

An Ability Inclusive Community Called Bethlehem

by Zach Grant, Director, Bethlehem Ministry

Left to our own devices we are terrible at knowing the things in life that are really valuable. The story of Bethlehem and Jesus' birth there, which we are so concerned with in Christmas, attest to this fact. The birth of a weak, vulnerable child in an unprepared place of necessity, the lowly manger, gives us little cause to hope for great things. God is often about using things that the world considers weak or unimportant to transform the world.

I asked my friend Chris, a young man with Down's syndrome, what he would name a new church. He said Bethlehem. I didn't like it at first. I thought a name that seemed more original or that more explicitly said what the new church was about would be better. But everyone I talked to liked Bethlehem better. Bethlehem seemed more natural, less contrived. My friends with disabilities have often been my teachers. It's proper that a church that seeks to name, lift up, and lead by the gifts of people with disabilities would be named by Chris.

Bethlehem seeks to be an ability inclusive community that lifts up the gifts of people with disabilities, encouraging and empowering them to lead us. In that way, it is a worshiping community for people with disabilities. It also seeks to be a community of relationships that cuts across the lines of disability. By upending the categories that usually define who serves and who is served, we hope to make a worshiping community that is for everyone.

The birth of Christ in Bethlehem and his death on the cross are both examples of God's power in vulnerability rather than strength. So, too, God sends out the church in vulnerability, God's power made perfect in weakness. Perhaps you feel weak, and wonder how God might use you for God's good purposes. Perhaps you see the amazing gifts of a loved one the world has labeled lowly or of little importance. This might be the community God is calling you to.