

# The Risky Business of Serving Jesus

How one church stepped out of its comfort zone and discovered a joy-filled ministry.

PAUL LESSARD

I was close to terrified when the first of the Club 21 participants came through the church door on a warm Friday night in the summer of 2010. Five volunteers and I stood in a stiff line, with frozen smiles on our faces as the special needs young adults streamed into the church, chattering excitedly with their friends, parents, and caregivers. We, the Castle Oaks volunteers, feeling conspicuous and awkward, were completely out of our element, wondering what we had gotten ourselves into.

Suddenly Jackie, who has a younger brother with Down's Syndrome, broke through our line to embrace and high-five the new club participants, gently teasing them and asking about their week. The spell broken, we followed her lead and began asking names and meeting parents.

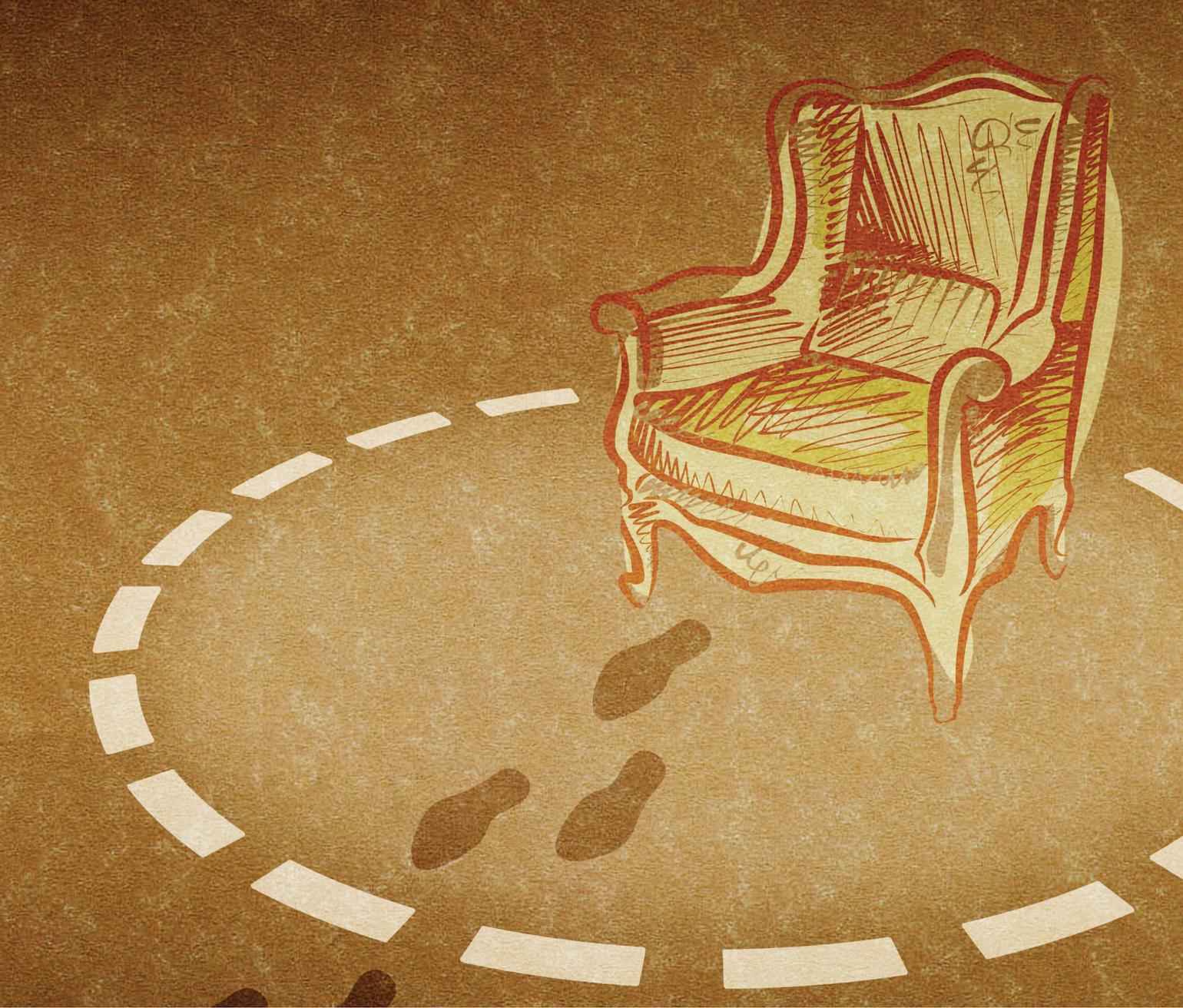
Club 21, a social and recreational event for special needs young adults age twenty-one and older, is a partnership between Castle Oaks Covenant Church in Castle Rock, Colorado, and Wellspring Community, a faith-based nonprofit that works with the developmentally disabled in our county. And, while I helped to forge that partnership, feeling God was clearly in this opportunity for our church, we all had little personal experience with the

special needs population.

When the doors opened that night for the kickoff event, we were actually more than *close* to terrified—we *were* terrified, or at least I was. However, the evening was an overwhelming success on many levels, and our worries turned out to be unfounded. Meeting on the first and third Fridays of the month for more than a year now, the club has grown from a member list of fifteen to fifty-six, with an average evening attendance of twenty-seven. The ages of the participants range from twenty-one to thirty-five. We play games, learn hobbies, dance, and end with a devotional. Our partnership, not just with Wellspring, but with the Holy Spirit, is helping to create a heart of compassion and generosity in our congregation as we reach out to and learn alongside a population that is largely invisible in many of our communities.

In a way that only God can work, Club 21 was the answer to two prayers—a prayer the church had made even before I came to serve them, and a prayer of mine offered some months later.

The prayer of the church was simply that God would show them ways to bring Jesus to people who were not



yet reached and to areas of need not currently served. Early in my candidating process, the church informed me that they had identified three areas in which they saw opportunity for ministry in our community: twenty-somethings, singles, and those who were “pre-faith.”

My own prayer came at the beginning of 2010, fresh into my call as their pastor, when I asked the Lord to reveal himself to me in a new way. No sooner had I prayed this than two questions came back: “Are you ready to move out of your comfort zone?” and, “Are you willing to take a risk to know me better?” Great questions, for both the church and me, and the answer of course was...maybe.

Early in his ministry Jesus went back to his home synagogue where he was invited to read aloud during the worship service. Jesus read from Isaiah: “The Lord has put his Spirit in me, because he has appointed me to

**When the doors opened that night for the kickoff event, we were actually more than close to terrified—we were terrified, or at least I was.**

tell the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the

Lord will show his kindness” (Luke 4:18-19, NCV).

Thereafter, especially in Luke the physician’s account of Jesus’s life, Jesus paid particular attention to those at the edges of the culture: widows, children, and the disabled. And, time and time again, his response was practical, not merely symbolic. When Jesus told the parable of the great banquet and the host who commands the servant to “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (Luke 14:21, TNIV), he wasn’t speaking figuratively. The able-bodied had refused

**Paul Lessard** is pastor of Castle Oaks Evangelical Covenant Church in Castle Rock, Colorado.

the invitation, and these were the people who were left. And they were welcome.

Our pastoral apprentice at Castle Oaks, Steve Roloff, is planting a church for the disabled and their families, and he preached from that text last fall. Steve has cerebral palsy and in speaking on this text, he pointed out that his brokenness is evident and the invitation is to people just like him. Then he added wryly that while the brokenness of the able-bodied may not be as obvious, they are welcome too.

For us as individuals and as a church to walk the path that leads to embracing the poor, the disabled, and those marginalized by society for whatever reason is also to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. But that involves risk—risk that we may not have the necessary resources emotionally, spiritually, or financially; risk that we may commit ourselves and not be able to follow through; risk that we may “plan the party but no one shows up.”

**N**ot long after I prayed my prayer, heard God’s questions, and professed my tepid response, I attended my first local pastors prayer group. The group meets on Thursday mornings, but “Sunday was coming,” as they say, and my sermon was continually flitting around the edge of my

consciousness. One phrase in particular kept coming to mind from the text in Matthew I was preparing to speak from: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (25:40, TNIV).

I was thinking of relating the “least of these” to those in the special needs population, though at that point I still had no real experience to speak from. I did have a statistic in mind from a meeting of Denver area Covenant churches that I’d attended some years before. At that meeting Bill Merritt, an “urban missionary,” passed around a list of local unreached people groups for us to pray over as we considered who and how to reach with our next church plant. The list was an interesting mix of immigrant populations (Vietnamese: 25,000 people, approximately four churches, all 100 people or less) and groups that don’t typically draw much attention when we consider local missions (Native American: more than 10,000, with only one church; apartment dwellers: 50 percent of urban population, 3 percent attend church).

At the bottom of the list was a most unexpected entry for me: the disabled. At that time their number was given as approximately 60,000, and it was estimated that 80 to 90 percent were unchurched. (That number has since grown to around

100,000 in the Denver metro area.) Those statistics caught my attention and imagination at the time, and now years later, I felt I was being nudged by the Spirit to bring this group to the attention of our congregation that upcoming Sunday. So it was with this sense of the Spirit and the verse from Matthew, “Whatever you’ve done for the least of these,” running through my mind that I walked into the pastors prayer group for the first time.

The Castle Rock pastors group was welcoming and I quickly felt at home. As it turned out, occasionally the group invited guests to make presentations on needs within the community. That Thursday the guest presenter was John Smith, a local teacher. The first thing John did was read, “Whatever you did for the least of these,” the exact verse that had been rolling around in my mind during the previous couple of weeks. Then he told us his story.

Eight years earlier John had begun a Young Life chapter for special needs high-school students. Over time the group had grown to more than sixty students, but unlike other Young Life groups, the students he served didn’t graduate and move on to more adult endeavors. They stayed and continued to attend. So now he had a group consisting of new students coming in every year, plus most of his original participants, many of whom were



Participants in Club 21

**But it is there, at that edge, that we find Jesus, seen and understood in a new way, there in his calm and peaceful manner, mitigating the risks we think we face with his presence and by his strength.**

now in their mid to late twenties. It was becoming unmanageable because of the wide age spread.

As the story ended, John came to his primary reason for visiting us. He asked whether any of our churches would be interested in starting a ministry that could accommodate his students who had “aged out.” Almost as an afterthought he added, “They’re mostly twenty-somethings, single, and though they’ve been coming to Young Life for years, many are pre-faith.”

I sat there amazed as I realized that John hadn’t come with a need so much as an answer to prayer, both mine and that of the church. He had named, almost verbatim, the prayer our church had prayed. From that conversation Club 21 was born—something new, something that charted new ground for us as a church and for me as pastor and volunteer. It was risky.

Nationally, statistics show that 17 percent of the population is formally classified as developmentally or physically disabled. When family and caregivers are figured into those numbers, upward of 30 percent of the population has some personal connection with the disabled community. Through Club 21 and other opportunities that have come our way as a result, we are coming to know developmentally and physically disabled

individuals of all ages, as well as their families and caregivers. We’re finding out that the divorce rate is exceptionally high for parents of a special needs child, that families are often very isolated and live day to day, and that, sadly, many drift away from faith as it seems that the church and theology has no place for their experience. However, we are also finding that while we thought we would bring Jesus to these young adults, of course, the Lord is already there.

One night, Tonya, who is twenty-four and a great encourager but who is nonverbal, had an opportunity to pray. She got up on the platform and the strings of syllables and sounds that came from her mouth were clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit. I was deeply moved as Tonya prayed for us, for me, knowing she had the ear of God as she exercised her spiritual giftedness in the context of the club.

In retrospect, my initial anxiety on that first Friday night came from the usual places: fear of the unknown, concern over potential loss of control

and possible embarrassment, and insecurities born of appearing (or actually being) incompetent. I realize that sounds like a lot of psychobabble to describe the worries I felt with regard to a simple ministry event, but for me all those fears describe the risk I felt I was taking.

It is worth noting that the path to being more like Jesus isn’t a way that necessarily leads to increased comfort and security. Rather, as we live more by faith, we find ourselves at the edge of our comfort zones, being stretched and at risk as we reach the end of ourselves and our illusions of control. But it is there, at that edge, that we find Jesus, seen and understood in a new way, there in his calm and peaceful manner, mitigating the risks we think we face with his presence and by his strength. Working through us to “free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show his kindness” (Luke 4:19, NCV).

Two gifts came our way in response to our prayers: we have been given a new glimpse of God in his fullness and mercy, and the Club 21 participants, who once were “those people,” are now known to us as A. J., Jeffrey, Tonya, Elizabeth, Holly, Allison, and Joel. They are friends we would never have made if we had been committed to staying comfortable and risk-free. ■

