

## VERBATIM EASTSIDE

**Introduction:** This conversation took place on Sunday July 13th in the Children’s lobby between services. I wasn’t technically “working” at the time. I had just been to service and went down to get my kids. I was chatting with a friend in the lobby when a staff member from our Children’s Team, Stacy, (S) grabbed me to meet this couple. Although I didn’t have any foreknowledge of this particular family, I do experience anxiety with every new family I meet who is interested in the special needs ministry.

**People:**

S: Stacy M: Me T: Teresa (Children’s Director)

P (Mom) and J (Dad): parents of a child with special needs who are new to our church.

**Conversation:**

Person	Dialogue	Thoughts, Feelings, Non Verbal Cues
S1	Oh, here’s M	<i>( I walk over)</i>
S2	This is P and J, this is their first week here and they wanted to ask about their son coming to church.	<i>(S walks away) I’m not prepared to switch gears. I kind of feel like I just got an on-the-spot interview. I immediately feel the need to impress.</i>
M2:	M: Hi, I’m M. How are you?	
P and J 1	Good, how are you?	<i>They seem hesitant</i>
M3	I’m good. So this is your first week at Eastside?	<i>I’m assuming their child has special needs. Racking my brain to make sure I hadn’t heard of this family before</i>
P and J 2	Yes, and we have a son with some.. needs. We are wondering if he can come.	<i>“some needs” is so vague. How do I get more info on those needs without sounding offensive? Are they embarrassed to say more? Afraid?</i>

M4	He can definitely come. How old is he?	<i>Crap, I shouldn't have said "definitely". I don't know for sure if we can accommodate his "needs".</i>
P3	He is in 5 <sup>th</sup> grade but acts more like a 3 <sup>rd</sup> grader.	
M5	Well, let me show you our 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade room." "We are very flexible with which room kids are in. We want each kid to have a good experience. Some families really prefer that their kid is with their peers, but some prefer that they are in the room that is more developmentally appropriate.	<i>I start walking toward Hikers Room awkwardly looking over my shoulder talking to them. I really just want to get out of the lobby. It is so loud, it's overwhelming me, maybe that's why I feel so stressed.</i>
M6	We have a buddy system here where an adult or youth volunteer goes to class with each child with special needs and helps them participate, although, some kids really don't want an adult to be specifically with them. Another option [opening the cabinet] is to just provide a little extra information for the regular teachers in the class to know the best way to work with that kid	<p><i>Wow, I'm out of breath, I think I'm talking way too fast and too much. I haven't even asked their son's name yet.</i></p> <p><i>Opening the cabinet to another kid's info sheet reminds me that that family stopped coming, probably because of something that I did or said.</i></p> <p><i>Our "system" is so simple, they are probably unimpressed.</i></p> <p><i>I don't even know if he is delayed, it might just be behavioral. But I'm so worried about saying something offensive I don't try to get more information at this point.</i></p>

P4	Oh I think that would be better.	Wow, I'm out of breath, I think I'm talking way too fast and too much. I haven't even asked their son's name yet.
M7	Some other options would be to try coming to our Thursday night service. Preschool thru 5 <sup>th</sup> grade are all in one room so he could be with his peers while also having a lesson that might be more at his level. Or, we could even try the 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade class. Does he like to help? Maybe he could be in that class but also have a "job" so he doesn't feel uncomfortable being older.	<i>Stop talking, this is too much information. I hope T and S aren't annoyed that I'm offering this.</i>
P5	He does love to help, that sounds great.	<i>Mom gets tears in her eyes. I'm shocked. I seriously thought they were being polite to me to keep listening and had already decided not to come back. They seemed so withdrawn.</i>
M8	Well, why don't I get your contact info. I'll give you a call this week and we can talk about what would work best for him. What is his name?	<i>Tears were a good sign, I think. I'm thankful the conversation is over. I hope I gave them enough information. They didn't really say much, probably because I was talking too much. The dad didn't really say anything, I should have talked directly to him more.</i>
P6	James	<i>I should have asked this a while ago, I probably seem impersonal that I didn't even ask his name yet.</i>
M9	I'm so sorry, pregnancy brain, I totally spaced out your names	<i>Crap. Forgot their names. Blame the baby.</i>

P7	My email is (gives email info to me.) I'm out of town this week so we probably won't come this weekend but maybe the next	
M10	Great, I'll send you an email and we can set up a time to meet. We could even meet here when there aren't so many people so James can see the different rooms.	
P8	This is so great, thank you so much	
M11	You're welcome! It was so nice to meet you both. I'm looking forward to meeting James.	<i>I really am happy to meet new people, but I feel like I sound fake when I say this. I'm too bubbly.</i>

**Personal Awareness:**

Typically, new families with children with special needs contact the church or me directly before showing up. I almost always either have a phone call with the mom or meet them at a planned service or even on a weekday at the church. These conversations and first meetings always cause anxiety for me. I feel a lot of pressure to make them feel welcomed, to not offend with my choice of words, and to impress them with our program. Based on my experience, I assume most people are looking for a church because they've felt unwelcomed at another church or even full on rejected. I feel a lot of pressure to represent Jesus, The Church, and Eastside to these families. I want to make up for any hurt they've experienced. Before I make a phone call or have a meeting, I pray for words, for my anxiety, and for the family. I kind of have to give myself a little pep talk going into it. I like to have a plan and know what I'm going to say. I'm not a spontaneous person at all. I think the spontaneity of this conversation made the anxiety higher than in those other conversations.

On this morning, I had no anxiety going into the conversation because it happened so suddenly. But my anxiety shot up as soon as S grabbed me because I assumed it was a family with special needs.

Other things that may have affected my anxiety- I struggle on Sundays anyways because I feel like I have so many hats on. I'm trying to worship, learn, and connect with Jesus. I'm working- I usually have a to-do list of volunteers to check in on, supplies to bring, etc. My kids are there- have to remember to pick them up ☺ I try to connect with friends. Sundays just feel a little overwhelming anyways so then switching gears quickly into a conversation that I feel a lot of responsibility to perform well in is hard.

### **Theological Analysis:**

#### **Embedded Theology:**

The wording that they used, "we are wondering if our son can come." I think I automatically assumed that at some point they were told that he can't come. If they felt rejected by a church, do they feel rejected by God? This wasn't stated but I assumed it. That assumption puts me on edge, I am so afraid of saying something offensive. For example, if I assumed he needed to be in a younger class, would they feel offended at the suggestion?

#### **Deliberative Theology:**

What is the call of the gospel? To love the least of these. It seems twisted because I truly have this deep desire for families with special needs to feel as valuable in the kingdom of God as anyone else, but in this situation I think my anxiety hid that desire. I went straight to programming and buddies and which service would be the best rather than share the desire God has placed in my heart.

What would salvation look like here? Salvation doesn't necessarily depend on this family coming back to Eastside! During this conversation, and honestly, all conversations with new people, I act as though it does.

What sin is involved? The sin involved is pride- I panicked under the responsibility I put on myself to be Jesus to them. I was so worried that I could get in the way, I'm not sure I was even pointing to Jesus. Also, I pridefully want to look like our ministry runs so smoothly, I just jabbered on not giving them a chance to say much. It's also a lack of trust in God- that He needs me to get it right otherwise these families are lost. I heard on a

podcast an Enneagram 2 describing herself as having an “overdeveloped sense of responsibility while at the same time minimizing my impact on others.” I assume if a family doesn’t decide to come back, it was something I did. I assume if they did decide to come back, they must really like the worship or the preaching or something. Families with special needs usually connect with me before they decide whether or not to call Eastside home because they have to find somewhere their kid can belong. Because of this, I can probably name all of the families that checked Eastside out and decided not to stay. I don’t know if they found other churches or if they don’t go to church now and that is heavy to me.

**Final Reflection:** I emailed this mom a day or two later asking if I could give her a call, didn’t hear back. I was honestly upset, assuming it was something I said that made them change their minds. I thought about it a ton the last two weeks, going over the conversation in my head, criticizing myself even more. Then, just this last Sunday, they showed up with their son to 1<sup>st</sup> service! I was there and hung out with him and it sounds like they’ll keep coming.