

Arms Opened Wide

Just south of Los Angeles, 120 feet below the rugged Palos Verdes coastline lay the weathered remains of a shipwrecked Greek freighter. Darkness brought many a sailor to an unkind fate before the Pt. Vicente lighthouse was erected in 1926. One of the brightest on the west coast, the lighthouse casts a beam that is visible for twenty miles.

Near the tall tower sits St. Peter's By The Sea Presbyterian Church, another beacon that radiates light and illuminates safe passages. And, for the last five years, St. Peter's has been very deliberate in its efforts to let the light and warmth of inclusion glow brightly throughout its Children's Ministries.

It began simply enough, recalled Karon Reinhold, Director of Children's Ministries. "I'd attended an educator's workshop where the mother of a child with disabilities spoke about a program that she had started at her church. Her message was an epiphany. In no time, we had the blessing of St. Peter's Senior Pastor, Dr. Clayton Cobb, and we called together an informal meeting of the congregants with knowledge of children with disabilities. The most important thing was that we had the mindset that we could do it. When you are sure that this is what God is calling you to do, you are certain to find ways to accomplish your objectives. We announced that all of our programs would be inclusive. And, people stepped forward to make it happen. Since that time our program has grown to include many children with disabilities."

One of St. Peter's most popular weekly activities is Children's Worship Development (CWD). This comprehensive program for children in grades K-5th provides instruction in choral and instrumental music and movement, all with a focus on using our gifts to worship God. CWD choirs provide music at Sunday services every 4-6 weeks and during the family Christmas Eve service. On Mother's Day, they present a children's musical.

When Penny Richards heard that St. Peter's had a CWD program that was open to children of all abilities, she wondered if there really might be a place for her six year old son, Jake, who has a rare chromosome disorder, with cerebral palsy and seizures. Although they lived forty-five minutes from St. Peter's, she was willing to make the trip if it provided Jake a real opportunity for age appropriate activities that didn't require Penny's presence. "It was important to find a place for Jake where he wasn't just a tag-along but an actual active member of a program," said Penny.

Upon learning that Jake would be joining CWD, Jean Gothold, Director of Music and Worship, contacted a high school sophomore, Mike Sweet, to serve as a mentoring buddy for Jake. Three years later, Mike is still Jake's buddy. Mike attends every Tuesday afternoon practice, and all special performances. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he shared. "Jake is the best. He's one of the happiest people I've ever met. He always greets me with a smile and his arms wide open. Spending time with him gives me something to look forward to on Tuesdays. And, it is always a great time."

Penny recalled that when she took Jake to his first afternoon at St. Peter's, she'd expected to spend the entire class with Jake. To her amazement, after a short while Mike said, "I've got it." And, Penny knew that he had. Mike and Jake have the free reign of the church campus. They go to movement classes where Jake scoots faster than other kids can walk. They listen to the handbells and they participate in their own way during choir. If Jake wants to rest, he and Mike take a nap together, right on the floor of the sanctuary, amidst all of the other activity.

Penny is pleased that St. Peter's doesn't expect every child to get everything. She expounded, "They meet each child where he or she is and they let the children absorb in their own ways. There is no sense of a heavy burden because the atmosphere is all friendship-based."

Although Jake isn't able to speak, he does make sounds. And, he reacts to music. Penny shared that when the children's choir performs, her family believes that Jake may have learned the appropriate times to make his sounds. "Without this program, we would never have known that," she added. "And, we wouldn't have the joy of sharing photos with grandparents and great-grandmothers of Jake in his robe as a participating member of the choir. Both sides of our family are church people. I can't tell you what it means to be able to send them church programs with Jake's name listed in the choir. We all take delight in these moments. And, when the choir performs, their voices sing hymns that are fresh to my ears because I haven't been in attendance at the rehearsals."

While the children are in CWD, St. Peter's hosts a tea every Tuesday for the mothers. These afternoons provide a chance for interaction and relaxation. When Penny joined the group she found a place for her creative talents and also an opportunity to bond with a fantastic group of supportive moms. She recalled that one day a few of the mothers admitted that they were unsure how to hold Jake because he looks so fragile and moves all of the time. "I so appreciated their candor," said Penny. "We had a good talk about Jake's physical needs." She acknowledged that the other mothers might have different specific goals for their children but she maintains that "my job is to show Jake all the joys and cool things there are in the world, and maybe that's a helpful alternative for mothers who are stressing about grades or discipline."

With Jake an active part of St. Peter's church life, the whole Turley family gets a fuller church experience. Knowing that wherever Jake is, he's a regular part of things, gives the family the space to fully participate in all activities. The Turleys are regular attendees at the Young Families' events on Saturday evenings. Childcare is provided. It is never an after-thought.

On Sunday mornings, Jake is surrounded by a host of friends. Overseeing his classroom is Kassandra Kelley. "All of our children are treated equally and follow the same rules," she stated. "Some may need more help than others, but everyone is treated the same. We welcome all children with open arms because each is a beautiful, gifted child of God."

At St. Peter's, the staff works hard to ensure that all children who can benefit from some extra support are given a "buddy" to guide them through activities. The staff stays in close conversation with the parents so that everyone is aware of adjustments that might need to be made. The staff and other children quickly learn how to interpret and respond. Kassandra added, "The children always lead the way. They're more flexible than adults." When progress is made, everyone celebrates.

Kassandra's experiences at St. Peter's have reshaped her career goals and she is now working towards a degree in severe special education. Already a professional Red Cross Rescuer with EMT training, Kassandra is studying sign language. She's learned that, "You don't need to be verbal to communicate. Jake speaks volumes if you take the time to listen. He's a great kid who shouldn't be underestimated."

Mike Sweet agreed. "It's easy to talk to Jake. He always listens. Although I can't understand the sounds he makes, I listen to him. We have real conversations." And, the other children communicate with Jake as well. Ivy a spirited imp of a young girl is one of Jake's favorite pals. They always greet one another with exuberant grins and outstretched arms. Then the mischief begins. "We just

have fun,” admitted Ivy. When asked what kind of fun, she replied with joyful mystery, “banana fun,” before galloping off to play a game of finger tug-of-war with Jake.

“Jake is such a great kid,” related Geoff Maddaford, Director of Handbells. “He’s always smiling and full of love. He’s just the best thing for everyone.” Geoff noted that although at first some of the kids were a little standoffish with Jake, they soon came to treat him like everyone else. “Jake is included everywhere,” said Geoff. “There’s no differentiation.”

To all who know him, Jake is a beloved friend. And without exception, the first comment others make about Jake is that he greets the world with his arms opened wide. Joanie Gale, St. Peter’s Elder for Children’s Ministries noted, “When Jake lifts his arms to me, I feel his love. He lights up my day. He’s so wonderfully happy and pure.”

At St. Peter’s, the disabilities ministry is almost under the radar because it is all about making everyone feel welcome. It’s not a program as much as it is an attitude of acceptance. Karon Reinhold related a story from her youth. When she was growing up, she had a first cousin with cerebral palsy. Although his family was very religious, they couldn’t worship together because there was no place at the church that would accommodate her cousin. “I’ve never forgotten the longing that I witnessed. At St. Peter’s, we are committed to providing a place for everyone. After every choir performance when Jake is present, people make a point of coming over to me to inquire about him and to share their gladness in his participation.” Mike Sweet was flabbergasted to be approached by some students from another church. When they noticed him they asked, “Aren’t you the guy who takes care of Jake? That’s so cool.” Mike’s involvement with children at the church has led him to look towards a future as a youth minister.

Acceptance is such an integral part of belonging. And St. Peter’s is focused on acceptance. So much so, that recently the church redefined its key values to be:

Welcoming in Jesus’ name...

safe, inclusive, hospitable, helpful and loving

Nurturing of each person’s relationship with God...

growing, becoming, encouraging, maturing and discipling

Challenging each person to live empowered by the Holy Spirit...

Serving, forming, inspiring, participating and providing opportunities.

Penny remembered, “When we came to St. Peter’s three years ago, I never could have imagined that we would be welcomed with such understanding. Why we even shared a Thanksgiving meal with Mike Sweet’s family, since our relatives live so far away.”

Outstretched arms, opened wide. The cord of inclusive ministry is a tie that binds heart and soul and spirit. It’s the joyful connection of love offered and love received. Its comforting embrace awaits all.

As Mike wheeled Jake down the sanctuary aisle, they heard the final refrain of the day’s singing lesson, “Never Stop Trying”.

~ St. Peteris By The Sea Presbyterian Church, Rancho Palos Verdes, California