



PHOTOS BY LINDA REEVES | FC

Nancy McCabe and her son 19-year-old Kyle McCabe enjoy an evening out among families. They are members of Seacrest Presbyterian Church and like the idea of the new family nights offered by Ascension as part of the parish's Special-Needs Children's Ministry.



Melissa Winters plays with her sons Max, 6, left, and Sam, 3, during a family night. Max has autism and was excited about seeing a movie that was being shown during the family night at Ascension June 25. The program is part of a new ministry aimed at serving families with special-needs children and is open to all. Winters and her family are not Catholic.

SPECIAL-NEEDS MINISTRY

Congregation shares the compassion of Jesus with people who are isolated and special

LINDA REEVES
of the Florida Catholic staff

BOCA RATON — Andrew and Ryan Boden beam as they eat pizza and eagerly wait for the movie to be projected onto the big screen. The 6- and 4-year-olds laugh and wiggle almost as excited as their parents appear. The movie showing was at Ascension Parish on June 25 during a family-night-out program that included pizza and popcorn.

"Our kids haven't been to a movie so this is a great opportunity for them," said Gina Boden, a parishioner of St. Thomas More in Boynton Beach, participating in the night out with Mark, her husband. "Because of our situation, we are unable to go out. We are hoping we can meet some other families in our situation."

At first glance, the event looked like a typical family event with lots of lively, energetic children and parents, but there was a twist. The event taking place in the parish hall was for children with special needs and for mothers and fathers like Gina and Mark, who need a little tender loving care and have unique needs of their own.

"It gives us an outlet to get out," said Gina, who is dedicated to her two boys, both with autism. "I think the family night is wonderful."

The Ascension gathering was part of the parish's new "Special-Needs Children's Ministry" announced in March.

The program launched in April after 270 families from the parish stepped forward, making donations

and offering assistance to jumpstart the ministry that goes beyond the child with disabilities.

The next family night is Aug. 14 beginning at 6:30 p.m. in the parish hall. There will be food, activities and a movie. All are welcome no matter what parish or faith one is affiliated with. Non-Catholics and people of all beliefs are invited.

"I think it is a good idea," said Greg Smith, who attended the June family night with daughters Yeva, 3, and Mila, 6. The family belongs to an Episcopal church in town. "We heard about the movie night. Our oldest daughter has special needs."

Russ Johnson, a father of three who spearheaded the ministry, points out that the disabilities of a child can affect the entire family unit. He saw a great need for the special-needs ministry created especially to give parents events to look forward to and a place to turn for inspiration, help and hope.

"I have a 5-year-old son in the spectrum of autism," said Johnson. He said raising children is by no means easy, but when there is a child requiring special attention and constant care, parenting responsibilities can be even tougher. Many youngsters with disabilities require constant one-on-one contact and interaction.

"Our mission is to have uplifting events where families can just come and be families and not worry," he explained. "We are trying to create — restore faith and hope."

The ministry's first event in April gathered 18 families and 54 people. The June 25 event was packed with

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The Special-Needs Children's Ministry of Ascension Parish offers family and individual networking, crisis counseling, communal outreach, sibling respite, service coordination, benefits counseling, awareness programs and topical education. For a list of parish events, go to the parish website, www.ascensioncatholicchurch.net, or call 561-654-6085.

Interfaith family night: Aug. 14, 6:30 p.m., Ascension Parish, 7250 N. Federal Highway, Boca Raton. Pizza, movie, games, prizes, special gluten-free and casein-free snacks, quiet room, activity room, networking opportunities and fellowship. 561-654-6085

Parent event: Oct. 23, 2-4 p.m., rectory, Ascension Parish. Specially designed program to convey support and

reinforce faith and hope, led by Rev. Canon Leonard Badia, a priest who serves in the Diocese of Palm Beach and Ascension Parish. 561-654-6085

Diocesan programs: Parishes throughout the Diocese of Palm Beach are addressing and spiritually supporting families and their children with special needs through various programs and faith formation processes. Diocesan department heads are also expanding programs.

The Office of Catechetical Leadership and Youth Ministry Formation is offering two programs for parish catechetical leaders and youth ministry coordinators focused on better serving the special-needs community. Disabilities awareness workshops are planned Oct. 9 and Oct. 23. For times and locations, call 561-775-9549.

equally as many and included parents, people from the special-needs community, children of all ages, volunteers and ministers of the parish.

"The evening brings families and many people together," said Father Peter Van Nguyen, parochial vicar. "The parents can relax. They can make friends."

Kyle Bennett of the Florida Atlantic University Center for Autism and Related Disability (CARD) in Boca Raton is a volunteer on the parish ministry steering committee. He presented a talk on water safety during the evening.

Working in the special-needs community, he is familiar with challenges faced by those touched by children with special needs, es-

pecially financial matters.

"Families have to pay for enormous amounts of therapy," he said. "They have to travel around to all types of therapists. They have a pretty stressful life."

"I don't think the public in general is aware of what a family with a child with a disability or kids with autism goes through," he continued. "I don't think people know that it's very challenging work."

The new ministry is seeking volunteers from the parish and the community who are professionals in areas of counseling, behavioral therapy, crisis management, estate and financial planning, art, music and nutrition to provide added support for families. All volunteers

and those involved with the ministry must go through screening and background checks in accordance with diocesan policy to keep children safe.

Barbara Cambia, a parishioner of Ascension who is a ministry volunteer, is a retired family counselor.

"I would like to be available for any individual counseling or family work," she said.

She pointed out that families with special-needs children are faced with unique problems and separations of family and divorce are common.

"It breaks up families," she said. "As far as faith, that is something that is really important in times of stress. If you are not involved in the Church at all, it is time to come and get some guidance."

One of the major aspects that the ministry is aimed at is helping parents faced with isolation.

"They become prisoners of their own homes because it is difficult and challenging for them to take their kids out to go to the movies, shopping, the mall or dinner," said Bennett.

"The children may engage in some behaviors. The ministry events offer a family-friendly atmosphere where folks can come without feeling threatened," he said. "They can come without having to worry if someone is going to ... look at them or say something rude to them about their child. It is a safe place to come to just have a good evening, which is not available to a lot of them. It is a great ministry and I hope it continues." ■