

In the News

Prestonwood Baptist Church

PLANO INSIDER

Church furthers commitment to special needs

By Liz McGathey, Staff Writer

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A growing number of churches are learning to address special needs in their congregations.

Jessica Baldrige, Director of the Special Needs Ministry at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, recently led a seminar at the church to help other churches acquire the know-how to accommodate and teach autistic members. Baldrige holds a Master's Degree in Special Education and a graduate certification in Autism Intervention.

"I have a son a that has autism so I've been with this special population for many, many years and God has directed my path to teach others," Baldrige said.

The seminar focused on building an effective special needs program and developing strategies for implementation in the participant's home church. The focus on autism stems from the increase in diagnoses of the condition.

"Ninety percent of families affected by autism are unchurched because most churches are unequipped to care for such special needs," said Mike Buster, executive pastor.

Prestonwood's Special Needs Ministry is designed to give every member the opportunity to learn and worship regardless of their abilities.

"What separates our program from others is we believe every child can learn whether they're verbal or non verbal," Baldrige said. "Every child is involved and we meet their needs -- whatever level that need is."

She said families long for a place they know their child will be taken care of.

"Many parents have been told not to bring their child back. Autism sometimes presents itself with different, challenging behaviors," she said. "The first thing we tell parents is that we will work through anything we need to do in order for your child to be successful."

Because her adult son Nick, 28, is autistic, Baldrige wanted to find a place for him to worship and fit in. Because Prestonwood designs classes for all ages an abilities, the family was led there.

“Nick just loved it. It was just an amazing look at he gave -- ‘this place is just for me. I don’t have to go with mom and dad to class,’” she said. “The furniture was appropriate. There was a camaraderie there with different people with different abilities.”

She said the special needs volunteers focus on the fact that special needs members don’t have disabilities, “they have differing abilities.”

“We have high level of commitment to this ministry. We believe this is a Jesus ministry that we are thrilled to be involved in,” Buster said. “If you look at the life of Jesus, he took time to touch and to care for those in need. Whether physical need emotional need or spiritual need, Jesus went where the needs were.”

This fall, Prestonwood plans to complete a new, 32,000 square foot building with extended classroom space, including a wing devoted entirely to its special needs members.

“We are building this building that will help accommodate special needs people and families. Our ministry and the new building will provide an even better opportunity to provide exactly that,” Buster said.

The building will devote five new rooms designed specifically for special needs. Buster said even the lighting has been considered as well as wall texture, play areas and furniture.

Families like the Boatrights benefit not only from the ministry but from Prestonwood’s flexible services as well.

Clay Boatright said Sunday mornings can be tough. His twin daughters, Paige and Mia, 8, were both diagnosed with multiple conditions including autism. His eldest, Blaire, 11, is a traditional child. He said even if his twins didn’t have special needs, Sunday mornings would still be a challenge for his family of five. Boatright and his wife Carole attend Prestonwood’s Saturday evening programs.

“I use the word ‘chaos’ a lot,” he said. “The weekends are challenging because there’s literally nothing to do; that’s the reason we love our church so much. Our twins don’t stop; they are literally in constant motion.’

He said when the girls were younger, breakables were moved upwards. Now that the young ladies are taller, he says, anything breakable probably isn’t that important anyway.

Paige and Mia are both non-verbal and Boatright said they don’t play games or with toys like traditional children but they love bouncing basketballs and love the water. The family is in the process of installing a swimming pool to free up the home’s bath tubs.

“Often, we will put them in bath tub four times a day because that’s what they enjoy so much,” he said.

The Boatrights have lived in different cities because of jobs over time and have been to

several churches. The challenges in finding a home church have been due to finding a church with a special needs program that also teaches the beliefs and values important to the family. They started going to church at Prestonwood last January.

“As Paige and Mia started getting older, they taxed the resources of the church. It’s difficult for kids as they grow older to be integrated into traditional Sunday school class,” Boatright said.

He said the teachers at Prestonwood work with the children to help them understand the Bible stories and as result of the teachers working with them combined with their time at school, Paige and Mia are able to sit still much longer.

“They taught one of our daughters how to say the word ‘Bible,’” he said. “That’s really what it’s all about. The teachers at Prestonwood and the whole program there have been very supportive.”

Boatright said he believes God has a purpose for his twins and a church with a strong special needs ministry can help identify what He wants for their lives.

“God created all of us and God doesn’t make mistakes. He gave us each a reason for being, including my twins,” he said. “God wants us to help each other reflect God’s presence in our lives. That applies to everyone regardless of what those capabilities are in each of us. We have what He designed us to have, and that’s right.”

I have two children who, in all likelihood, will live with me for the rest of my life and will be financially dependent on me for the rest of theirs. With that in mind, you look at the world a little differently.”

All ages are welcome to Prestonwood’s special needs Bible fellowship times on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. For a complete schedule, visit www.prestonwood.org.

For more information visit www.prestonwood.org/autismseminar.