

A Restoration Church Plans Ministry to People and Families Affected by Disabilities

A Response Paper by Dr. John Holmes to

Module IV: Church and Disability Ministry

A Restoration Church is being planted in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, PA with a core value and urgent priority of intentionally reaching people and families affected by disabilities with the Gospel in obedience to Luke 14:12ff. We are all broken people living in a broken world. At A Restoration Church we understand the Gospel in terms of God in Christ restoring His people and His creation by fixing the underlying cause for broken lives in a broken world (Genesis 3) through Christ's substitutionary atonement of Christ Jesus for all who receive its benefits by faith alone. By Jesus Christ's holy life, His death for our sins, and resurrection victory He satisfies divine justice, paying sin's penalty by offering His holy life for us to claim as our sin offering. Jesus also conquers sin and its consequences putting death to death forever for those who completely transfer their trust for salvation and righteousness to Jesus Christ alone. Having first dealt with the cause of brokenness, Christ by His Holy Spirit begins a process of restoring us to his intended design, a process that continues in believers throughout our lives in this broken world to be completed with the restoration of all things in a new heavens and a new earth. We see Christ's church as a life-restoring community of believers called out (εχχλεισιν) of the corruption of this broken world and called into an assembly of people who have been given new lives which are being progressively restored by the power of the Spirit of Christ living within us applying the Word of God to and through us. We see the church's mission in terms of proclaiming and applying the good news of Christ's transforming and restoring power to make disciples of people whose lives have also been broken and who also live in a broken world, restoring them to become more and more like Jesus Christ.

Although death is the ultimate way people are broken by sin, it is not the only way. The image of God in man was so damaged by Adam's sinful rebellion against God (the downfall fall of mankind) that we are affected in every area of our lives. Nothing about us works entirely like God's "very good" (Genesis 1:31) initial design. We age, we get hurt, we get sick, we suffer and we die. Some of us are more evidently damaged physically, some are more evidently damaged mentally, some in our desires, some in our character, some in our relationships, some in our reasoning, but we are all deeply broken in our spirits, our hearts, our souls. Expressions of brokenness ebb and flow throughout our lives. Added to the typical ebb and flow are the intensifying effects of this brokenness experienced through aging, disease and injuries. We display brokenness more prominently in some areas, but the truth is, we are all broken and damaged in every area of our lives to some degree all the time. We are broken people who live in a broken world. What this means is that we all need restoring grace and power from God in every area of our lives all the time. Those we categorize as affected by disabilities are those whose brokenness is more prominent and obvious to them and to those around them.

"The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3), calls out broken people to come to Jesus, the Great Physician, who came to make "all things new" (Revelation 21:5). The underlying longing of people in all ages is to be restored completely forever. The psalmists make clear that the longing for restoration is for both body and soul to become what God intended in the first place. "He restores my soul." (Psalm 23:3) "The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness." (Psalm 41:3) "Create in me a clean heart...Renew in me a steadfast spirit in me...Restore unto me the Joy of my salvation." (Psalm 51:10+12) Bemoaning his broken relationships the psalmist writes, "Restore us, O God: Make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved." (Psalm 80:3, also 6, 7, and 19)

God is willing to restore us in spite of who we are and what we do. Restoration is his undeserved, loving and gracious gift. *"I have seen his ways, **but** I will heal him: I will guide him and restore him."*(Isaiah 57:18 emphasis mine) Repentance is a prerequisite for receiving the restoring works of

God. One purpose of God's restoring work in us is for us to be able to serve him. "...If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me..." (Jeremiah 15:19). The words of Hosea 6:1+2 prophetically echo the process and promise of God's restoration by the analogy of winter and spring rains that restore the earth to full bloom and beauty.

¹ *"Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.*

² *After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.*

³ *Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth."*¹

On the day of Pentecost, Peter declared that Jesus Christ *"must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."*²

Clearly the Bible and the Gospel are about God redeeming and then restoring the world and the children of Adam's race. Jesus came to begin a new Creation in which broken people, who commit themselves by faith to Jesus, are by a new birth from above by the power of the Holy Spirit, made new creatures. The restoring process that Jesus begins and sustains by His Spirit eventuates in full restoration and complete perfection in all areas of our existence in the new heavens and the new earth. That is what we long for and work toward as the Church, those called out to continue the ministry of Jesus on earth by the power of his indwelling Holy Spirit so that we serve Christ as his lips, hands and feet expressing his heart for broken people. To the degree that A Restoration Church accomplishes this, we are functioning parts of the body of Christ on earth. The church is only whole when all the parts of the body (including the weaker parts) are present and functioning. (1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 13)

The question is, how will we help restore lives? What principles apply and how do we intend to implement them? Dr. Jeff Mc Nair's lectures (August, 2008, Joni and Friends internship lectures) mentioned the principle of "universal design." He pointed out that solving problems and removing barriers for people affected by disabilities often results in unintended benefits for the rest of us. Curb cuts intended to benefit people with mobility hindrances also benefit cyclists, people making deliveries, people with shopping carts or trailing luggage and parents with strollers.

In a similar way, we believe that the changes the church makes in order to disciple, include, integrate and utilize people and families affected by disabilities in its body-life and worship will have the benefit of reciprocal blessings. The body of Christ is weakened and more deeply broken when it excludes people who are more obviously broken. We may not pretend to love God and disdain, reject or live indifferently toward those affected by disabilities (Matthew 25:40+45) When Jesus atoned for my sins and changed my life, he made life easier for those who come in contact with me even if they do not know Jesus.

¹*The Holy Bible : New International Version. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.) (Ho 6:1-3). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.*

²*The Holy Bible : New International Version. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.) (Ac 3:21). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.*

What should those changes in the life of the church look like? Our thinking here is aided by Including People With Disabilities in Faith Communities by Erik Carter. Our attitudes are the first areas that need to change.

- We are to value those affected by disabilities for their intrinsic value in the body of Christ instead of approaching them as “projects.” They are much more than projects in God’s eyes. Come judgment day, they may well out-shine the rest of us.
- We are to approach each other as equal faith partners and as joint heirs with Christ understanding that the greatest blindness is not physical but spiritual. The greatest ugliness or beauty is hidden inside and not seen with physical eyes. The greatest deformities are in hidden recesses of the soul not in the deformities of bodies and brains. We will live, shoulder to shoulder as neither superiors nor inferiors in each other’s eyes and hearts.
- We are to listen to each other not assuming that we are the ones with the most to teach, to give, and share. Do we value character more than functionality? Can we learn endurance, contentment, joy, faith, hope, and love only through our own insight and experience or are there profound lessons that we can learn by sharing in the lives of those with deeper life struggles than our own? We need meekness, humility, and teach-ability in our encounters with people and families affected by disabilities.
- We are to prioritize reaching out to people with disabilities. 1. This involves urgency, “*go out quickly*” (Luke 14:21). 2. It involves priority of focus, “*Bring the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.*” Others are to be included if “*there is still room*” (Luke 14:22). 3. It involves sacrificial effort to “*bring*” instead of to simply invite people affected with disabilities.

A Restoration Church staff is studying and working through issues that affect our ability to apply the Gospel to help restore and elevate the lives of people and family members spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. This involves ministering to and with parents, siblings, and individuals affected by disabilities throughout their lifecycles. It involves building the right foundation so that future ministry prioritizes people and families affected by disabilities throughout the centuries to come. As we at A Restoration Church learn from our mistakes and gain insights from others who share our Lord’s heart for restoration ministry, we want to provide reproducible models and then begin reproducing similarly focused churches around the world.

We are committed to the concept that we remove every human barrier that prohibits healthy inclusion of people and families affected by disabilities into the life of A Restoration Church. These include but are not limited to:

1. Liturgical barriers: How do we include and share Christ with non-verbal people? Perhaps a faith journey scrapbook will accommodate an autistic teen or adult. How do we make sure that people who cannot stand are not left staring at the not so inspiring rear ends of fellow worshipers? Seating layout needs to accommodate unobstructed views for those who cannot stand. We are trying to have people sit more during the worship. How do we accommodate very limited attention spans? Perhaps we use three mini sermons scattered throughout the worship time instead of one longer traditional sermon?

2. How do we deal with distractive and disruptive behavior in appropriate ways and with godly attitudes? We must address the matter sensitively with parents, fellow worshipers and the individuals with such behaviors encouraging them toward better behaviors which are in accord with biblical standards. We must love them where they are but help them become more Christ-like. How will we deal appropriately with runners, jumpers, and “happy wanderers?” (term borrowed from a song in the opera, Hansel and Grete!) Accepting them and loving them does not mean ignoring them. Will they need another’s strong yet tender arms and hands to help provide the restrained behaviors they need? How do we stretch the faith, character, intellect, attitude and behavior of those with disabilities? How do we encourage Godly behavior with tough love instead of giving people with disabilities a pass on inappropriate behavior? Each member of the body of Christ is called on to help each other in areas of weakness and struggle. Each need is unique and requires biblical, Holy Spirit directed solutions.
3. How do we deal with disabilities that impair sight, sound, and language comprehension? We are trying to find a way to provide signing for the deaf? We do provide T-coil neck loops to communicate directly through hearing aids and in-ear monitors are being provided currently with wireless receivers. We use ear-worn wireless microphones which produce consistent sound levels and clear signals to the individual receivers. We project large letter texts on the screen throughout services and print enlarged bulletin sheets as needed on legal sized paper in order that people with diminished eyesight can follow the worship.
4. Architectural barriers and social barriers must be addressed. Some people can’t stand being closed in and crowded by people and facilities. Some can’t stand to be touched by others or even sit in chairs with arms. Handicapped parking, door widths, toilet and sink layout and automated flushing, washing and hand drying are some of these issues. Do people need a lift equipped van to bring them?
5. There are effort and exhaustion barriers which affect the ability of people and families affected by disabilities. Do some need help just getting ready to come? Are there programs designed for adults with cognitive issues. How can we create a community of support around exhausted caregivers? What kinds of “support groups” will provide the care and help needed without becoming gripe groups? What kinds of respite will we provide? How will we recruit and equip loving shadow assistants to aid families affected by disabilities attending services?

Because a good percentage of our people have served as STMs at family retreats and because our people understand our vision and commitment, we are better prepared than most small churches to deal with such issues with willing resourcefulness. We are deeply appreciative of the help, training and experience we have received from Joni and Friends.

A Restoration Church presently includes a double amputee who uses a wheelchair, a lady who uses a walker due to the deterioration of her cerebellum, a lady blind in one eye as a result of Devick’s Disease, a young man with low IQ (who a ministry intern with us) and a teen-age boy with delayed auditory response syndrome. Each is integrated into the life and work of the new church plant with acceptance and appreciation within the body-life of our small core group. This is intentional and reflects our commitment to full integration and gift utilization.

We are planning to sponsor an ongoing regional forum for special needs educators designed to help the educators in different school systems share their ideas and to provide Restored Lives, Inc. an opportunity to cooperate with them and stimulate their thinking from a biblical world view of disabilities and to help them explore societal and medical ethical issues that threaten the wellbeing of families and people with disabilities. One school system is exploring ways we can cooperate with them in their special needs camp next summer.

We are reaching out to area school administrators and special needs teachers as well as staff at retirement communities. We have begun our first weekly on-site Bible study at "Sunrise," the retirement residence closest to our office.

We are establishing a separate 501c3 organization to work alongside A Restoration Church in order to develop practical programs assisting families and individuals affected by disabilities. We are presently without buildings and property of our own but God has enabled us to utilize facilities that present no physical barriers to people affected by disabilities. Our vision is to develop a building site for the church which includes offices and facilities for doctors, therapists, educators, trainers, designers, equipment venders, care givers and counselors who serve the needs of people affected by disabilities. The Idea is to have a commercially viable complex that assists the various needs of people and families affected by disabilities on every level of their needs. The property ("Restoration Center"?) would also house A Restoration Church and Restored Lives, Inc. using a 99-year renewable charitable lease agreement. We are praying and looking for investors, developers, disability sensitive architects and Christian professionals to help make this happen for the disability community in the greater metropolitan Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania region.

We want to establish a regional office of Joni and friends and have already begun searching for appropriate sites for Joni and Friends family retreats that can serve western Pennsylvania, northern West Virginia, western Maryland and eastern Ohio. We are sharing the vision for disability ministry with regional pastors. This is one of the underlying reasons why my wife and I were interns this summer with Joni and Friends in California, why nearly one fourth of our core group served as STMs this summer. We understand that what we are attempting to do at A Restoration Church is quite radical in the church planting world, is much too big for us to accomplish alone and is doomed to fail unless God is in it. Pray for us!