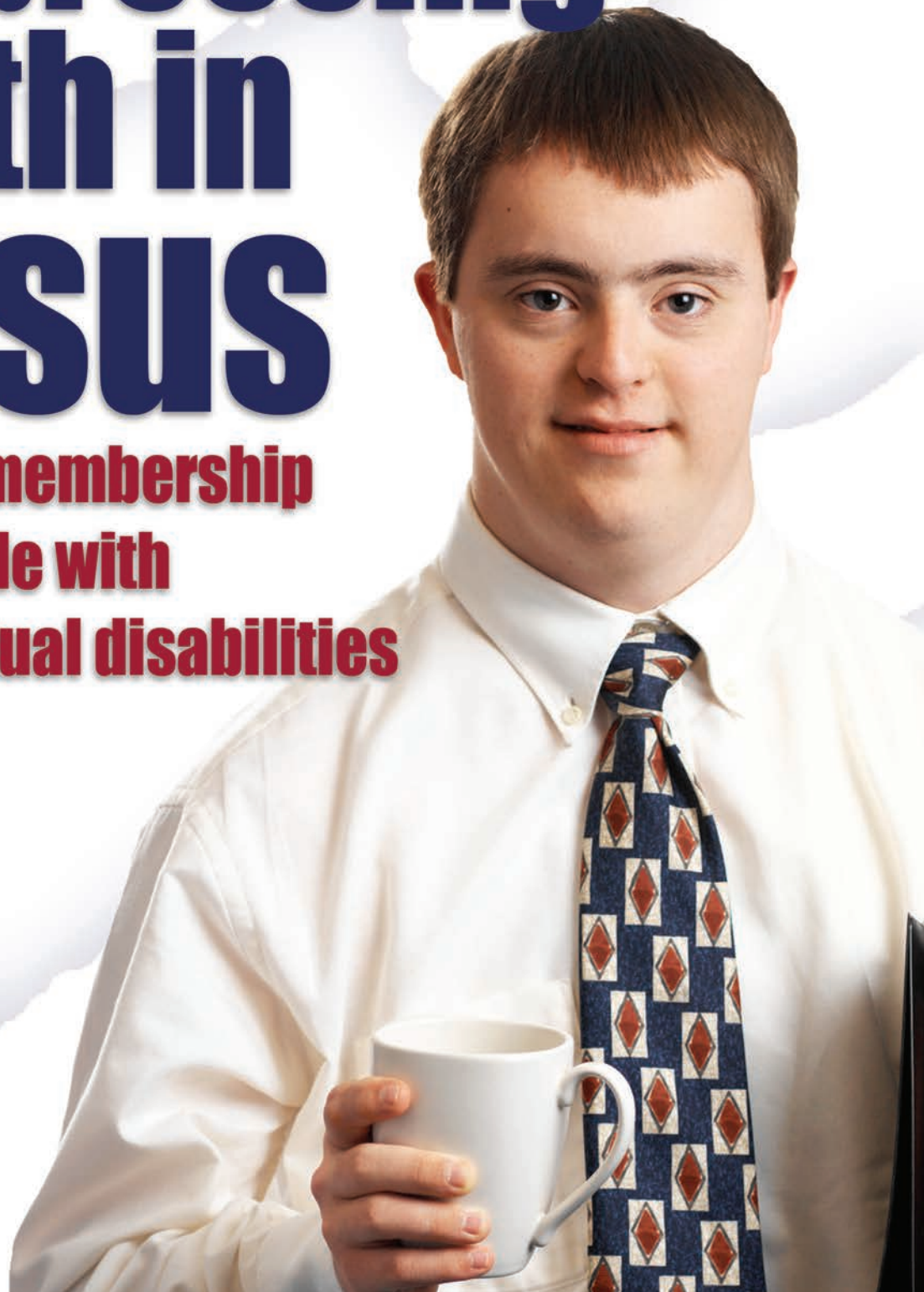


RONALD C. VREDEVELD

expressing faith in Jesus

**church membership
for people with
intellectual disabilities**



REVISED EDITION

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for people with intellectual disabilities**

Ronald C. Vredeveld



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Friendship Ministries is an interdenominational, international ministry with people who have intellectual disabilities. Through consultation and with the help of resources that encourage spiritual development and relationships, Friendship Ministries helps churches to include people with intellectual disabilities in fellowship and service as members of the body of Christ.

Illustrated by Tim Foley

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Contact Us

We welcome your comments. Call Friendship Ministries toll-free at 1-888-866-8966; write to us at 2215 29th St. SE, Suite B6, Grand Rapids, MI 49508; e-mail us at friendship@friendship.org; or visit www.friendship.org.

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Preface

This book revision was inspired by my friends with intellectual disabilities whom I've been privileged to walk alongside as they publicly expressed their faith in Jesus. They are my role models for living and expressing my faith. Their presence in the church has taught many to see God's family as truly inclusive.

I take this opportunity to encourage pastors, church leaders, and church educators to enable people with intellectual disabilities to become full participants in the life of your congregation. I guarantee that your congregation will be enriched by their presence at the table of the Lord.

I also wish to assure families of members with intellectual disabilities that together they will celebrate that Jesus is Lord of *all*. Families across the country have told me that they worried about how the church would react, how the service would go, and if their loved one actually knew enough to go forward. Afterwards, without exception, they have said it was an incredible experience.

May God bless all those who participate in helping those with intellectual disabilities to express their faith in Jesus. Thank you, Steve, Matthew, and David for teaching me how to help.

Nella Uitvlugt,
Executive Director
Friendship Ministries

Introduction

A Call to Share God's Love More Fully

Over the past twenty-five years, many faith communities have taken seriously the need to serve persons with intellectual disabilities. The growth of Friendship Ministries and other similar ministries is evidence that God is blessing efforts to meet this need.

Experiencing Community

Through its series of Bible studies, Friendship Ministries offers a unique opportunity for youth and adults with intellectual disabilities to experience community in a Friendship group. And from the very beginning, Friendship has advocated full inclusion of these children and adults in the life of the church. One of the very first goals stated is this: “The Christian community will grow in its acceptance of and love for persons with mental impairments.”

Ask anyone who has been involved in a Friendship group, and they will tell you that acceptance and love is happening. But the challenge to welcome and include youth and adults with intellectual disabilities more fully into the life of the church continues. New goals for Friendship Ministries (see below) speak to that challenge.

Sharing God's Love

Friendship Ministries enables friends to

- experience the joy of knowing they are valued by God and by God's people.
- grow in their relationship to Jesus Christ, claiming him as their Savior and Lord.
- grow in their relationship with Christ's church, making a public profession of their faith and participating in the church's life and work.
- be truly accepted and loved by the Christian community.
- use their gifts to serve others.

—*Friendship Program Guide: A Resource for Leaders*, © 2009, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Friendship Ministries: Making a Difference!

Friendship Ministries was initiated in the early 1980s when Jack and Dottie Wiersma, parents of Sherman, who has Down Syndrome, came to what is now Faith Alive Christian Resources, the publisher of Friendship materials, asking for help. Their single request for a program to teach people with intellectual disabilities has grown into a ministry that has worked with more than sixty denominations in North and South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. The ministry has also expanded into Latin America through the work of *Ministerio Amistad*—that's Friendship Ministries in Spanish.

From its beginning, Friendship Ministries has been *sharing God's love with people who have intellectual disabilities and helping them become active members of God's family* (mission statement). Support for this nondenominational ministry comes from individuals, businesses, and churches.

—*Friendship Program Guide: A Resource for Leaders*, © 2009, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Including More Fully

Friendship groups and other programs developed specifically for youth and adults with intellectual disabilities are important for nurturing their faith and for enabling them to express their faith. The challenge confronting faith communities is to include friends with disabilities as fully active members, brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, by

- celebrating with them in worship.
- learning together with them.
- sharing with them in fellowship.
- serving alongside them in ministry.

Expressing Faith in Jesus addresses this challenge, with special emphasis on expression of faith. While this book describes a process for public expression of faith, it also reminds you to rejoice in the everyday expressions of faith from the heads, hearts, and hands of friends with intellectual disabilities. Here are some examples of such expressions:



When his father died, Mike said, “That’s OK. He’s not sick anymore. He’s in heaven with Jesus.”



Sandy danced to the songs at Joe’s funeral, and Ernie pointed to heaven.



When the pastor handed Tom the bread at the Lord’s Supper and told him that Jesus loves him, he said, “I know that. Jesus loves you too.”



Leroy was asked to describe what God’s mouth looked like. He responded, “God’s mouth is saying, ‘Come here, my son, I have a hug for you.’”



Sandy smiles as she tries to sing “Kum Bah Yah.” Unable to say the words fast enough, she spins her arms as fast as she can.



“Jesus loves David; David belongs in God’s family. Amen.” When this blessing song is sung to him, David stands proudly and smiles. He knows he has a place in the family of God and that he is loved.



Mary plays the small harp on her wheelchair when the group sings and when she hears a prayer request that is important to her.



John is up early, waiting for his ride to church. As he walks slowly into the church sanctuary, his face lights up. With a wave, he greets a friend.



Richard is the first to arrive at Friendship. He stands at the door to greet each person as they enter the church.



Dierdre leaves the worship service expressing her thanks: “I always feel better when you pray for me.”



When Sally was asked to carry the cross, she pressed it against her and held it carefully as she walked down the aisle. She bowed and carefully placed the cross on the altar table. Her whole being said, “Wow! I got to carry the cross!”

We trust that these expressions of faith will remind you of your own experiences and encourage others in your faith community to be open to them. Realize that as our friends with intellectual disabilities are more fully included in the life of your faith community, reactions will vary. Remember that it is natural to move away from people who seem different. Recognize too that church people often worry about changing the way we do things.

Journeying Together

Over and over, the Bible calls us to love one another. Consider these words:

Dear children, don't just talk about love. Put your love into action. Then it will truly be love.

—1 John 3:18

Don't forget to welcome strangers.

—Hebrews 13:2

You must treat people fairly. You must love others faithfully. And you must be very careful to live the way your God wants you to.

—Micah 6:8

Paul teaches about the importance of each person within the body of Christ in Romans 12, where he says: “*We all have gifts. They differ in keeping with the*

Growing Together

Probably the most unique aspect of Friendship Ministries is our emphasis on friendship and mutuality. We struggle with our terminology, not wanting to use *teacher* and *student*, because that implies a one-way relationship. We prefer to simply use one word—*friends*—but that doesn't always work because we sometimes need to differentiate between the one with recognized intellectual disabilities and the one without. So we use the words *friend* and *mentor*. We always focus on growing together in our love for God and for each other.

—*Friendship Program Guide: A Resource for Leaders*, © 2009, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

grace that God has given each of us” (v. 6). In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reminds us that we are not all alike, but all are important to God. The faith community welcomes people with intellectual disabilities as another unique gift from God to God's people.

As the biblical message reshapes the attitudes of their members, churches minister to families struggling with the demands and stresses of caring for children with special needs. Their Christian education programs adapt classes to meet the needs of children who have impairments, possibly by adding a second teacher as a mentor for such children or by using additional materials. And they eagerly encourage and invite their members with such disabilities to express their faith and welcome them to full participation with the people of God.

In all Christian communities, people are invited to join the faith community in worship, and then they are encouraged to become members by publicly expressing their faith in Jesus Christ before the faith community. Children within faith communities are also encouraged, as they get older and learn more about the Christian faith, to express their faith in Jesus. Some churches refer to this ceremony as *confirmation*; others call it *profession of faith* or *adult baptism*. We need to make sure to include our friends with intellectual disabilities in the same milestones on their faith journey.

The faith community cannot delay this process until church leaders know how to welcome and include. Those who have experience can provide direction, leadership, and encouragement, but the real teachers on this journey are our friends with intellectual disabilities.

Whatever your faith tradition, the material presented in this book will guide you on this journey with your friends.

- Section 1 discusses why faith communities should welcome and include people with intellectual disabilities.
- Section 2 focuses on how to walk alongside the person desiring to make public expression of faith before God's people.
- Section 3 provides direction for journeying together as a community of fully included believers.

Welcome to this journey!

Welcoming and Including People with Intellectual Disabilities

The church's attitude toward people with intellectual disabilities must be consistent with its basic convictions. Reflecting on some of our beliefs about humankind and the church will guide our actions as communities of faith welcoming and including one another.

The Image of God

The uniqueness of humanity is that God created us in his own image. In the beginning, God said,

“Let us make human beings in our likeness. . . .” So God created human beings in his own likeness. He created them in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female. . . . Then . . . he breathed the breath of life into him.

—Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7

The “likeness of God” and the “breath of life” point to God's great plan to bring humans into a special relationship with him.

Some have tried to define the image of God primarily in terms of human intelligence. Others have added to intelligence the ability to communicate—to read, to write, to speak. But the image of God cannot be reduced to these variable and quantifiable individual abilities. It is not something we can possess in varying degrees. Since bearing the image of God involves all of our being, it does have an intellectual component. But this aspect must not be overrated in importance.

The various terms we use in analyzing human intelligence define people by relating them to “normal” people. When compared to God and to what God will eventually make of us, these differences among our various mental abilities are insignificant. They do not define God's image in us. Instead, our living interaction with the infinite and perfect God and with other humans is the heart of what it means to be created in God's image. Since God establishes and maintains this relationship with us, it does not depend on us, on any characteristic we possess, or on any action we take. Because we are made in the image of God, we respond to God with a love that transcends words, and we can communicate love to each other with sensitive touch or a caring smile. Thus, people with intellectual disabilities are not hindered in their ability to feel and express love for God and others.

What's Enough?

Thirty-year-old Paul has Down Syndrome. When Paul decided that he wanted to profess his faith in Christ, his parents met with one of the leaders of the faith community to ask that Paul be permitted to make profession of faith and to participate in the Lord's Supper. The elder told them that their son did not know enough to do either.

Knowing the Truth

What do we mean when we say that we must know the truth to be saved? What does *truth* mean? Does the Bible establish or allow the church to establish a minimum level of knowledge before a person can profess faith in Christ and have access to the Lord's table? To answer these questions, we need to consider the meaning of salvation.

In Ephesians, Paul describes salvation as a gift from God by grace alone. Although the gift is not from ourselves, it is received by faith, and we rightly emphasize the place of knowledge as a component of faith. For this reason, many denominations have developed strong education programs and a sound curriculum. However, this emphasis has led some to conclude wrongly that salvation depends on what we know about it, and that membership in the church is by virtue of our knowledge.

In fact, our salvation does not depend on our knowledge. Although infants and children are not yet able to understand the truths of the gospel, they are included, along with their parents, in God's grace. Grace is the favor and generosity of God toward us, based completely on his love in Jesus Christ, not on anything in us. God claims all that we are, including our minds, but God does not ask anything of us that we cannot give.

God promises steadfast love and mercy to our friends with intellectual disabilities too. For that reason, the congregation promises to nurture them, to encourage them to profess their faith, and to include them in the ministry of the sacraments. The fulfillment of this promise demands attentive effort and encouragement from church leaders.

Neither Scripture nor our own experience tells us that God distributes the gifts of salvation only to people who have a certain level of intelligence. The kind of knowing that faith requires is an intimate, trusting, person-to-person sort of knowing not confined by the speed or breadth of one's intelligence. Our friends with intellectual disabilities often show a high level of trust, exhibiting the simple faith that Jesus acknowledged when he blessed the children whom the disciples had intended to turn away. Jesus said:

"Let the children come to me. Don't keep them away. God's kingdom belongs to people like them. What I'm about to tell you is true. Anyone who will not receive God's kingdom like a little child will never enter it."

—Mark 10:14-15

Our friends' minds are not cluttered with concerns that preoccupy others or with the need to understand and know all about faith. But theirs is not a childish, wobbling, unfounded faith; it is deeply trusting, informed by hearing the stories of God's people and by living in a broken world. Their faith may not be informed by the knowledge of a creed or statement of faith that they have studied, but their faith is nurtured by relationships that reflect the love of Jesus. Their responses to God's love, which arise from their inner being and are nourished by the Spirit of God, express a simple but very rich faith in Jesus. When the faith community encourages new members with intellectual

disabilities to express their faith in Jesus, the emphasis is on the belief of the heart rather than the level of knowledge.

Participation in the Lord's Supper

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, or Eucharist, varies from one faith tradition to another. Some faith communities celebrate this sacrament each week, others once a month, and still others four times a year. Some faith traditions believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus; others use the bread and wine to remember Jesus' death on the cross. Sharing in the sacrament reminds all Christians of God's great love for us, vividly shown in the death of Jesus, God's Son.

The invitation to participate in the sacrament also is different. In some faith communities, all are invited; in others, participation is very limited. These differences are important. They affect how our friends with intellectual disabilities are included. For faith traditions where expression of faith in Jesus and membership in the faith community is necessary to participate, friends with intellectual disabilities should be included after their expression of faith. In faith communities where all are invited to participate, friends with intellectual disabilities should also be included.

Inclusion in the sacrament is important. The people of God gather at the table of the Lord, concentrating on Christ's love, humbly receiving the gift of bread and wine, and trusting God to give grace and strength. While complete understanding of the sacrament is beyond our thinking and expression, the power of this gift from God touches us deeply. Friends with intellectual disabilities come to the table just as we do—with childlike faith. At the table we are loved and blessed, and our trust in God is deepened.

The Nature of the Church

A clear understanding of the church is also crucial to a discussion about expression of faith and full participation for our friends with intellectual disabilities. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, the apostle Paul compares the church to a physical body. Both are organically one and yet have many different kinds of members. The miracle of the church is that out of a widely diverse group of people God creates a functioning, coordinated fellowship as harmoniously integrated and unified as our physical bodies. The church is the fellowship of saved people who worship together, who support each other, who learn from each other. Friends with intellectual disabilities are included in this body. They bring their faith and their spiritual gifts to the body of Christ, enriching the community of faith. Without their presence, the body is less than it could be.

Paul also talked about oneness and equality in Jesus Christ when he wrote,

You are all children of God by believing in Christ Jesus. . . . There is no slave or free person. There is no male or female. Because you belong to Christ Jesus you are all one.

—Galatians 3:26, 28

A-B-C Prayers

When a [rabbi] came to worship, he saw a man with a developmental disability deep in prayer. The rabbi had seldom seen such deep faith. One day he kneeled beside the man to hear his prayer. He was surprised to hear the man repeating the alphabet over and over again. When the prayer was finished, the rabbi asked why he said the alphabet. The man with the disability said that he had worked hard to learn the letters of the alphabet but he could not learn the words of prayers. He then decided that he would just say the letters and let God make up the words.

—Dave Hingsburger, *Behaviour Self!*
© 1996, Diverse City Press, Richmond Hill, Ontario.

Balance

In seeing every person
as a face of God,
we have a basis for great respect
for every living person.
But this great store of respect has a
way of getting out of balance.
We forget to divide it evenly. . . .
We overly honor some, so that we
make fools of ourselves,
and we snub others,
so that we make fools of them.
When we learn to neither
tremble before the high
nor to scorn the
personhood of the lowly,
but view all with an open face,
we are learning a sense of
cosmic balance.

—Gordon and Gladis DePree, *Faces of God*.
© 1974 by Gordon and Gladis DePree.
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Inc., 10 East 53rd St., New York, NY 10022.

Paul, concerned about the status of people, mentioned the labels given to people in his day. Persons with intellectual disabilities have also been labeled. These labels exclude; they devalue the individual. Paul says that we are all children of God. “*You who belong to Christ are Abraham’s seed. You will receive what God has promised*” (v. 29). All children of God should be welcomed into the faith community and accepted and valued as sisters and brothers.

As noted in the Introduction (sidebar, p. 10), Friendship groups encourage the mutuality of relationships. Friendship mentors talk enthusiastically about what they have learned from their friends who have intellectual disabilities. Their testimonies confirm the Bible’s description of the church. They emphasize the value of including our friends with intellectual disabilities in congregational fellowship.

Because the church is a fellowship of mutual service, each member has tasks to do for the church and the gifts to do them. If church members sometimes complain that there is nothing friends can do, it may be because they put lower value on some kinds of members and their tasks than on others. They may consider the members who have the gifts for teaching and preaching to be more important than those who have the gifts for cleaning, ushering, or outdoor work. While it is true that some tasks and gifts are less common than others, that does not make them or the members who have them more important.

For the body to function well, all members must use their gifts and must be appreciated and thanked by all the rest. Each member benefits from the opportunity to serve the rest of Christ’s members, and the body itself also benefits from the participation of each member. If our friends are not allowed or invited to serve because they have intellectual disabilities, not only will they feel devalued and hurt, but the whole congregation will lose the benefit and blessing of their contribution.

Jesus reached out to a variety of people who were not considered very important—children, women, social and moral outcasts, and the diseased. Following the pattern of Jesus, the church needs to reach out beyond itself to a variety of people, including those who are considered offensive, who for some reason seem not to belong. It must also encourage friends with intellectual disabilities to give themselves to Christ and to express their love for him. This mission to people with intellectual disabilities—and to those with other disabilities, for that matter—has been neglected.