

Ministry helps children with special needs, their families feel at home

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An e-Review Feature
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This article is one of a series on churches reaching out to children and families.

Sally DePalma hopes other pastors will catch the vision of how a ministry called “Buddy Break” gives tremendous relief to parents and siblings of children with special needs.

DePalma coordinates the ministry for St. James United Methodist Church in Tampa Palms, spearheading a monthly respite program that mobilizes volunteer “buddies” who serve more than 50 individual families. Parents are given some time each month to relax or run errands, the children are loved in a fun, nurturing environment, and the children’s siblings receive special attention and care. Some of the down time for weary parents has included free onsite professional massages and facials and access to discounted rooms at a local hotel.

Buddy Break takes place in partnership with the Orlando-based ministry Nathaniel’s Hope, the creation of Tim and Marie Kuck in honor of their late son Nathaniel, who died when he was 4 years old after suffering from multiple birth defects.

“I’m trying to put it in churches’ minds that you can do this,” said DePalma, a mother of two daughters. Leah, her youngest, now 8, was diagnosed with mild autism at age 2.

De Palma says the ministry has 100 buddies, “a number of them” members of other churches. “Hopefully, we’ll ignite a flame within them where they’ll take it to their pastors,” she added.

With such rapid growth in the ministry at St. James, DePalma is wrestling with whether to spend her energy getting more members of other churches involved — who will then inspire their own pastors — or approaching other pastors directly. There is an increasing sense of urgency about the need to get more churches to climb on board.



Volunteers make a recent monthly gathering of the Buddy Break respite program a day of fun and play for the children it serves. Photo courtesy of In the Loop, a weekly community newspaper published by the Tampa Tribune. Photo #07-0517.

"This is getting maxed out on us. We'll keep taking people, but there is only so much we can handle," De Palma said. "We're ready now, and we've got enough experience under our belts to feel confident to say to other churches, 'Come on and take a peak at us now.' "

The Kucks have shared their journey of the intense, often isolating lifestyle inherent for families with special needs children. Tim Kuck says, "We had five Fs: faith, family, finances, friends and flexibility. We barely made it."

"What does a family do that has only three F's or two F's?" DePalma asked. "Once their son passed away, because they saw the needs and the aches, that sparked in them that a ministry needed to be created to address and support these people and show them real hope through Christ."

Now, DePalma said, "People are coming out of the woodwork, just to be accepted."

DePalma said the children and families Buddy Break serves have the monthly respite care date carved into their calendars and minds. "They own it. It's their place to come and have fun. A lot of these kids are weeping when they leave because they had so much fun," she said.



A child gets to spend some concentrated time with his buddy at a recent monthly gathering of the Buddy Break respite program for families of children with disabilities. Photo courtesy of St. James United Methodist Church. Photo #07-0518. Web photo only.

Buddy Break also includes a ministry to the siblings of special needs children, who bear an unusual burden. Many can feel disenfranchised from the family because most of the financial and emotional resources get devoted to the special needs child, and they often end up resenting their sibling.

"We love on the sibs," DePalma said. "They have their own Buddy Break experience. Eventually, over time, we want them to feel comfortable in this environment, where they can start talking about what it's like to be a sib and feel free to stay, 'Hey, it stinks,' and have Christian support."

Before meeting Marie Kuck and learning of Nathaniel's Hope, DePalma had spent a couple of years wanting to launch a special needs ministry.

"It really wasn't working," she recalled. "Do you pump up volunteers and then try to find the families or get the families and then try to find volunteers? When I met Marie I just started crying because it was really on my heart to do this. Buddy Break was just the perfect tool. You are in a big way saying to your community beyond your church doors, 'Come here. I want to love on you.' "

About a thousand people attend St. James each week. The ministry is helping the church identify the special needs families and the members of the congregation who have a soft heart for them and has become a tool for getting unchurched families — and unchurched buddies—to come through the doors. DePalma said the church hopes to begin a Sunday school program for special needs children in January.

"They just want to be part of the normal life," she said. "These families want to get into church and feel a little chip of mainstream again. If your church excludes you, where is there to go?"

DePalma emphasizes the crucial ministry buy-in from a church's pastor in order to make it succeed. "If a pastor does not grasp this need it is not going to have anywhere near the impact that it has the potential to be. These families are craving acceptance and hope, and too often churches actually have said, 'Thanks for coming, but we don't have a place for you.' I have spoken to families who have experienced this. It does happen."

Fortunately for DePalma, the ministry and the families it serves, St. James' senior pastor, the Rev. Brian James, is on board and the entire staff has been motivated to make the ministry a success.

"Buddy Break has been one of God's gifts to our church family," James said. "It mirrors the goals we have set out in our church's vision of 'connecting lives through a relationship with Jesus Christ in our homes, our church and our community.' "

James said the church has seen a level of creativity in sharing space, resources and time that can only be found in a Spirit-driven desire to share Christ's love with the special needs families.

"I really believe that Brain will be key in showing leadership to other pastors, and what it takes — how it needs full support," DePalma said. "It really needs to be embraced by the senior pastor and leadership to really work. It has not been understood before how big the need is."

More families continue to call about Buddy Break. Two of the existing families drive in from Sarasota, including a Jewish family that said it has not found acceptance of their child among the Jewish temples in their own city.

"I really think God has his fingers on St. James to be a lighthouse, to shine a light on the special needs community," DePalma said. "It is amazing how Buddy Break has taken over St. James."

Churches invited to celebrate children

United Methodists throughout the state are encouraged to participate in the 12th annual Children's Week March 25-April 1.

The statewide celebration is designed to give advocates, families and legislators the opportunity to learn about important issues affecting the health and well-being of children in Florida. All activities are free and open to the public.

During the past 12 years, the only broad-based promotion of children and family issues in Florida has been Children's Week, according to Jason Zaborske, statewide coordinator for the event, which is organized by United Way of Florida in Tallahassee.

Children's Week is primarily supported by dozens of non-profit and faith based organizations and comprises more than 30 community events and activities. In previous years thousands of parents, children, legislators, professionals, community leaders and concerned citizens have participated in the event, sharing their experiences and information about children's issues in dozens of communities across the state and at the state capitol.

Florida Conference Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker and other religious leaders will advocate for laws and budgets that ensure a high quality of life for children at a press conference March 27 at the capitol building. United Methodists are encouraged to attend.



Other ways churches can get involved:

- Whitaker is asking all churches to choose March 4 or another convenient time to plan worship services that feature children. Churches may offer times of prayer for children and their families, display children's special talents or encourage them to participate in the worship service.
- Hanging of the Hands — Churches are invited to ask their children to create paper cut-outs of their hands and paste them on 8.5 by 11 sheets of colorful paper to display around the church as a visible symbol of children in the church family. They may also be sent to Tallahassee to be displayed in the capitol rotunda during Children's Week. The deadline is March 23. They should be sent to Children's Week, c/o Kids Incorporated, 1170 Capital Circle NE, Tallahassee FL 32301.
- Churches are asked to share how they have celebrated children in worship by sending an e-mail, with photos, to Tita Parham, editor of e-Review Florida United Methodist News Service, at tparham@flumc.org.

A bulletin insert offering details about the week is available on the Florida Conference Web site at <http://www.flumc2.org/page.asp?PKValue=573> for churches to download and use to encourage members of their congregations to participate in Children's Week. More suggestions on ways to participate are available at <http://www.childrensweek.org>.

The Florida Conference's episcopal office, United Methodist Women and the Connectional Ministries office are helping sponsor Children's Week through the conference's Council of Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty (BICAP) task force. More information about the conference's efforts is available by contacting Pam Davis at psbdavis@hotmail.com or 954-0698-6784 or the Rev. Dr. Larry Rankin at lrarkin@flumc.org or 800-282-8011, extension 131.

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This article relates to Outreach.

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