

Joe's Debut: Easy, Natural Inclusion

By

Jim Pierson

My home church has included people with disabilities for years. It is a routine with us. Among those who are part of our fellowship is a wonderful family with four beautiful children—two boys and two girls. Because of a rare gene that the parents carry, one boy and one girl have serious vision problems. Watching Joe's and his sister's integration into the life of the congregation has been a blessing.

My positive thoughts soared when I attended a children's musical at the church on a Sunday evening. The director is renowned for her ability to stage a great production and get movement and music out of the children. As I watched the production, I was drawn to Joe. Except for his thick glasses, an audience member would never have guessed he has a vision problem. He did all of the steps, turns, and hand movements the other choir members did. He pretended to play a xylophone. To my delight, he sang a solo! He stepped to the microphone and belted out the words. He received applause full of admiration.

Joe was easily included. He was just like the rest of the kids. He was dressed like them and performed like them. There was, however, a real difference. He did it from memory. Going outdoors in bright sunlight renders him blind. So, when the spot light was on him he could not read the cue cards or see the director's hand movements for directions. When he was in a line with the other choir members, he depended on their movements to stay with the routines.

As I observed this superior example of inclusion, the trainer in me came out. What were the ingredients that made it so easy for Joe to be so successfully included in this church activity? Most often I make a list of techniques that make inclusion happen for a specific disability. In this case it is a list of factors that make it happen; it is a set of factors that blend to make inclusion natural.

First

- Joe attends a church that believes he is a valuable person and wants him to be there.
- The church believes everyone has a soul and is worthy of being taught about God's love for him through His Son Jesus Christ.
- Sunday school teachers and children department volunteers know the needs that come with his serious visual deficit.

Second

- The director of the children's choir, His Kids, believes that every child is important. Regardless of ability, every child has gifts that should be used to honor God.

When I talked with her about Joe, her response was electric. She talked about what an awesome kid he is, how nice he is to work with, and how he participated with the other children against some pretty incredible odds. She ended her litany of accolades by saying, "He does it by memory. When he is on stage under the lights, he cannot see anything. I have learned so much from him about hard work and courage."

Third

- His family wants him to be as involved as he can be.
- His parents are aware of his limitations. I often ask his parents to talk with my college special education students. Their insights into Joe and his sister create a superior learning experience.
- Wanting Joe to achieve, his parents develop his strengths more than showing concern for the disabilities his vision deficit causes him.

While they know his limitations, they frequently talk about the horizons before him. He is in the honors choir, on a dance team, and runs the 400 meter dash on field day.

Fourth

- The philosophical approach is what he can do, not what he can not do. If Joe can not read the cue cards or see the director's hands, what can he do?
- Use the skills that he is developing in every other area of his life—memorize it.
- He has also learned to watch other people doing activities. That is called adaptation. Find out from the person and his family how he adapts to his world. Apply it to the student being included in your church.

A couple of days after the performance, I asked Joe how he felt about the success of his performance. "Well, it was neat. I'm glad I had everything memorized. That light was bright. But I watched the kids next to me."

Fifth

- Ask professionals what works.

Vision specialists, teachers and others shared the techniques they use to help Joe. For example, when he wanted to run in the 400 meter dash on field day, his vision teacher suggested sunglasses and a hat with a brim to take care of the blinding sun problem. Those two props worked. Having someone run in front of him to guide him did not. Joe ran faster than the guide. Next year the guide will be at his side.

An old standby is increasing the size of the print on instructions and cards. His dance teacher videoed the routines so he could watch them at home on his large television screen. There are lots of creative, innovation professionals who want their students to achieve and be involved in the community. Ask for the ideas and use them in your church's inclusion process.

A lot of factors went in to making Joe, with a visual acuity of 20/800, a success in his Kid's Choir solo debut. There are lots of children whose lives will be eternally changed if they are given the opportunity to know the Light of the World. Plan to include children of all abilities in the life of your congregation.