

A special child in YOUR Church

Recommendations to the pastor of the local church

Foreword

About 10% of the world's population (about 700 million people) have some form of disability. Much has been done in recent years to help them socialize and to create better living conditions, but still the lives of quite a few of them are more like a daily battle than an interesting journey. Certainly, spiritual needs of these people, just like those who care for them, need to be satisfied.

A separate group is children with disabilities, as well as their parents or guardians. It is these children who are just beginning their path of adaptation to the current health situation (if at all possible), have difficulties with socialization, go through a behavioral crisis, and their parents (guardians), going through their difficult process of accepting the health problems of their child (ward), feel the need for special spiritual support. I sincerely hope that they can get it in YOUR congregation and this booklet is meant to make that task a little easier.

In general, if we talk about children with disabilities, then they are usually divided into two large groups: with physical disabilities and mental disabilities, but it is a very shorthand term in order to provide more appropriate assistance, because everyone needs a personalized approach. It should be noted that there are a number of disabilities that do not entail any difficulties in terms of coming to the Church and in terms of socialization. But even in such cases, if having disabilities is not confidential information, on special dates (for example, on International Day of Persons with Disabilities), such people can be given special attention in the Church. But the main purpose of this booklet is to help you accept a child with disabilities and their parents / guardians in your congregation when the child does have visible difficulties (using of a wheelchair, blindness, deafness, dumbness, mental problems) and needs special care.

Let us talk briefly about the needs of these children and their parents. Of course, like other people, they need acceptance, an understanding of their needs. Also, considering their situation, they need a delicate approach, since for many children and their parents / guardians, having disabilities is a difficult moment to accept. But most of all, I would like to reassure you, dear pastor, that such people,

like everyone else, desperately need Jesus and His grace. Due to difficult life situation, such families can often be more inclined to accept Jesus as their Personal Savior, but they can also be embittered by daily health challenges. But they certainly do not deserve to be the last to whom our message and ministry is directed. They also want to contribute to the life of the congregation, of what we're going to say later. At the same time, it should be understood that their "status" doesn't mean that they don't have the right to choose and they will agree to any suggestions of the pastor and other church members. Remember this!

Over the past years, our family, after being invited to administrative ministry, has come to our congregation, more like ordinary church members. I have a wonderful daughter who has been bravely fighting a serious chronic disease for 10 years. It is our observations over the past few years that have become the basis for this small booklet. We are parents, we are not psychologists, not sociologists, and we do not deal with these issues professionally. But at the same time, I think that in most cases the pastor has to interact with such parents who just want what's best for their children. And we hope that our voices will be heard.

So now we come to some practical recommendations.

Section I. Before the Service.

Is your congregation ready to accept children with disabilities and their parents / guardians?

Wouldn't the first visit of such a family to the church service be stressful for both them and the ministers? To prevent this from happening, let us see what can be done at the preparation stage.

1. As we have already mentioned, there are two main groups of people with disabilities, but for those mobility disabilities, the physical accessibility of your church is important, and namely, handicapped parking spots, convenient access to the hall in a wheelchair, without protruding thresholds and steps and access to a toilet with a separate cabin for people using a wheelchair. It is clear that some points from this list make you seriously think about renovating church premises, but this is the first important sign

for such people, telling them that they are welcomed. When we talk about children in wheelchairs, parents are usually able to cope with small obstacles on the way, but even these small difficulties can give the impression that they do not belong here. You can indicate on the church website that you have a ramp, a separate toilet for people with disabilities, and easy access to the hall. Make sure that there are no fast flashing lights and noises that are too loud to scare the child in your church. If during the service elements of drama are used, with a louder sound level and additional bright light, warn the parents about this.

2. The main inscriptions, written in Braille can also serve as a good sign of your readiness to receive people with special needs in your Church.

3. The pastor needs to hold a training meeting with the following groups of people:

i. With all members of the church, explaining that in general, you should not be afraid of children with disabilities, hide your eyes from them, look closely or show pity on your face. They're just like other children. Compliment the child, smile. Don't be intrusive. Do not make numerous offers of help, do not immediately offer them the best places in front of the stage, do not offer to immediately pray for them. Pay minimum attention on child's disabilities.

Warmly greet the child and his or her parents. If this is a child with ASD, then you should not expect that he or she will pay attention to you or answer your questions. Don't focus on that, do not try in any way to get a response from the child.

ii. During the service, any children can make noise. It is important that adults do not turn around and make comments if they hear a child crying or screaming, let parents/guardians deal with it. At the same time, the divine service should be comfortable for all people and for some cases it is good to have a separate room in the church where one can observe and listen to the service. Also, if the child is old enough, you should not talk about him with his parents / guardians, as if he is absent. When you greet his parents, greet him also. In general, try to show the same attitude that you would show to other children.

iii. Sabbath school teachers. The teacher should allow the parents / guardians of a special child to be present in the SS class if necessary. It would also be nice if a teacher could offer a number of

different activities, in some of which a child in a wheelchair, for example, could participate. If such a child starts attending the Sabbath school class on a regular basis, then in his absence the teacher can have a little talk with other students of the class, explaining and helping them to interact with the child with disabilities as comfortable as possible.

iv. Deacons. They are the ones who can meet a family with a smile at the entrance to the church, tell about the location of the hall, drinking water and toilets, tell where they can find most comfortable places for persons a wheelchair, if necessary. Also, the deacon on duty can introduce himself to the parents as someone whom they can call at any time if they need help. Also, be sure to show where there is a place in your church (preferably a room) that they can use individually if necessary. This room should have a sofa or bed for certain cases.

4. In general, the main recommendations are: to minimize the focus on child's disability, to offer assistance only when needed and to provide necessary information for a comfortable attendance of the church.

5. Make sure your church has at least one individual compact sound amplification system for the hearing impaired. Make sure it is suitable for children too.

6. Make sure that at least a small amount of Bible materials for children in Braille are available in your church. It will be good to present such a gift after the first visit of the children who can read Braille. You can also prepare a small folder of children's Sabbath School materials in large print for the visually impaired.

SECTION II Church service

1. In the church hall. Often, some church members try to provide a seat for children with disabilities and their companions in the very first row of the hall, thus showing respect and compassion to them. While this is commendable, it's better to

allow the parent / guardian to choose a comfortable seat in the church. It is important for some parents / guardians to sit as close to the exit as possible, especially if they have children with autism spectrum disorders or other difficulties in social interaction. While some congregations have special rooms where church service can be observed and heard, some parents / guardians may feel uncomfortable in these rooms, feeling separated from the main congregation.

2. It is important for parents / guardians to feel that the ministers and members of the church understand their late coming and early leaving. Many families who have children with special needs sometimes cannot stay for the entire service, due to various nuances. If they come later or leave earlier, don't ask them why etc.

3. If children with special needs regularly come to your church, then the question arises about their participation in different church services, both regular and festive. Here balance is essential. On the one hand, parents / guardians may be happy with the opportunity for their child to participate with other kids, but on the other hand they may feel uncomfortable. Sometimes leaders of children's ministry being afraid to appear inattentive try to involve a child with disabilities in absolutely all children's performances. It's not bad, but in such cases they should carefully choose for the child task, that won't be too hard for him or her and that will not cause additional stress or psychological trauma.

4. In general, it is good to have one ministry per year, when you can especially mention children with disabilities and their parents / guardians and pray for their health. Usually, such services are timed to coincide with special dates that are celebrated in the world. But it's better not to do it too often. As it was mentioned above, any undue attention to these circumstances is not comfortable for the people this applies to. It should be understood that often the parents / guardians of a child with special needs have not yet fully accepted the circumstances of their life, have difficulties with adaptation, and possibly struggle with some psychological difficulties caused by the health problems of their child / ward. Parents of young children with disabilities are very often vulnerable and require a more delicate approach.

SECTION III. After the service

1. We recommend that each congregation have a special needs ministry coordinator who can come to the parents / guardians after the service in order to leave his/her contact information, as well as invite them to join a parent support group, if there is one in your congregation. This person can also give a small gift to the child who first came to your service and invite him to come again.

2. Pray for families bringing up children with special needs. These families also have their joys and successes, achievements and plans, but sometimes their path becomes simply unbearable and they need prayers of the congregation. Have the prayer group pray for them regularly.

Conclusion

In the whole, any new place to visit for a family with a special child can be a real challenge, especially if it is a congregation with its own orders and plans. But at the same time, the church family can be an amazing place of support and inspiration for such families, a place where their child can also grow spiritually. Try to make their visits in your church as comfortable as possible, ensure acceptance by other church members, and also pray for them.

The booklet is prepared by Olga and Maksim Krupsky, pastoral family from Ukraine bringing up a child with special needs.