

A niche of welcome

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue



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My good friend, a lifelong, dedicated Episcopalian, announced that she had stopped going to church. “Oh no! What happened?” I asked. “I just can’t take the dirty looks any longer. I just *can’t* do it.”

That was all she had to say. I could easily fill in the rest of the story. She has three beautiful children, two of whom are on the autism spectrum. Forcing them to sit through an hour-long service had become too difficult when the community didn’t understand how people of all abilities could worship together.

Since that day, I have become increasingly aware of those times when the parents of a daughter with Down syndrome or a son with autism drop out of a worshiping community. I wondered who was doing the work of reaching out to people of all abilities.

I was thrilled when I met J. C. and Mindi Mitchell. He is a Disciples of Christ minister, she is an American Baptist minister, and they are the parents of A. J., who is blond and energetic and has autism. His parents took time to teach me how to communicate with him, instructing me how to take his lead, touch his forearms, and appreciate his motions.

When it comes to works of art, we can think about their appeal in two ways. Some works seek to reach a wide audience. These are the works that become the hit tune, the runaway best seller, the blockbuster movie. Other works seek a particular niche.

A niche artist knows that the monetary payoff may be small, the audience limited.

We have hits and niches when it comes to starting new congregations as well. When denominational churches dominated the religious landscape in the 1960s, we had buildings in the center of town. Sometimes denominations would buy a piece of property at a well-traveled, well-heeled intersection, and expect the members to flood in. But when the membership numbers dropped, churches began to reposition their ministries. Many have figured out how to serve in a niche.

Bellevue Christian Church in Washington is doing just that, with the help of its pastor, J. C. Mitchell, who is working on a “parallel start.” Most of the members in the dwindling congregation were in their eighties and nineties. The congregation sold its building and set aside part of the proceeds to help start a new congregation. The established group now holds its traditional services in an elementary school.

J. C. Mitchell serves the traditional congregation at one-quarter time and the new church at three-quarters time. Mindi Mitchell serves the new church at one-quarter time, while working with Burien Christian Church.

The couple began Open Gathering, an emerging community that reaches out to a population of all abilities. It hopes to minister with people who have sons and daughters (adult or children) with special needs.

“We want to be a place where we practice invitation over accommodation,” J. C. Mitchell explained as he listed examples of accommodation. “Some churches will build a ramp to make the church accessible, but they put it in the back door. Or a church might have an autism class, but a parent realizes that it’s more for detaining his son.”

A truly inclusive and inviting church will appreciate the gifts of all members, he said. “I spoke to a high-functioning person with Asperger syndrome who attended her church for 20 years, and she was never invited to serve in an office or hold a position in the church. That’s because the church is accommodating her. They’re not inviting her.

“Another thing churches do is they want to help a person with a disability because he is ‘less than’ and it’s an act of charity. When a church invites, we realize that everyone has something to give. People miss them when they’re not there.”

Open Gathering mostly meets for worship. It hopes to be able to offer respite care and education. The respite care program would provide parents with three or four hours in which to go shopping or run errands. "Parents are exhausted," J. C. Mitchell said. "It's difficult to get a babysitter when your child has special needs."

The education program would extend beyond the worshipping community. Open Gathering wants to help the larger church understand how to minister to all abilities. "There are horror stories—all the ways that people have been mistreated in churches," J. C. said. "I want to be able to empower the family to be able to communicate what they need and help the congregation to understand so the family can go home to their church."

When my husband, Brian, and I visited A. J.'s family and worshiped with him, the congregation responded to the word proclaimed by remembering our baptism. Standing in line before the font, one person placed a watery sign of the cross on the forehead of the person behind them. When it was A. J.'s turn, he reached into the bowl and slathered water all over Brian's face. Tears quickly mingled with the water when A. J. finished the liturgical act by jumping on Brian's back. We knew, when it was time to say goodbye, that we would sorely miss him.