

## Towards a STARS Group Home

A new housing opportunity is in development for STARS.

by Dawn Clark

For a number of years, STARS families have talked about the need for housing for their adult children with developmental disabilities—especially as people with developmental disabilities are living longer than anyone ever expected. In 1929, the average life expectancy of a child with Down Syndrome was nine years old. In 1997 it was 49 years. Now people with Down Syndrome are often living into their sixth and seventh decade. Autism has increased in this country to 1 in 240 births. In a few years, these children will be adults who will require care. Parents can no longer count on outliving their children with disabilities.

The state of Illinois ranks 51st in the country—including Washington, DC—in providing housing and services for adults with developmental disabilities—over 3500 adults with developmental disabilities are in need of 24-hour residential services and that need is only going to increase. At the present time, the state is only able to provide housing for individuals whose parents are either dead or dying. In addition, the housing that is available is often not in the community where the disabled persons have lived all their lives, and as a state-run facility, it would not nurture the STARS in faith as their parents would desire.

How do we as a church respond when we see these needs? Isaiah declares (Is. 46:3), “Listen to me, all who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, I will bear; I will carry and I will save.” God is faithful to us from first breath to last. We live in a society that is short on commitment and devalues people with disabilities. Eighty percent of Down Syndrome babies are aborted. We believe in the sanctity of human life and speak out against abortion and euthanasia. Yet this call to preserve life also means that we must look for ways to serve life. When we do this, we declare boldly and loudly to a secular world that our faith moves us to come alongside those whom society often marginalizes and sacrifice to provide for their needs.

With these thoughts in mind, two years ago the council of elders was approached concerning the establishment of a Housing Committee to investigate how different needs in the STARS community might be met and the following motion passed:

Motion 756: That the council encourage Tim Klenk and Jim Davis to work with the director of disability ministries, interested deacons and other regular members of College Church to explore ideas concerning whether and how the church should be involved in establishing a group home for participants in its STARS program, with the possibility that recommendations to the elders might emerge from this group.

This Housing committee has met on a monthly basis for the past two years and consists of STARS parents: Ray Chase, Greg Schmidt and Jim and Freda Davis as well as Nancy Singer, Dawn Clark, David Bea, Tim and Jo Klenk, Brad Warren, Bob Baptista and Jan Kay. When we looked at the demographics of our STARS families we found that:

- 48 of our 90 families have STARS over the age of 18;
- 60 percent of our STARS are male;
- 64 percent of our STARS have parents over the age of 50;
- 31 percent have parents over the age of 60;
- 8 of our STARS are living with parents over the age of 70;
- 18 percent of our STARS come from single parent households and half of those households have a parent over the age of 60.

We then looked into the different options for residential housing that are available in this state and other states, including Christian organizations that provide such housing and we also met with experts in the field. At the November 2008 elder council meeting, Ray Chase represented the committee and presented a report of our findings and made the following recommendations:

- Among the models for living arrangements considered by the Committee is one in which rental housing would be provided along with instruction on skills needed for living more independently and the coordination of activities designed to facilitate a family-like atmosphere and College Church values. The Committee concluded that, at least as a first step, this kind of facility having a group of fairly capable STARS men, might be an excellent way to start a program providing housing and activities for needy STARS.
- Initiate a pilot project along the lines of the model described above in which three or four STARS would reside in the house for a week, with volunteers providing the kind of support that would be available if a STARS Family Home started to provide such a residence.
- College Church create a financially independent not-for-profit corporation and appoint a Board of Directors for that corporation, to establish, fund and operate one or more residential facilities for participants in the Church's STARS program.

After hearing the findings and recommendations, the council of elders voted to have the committee proceed with incorporation and the pilot project subject to the review and approval of the bylaws by the elders.

During the third week in January, four adult STARS men lived together in a home with a variety of supports. This week was designed to help us determine a staffing model which will in turn indicate the amount of funding it would take to operate a home if the Lord continues to lead in this direction. The week was successfully completed and the evaluation process is underway.

We would appreciate your prayers for us as we move forward. Above all, we desire that this home and the manner with which we proceed would be God honoring. May our “light shine in such a way that people will see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven!”