

# **Special Needs and the Church by Cheryl Vandiver**

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## **What is it like to live with special needs?**

It's a question those of us who don't have special needs realistically can't answer. We can try. We may even get close. But we can never truly understand what life is like for our neighbors and children dealing with Autism, Down's, Asperger's, or any other syndrome, chronic illness or medical diagnosis that causes them to be labeled as 'different'.

Often we get so caught up in describing the 'syndrome' that we ignore the real hopes and dreams children and adults with special needs have. The level of care required for someone with special needs can cause us to overlook the fact that those with special needs just want to feel normal.

They love to read, dance, sing, hang out with friends and family, and be in the presence of those who love them. Just like everyone else, they want to be respected and acknowledged. They want a place where they can be themselves, where they don't feel lonely, and where they can be loved without being made to feel different.

For any person, going to a new church for the first time can be a daunting task. Imagine being a person with special needs, who already feels singled out. They may be anxious around crowds, they may not know where to go, and they may be afraid no one will talk to them.

Now imagine you're a parent of a special needs child and being unsure whether the church is equipped to serve your child. Imagine not knowing whether your child will be accepted or left in safe hands. It's no surprise, after dealing with all of these things that many parents decide to avoid church altogether.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbors, and to do for others what we would want done for ourselves. This is why we take seriously the call to welcome all of God's people at HPUMC. We are committed to the physical, spiritual, and emotional health of all those we serve, including children and adults with special needs.

For families who may feel like they have nowhere else to turn, they find a place that welcomes and cares for their children.

For kids who have a sibling with special needs, they find a place where they can feel free to have fun and be recognized as the individual that they are.

For adults with special needs they find a place where staff and volunteers are excited to spend time with them and get to know them. They find a place that not only takes seriously their dreams to dance, sing, and act but also provides the stage for them to do so!

At church, those with special needs find an atmosphere of acceptance that is not limited to one classroom, but flows freely throughout the entire church. More than that, they find a place to simply belong. Our team of staff and volunteers walk alongside them, calling out their strengths, interests, and purpose.

We see in Sunday School that they want to be prayed for, and they want to know how to pray for their friends. In Respite they want undivided attention and to have fun, a break from therapy, to make choices, to be accepted.

The church is not a place where any person should feel unwelcome or unloved, but where all can experience the unconditional love of God.