

What is Culture?

Culture is the invisible force that guides the growth and development of groups of people. Culture is the sum of the beliefs and values that shape what we do, how we do it, and why it's being done! While businesses have the luxury of creating their own mission statements, churches have already been given a mission. In Mark 16:15, Jesus tells his disciples to "go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone." By cultivating a culture of belonging, our churches can expand their reach to *everyone*. A church culture that excludes people with disabilities (even accidentally) is a church that is unable to go into *all* the world, because people with disabilities *are* a part of the world!

So how can Christ-honoring churches ensure open doors to evangelize and disciple people living with disabilities? Including people with disabilities is more than simply starting a program. It requires assessing the underlying culture of the church. The 5 Stages of Culture Change will guide your church toward a culture that is increasingly accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities. Each stage includes action steps for culture change.

- 1. UNAWARENESS** creates a chasm between churches and people with disabilities. This gap is narrowed by awareness. As churches become aware of needs and discover God's heart for people of all abilities, they will begin evaluating how their church can remove barriers and provide supports for people with disabilities.
 - Takes steps to understand a biblical view of disability, suffering, and God's sovereignty
 - Invites the entire church into an awareness process through prayer, teaching, and training
- 2. EVALUATION** draws churches closer to people with disabilities, but there is still a gap between *wanting* to help and actually helping. This gap is closed by training. The "how-to" will help churches move from an awareness of needs to actively caring for people with disabilities.
 - Communicates a vision for an inclusive culture
 - Establishes disability ministry leadership roles
 - Seeks out families and individuals affected by disability to understand their needs
 - Identifies physical and social barriers
 - Removes barriers
 - Provides supports
 - Creates specialized spaces

3. **CARE** draws churches closer still, but distance remains because people with disabilities are viewed as the object of service. “We” serve “them.” This gap is closed by forming friendships.
 - Provides opportunities for families affected by disability to be in community. Time together = Friendships
 - Offers supports at church events (worship services, small groups, special events, etc.)
 - Invites families affected by disability to share testimonies and stories of their experiences at church, both positive and negative

4. **FRIENDSHIP** is an intimate relationship. The gap has been closed on a personal level, but a final step will move people with disabilities from friendships with their typical peers to also contributing in ministry together.
 - Identifies the spiritual gifts of people with disabilities
 - Identifies potential areas of service and outreach
 - Encourages and celebrates those gifts

5. **CONTRIBUTING** alongside people with disabilities is the final step to an inclusive church. There is no longer any distinction between people with disabilities and their typical peers. People with disabilities are not strangers to the congregation, but friends. They are not merely people who *are* served, but people *who* serve, influence, and lead through their presence, gifts, and abilities.
 - People with disabilities serve the community
 - Churches with an inclusive culture will influence the culture of other churches and the community
 - Potentially host network meetings, trainings, and conferences

*Adapted from “The 5 Stages: Changing Attitudes,” © 2009, Dan Vander Platts. Every church is unique in their movement through the stages.