lord brought together at our church a constellation of approximately twenty stars, twenty capable, willing servants, eager to undertake special needs ministry! This booklet is the distillation of their hard work, their hard won lessons, and their love. Use it and share it and get ready to cheer on those "stars" where you are, whom God will raise up to do special needs ministry.

David Koch  
Retired Senior Pastor

# Part 1 – The Foundation of Special Needs Ministry

## Meet some of our youth...

**Sarah's** face is framed with soft brown curls; she is a petite twelve-year-old whose quiet face lights up with a smile when something pleases her. Sarah was born with a rare chromosome disorder that is accompanied by developmental delay and she can neither speak nor sit unassisted. She has a tracheostomy and is medically fragile. Sarah is also a member of our church. Like the other twelve-year-olds at our church Sarah needs people in the congregation who will appreciate and accept her as she is, and recognize the gifts that she brings to us.

**Michael** is a warm twelve-year-old boy with a great smile. He's active, friendly, and affectionate. Michael likes the music that our church band plays during worship, and, in fact, the trumpet player in the band has noticed Michael's enthusiasm and invited him to play with a rhythm instrument when the music starts. But there are also problems. Michael can't sit still during church and his high energy level prevents the rest of his family from being able to worship. Michael has Down Syndrome and a seizure disorder; he does not talk and it is hard for him to form meaningful relationships with others. But Michael is also an important member of our church and God wants to use Michael in our life together as a congregation.

**Kendra** is a nineteen-year-old young woman who has been coming to church for 13 years. Although she would like to become a member of the church and receive the sacraments, she has never joined a confirmation class because the classes are too hard for her. She has trouble understanding abstract concepts and it takes great effort for her to grasp spiritual truths. Kendra doesn't engage with others socially like you and I do, and despite the fact that Kendra has been attending worship services for 13 years, she has few friends. Kendra has autism.

Perhaps you have a Sarah, a Michael or a Kendra at your church and want to help them become more involved in your church life. Where do you start? What do you do? What is it they need? The answer will be different for each one of your youth because God is working in each of their lives in a unique way.

The special needs youth in our congregation face significant and unique challenges. Some are mentally challenged, some are physically challenged and others have autism. Several of our youth have medical conditions that are life threatening. When we began Special Needs Ministry at our church, at times the task seemed too great, but consistently God's grace has supplied all that we have needed. Members of our congregation both young and old have stepped forward to offer love, friendship and support to our special needs youth and their families. The Spirit of God is evident in the love, patience, kindness and joy experienced in our ministry.

## **The Challenge of Special Needs Ministry**

***“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must also love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34***

Learning to love people who are different from us is a challenge. It requires us to grow in understanding, wisdom, and acceptance. When we encounter people who have obvious flaws and weaknesses, the challenge is heightened. Youth with special needs may not speak clearly and often have poor social skills. They may not smile at the same things you and I do, and they may not even look at us when we speak to them. Frequently, special needs youth have varying degrees of mental and physical challenges.

We “able bodied” people also have limitations that interfere with befriending special needs youth. Most of us are busy and question whether we have time to love a special needs youth, others assume they lack the skill and experience necessary to do this ministry, and if we are truly honest, many of us would admit that there are times when we are uncomfortable with youth who look and behave differently.

This handbook is written to help us learn to love and support one another in our Christian walk. It offers a method to get to know youth who have special needs by listening to them and their families. It provides a framework for our special needs youth to talk about who they are, how God made them and how they want to grow in their Christian faith. Finally, the handbook offers a plan for the church to fully welcome special needs youth and their families into the Body of Christ.

## **You Can Do It**

Special needs youth have many kinds of disabilities. Depending on the youth in your congregation, the task of starting a special needs ministry may seem too hard. However, God loves every one of his children. He wants them to be part of his church on earth and has commanded us to love special needs youth the same way that Christ has loved us. God has also promised that His grace is available to us even in the midst of our weaknesses and limitations.

***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”  
2Corinthians 12:9***

Special needs ministry happens by the grace of God and through His power. When we respond to His command to love one another and are eager to become vessels of His grace, we are in a position to begin special needs ministry.

## Who are Special Needs Youth?

Society places high value on intelligence, beauty, and physical prowess. Special needs youth often don't measure up well compared to these standards. Because they lack attributes esteemed by our society, it is easy to unwittingly place them in the category of "have-nots". This perspective views special needs ministry as a work of mercy with the "haves" helping the "have-nots" as though the church were comprised of two separate groups.

Special needs ministry begins by seeing our youth as God sees them, rather than as measured by society's standards. The foundation for special needs ministry is found in the book of Genesis and in the Psalms; these verses give God's perspective on our youth.

### Special needs youth are

- **Young people created in the image of God, *Genesis 1:26***
- **Young people created with unique gifts, abilities and challenges, *Psalms 139:13-15***
- **Young people whose days have been ordained by God, *Psalms, 139:16***

- **Young people created in the image of God.**

*"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him."*

*Genesis 1:26*

*"When God created man he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them..." Genesis 5:1, 2*

We learn in Genesis that we are valuable, because we are made in the image of God. Human beings were made differently than the rest of creation. God created plants and animals by simply speaking a word, but when He made man God scooped up the ground and physically formed him. Then God breathed life into man. The value that God places on our human souls is knit into our being.

Therefore, what makes our youth special is not their peculiar muscles or how well they walk or whether or not they can speak or care for themselves. What makes our youth special is that they are made in the likeness of God.

- **Young people created with unique gifts, abilities and challenges.**
- **Young people whose days have been ordained by God**

*"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret*

*place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Psalm 139:13-16*

Psalm 139 is difficult to understand in the face of suffering and disappointment. Why does God allow children to be born with illness and deformities, and how can He ordain their days to include suffering? These are honest questions and are particularly difficult and painful questions for families of special needs youth. It is beyond the scope of this handbook to answer these questions so you may want to refer your special needs families to the resources in the Appendix that address some of these topics. However we do learn from Psalm 139 that God has specifically created our youth with certain gifts, abilities, and challenges and that he is actively at work in their lives every day.

Often youth who have special needs live on the fringe of society. The more significant the disability, the further they are pushed inadvertently to the side. Because their speech is difficult to understand, people do not take time to listen. When they move slowly, able-bodied people rush by. They may look peculiar, and so they are either stared at in public places, or ignored out of embarrassment. Rarely are they asked to serve.

Placing a high value on our special needs youth and respecting what God is doing in their lives is at the core of our ministry. When we give equal validity to the work of God in their lives, we place them solidly in the Body of Christ rather than on the fringe.

**As Christians we must consciously look past the outward attributes of special needs youth.** It is important to esteem them for who they are, human beings made in the image of God. Then we are able to see them as essential, not optional members of the Body of Christ and infinitely worthy in the eyes of God. When we do this, we no longer view the ministry as one where the “haves” serve the “have-nots” but rather as a full expression of the Body of Christ living and working together in mutual love and respect.

# What Makes this Model Unique?

## Individual Spiritual Planning

A program is developed for every special needs youth to help him or her grow spiritually. This is accomplished by writing an individual “Spiritual Plan” for every youth. The Spiritual Plan is developed by a team comprised of the special needs youth, family members, pastoral staff and friends; the planning process is led by a Special Needs Minister. During one or two team meetings spiritual goals are identified. These goals may include: learning Bible stories, participating in corporate worship, experiencing fellowship, praying and serving others. Because the plans are individual, special needs ministry looks quite different among the special needs youth being served. This is illustrated by looking at some of the actual spiritual goals that have been identified for youth at our church.

Spiritual Goal	Spiritual Plan
<p>Our youth will know he is loved and is part of God’s family.</p> <p>Our family will be able to sit together during worship services.</p>	<p>Create a circle of friends with both peers and adults. These friends sit with the family at church on a rotating basis. During the sermon they go to a classroom for music, games and a snack. This is a time for them to become friends on a more personal basis.</p>
<p>Our youth will join a regular Sunday school class without mom having to be there too.</p> <p>Our child will be used by God to help others around her know that all life is precious.</p>	<p>Three special friends learn how to do things to help our youth join a regular Sunday school class. They learn how to do simple care for her (push her wheelchair, replace the nose on her trach , and get mom when our youth needs more help).</p>
<p>Our youth will learn how to participate in Sunday morning worship services.</p> <p>Our youth will learn Bible stories about Jesus.</p>	<p>During the sermon, the special needs youth leaves the worship service with two friends (an adult and a peer). During that time the special friends teach a Bible story using a special education curriculum. They all return for communion and closing worship so that our youth can become comfortable walking through the communion line and receiving a blessing.</p>
<p>Our youth will receive instruction in Christian truths. This will prepare her to receive instruction in the sacraments in the future.</p>	<p>During the education hour our youth will receive instruction from the Old and New Testaments to prepare her for confirmation instruction at a later time.</p>

Part II of this manual gives specific details about who participates in Spiritual Planning sessions, how spiritual goals are determined and how these goals are met.

## **What Else Makes This Model Unique?**

**Every special needs youth is surrounded by a group of special friends. Many of these friends are other youth in the congregation. .**

This ministry emphasizes peer involvement with special needs youth. Young people in the congregation are encouraged to join the ministry, and become friends with special needs youth. Peers are usually paired with an adult when serving; these teams provide a broad base of friendship and support for the youth and his family. These teams are also what make it possible to provide such individualized ministry because they spread out the “work load” so that no one person must invest an inordinate amount of time to make the spiritual plan work.

Our congregation is currently serving five special needs youth. These youth are served by twenty-two special friends in our congregation, approximately one third of these friends are young people. By expanding their circle of friends, special needs youth are drawn from the perimeter of church life into meaningful relationships in the Body of Christ.

## Why is Special Needs Ministry so Important?

As you have read through this section, you may have been having thoughts like “sounds good, but this is a lot of effort for a small part of the congregation” or “twenty-two people serving for the benefit of five, is this really necessary?” But we learn in the letter to the Corinthians “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable”. Paul instructs us to treat the parts we *think* are less honorable “with special honor”. **When we bring special needs youth fully into our church life, the Body of Christ becomes complete.** Special needs ministry is not just for the good of the special needs youth; it is for the good of the entire body. The health of the Body of Christ is increased when we have effective special needs ministry.

*“ The body is a unit though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” **On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment...But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it”** I Corinthians 12:12, 14-15,21-27*

In order to be healthy, the Body of Christ needs all of its members participating. Both able-bodied members and special needs youth grow in their faith when Special Needs Ministry is in place.

# Part II-Planning the Ministry

## Steps to Getting Started

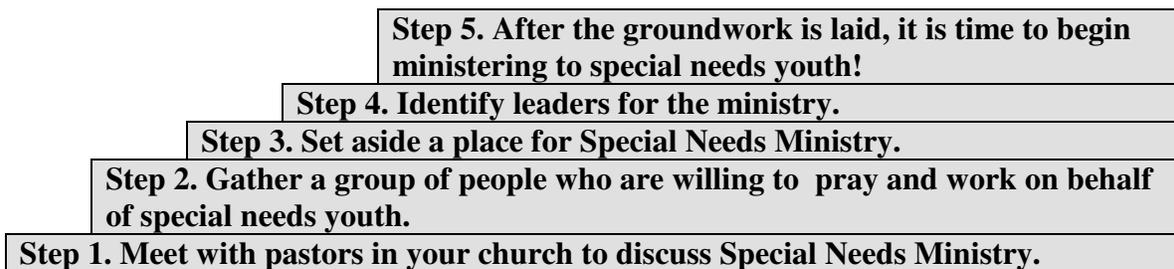
**Special Needs Ministry begins with careful planning.**

Special needs ministry begins with careful planning. Many families of special needs youth live with the constant stress of serious health, educational, and emotional challenges. The time and energy necessary for special needs families to complete even simple daily tasks can be exhausting. Statistics place the divorce rate among such families as high as eighty five percent; this reflects the extreme stress many of these families face.

Ministry done haphazardly can add stress to their family life instead of helping it.

Careful planning is also important for those youth who need predictability and routine to succeed. For youth who have serious medical conditions, it is essential to have contingencies in place in case medical emergencies arise. Our church took six months to prepare before beginning Special Needs Ministry; this allowed us to have essential elements in place before we began ministering to youth. Below are the five steps we used to prepare for our ministry.

### Steps to getting started



**Step 1. Meet with pastors in your church to discuss Special Needs Ministry.**

Meet with pastors in your church to talk about how special needs youth in your congregation and their families will benefit from Special Needs Ministry. Explain how this model of ministry works and allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. You may want to give your pastors a copy of this handbook beforehand so that they have an introduction to the ministry prior to your meeting.

Be prepared to let your pastors know how they can help you. When we initially met with our pastor his first question was “What can I do to support this ministry?” If you have a large congregation, there may be several pastoral leaders that you will want to establish relationships with. For example in our congregation when the special needs youth is approaching confirmation, we work closest with our senior pastor; when the youth are younger we work more closely with the director of children’s ministry. This meeting is also an opportunity to discuss how funding will work if you need to acquire special supplies.

**Step 2. Gather a group of people who are willing to pray and work on behalf of special needs youth.**

**Step 1.**

Get the word out that you are beginning to pray together and working towards establishing a ministry in your church. This can be done through announcements during church services, information in weekly bulletins and talking informally with friends. We got a great response from our congregation by sending a letter to all members who had a background in special education inviting them to an initial meeting. About 15 people attended that meeting and from this group a steering committee was formed. Not all those who attended our first meeting stayed; as time went on some people left and new people joined.

<b>Step 3. Set aside a place for Special Needs Ministry.</b>
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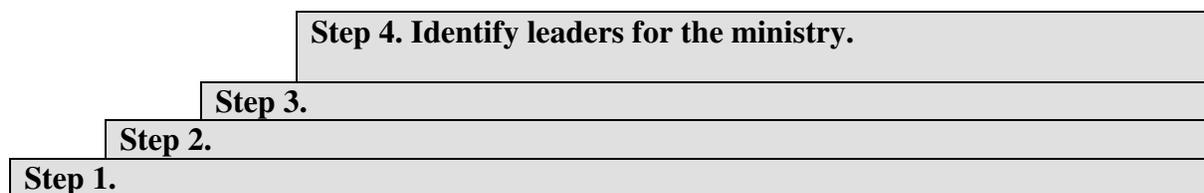
<b>Step 2.</b>
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<b>Step 1.</b>
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Find a place in your church that can be set aside for Special Needs Ministry. The size and design of this space will depend on the youth you serve. If your church has youth with significant needs, it is ideal to have a room designated for the ministry.

In our church the special needs room functions as a resource room rather than a classroom, and is designed to serve youth of all ages. It is flexible enough that furniture and space can be rearranged to accommodate wheelchairs and adapted seating for children with different physical and mental challenges. It has soft furniture and lighting. There is a photo gallery on the wall of the youth and their special friends. It is a space that communicates our church's love and commitment to special needs youth and their families. We planned our space to provide:

- **A gathering place** for special needs youth to meet with their friends.
- **A quiet study area** for special needs youth to complete coursework for confirmation classes and Sunday school.
- **A comfortable place to rest when special needs youth need a break from the noise and busyness of Sunday morning church activities** (for example, when church services become too much for the youth to manage or when a Sunday school class becomes overwhelming).
- **A resource center** housing special materials and supplies that are necessary for the ministry
- **A place for meeting and planning** with special needs youth and their families.



There are two types of leaders in this model of Special Needs Ministry, administrative leaders and Special Needs Ministers.

### **Administrative Leaders**

In our church we formed a steering committee to provide administrative leadership. The steering committee takes responsibility for:

- Planning and maintaining the special needs room
- Ordering curriculum
- Organizing the annual training for friends of the special needs youth
- Informing the congregation about the ministry
- Initiating ongoing communication with church staff
- Evaluating the ministry and making recommendations for improvement

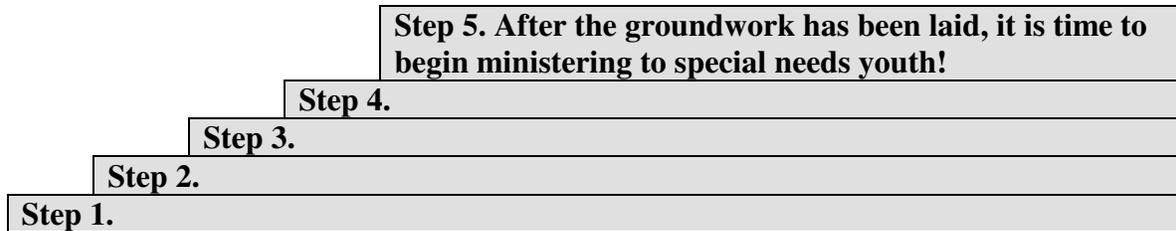
Our steering committee has also chosen to do additional projects during the year such as planning an annual service project for our special needs youth. Every Christmas our special needs youth invite the entire congregation to join them in making angel ornaments for our Christmas giving tree. We have also sent several young people from our congregation to camp with our special needs youth as short-term missionaries. In the spring our steering committee plans an expression of thanks for those serving in the ministry. We have found that our steering committee works best when it is comprised of parents of special needs youth as well as other church members.

If you have a small number of special needs youth in your church, you will not need such an elaborate structure. As the number of special needs youth in your church grows, you may increase your structure and organization to serve them. The mission of your ministry will be the same whether it is large or small; to help special needs youth and their families grow in their Christian faith as members of the Body of Christ.

### **Special Needs Ministers**

Special Needs Ministers play a very valuable role in special needs ministry. Every special needs youth is assigned a Special Needs Minister to guide them through their spiritual planning. The Special Needs Minister and the pastor lead the spiritual planning process that involves the youth and his family and friends. Once the plan is written the Special Needs Minister takes responsibility for seeing that the plan is implemented smoothly.

An effective Special Needs Minister makes it possible for people in the congregation to serve in the ministry even when they have had little or no experience in special education. People who are well suited to become Special Needs Ministers are those who are able to organize and lead a team of friends from the congregation and who have previous training or experience working in professions such as church ministry, social work, special education, speech or occupational therapy.



## **Begin with Spiritual Planning**

- **Choose a Special Needs Minister to oversee Spiritual Planning.**
- **Invite people to the Spiritual Planning session.**

The family and Special Needs Minister make a list of the people they would like to invite to the Spiritual Planning session. The list includes a pastoral leader in the church as well as anyone else the family would like to include (for example siblings, friends and peers). The Special Needs Minister arranges a place to meet and takes responsibility for making sure everyone receives an invitation; this could be a written invitation or a simple phone call.

- **The Spiritual Planning Session:**

Begin your meeting with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you in your planning. God deeply loves this special youth and has a plan for his or her life. God wants to prosper this family and give them hope. Jeremiah 29:11 says *“for I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope.”*

The questions in the Spiritual Plan are a guide for listening to your special needs youth and their family. Present the questions informally as a way to open up discussion. The questions are a method of getting to know special needs youth: how God has made them, what they enjoy doing, and how they would like to get to know God better.

This may be the first time people in the church have an opportunity to become well acquainted with special needs youth, how they think, what they like and how they learn. It is a time of discovering together how to share the good news of Jesus with them. Feel free to think “outside the box” and dream a little when brainstorming.

During your planning time, be specific when writing procedures for medical emergencies. For example you may need to arrange a paging system or use cell phones as a way to contact parents in an emergency. Special friends will need to be trained in these procedures.

As you close the meeting with prayer, let the family know that you are glad to be involved in their child's life and eager to begin the Spiritual Plan. Spiritual Planning can offer a new beginning to families who have been struggling to fit into church life. Spiritual Plans may be adjusted during the year as needed; usually these changes can be made informally. The Spiritual Plans are reviewed annually so they can grow and change as the special needs youth gets older.

### **Who should attend a Spiritual Planning Session:**

- **The family of the special needs youth**
- **The youth, if he or she is old enough and would like to participate**
- **A pastoral leader in the church**
- **Anyone else the family would like to invite** (for example, siblings, friends and peers)

### **Tips for leading a Spiritual Planning Session:**

- **Choose a comfortable place to meet.**
- **Begin with prayer.**
- **Present the questions informally.**
- **Listen carefully** during your time together.
- **Resist the temptation to try to “fix everything”.** Be realistic about what you can do as a ministry; good intentions can sometimes lead to plans that are too ambitious.
- **Be specific when writing procedures for medical emergencies.**
- **Give a copy of the Spiritual Plan to the family as soon as possible.**

# Spiritual Plan

**Spiritual Plan for:**

**Date:**

**Persons attending:**

1.) Psalm 139: 13-14 describes how God created each of us in a unique way and how intimately he knows each one of us. *"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful."*

**Describe how God has made you. What do you enjoy doing? What are your special interests? Describe your personality, gifts and talents.**

2.) God wants to work in our lives everyday. His plan is for us to know him, love him and serve him. *"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* Ephesians 2:10

**Describe how you would like to know God better. How would you like God to work in your life? You may include things such as learning more about Jesus, learning more about worship, making friends at church, and having a chance to serve others.**

**What ideas do your parents and friends have about how God may want to work in your life this year? For example this may include sitting together as a family at church, taking communion, or being confirmed.**

3.) We often face challenges in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 12 Saint Paul talks about the difficulties he is facing in his own life. He says that he feels weak and that life is hard for him. " *But he (God) said to me, 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'* Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me...For when I am weak, then I am strong."

**What fears or worries are you are facing in your life that you would like to share with us? How will they affect our spiritual planning today? May we pray with you about them?**

**4.) Are there any serious medical conditions that the team should be prepared to deal with in an emergency? For example, this may involve any seizures, breathing difficulties, medications and their side effects. What precautions do we need to take?**

**5.) Based on our discussion today, what spiritual goals would you like to pursue this year at church?**

**6.) Who can assist you in meeting these goals?**

**7.) Next steps...**

-Final plans will be made at our next meeting on:

-Who will be invited to the next meeting?

-What needs to be done prior to the next meeting? Who will take responsibility for each action?

# Spiritual Plan - Annual Review

**Spiritual Plan Review for:**

**Date:**

**Persons attending:**

1.) In John 15, Jesus tells us that God desires to bear fruit in our lives. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener...every branch that does bear fruit he (the father) prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."* John 15: 1,2

**Take a few moments to review together the current Spiritual Plan.**

**What is working well in the current Spiritual Plan?** Be specific regarding activities, scheduling, curriculum, etc. Include unexpected blessings as well.

**What difficulties have you encountered with this Spiritual Plan?** Again be very specific. Have the study materials been appropriate? Are they too easy or too hard? Has the Spiritual Plan been too ambitious this year? (In other words does it feel "hard" for the special needs youth and his/her family?) Should the plan be scaled back? Has it been necessary to make changes in the Spiritual Plan during the year? If so, what were these changes and why were they necessary?

2.) *"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Psalm 91:1*

**Since we last met, have there any important changes in your life that you would like to share with us?** They may be related to growing up (such as changes that come with entering adolescence), changes in health, discovering new abilities or interests, moving to a new home or school, etc.

3.) **Based on our discussion today, what spiritual goals would you like to pursue this year at church?**

4.) **Who can assist you in meeting these goals?**

5.) **Next steps...**

-Date for next meeting:

-Who will be invited to the next meeting:

-What needs to be done prior to the next meeting and who will take responsibility for each action:

## **Part III – The Results from Special Needs Ministry**

### **What can you expect from Special Needs Ministry?**

#### **Fruit of the Spirit**

***“... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.”***

***Galatians 5:22***

Below are true stories from our congregation, only the names of the people have been changed.

#### ***Love***

As they say goodbye, one of Ann’s friends spontaneously gives her a friendly embrace and a quick kiss on the forehead. She promises to take Ann to a special event later in the week. Such gestures are expected between good friends; but here they are remarkable, because they are exchanged between two unlikely people, a developmentally delayed teenager and a busy mother with five children of her own. They express a friendship between two people who have learned to love each other despite many obstacles.

#### ***Joy:***

Sunday morning Beth bursts through the door eager to talk about her time with Kendra. Beth’s face is animated and her joy evident; she and Kendra both had fun during the Bible lessons that morning. Knowing that Kendra’s parents are satisfied also brings Beth pleasure. Happiness and satisfaction are part of the joy that comes when two teenagers, one with autism and one who is able, become friends through Special Needs Ministry.

#### ***Peace:***

Michael’s family is together in church listening to the sermon. Their daughter is sitting quietly on her father’s lap. Michael’s family is peaceful today because several other people have joined them for the worship service. Two college students are sitting with the family, so that when Michael, who has Down Syndrome, becomes agitated they can help by taking him to another room to play. As the friendship grows these students offer to baby sit for Michael’s family, providing his parents with much needed respite. These special friends offer Michael’s family the gift of tranquility.

## ***Patience***

Christy calmly waits as her friend slowly makes her way over to the elevator. Her friend is easily distracted and has to be reminded several times to come, but Christy's warm smile never wavers.

Matt is trying a new activity with Michael this morning and the activity is not going the way he anticipated. Matt will have to adjust and try it a different way next week, but this does not change his commitment to helping Michael the following Sunday. Special friends give special needs youth the gift of understanding and tolerance.

## ***Kindness***

Sixty members of our church join the special needs youth one evening to help make several hundred ornaments for our church's Christmas giving tree. Many of these people have never met our special needs youth before tonight, but everyone is warmhearted and friendly. Their generosity helps us accomplish our goal in one evening.

## ***Goodness***

Lisa is in ninth grade so it is natural for her to want to go to McDonald's with a friend on her day off from school. She invites her friend from church, but the lunch date is anything but typical. Their conversation is stilted because her friend uses a computer to talk and the restaurant is bustling and noisy making it hard for them to communicate. Lisa is unfazed by this and carries on with their lunch date; her steadfastness demonstrates the goodness and mercy of God.

Last summer Diana attended a camp with a special needs youth from church. She went as a short-term missionary to learn more about serving in special needs ministry. The surprise comes the following summer when Diana calls her special needs friend to ask if they can register together for camp so they can be roommates. The goodness of God shines through friends like Diana.

## ***Faithfulness***

Katie is a junior in high school and has served special needs youth for two years. At times she has questioned her effectiveness, but Katie's faithfulness has paid off. This is what the parents of her two special needs youth say, "Special Needs Ministry is implemented by Spirit-filled people who are committed to sharing God's love", "the church has made me feel my daughter is very welcome here" and "the Special Needs Ministry has been a blessing to our family".

## ***Gentleness***

Remember Sarah whom you met in the first chapter? Sarah is twelve-years-old, severely mentally challenged and medically fragile. One way to communicate with Sarah is by gently touching or tapping her from time to time. Yolanda is a peer and one of Sarah's special friends at church. Yolanda has learned how to softly talk to Sarah while tenderly tapping her shoulder. Yolanda freely and naturally expresses her friendship with Sarah in these simple ways.

## ***Self control***

Beginning Saturday morning Ann uses sign language to ask if she can go to church on Sunday. Attending church is a highlight of her week and so she persists with her question throughout the day seeking reassurance that she can go the following morning.

On Sunday Ann quietly attends the worship service. She participates in the offering and the music and walks through the communion line with everyone else. Just two years ago this was unimaginable because Ann could barely sit through even one song in church. With the support of her family and friends in the ministry Ann has gained the self control necessary to join the rest of the congregation. Her smile as the worship service begins, shows what a great gift this is to her.

# Stories From Some Parents of our Youth

## Michelle's Story

Special Needs Ministry has been a blessing to our family. Our developmentally disabled daughter had long ago outgrown Sunday school classes and was not mentally mature enough to understand adult Bible class. The creation of this ministry filled a need to provide spiritual education and nurturing at a level that our daughter could comprehend. Although a young adult, our daughter interacts well with people younger than her chronological age. Our daughter's Special Needs Minister, pulled together a team of people—a Circle of Friends—that included two adults who each worked with a younger teenager and an older teen who was a senior in high school. These caring people developed lessons for Michelle and spent an hour with her every Sunday. Although at times it seemed that Michelle wasn't overtly responding, we know that she was learning. She understood not only the Gospel truths presented, but also that she is loved and accepted by those around her and that she has a place in the Church and God's kingdom here on earth.

One example that showed us Michelle understood what was presented is her response to the story of Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea. As Lisa and Michelle were discussing the story, Michelle started talking about visiting Cabela's sporting goods store. It seemed Michelle was out in left field, not getting the point at all. However, as she started to describe the aquarium at the store, Lisa realized she did understand. At Cabela's, the fish are displayed in floor-to-ceiling tanks on both sides of a walkway. One literally walks between the walls of water, just as the Israelites walked between the walls of water divided by Moses to lead them to safety. Michelle related her experience to the Biblical story. We know that God works in Michelle's heart and leads her to understanding, even though she can't quote Scripture verse by verse and write down the "answers" one expects.

This Special Needs Ministry works because it is implemented by Spirit-filled people who are committed to sharing God's love. The Individual Spiritual Plan helps spell out what is needed for each individual and includes specific goals appropriate for each unique person. And, it is truly a Circle of Love—those who minister receive as much love in return as the love they share.

## Katherine's Story

I'm sitting in the maternity ward holding my beautiful new baby. Earlier in the day Katherine whimpered whenever I lay her down and I wondered if it was an early sign of colic, but now she sleeps contentedly upon my shoulder as we prepare for discharge.

At last the nurse rolls Katherine off in her bassinet for one last check-up before we leave for home. Several hours go by before the pediatrician enters my room, and I remark that she must have had a busy morning to be gone so long. With a serious look the pediatrician tells me that my beautiful baby is very sick. It slowly dawns on me why my pediatrician's morning has been so busy. The next time I see my daughter she is in an oxygen tent struggling for every breath, her tiny chest heaving and her face a dusky color.

Months blur by in a grueling series of heart surgeries and congestive heart failure. The days are an endless round of tube feedings, medications, worry and fatigue. By far the most difficult part is watching my innocent baby suffer.

Four months later I am in the park with Katherine's sister. Katherine is in the Intensive Care Unit recovering from her third heart surgery and I am with Beth during a brief break from the hospital. As I push Beth in the swing I feel the cool spring air and see the trees budding. Other mothers are there with young children and the mood in the park is happy and carefree, spring is here at last. I have always loved this time of year, yet today I feel strangely disconnected from those around me. *"I used to be like that"* the thought comes unbidden. Startled, I realize a profound change has occurred. During the last four months my family and I have left behind a "normal" life, a life where simple pleasures such as a baby's smile, a carefree afternoon at the park or a quiet family evening abound.

As the months turn into years I am keenly aware that Katherine's body and mind have been devastated by her illness. There is significant injury to her brain and her growth is hampered by cerebral palsy. Although she slowly learns to use her hands, to walk and say simple words, more heart problems at age four take a significant toll on her. Following her fourth heart surgery, the right side of her body is weakened; what saddens me most is Katherine has completely lost her ability to speak.

At our church love and concern is always expressed toward our family and in the early years it is possible to "fit in" with regular church life. Like other families with young children we use the nursery. Later Katherine is able to join early Sunday school classes, if I stay to help. But eventually circumstances change, the gap between Katherine and her peers widen, we now have four children in our family and it is a challenge simply to attend church.

I notice that we are gradually drifting to the periphery of church life. Katherine is overwhelmed by noise and large groups and she cannot tolerate

attending worship services or other church activities. Her limitations make it difficult to mingle with others following the service. I also notice that usually people quickly pass by Katherine in the lobby, rarely do they acknowledge her presence. Because she doesn't smile or talk or behave like children her age, others are not naturally drawn to her. She is not intentionally ignored, nor does she seem unwanted; it is more as though she is invisible or like a shadow. This is the setting in which Special Needs Ministry begins to grow at our church.

It begins slowly, first with several teenagers who volunteer to help Katherine at church. I am touched by the love they extend her; one picture especially stands in my mind. It is of two strapping teenage boys towering above my small daughter. They ask if they may serve her together since they have more confidence working as a team. These teenagers pave the way for Katherine to join a Sunday school class and there she encounters a teacher who not only welcomes her but who sees Katherine as a special creation of God and an important member of her class. Eventually more than thirty people work together to bring special needs ministry into our church life.

The vision for our ministry becomes more focused following Katherine's summers at a Christian camp. The camp she attends welcomes physically and mentally challenged youth into their regular program. For the first time in her life Katherine enters a place where she completely belongs. I am astonished when I pick her up after her first week there. Her new friends have learned her sign language. Together they have gone swimming, canoeing and horseback riding. They have spent the week playing together and loving each other. I am astonished to see how easily she moves among this group of children. Until now Katherine has always been "different" and "separate" from the normal stream of life. But here all the children are loved and accepted regardless of their abilities; it is a beautiful expression of God's love and grace.

Katherine's joy tells most of the story, but there is another less obvious sign of God's presence. As our car pulls away from camp I see Katherine's counselor wiping tears from her eyes. Katherine received love at camp, but she also gave to others. Katherine was a vessel of God's love and grace, despite her limitations. This week the Body of Christ at camp was more complete because Katherine was there.

## **Appendixes**

Appendix A - List of Resources

Appendix B – Selections from an Actual  
Church Ministry Handbook

Appendix C - Sample Annual Calendar

## Appendix A – List of Resources

Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Navpress, 1988).

CRC Publications, *Friendship Series*, 2850 Kalamazoo SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560.

James Dobson, *When God Doesn't Make Sense* (Tyndale, 1993).

Cherie Fuller and Louise Tucker Jones, *Extraordinary Kids* (Focus on the Family, 1997).

See our website at [www.specialneedsministry.com](http://www.specialneedsministry.com) .

**Appendix B - Selections from an Actual  
Church Ministry Handbook**

**Handbook  
For Special Needs Ministry**

### **Mission Statement:**

The mission of the Special Needs Ministry is to help youth who have special needs grow in their Christian faith as members of our church. Our ministry exists to support our special needs youth in all aspects of their spiritual growth including: learning Biblical truths, worshipping, experiencing fellowship, praying and serving others.

The Body of Christ is described in I Corinthians 12:12-13,27 (The Living Bible) in the following way: *"Our bodies have many parts, but the many make up only one body when they are all put together. So it is with the body of Christ. Each of us is a part of the one body of Christ...the Holy Spirit has fitted us all together into one body. We have been baptized into Christ's body by the one Spirit and have all been given that one Holy Spirit...all of you together are the one body of Christ and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it."*

Because each member of the Body of Christ is necessary for every other member, our mission is to have our special needs youth connected as much as possible to other members at our church as they seek to grow in their spiritual lives (rather than providing a special education class for them that is distinctly separate from the rest of church life).

### **Our Service Model:**

Each special needs child (from birth to young adulthood ) is offered the opportunity to develop an individual program to help him / her grow spiritually. The format used for planning the program is the "Spiritual Plan" (SP).

The SP is a model that is developed by a team of people chosen by the child and his/her family. The team is led by a Special Needs Minister who has agreed to be the coordinator for the SP. The team may be comprised of the special needs child, his family members, pastoral staff and other special friends.

During two team meetings, a set of spiritual goals are identified, and specific plans are made to help the child and his family reach these goals. The forms used at these meetings are included in the appendix of this handbook .The SP is not a static document. Rather it is intended to be a framework to be built upon and modified over the years.

As a ministry we pray that we will be able to support God's work in the lives of each one of his special children in accordance with His promise in Jeremiah 29:11. *"For I know the plans I have for you" declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. "*

### **Administrative Relationship to the Congregation:**

The Special Needs Ministry functions under the direction of the Coordinator for Children's Ministry. The Coordinator for Children's Ministry works in conjunction with the Youth Minister once the special needs youth has reached 6<sup>th</sup> grade age level

Special Needs Ministers, friends and teachers will be commissioned annually by the congregation.

### **Service Opportunities within the Special Needs Ministry:**

**Steering Committee:** The steering committee takes responsibility for the overall functioning of the Special Needs Ministry. This includes responsibility for training direct caregivers, curriculum development, planning annual church service projects (e.g. taking responsibility for the Christmas Angel Giving Tree), public relations within the church, maintaining a presence on the church web site, and recruiting new committee members. Steering committee members may or may not be involved as direct caregivers in the ministry.

Commitment:

- Steering committee members make an annual commitment to this service.
- Committee members generally meet once a month; meetings are 1 1/2 hours long.
- The committee chairperson is chosen by the active committee members every Spring.

### **Direct Caregivers:**

**Special Needs Minister-**The Special Needs Minister is the primary contact between the church and the special needs youth and his/her family. This person coordinates all aspects of the Spiritual Plan including:

- Making the initial contact with the special needs youth and his/her family
- Scheduling and moderating the two SP sessions.
- Keeping records of the SP meetings, filling out all necessary forms
- Recruiting the people who will serve as special friends
- Assuming responsibility for follow-up to insure that the SP is successfully implemented

We recommend that the Special Needs Minister have previous experience working with individuals who have special needs.

Commitment:

Each Special Needs Minister makes a commitment to a specific youth. This commitment is ideally for a two-year period.

Meetings required include:

- 1.) two evenings of training in the fall and follow up training in January.
- 2.) two SP meetings
- 3.) two support meetings for the special friends
- 4.) other meetings as necessary to meet the needs of the youth being served.

Special Friends- Special friends are people who become a part of the special needs youth's circle of friends. They are people of any age who want to share God's love with a special needs youth. Young people in the congregation are especially encouraged to join this ministry. Young volunteers will always be paired with an adult who assumes responsibility for the special needs youth.

-Special friends make an annual commitment to this service

-Special friends meet regularly with the special needs youth for teaching and fellowship. (Adult special friends take responsibility for these sessions; young people who are special friends are important for fellowship as well as assisting the adult during these times).

-Time commitment is flexible

-Special friends make a commitment to attend :

- 1) One training session at the beginning of their service
- 2) Two support meetings as follow up

**Training:**

Training for Direct Caregivers is based on the introduction to the Friendship Series curriculum.

**Recruiting new committee members:**

The Steering Committee will actively work with the leader of "Walking the Walk" to recruit new committee members.

The Special Needs Ministry will maintain a bulletin board in the front lobby displaying previous and upcoming activities as well as service opportunities.

# Appendix C - Sample Annual Calendar

Sample Annual Calendar for Steering Committee

## May

Chose chairperson for the following fall.

Name of person who will chair committee in the coming fall \_\_\_\_\_

## September

Plan Fall Training Session for the people who will be serving special needs youth in the coming year. This includes overseeing the content of the evening: what will be taught, invitations, refreshments, and some token of appreciation for those attending.

Name of committee member who will oversee this event: \_\_\_\_\_

## October

Hold the Fall Training Session

The congregation commissions those who will be serving in Special Needs Ministry in the coming year, this is done during a Sunday morning worship service.

## November

In early November host the annual Christmas service project. Invite other members of the congregation to join you for this evening of service. (For example, at our church we make angel ornaments for the giving tree that is displayed in our church lobby.)

Name of committee member who will oversee this event: \_\_\_\_\_

## January

Hold a follow-up training session for individual teams as needed. Each Special Needs Minister takes responsibility for his or her team of special friends.

## May

Spiritual Plans are reviewed using the annual review forms. Special Needs Ministers take responsibility for this.

## June

Plan an expression of thanks for all those who have served in the ministry throughout the year. This could be personal notes written to special friends, a small gift or perhaps a party.

Name of committee member who will oversee this event: \_\_\_\_\_