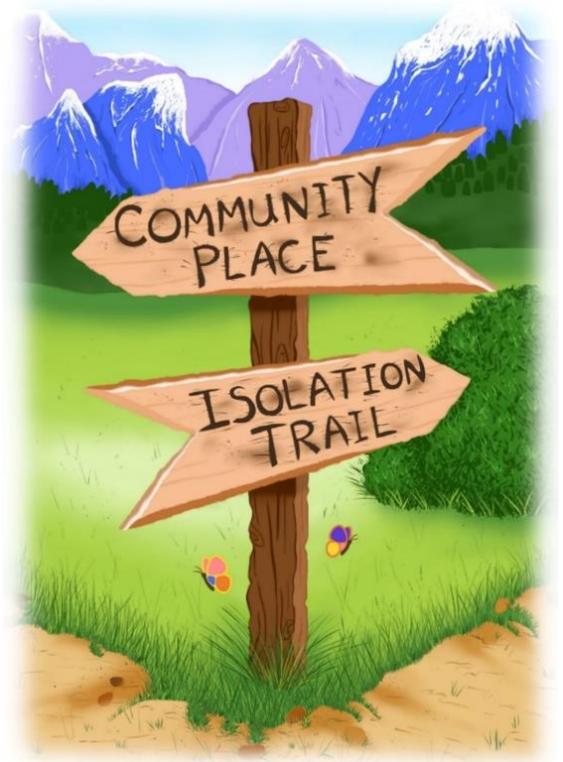


## TOPIC 8, EPISODE 7—COMPANION TRAINING

### BEYOND THE FRIENDSHIP GROUP

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- There was a time when the strength of a city was measured by the size of its massive walls and the protection they provided. The book of Nehemiah tells us that the Israelites were shamed because the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins.
- Walls around a city offered protection against their enemies. But as important as this protection was, for most people, everyday life took place outside the walls.
- The same is true for our churches. We come together to worship every week, or we may be part of a small group or Bible study. Our churches are safe environments for ministries with children and compassionate places for a thrift shop or food pantry.
- Authentic Christian communities need to transcend outside the church building and encompass the world we live in.
- The Church is so much more than a Sunday event. The Church is our connection with Jesus Christ and other believers. It is a lifestyle of Christian living in our communities that serves as a testimony to God's love.



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## BEYOND THE FRIENDSHIP GROUP CONTINUED

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- The light of Christ must extend from Monday through Sunday, and shine on the world around us, including our friends with intellectual disabilities.
- It is not as much about changing program models or adding activities as it is about changing our hearts. It begins by seeing our friends with intellectual disabilities as co-laborers in building up the Church.
- Our friends with disabilities may live in our communities, but many still live in isolation. This is because forming authentic Christian community requires more than meeting once a week at church to worship or participating in a small group. It is experiencing life in Christ together in the communities where we all live.
- There are two contrasting stories in the Gospels of Jesus' interactions with people with disabilities. In both cases, Jesus brought healing.
- The first story is in **John 5** when Jesus went to the Pool of Bethesda and asked a man who was paralyzed for thirty-eight years if he wanted to be well. The man replied that he had no one to help him into the pool when the water was stirred. Someone else always got in ahead of him. Jesus then healed the man.
- The second story is found in the second chapter of Mark where Jesus is at a home in Capernaum and a crowd gathered to hear him teach. Four men carried their friend, who was paralyzed, to see Jesus. Because of the crowd they were unable to get near Jesus, so they lowered their friend through a hole in the roof. Jesus healed the man because of the faith of his friends.
- The man at the pool of Bethesda didn't have a friend, or even someone with enough pity to carry him to the water. Even more than a physical healing, he needed friends who would lift him out of isolation. But the man in the Mark 2 story had four friends willing to overcome any obstacle to bring him to Jesus.

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## BEYOND THE FRIENDSHIP GROUP CONTINUED

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- Professionals who work with people with disabilities strive for the “inclusion” of people with disabilities in their communities. Inclusion is defined as the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.
- Inclusion is a good thing, but God calls Christians even further. God wants us to give our friends with disabilities access to Christian community.
- We are to be one Body of Christ. We know from **1 Corinthians 12** that *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”*
- Being “one Body” is more than making our building accessible, inviting people with disabilities into our churches, or including them in a Bible study. It is being a friend who embraces people with disabilities and sees their value in Christ.
- Having a Friendship group is only the first step in integrating those with intellectual disabilities into the Church Body. Actively involving adult friends into the full life of the Church is essential to those with disabilities in becoming the indispensable parts of church congregations.
- As we discussed in a previous episode, every believer is blessed with spiritual gifts. This includes believers with intellectual disabilities. It is important to recognize and find opportunities for people with disabilities to exercise their spiritual gifts.
- Some ways our friends with disabilities can develop their gifts may include:
  - Participate in worship as part of the music, lector, usher, or greeter teams.
  - Become involved in prayer ministry and share the church prayer needs with the Friendship group.
  - Teach adult friends to give, whether it be financially or with material goods.
  - Include adult friends in the churches volunteer service projects or mission trips.
  - Participate in other small groups or Bible studies, in addition to the Friendship group.

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## BEYOND THE FRIENDSHIP GROUP CONTINUED

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- A friend with a disability may need someone to join in these activities with them to help foster relationships with others. Invite the friends with disabilities to become members of the congregation and if necessary, help prepare them for baptism. As they exercise their gifts within the congregation, they will develop relationships with more people.
- Embracing our friends with disabilities is not only limited to church activities. We can look for opportunities outside of the Friendship group and other church activities for fun and fellowship.
- **Acts 2:46** says that every day Christian believers would meet in the temple courts and break bread in their homes and eat together with glad and sincere hearts.
- You may have developed a close connection with someone who has a disability. Find ways to spend time with them outside the regular Friendship group meetings!
  - Talk with them on the phone and pray together.
  - Attend events they are involved in such as Special Olympics or bowling.
  - Plan activities together, such as going to movies and baseball games. These activities can be done as a group and individually.
  - Go out to dinner or invite them to your home for a meal.
  - Share a meal with their family or group home. This is an excellent way to get to know the support staff and families.
  - Go for a walk together.
  - Let the important people in their lives know you are available in times of crisis.
- Embracing our friends also means loving the people who are important in their lives, such as their families and support staff. Along with their Christian friends, these are the people who have the best opportunity to help our friends with disabilities break through isolation by being part of their lives.

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## BEYOND THE FRIENDSHIP GROUP CONTINUED

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- However, aging parents might not have the energy they need to integrate their loved ones with disabilities into the community. This can lead to isolation in the home. Limited funding, the lack of day services, transportation, and respite only compounds the isolation.
- Support staff receive low wages, one of many reasons for high turnover rates. The result of high turnover is inadequate staffing levels and a revolving door of these important people in the lives of our friends with disabilities. Inadequate funding compounded by high turnover causes service providers to limit staff in the homes.
- If four people with disabilities live together, and three of them want to go to church and one does not, many times no one will get to go because there is only one staff working. A few people with intellectual disabilities may be able to use public transportation, but it may not be reliable to get them to church or picked up in a timely manner.
- As a volunteer companion you could explore options for transportation, as not having a ride can keep many adults with disabilities from attending church services. Consider speaking with church leadership about forming a transportation ministry.
- A disability ministry in your church is not only for the person with the disability, but it can also offer Christian community to their families and support staff who become isolated.
- Get to know the families and support staff. Ask them how you and the group can pray for them. Be sure to communicate that they are also welcomed to attend regularly scheduled worship services. Introduce them to your pastors and congregation members. Sit with them during worship to help them feel welcome and facilitate introductions.
- As we read in **1 Corinthians 12:22**, all friends with intellectual disabilities, family members and support staff are indispensable!