*Here is a Sabbath worship service presentation for Special Needs Emphasis Day. Feel free to use it as is, but better still, turn into your own words and style of presentation. It is prepared by by Josef Slowík, \* Pr Josef Slowík is the Special Needs Ministries coordinator for the Czech and Slovak Union, EUD.*

**Inclusive, Not Exclusive Christianity**

*prepared by Josef Slowík\**

(1350 words)

Many in today’s world aspire to be among society’s elite, among those considered exclusive. If something is *exclusive*, then it is not for everyone. Exclusivity is associated with advantage and privilege. But if you belong to the rather exclusive special needs people group—those with physical or intellectual challenges—it usually means that you’re disadvantaged, “handicapped” is an oft-used label, and even stigmatized.

But what is the general attitude of the Christian church towards people with special needs, to those who are seen as different and disadvantaged? If the church really is the body of Christ, of necessity it must be *inclusive*.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 describes the Church as a “body,” an organism composed of many parts—organs, limbs etc—that are interdependent and in which each part is irreplaceable. He warns us to neither neglect nor underestimate any of its parts, even if they are small and unattractive. Nevertheless, we have often neglected and underestimated those who seemed to be physically or mentally too weak, too disadvantaged or too different. We paid them little attention, perhaps because we were afraid, or that it was too hard or inconvenient. Perhaps our biggest obstacle is that we aren’t able to communicate with such people, that we don’t know how to comfortably approach them, because we don’t have a personal experience with them.

We are not able to heal the deaf, blind and paralyzed, as did Jesus and the apostles. It seems such miracles don’t happen today. But if there is a miracle, it’s in accepting such people as an equal part of the Christ’s body—His Church. From a biblical point of view, they are people who have a clear perspective in the kingdom of God. God counts them among the remnant (Jeremiah 31:7–9). His invitation is for them, and the they will not reject it, unlike some others (see Luke 14:16–22).

We read in the gospels that there were many special needs people in multitudes that daily surrounded Jesus (Matthew 15:30), and He certainly didn’t heal all of them, and they remain today. God never removed them, instead, He teaching His followers (us) how to approach them. Such were not to be discriminated against or oppressed (see Leviticus 19:14, 15; Exodus 22:21, 22). On the contrary, God sees their potential and identifies with them (Isaiah 35:4–6).

With many Christians, there’s a tendency toward a theology of prosperity: God will provide us with success and comfort. But the biblical story proclaims a rathermore prosocial and antidiscriminatory bias: we are to “consider others better than ourselves” (Philippians 2:3) because every human is worthy of our attention, everybody is invited to receive God's grace and to follow Jesus, and no-one is excluded from Christ’s body, including those who are disadvantaged or even rejected in major society (see 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 2:19–22; James 2:8, 9).

People with special needs obviously need various forms of help in some daily matters, but they also have much to offer. They don’t want to be wholly dependent on others, they want, and are able, to serve. They don’t only have special *needs*, they also have unique *abilities* and gifts to give like all Christ’s followers. We need to recognize and use their potential, and then we will see not only their differences and disadvantages but also their enriching possibilities.

In John 9, we read the story in which Jesus meets a man born blind. The disciples promptly ask a question reflecting their prejudices, which persists still: they saw a human impairment always as the result of sin of the individual or their ancestors. Writes Ellen White: “Satan, the author of sin and all its results, had led men to look upon disease and death as proceeding from God,—as punishment arbitrarily inflicted on account of sin” (*The Desire of Ages,* p. 471). Jesus rejects this view, pointing to man’s disability as an opportunity to show God’s grace and power. Jesus heals the man using ordinary mud and water, nothing complicated or sophisticated, but when members of the religious elite find out that this healing occurred on the Sabbath, they call the man and ask him the details. They suggest he wasn’t blind at all, and suspect a scam, and call the man’s parents. But the parents refer them back to their previously blind son. The miraculously healed man is again called, to prove that Jesus was sinning in perfoming the act on the Sabbath. The scholars recognized that Jesus possessed an unusual power, but were confused, because of their corrupted beliefs, as to its origin. Then from the formerly blind man comes a surprisingly wise and profound response: “Why, here is a strange thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (John 9:30–33). Confounded, the religious leaders quickly expel the man.

What a clear demonstration that the problem with accepting a person with special needs lies not in their disability (he was already healed), but in our human attitudes. They still saw him as someone disabled and disadvantaged! And herein lies a great revelation: the man had been living with a severe impairment for years and was undoubtedly limited in his education and participation in the religious and general community, yet his statement manifested a mature intelligent personality. He possessed a good knowledge of Scripture, moral competence and the ability to defend his beliefs and attitudes. Perhaps these came from Christ (see *The Desire of Ages,* p. 474), but clearly his congenital impairment didn’t make him stupid, incompetent or dependent.

In an *inclusive* approach to those with special needs, their obvious impairments, disabilities and limitations aren’t the important thing. What is more important are their abilities, their gifts and their potential, for which it is up to the broader church community, and especially those in charge, to provide the opportunity for them to be used. Most of all, what they need is our respect; to appreciate their personal originality and deal with them equally, as we do with all others. We shouldn’t expect their simple assimilation (i.e. complete adaptation to our majority standards), because in many cases full adaptation simply isn’t possible. An inclusive approach assumes mutual adaptation of the majority and the minorities.

When thinking to create inclusive church communities, I suggest the *5B* strategy:

1. **Barrier-free accessibility**. Not just the elimination of physical barriers (e.g. a ramp for wheelchairs or hearing loop for the deaf), but removing or reducing barriers in communication, barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding.
2. **Breaking the worries**. Don’t be afraid of contact with those who are different or have some special need; build the community where such people don’t have to be afraid to enter and be part of it.
3. **Being nearby for those who need us** (not only on a Sabbath). Many people with special needs are limited in their opportunities to acquire new social contacts. They would like more than just visiting a Sabbath worship service. Let’s accept this as an impulse to become a Christian not just one day a week but every day.
4. **Biblical view** **on people with special needs**. Nowhere in the Bible do we find God refusing people with special needs. On the contrary, He identifies with them (Matthew 25:34–40).
5. **Building the church together**. It is our privilege to help create the body of Christ in which all His followers have their place and mission regardless of human weaknesses, limitations and special needs, so-called.

An inclusive church community adopting/adapting the 5B strategy, and the attitudes of Jesus, will provide the living experience of the present kingdom of God on earth. It will be the living testimony of God, who does not cast out anyone who comes to Him (John 6:37–40).

*\* Pr Josef Slowík is the Special Needs Ministries coordinator for the Czech and Slovak Union, EUD.*