



How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry

An inclusive worship service for people with developmental disabilities

After members of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Exton, Penn. recognized the need for a worship experience that was targeted to the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities, they decided to act together.

Rejoicing Spirits Ministry, which specifically targets

individuals with developmental disabilities, offers the opportunity to hear about God's love and His grace.

The Rejoicing Spirits Ministry's first priority is to provide a unique worship experience especially designed to capture the attention and interest of individuals with developmental disabilities, along with their families, caregivers and other supportive community members. To encourage and help other churches to reach out to individuals with developmental disabilities, St. Paul's wrote a "How to Start a Rejoicing Spirits Ministry" guide which comes in a three-ring binder and is available for a \$20.00 donation. The guide can be used by congregations of any faith and outlines all the procedures from setting up an initial feasibility review committee to launching the first worship service. Included in the guide are many examples such as invitations, letters, newsletter articles, press releases and a variety of worship bulletins.

Susan Crawford, a member of of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, initially came up with the idea for removing

the boundaries in her church that made it difficult to minister to individuals with developmental disabilities. This is her story: "January 2003 marked a turning point in my life. I was a member for less than two years at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Exton, Penn. and involved only peripherally, helping with a few activities here and there.

I wanted to be more active, but didn't know how to best serve the Lord. Then, I attended a class held at my church called, "Identifying Your Spiritual Gifts." This class became the first step of many to lead me in orchestrating a newly-created, unique worship service for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Later that month I was driving to a business appointment at a local rehabilitation and employment facility for individuals with disabilities. I own a business and wanted to meet with the organization's management about doing contract work for me.

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"There should be a special worship service targeted toward individuals with developmental disabilities."
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- Susan Crawford

Suddenly I had an idea. "There should be a special worship service targeted toward individuals with developmental disabilities." Wow! How did that great idea pop into my head? You know, someone really should start a service like this. Someone else, of course, but not me. I'm too busy. I was seeking a 'little calling,' not to undertake a monumental project. Perhaps this message was intended for the person in the car next to me.

Reflecting back on that day, I believe this was the defining moment that change my life. The moment the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to me. He told me this is how I should use my talents to spread the Lord's word.

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I had arrived for my meeting and was waiting for my business associate when I recognized a familiar voice. I turned and was greeted by Evan, a gentleman with developmental disabilities who had attended my former church's worship services. Some 300 people worked here and I bumped into Evan. What a coincidence.

A few moments later on a tour of the facility, I ran into Linda, an individual who lived in a group home and who also attended my former church. I had no idea that she worked at this facility. Just another coincidence? Later driving home, a van of individuals with developmental disabilities was on the highway next to me. Yet another coincidence? All this time, the idea of a special worship service whirled within my head. I couldn't help thinking about the exceptionally talented people at St. Paul's. They could make this vision a reality. I stopped at a card shop and browsed the aisles and suddenly found myself staring at stationery labeled, "Dear God, Guess what...I'm ready to listen now!" The final coincidence. God knows my thoughts.

I sought guidance from Diane Miles, the leader from the spiritual gifts class. I discussed my thoughts about God leading me to this ministry. Diane urged me to meet with Pastor Greenwald, our interim pastor. Pastor Greenwald enthusiastically encouraged me to pursue the 'calling' I had received.

The Lord continually blessed me as I moved forward with this ministry. A talented group of individuals agreed to explore the issues and determine the feasibility of a special service. Our research confirmed that there is a large population of individuals with developmental disabilities who are not associated with any church community. We formed our ministry, the Rejoicing Spirits, and adopted the following verse: "So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other." I Corinthians 12:25.

The Rejoicing Spirits service focuses on capturing the attention and interest of individuals with developmental disabilities, along with their support providers families, and other supportive members of the community. We created a welcoming environment for all

children of God filled with lots of music and joyous singing along with brief, meaningful messages.

Participants feel accepted and part of a love-filled community. We want them to learn about God and his love for each of them. The service provides fellowship with other Christians and the opportunity for friendships to develop. The Rejoicing Spirits can be a stepping-stone for those individuals who want to transition into a fully-integrated church community. For others, the Rejoicing Spirits worship service may fully meet their needs. But no one is excluded from this worship experience; anyone who is already integrated into a church community is also invited to this very unique worship service.

The Lord lovingly continues to guide us and brings many members and non-members to become involved in interesting ways. Rejoicing Spirits is now growing beyond our borders. Two local Lutheran Churches will be launching their own Rejoicing Spirits Ministries this fall, and other churches are considering starting their own ministries. When these ministries are launched, our Rejoicers will have another opportunity to praise the Lord each month – the best gift of all.



Rejoicer Karen Blunk singing "Amazing Grace" at the May Rejoicing Spirits Service. at St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

*FOR MORE INFORMATION AND
TO ORDER THE MANUAL*

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