



DISABILITIES MINISTRY

"And when they could not bring [the paralyzed man] to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him..." —Mark 2:3-4 (paraphrased)

REFLECTION

Make a Joyful Noise

One of my earliest memories at church was sitting next to my mom at the piano and pushing octave Ds to help her play *Palm Sunday* by Carlton Young. As the eldest daughter of one of the church pianists, I guess this made sense. Our congregation was small so we didn't have a lot of music opportunities. I participated in music every chance I got, though. I tended to be the eldest in the youth choir and the youngest in the adult choir, just because I wanted to sing. My school options were also limited, so most of my group music happened at church, often around the holidays. I was always encouraged to sing or play my oboe, and my mom even found this creative way for me to play piano for the congregation.

When I was a teen, one of the women in the church gave birth to a boy with Down Syndrome. I was a nursery care worker at the time, so I got to play with him at church as well as babysit in his home occasionally. While he was young, one of our favorite things to do was bang on the piano after worship. He really loved those keys & sounds. Until Sunday School began, we'd play together as often as we could. As he grew, he participated in the children's choir, the interpretive dance numbers, and helped walk the offering to the altar during offering. Sometimes it was comical, sometimes distracting, but he always gave the task his all.

This boy has grown into an amazing young man. He was at my wedding and, even though I hadn't seen him in quite a while, he requested a song so that he could have a special dance with me. The bond of music was still there; I'm pretty sure I teared up more than once. This boy, now a man, has always been inspired by music. Our pastors and congregants were amazing at accepting him where he was developmentally and encouraging him to be a part of things. Sure, he needed some extra guidance and reigning in occasionally, but his exuberance for life was something we all could learn from.

Looking back, it isn't much of a surprise that I grew up to become a Music Therapist. I now work in special education, helping students reach their fullest potential through the power of music. My congregation's support of my talents, but also my experiences with the youth of the church, teaching

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Sunday School and doing music whenever possible, helped me to find *my* truest potential back then, too. My little home church is still my favorite place to sing.

Music is an amazing equalizer. One does not need understandable speech to be able to sing. The most random banging on a drum can become rhythm and music if given some time and attention (Make a joyful noise, after all!). Dance does not need to be choreographed to be expressive and meaningful. Nearly everyone with special needs is able to express themselves through music or dance, given the opportunity.

One of my students in his early twenties has autism. He is only able to speak a few words at a time and they are difficult to understand. He is plagued by compulsive behaviors such as checking light switches and electrical sockets, and scratching at his skin. However, he can play nearly any song on the guitar after hearing it once or twice. The largest part of his repertoire is hymns and praise songs.

His parents discovered a church program in the area specifically designed to help those with different abilities to worship. This church offers 'buddies' who can sit in the pews with them if they need one-to-one support, and anyone with a special talent is encouraged to participate in worship. I have never been to this service, mainly because he doesn't need me. As long as someone can cue him to play *Amazing Grace* in the Key of E, he can do it. And he can *sing* the whole thing, this man who can barely hold a conversation.

He and I also visit the day program at Community Mental Health and play for the clients there. We play duets, I pass out instruments, and we do a big sing along. It is important to his parents that he give back of the talents with which he was blessed, when from the outside, it might seem he was dealt such a difficult blow. When we play, his compulsions nearly disappear; he sings, and he can play in almost any key with only a few reminders. He has a better ear for music than I do. His playing is a truly amazing thing to behold.

Music and the arts is one of the easiest ways for a congregation to include persons who have different abilities in worship. Instruments don't have to be fancy, nor do the song arrangements. The Psalms encourages us over and over to praise God through song. God gave us music that we might praise him with a joyous heart. You will rarely see a more intense joy than that of someone improvising on an instrument or singing from their innermost spirit, especially someone who is almost always told what to do, or whose decisions are often made for them. When given a chance to shine, you may be amazed by the blessings bestowed.

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