



Church Training Pathway

How Your Church Can Welcome and Disciple
People with Disabilities



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Dear Friend,

Welcome to the Joni and Friends Church Training Pathway. By the fact that you're here, I know at least three things about you...

First, you belong to a church that desires to make God known. Second, you want to show radical hospitality to those who are often overlooked and forgotten. And third, you are willing to do hard things!

Hosting a Night to Shine requires a lot. But when the red carpet gets rolled up, the lights dim, and church goes "back to normal," what becomes of those who were celebrated the night before? Statistically, most of them don't belong to a church. Many of them don't know Jesus.

A night can be fun, but discipleship is a lifelong process. And making disciples is what it's all about. It's why Jesus commissioned his followers to:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

MATTHEW 28:19-20

Joni and Friends is here to help you evangelize and serve people with disabilities in your church and community. And it's my privilege to be your guide through the Joni and Friends Church Training Pathway.

So what can you expect from this training? Over three hour-long sessions, you will discover ways to serve and disciple people with disabilities that will bear amazing fruit in your church. I'm so glad you're here, and let's get started!

Ryan

Ryan Faulk
Joni and Friends Ministry Mentor

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1

SESSION 1

Foundations



Watch This Video
Session 1 Introduction



Watch Video

In This Session...

Welcome! By the end of this training, you'll have a clear plan for your church to reach people living with disabilities with the love of Christ. People with disabilities are all around us - in some ways, they are the largest minority group in the world. About 1 in 5 people in the United States have a disability. And worldwide, there are over 1.3 billion people with a disability.

Your church is not called to reach all 1.3 billion of these people. Your job is to faithfully make disciples right where God has you. So, take a look at your congregation... Take a look at your neighborhood... How many of them live with disabilities? How many of them know Christ? How many of them have a church home? This course will help your church take steps to welcome people with disabilities into your fellowship. Not to just welcome them into the building, but into the body of Christ itself; to see them use their God-given gifts for the sake of the mission of the church. Its not just people with disabilities who need the church. The church needs people with disabilities.

So, let's get started! In this session, we'll begin to discover how your church, in all it's uniqueness, can effectively make disciples of people living with disability.

The route towards establishing a ministry that includes people living with disability at your church will reveal itself at the intersection of four things:

1. God's Heart for People with Disabilities
2. The Mission of Your Church
3. The People with Disabilities Who Are in Your Congregation and Community
4. Barriers that Exist in Your Church (Assessment of Attitudes and Physical Accessibility)

Discussion Question

Disability ministry is anything that invites and supports participation by people with disabilities in all the ministries, programs, and activities of your church.

Given the statement immediately above, why can't "disability ministry" just be an isolated program in your church?

Vision for Your Church



Watch This Video

How Your Church Can Include People with Disabilities



Watch Video

Discussion Question

How do people with disabilities fit into the mission of your church to “go make disciples?”

Church Culture and Disability



Watch This Video

How to Change the Culture of Your Church to Include People with Disabilities



Watch Video

Stages of Church Culture

Ignorance/unawareness > Evaluation > Care > Friendship > Contribution

1. Ignorance/unawareness + Awareness = **Evaluation**
2. Evaluation + Training = **Care**
3. Care + Time = **Friendship**
4. Friendship + Opportunity = **Contribution**

Discussion Question

Which Church Culture Stage best describes your church at this moment?

Read and Discuss

Ministry is a Shared Responsibility

Consider this... polar bears can weigh over 1,000 pounds, and yet are able to move across impossibly thin sheets of ice. Why? Because by spreading out their massive weight, they can avoid cracking the ice and falling into the freezing water. If a person (who doesn't weigh 1,000 pounds) put on a pair of high heels and stepped on the ice, they may find themselves swimming much sooner than expected.

So how much weight can that ice support? In short: it depends on how broadly the burden is spread. Disability ministry is similar. When the responsibility for including people living with disability is shared and spread out across the church, the church becomes capable of great things. When disability ministry is placed on a single person or group, the church will be limited in its capacity. And more than that, it will at some point reach a breaking point, and someone will find themselves ill-equipped for the icy water they're suddenly swimming in.

Ministry capacity, success, and longevity all depend on spreading responsibility broadly.

Discussion Question

Including people with disabilities requires a culture change in your church and awareness and understanding from leaders throughout your church. Who needs to join you in this process of culture change?

How Can People with Disabilities Fully Engage?

Few things are as overwhelming as starting a journey without knowing the destination. And for many churches, that's exactly how ministering to people with disabilities can feel. We know we want to serve people with disabilities, but we're not sure what that looks like. If you're in a similar situation, fear not!

You can do this. Your desire to reach people living with disability with the love of Christ is a reflection of God's heart. All ministry is God's ministry.

The fear of not knowing how or where to start has a simple solution. Not because there's some secret program every church can and should implement, but because there is a pathway that will lead you and your church (in all its uniqueness) to a ministry that is honoring to God, effective at making disciples, and sustainable.

Disability ministry is not a thing that we do, it is a way we do things. As a result, it is not necessarily a program. So where do we start?

First: Determine what a "fully engaged" member of your church looks like. What would it mean for someone to be fully bought in? To fully participate in the life of the church? Maybe it looks something like this:

- Participates in worship, teaching, and fellowship during our Sunday service.
- Participates in a mid-week small-group or Bible study.
- Serves somewhere in the ministries of the church.

Whether your list includes three, ten, or twenty items, there is a core to what it means to belong to your church community. Your church may have a highly formal and well-defined idea of what this looks like, or an informal and unspoken assumption.

But make no mistake, there is some essential core for what it means to be a part of your church. But why is it important to define this core? Because by knowing what is expected, you will be able to identify barriers that keep people with disabilities from fully belonging.

Consider this example:

Gary is a person with an invisible disability who attends Church X. Gary comes to church faithfully every Sunday and enjoys the worship and teaching. But every week, Gary sits alone. Gary is not part of a mid-week small group, and he doesn't serve anywhere in the church.

How do we use Gary's situation as a starting point for disability ministry? We start by asking why Gary isn't involved in so many areas of church life! By asking Gary, we learn that he sits alone because he struggles to make friends, and no one at church has ever reached out to him. He is greeted by many friendly people, but none that try to engage him outside of Sunday. We also learn that he isn't in a small group because the ride-sharing service he uses doesn't run during the time when the men's group meets, and he doesn't have any friends he can ask for a ride. As far as serving goes, Gary believes that because of his disability, he doesn't have anything to contribute to the church, so he has never signed up for a serve-team.

There are a lot of barriers embedded in this story. Three immediately jump out:

1. Gary is socially isolated.
2. Gary does not have reliable transportation.
3. Gary believes he has nothing to contribute to the church.

What do we notice about these things?

None of these barriers have anything to do with the church’s architecture, policies, bylaws, or theology. As such, these barriers can’t be removed by simply changing any of those things.

The church is not actively doing anything to prevent his inclusion. Secondly, these barriers are interconnected. Gary is socially isolated so he doesn’t have reliable transportation or anyone to point out how he can contribute to the church’s mission. But why didn’t anyone notice this before? Why has Gary been unengaged for so long? Perhaps the answer is something like this:

Honestly, I never thought Gary seemed all that interested in being friends with me. I say ‘hi’ to him every week and get little more than a nod and a small ‘hello’ back. He doesn’t even really smile or make eye-contact. I thought he just wanted to be alone.

And from this assumption stems the rest of his disconnection. How can we break this cycle? An effective disability ministry for Gary means raising the awareness of the congregation about people with disabilities who may not socialize the way others do. This awareness invites church members to pursue relationships with people like Gary. A simple first step could be to simply ask, “Can I sit with you today?” Relationships can’t be programmed. But we can make it easy for people to do the right thing. For Gary, disability ministry looks like his church community believing that he is capable of friendships and has a God-given role to play in the church.

But Gary’s is only one story. Finding how your church can welcome unique individuals begins with knowing what it means to truly belong at your church. The next step is identifying barriers that keep people from that engagement.

As you address the needs of individuals, you may find helpful ministry structures or programs that will serve your community well. But there is no one-size-fits-all approach!

Assignments



[Watch This Video](#)
[Survey Instructions](#)



[Watch Video](#)

1. Survey 1: Church Structure
2. Survey 2: People with Disabilities in the Church
3. Review survey answers as a group and compile themes into one document to refer back to throughout the Training Pathway.

Survey

Church Structure

1. Does your church have a mission, vision, or values statement? How greatly does that influence day-to-day decisions in the church? If your church does not have those statements, consider what the church holds as being of chief importance.

2. How do people with disabilities fit into the mission of your church?

3. What's expected of someone who calls your church home? What would a "fully engaged" member of your church look like?
(e.g., participates in weekend worship, part of a midweek small group, serves somewhere in the church)

4. How are the expectations for fully engaged members communicated?

5. What are the ministries/programs of your church?
(e.g., children's ministry, small groups, pastoral counseling, care services, international missions)

6. What are the auxiliary/support ministries of your church?
(e.g., ushers, parking team, A/V, musicians)

7. Who leads each of these ministries?

8. What special events does your church do throughout the year?
(e.g., VBS, conferences, worship night)

Survey

People with Disabilities in the Church

1. Are there people with disabilities participating in your church?

2. What patterns do you notice about people with disabilities who are already a part of your church?
Consider things like age, marital status, family dynamics, income, and length of time at the church.

3. Are the people with disabilities “fully engaged” at your church? If not, list the ways in which they are not engaged.

4. Are there people with disabilities who were a part of your church that no longer are? Why are they no longer at your church?

Survey Results

What did you discover?

These surveys provide a collective starting point for the rest of this course. Getting a clear picture of where your church is today is a vital first step in getting where you want to go.

By comparing the results of these surveys, you'll be able to tell where people with disabilities are engaged in your church and where they are experiencing barriers.

Discuss the findings of both surveys as a group and compare your results. Compile your answers, notes, and common themes into this document to refer back to throughout the Training Pathway.

Knowing where you are as a church is crucial to knowing how to get where you want to be.



2

SESSION 2

Assessment



Watch This Video
Session 2 Introduction

▶ Watch Video

In This Session...

In session 2, we're going to develop a biblical vision for what a truly disability friendly church looks like.

Now that you have clarity on where your church currently is in relation to people with disabilities, you'll be able to start taking steps from where you are to where you want to go.

Before we begin, take some time to review your findings from the surveys in session 1. As you're discussing the questions, look for patterns - types of disabilities, age, length of attendance at your church, income levels, supports needed, and other family dynamics.

Discussion Question

What patterns do you notice in the People with Disabilities in the Church Survey?



Watch This Video
Session 2: Gaining a Biblical View on Disability

▶ Watch Video



Watch This Video
Introduction to A Biblical View of Disability

▶ Watch Video

Discussion Question

How is your theological tradition challenged or complemented by the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church?

A Biblical View of Disability



Watch This Video

Imago Dei: Why Every Person Has Inherent Value



Watch Video

Discussion Question

How does an understanding of the Imago Dei impact our theology and practice of disability ministry?



Watch This Video

1 Corinthians 12



Watch Video

Discussion Question

How should “Unity, Necessity, and Intentionality in Diversity” inform our ministry to and by people living with disability?



Watch This Video

An Overview of Luke 14



Watch Video

Discussion Question

What is the “Luke 14 Mandate?” How should we respond to this mandate?

A Biblical View of Disability

Read the following truths and accompanying verses and discuss the questions below.

1. Genesis 1:27-28

Humans are created in the image of God and have intrinsic worth and value on that basis.

2. Matthew 28:18-20

Every believer has been called to make disciples, and no exception is made for those who have disabilities.

3. Ephesians 4:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Each believer is called to specific work according to the grace given them, but they are called within the context of a unified body of Christ. The body of Christ emphasizes unity in diversity.

Discussion Questions

How do these verses help inform our ministry to and by people with disabilities?

What are possible avenues of service for people with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities in your church?

Would someone with a physical, intellectual, or developmental disability be able to serve?

Barriers to Accessibility

Watch This Video



**How to Remove Barriers to Accessibility
in Your Church**

▶ Watch Video

Discussion Question

What potential physical and social barriers are in these areas?

	Physical Barriers	Social Barriers
<p>Worship (music, arts, etc.)</p>		
<p>The Word (Bible studies, sermons, classes, etc.)</p>		
<p>Fellowship (small groups, special events, etc.)</p>		

Assignments

1. Making Your Church Accessible
2. Disability Etiquette
3. Review 5 Stages of Church Culture Change
4. Disability Ministry Models

Making Your Church Accessible

Removing Barriers: Physical and Social



Principles of Accessibility

God's heart is to welcome people of all abilities into his church (Luke 14). For those with disabilities, that requires churches to remove the physical and environmental barriers that can make it difficult or even impossible to participate in worship services and programs. Though churches are not mandated to follow the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the principles of universal design behind ADA help churches welcome everyone. Though some changes can be expensive, many can be made at little or no cost. It is important to invite church leadership to participate in the process by demonstrating the accessibility barriers found in your church facility. When discovering these barriers, evaluate what can be done immediately, soon, and in the long-term. Consider these principles as you plan the next steps towards accessibility.

Provide Access Without Limiting Options

For example, designated wheelchair seating existing in only one part of sanctuary can have the effect of segregating or isolating people with disabilities.

Enable Independence

A wheelchair ramp that leads to a door that cannot be opened by a wheelchair user is not an accessible door. Things like doors, wheelchair lifts, and elevators should be operated with minimal strength, motor skills, or cognitive ability. Signage should be legible to people with visual or cognitive impairments using braille, high-contrast letters, and simple symbols. Ask yourself: can people with disabilities get from the parking lot into all buildings and the rooms in the buildings? Can they get onto all stages and platforms, navigate every doorway, and access additional facilities, such as drinking fountains, sinks, and bathroom stalls?

Respect Sensory Needs

Disability sometimes affects the five senses. Sight and hearing are the two most well-known. Things like announcements, sermons, worship, and fire-alarms all need to be communicated in multi-sensory ways. Sign-language interpreters, audio induction loop systems (for hearing aids), and lyrics projected on a screen are all ways of improving sensory accessibility. Consider also how those who have sensory sensitivities may also be impacted by the sights, sounds, and smells of the facility.

Include People with Disabilities in the Decision-Making Process

Designing a space for people whose experiences and needs differ from your own requires inviting them into the decision-making process. It is important to survey a broad cross-section of people.

Improve Safety

How would someone who is deaf know the fire alarm is going off? How can someone who is blind tell when they are getting near a staircase? Consider how your church design improves the safety of people with disabilities.

Barriers to Accessibility

Applying the principles listed above requires being able to see what barriers are preventing access for people with disabilities. Broadly speaking, there are two types of barriers your church may encounter.

Physical Barriers

Some barriers can be purely physical. A staircase or narrow doorway can make a space inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair. Loud noises, bright lights, and strong scents can make a space inaccessible to someone with sensory processing disorder. Lack of transportation can make it impossible for someone to get to church. These barriers are physical in nature and require physical solutions.

Social Barriers

Some barriers are not visible but may exist in the attitudes and expectations of those in the church. Unwelcoming attitudes may be beliefs that, *People with disabilities are not created in the image of God, or people with invisible disabilities need to just get over it.* The expectation of absolute silence during a worship service, for example, may mean someone with involuntary repetitive movements or vocalizations can never fully participate. Social barriers are the more difficult types of barriers to remove, since people may not even realize they exist.

Implementing Changes and Removing Barriers

When barriers have been identified, what do we do? There are three options:

Remove the Barriers

A simple change to the physical or social environment may be all that is needed to make a space accessible. Building a wheelchair ramp is a modification to the physical environment that makes it more accessible. An awareness event or sermon on the theology of disability may help change the hearts and minds of the congregation, modifying the social environment to become more welcoming.

Provide Supports

If a change to the environment is not possible or insufficient, providing supports may aid participation. A simple example is our everyday use of reading glasses. Text can only be made so large, so at some point modifying the environment (the text itself) becomes unfeasible. When this is the case, the use of tools like glasses aid participation. People with disabilities may require similar supports, ranging from seeing eye-dogs for people with visual impairments, noise-cancelling headphones for people with autism, or a one-on-one buddy for someone with developmental delays.

Create a Specialized Environment

In some rare cases, modifications and supports will prove insufficient and a specialized environment will need to be created. This may be as simple as a breakout sensory room allowing someone to “cool down” and avoid a meltdown, or a companion bathroom with an adult changing table. Even when a specialized environment is available, the goal is always integration and mainstream participation whenever possible.

Accessibility doesn't happen overnight. The three ways of dealing with barriers listed above may happen on different timetables. How do we plan to become increasingly accessible? We need to identify what we act on now, what we can act on soon, and what we will need to plan on for the future.

Long-Term Changes

Some changes require budgeting and planning. Others simply require time. Most churches will be unable to simply cut a check and install an elevator. But the first step to making needed changes is to discover the needs. People who have never befriended someone with a disability may be unsure and uncertain how to act. Gaining familiarity and seeing healthy friendships modeled may take time.

Near Future Changes

Many (perhaps most) changes can be done with a modest budget. Ordering new signs, painting accessible parking spaces, or building mobile plywood ramps can be done relatively quickly and with minimal expense. Beyond thinking in terms of dollar amounts, consider who in your congregation may be able to lend expertise and labor in making simple changes to the church.

Immediate Changes

Some changes can happen immediately and without any monetary cost. If a Bible study meets on an inaccessible second floor, simply changing the meeting location can make it more accessible. If disability has never been spoken about, beginning a conversation can get the ball rolling. Adding more wheelchair designated spaces throughout the sanctuary may be as simple as removing a few chairs. Consider what changes can be made at no-cost. Something is always better than nothing and taking the first step is often the most difficult.

Accessible Beyond the Church Campus

Apply the principles described above to all church activities, such as in-home small groups. Consider how people with disabilities can determine beforehand if they can participate in a ministry event, activity, or meeting happening outside of the church building.

The Purpose of Disability Etiquette

Unlike etiquette for taking tea with the Queen of England, disability etiquette is full of exceptions. There are no hard-and-fast rules. But guidelines, like handrails on a staircase, give people a greater degree of confidence to step forward boldly. Uncertainty about norms and appropriate language may paralyze someone and prevent them from entering into a friendship with a person with a disability! These recommendations should not be seen as barriers that restrict, but guidelines that empower! This guide is far from exhaustive, but as you use good judgment and ask heartfelt questions, you will find friendship with a new circle of people.

People First

Begin by using “people-first language,” putting the emphasis on the individual, not on the disability. It’s a subtle difference but speaks volumes! For example, say, “the woman who is blind,” rather than “the blind woman.” A people-first focus also includes how we talk to people with disabilities. Talk directly with adults and children with disabilities, rather than “through” spouses or caregivers. Talk “with” and not “at” an individual using age-appropriate language and tone.

Like any relationship, time spent together builds trust and mutual understanding. The key is honoring the other person’s preferences and reflecting God’s heart for people of all abilities.

Engaging People with Particular Disabilities...



Visual Impairments

- Let the individual initiate a handshake or invite them to shake your hand. Otherwise they may be startled by an unexpected touch.
- Announce your arrival and departure, letting them know who you are until they can recognize your voice. Don’t leave someone talking to themselves or force them to ask who they’re talking to.
- When walking together, guide—don’t pull. Allow them to hold on to your elbow or arm, rather than holding theirs. Or, put your hand on their shoulder. Ask them which side they prefer to be guided from.
- Don’t assume! Ask, “How can I help you best?” Or, “May I help you across the street?”
- Communicate details such as approaching staircases, which side the handrail is on, and when you are nearing the last step.
- If they have a guide dog, do not touch or distract the dog unless you have permission. Guide dogs are often trained to be “on the clock” while wearing their harness.
- Vague statements such as “over there” or “right here” are not helpful. “To the left of your hand” or “right in front of you, waist high” are useful.
- Details matter, so ask if they’d like you to describe your surroundings, particularly the layout of the room, any upcoming obstacles and terrain, especially when moving onto grass, gravel, or a wet surface.



Ambulatory Impairments

- Be aware of the environment! Make sure wheelchair users have enough room to move freely.
- Treat their wheelchair as an extension of their body. It is not something to lean on, sit on, hang things on, or touch without asking.
- Do not assume that the individual needs you to push his or her wheelchair.
- Before helping someone out of a wheelchair, set the brake and turn off any power controllers.
- When speaking with someone in a wheelchair, be mindful of how high you are relative to their eye level. Standing further away, sitting in a chair next to them, or even kneeling can help alleviate neck stress.



Hearing Impairments

- Face the individual and speak at normal pace and pitch.
- Be sure the light accentuates your face and does not glare in the individual's eyes.
- Attract the individual's attention before trying to communicate.
- Use meaningful hand and body gestures.
- Remember, for those hard of hearing or fully deaf, language is largely a visual activity. If they can't see your mouth, they can't "hear" you!



Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Autism is a spectrum. If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism!
- Individuals with autism may be apprehensive about social interaction.
- Individuals with autism like predictable routines. Tell them how long the current activity will last and what is coming next.

5 Stages of Culture Change

*Inclusive Churches for People of All Abilities**



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.

Disability Ministry Models

Thinking Through the Three Options



The Goal of Disability Ministry

A good ministry model enables people to encounter Christ. These suggested ministry models for disability ministry are built under the assumption that a unified church (disabled and abled people together) is the goal. They also make allowances for times when integration may not be, for the moment, best. However, it's important to remember that what is easy and what is best are not always the same thing. Integration requires sacrifice—adjusting expectations, reallocation of volunteers, the expense of material changes to the church. But in light of eternity, giving people of all abilities the opportunity to know and serve Christ is worth any sacrifice. Christ has provided the clearest and most compelling example of sacrifice.

The “Worst Case Scenario”

If we start with the goal of including people with disabilities in the existing ministries and programs of the church, we will look for ways we can remove barriers or provide supports to overcome barriers. Someone who struggles with the regular programming of Sunday morning may just need someone to help them stay focused, navigates transitions, or understand the lesson. But sometimes, supports will be insufficient to overcome those barriers.

When churches hear, “Can we include people with disabilities?” they may jump to the worst-case scenario. Someone who reacts with kicking and biting is a danger to themselves and others. But perhaps what causes a child to kick and bite can be eliminated. There may be environmental triggers the church can help minimize. But even if these behaviors cannot (in the moment) be resolved, the church must still answer the question of how they can faithfully share the gospel with the person with the disability and their family. How will we share the message of Christ with this person? How will their parents and siblings hear the message of salvation?

For example, a person with autism may be overwhelmed by the lights and sounds of musical worship. If something like noise-cancelling headphones does not help, this person may benefit from worshiping in a space designed with their needs in mind. This same person may easily participate during the time of teaching and not require any assistance listening to and understanding the message. But if the time of worship comes first, the early overstimulation may negatively impact other parts of the service. This may lead to leaders falsely concluding that this person cannot be successfully integrated with their peers. But as we've seen, taking early steps to prevent that overstimulation during worship may allow that person to be very successful in the other elements of the service!

Disability ministry, most simply put, is anything we can do, provide, or change that allows people with disabilities to be full members of the local church. The justification for every church doing “disability ministry” is that every church has been called to make disciples, and nowhere in scripture does it exclude people with disabilities from being disciples.

The Three Ministry Models

Broadly speaking, there are three approaches a church can take toward including people with disabilities. These models should not be rigid as in, “Our church uses ‘x’ model,” but instead these three models should serve as a guide for how including people with different needs.

Integrated

An integrated model sees people with disabilities fully participating in the activities of the church in the same setting as everyone else. They may do so with the support of a one-on-one buddy, a tool like noise-cancelling headphones or a seeing-eye dog, or they may be able to fully participate with physical changes to the environment, such as wheelchair ramps or elevators.

Hybrid

A hybrid model sees someone with a disability participating in the mainstream activities where they can, but participating in a specialized environment when they need to. A simple example of this may be someone who loves to worship with the entire congregation but struggles to follow the regular sermon and needs someone to take time to teach them and their own pace and in their own way. The hybrid model allows an individual to benefit from all aspects of a ministry program without segregation.

Specialized

Sometimes, someone may not be able to participate in many core activities. Someone with complex medical needs, for example, may be unable to even attend church. In this case, livestreams, Zoom calls, and one-on-one home visits may still enable this person to participate in as many ways as they can. Children with extreme violent behavior may similarly need to have their own space. In these cases, “reverse inclusion” may be a viable option. Entering *their* space demonstrates a commitment to their inclusion and may provide a bridge back to mainstream participation at a later date.

A Real Life Example

Regardless of the approach that best meets an individual’s initial needs, regularly reevaluating these needs will help you adjust your ministry model as circumstances change. Remember that the goal is for people of all abilities to know Christ and find their place of belonging in the Body of Christ (the church). Here’s an example based on true events...

Nick’s Story

Nick (not his real name) is an energetic middle school student. Like his peers, he loves playing video games, riding his skateboard, and shooting baskets. Nick also has a sensory processing disorder and quickly becomes overwhelmed by lights and sounds. Nick loves seeing his friends at leaders at youth group, and loves musical worship. But by the second or third song, Nick starts to bounce on the balls of his feet, shake his hands and head, and make involuntary noises. Nick is becoming overstimulated, but his behavior is largely tolerated and unnoticed since everyone else is singing and raising their hands. By the time worship ends, Nick is overstimulated. The youth pastor then leads a high-energy ice breaker, even encouraging students to shout and get excited. Nick, thrilled to be a part of the group and having the time of his life lets off a scream of excitement. As the game ends and most students begin to shift into a time of teaching, Nick is still bouncing and struggling to sit quietly. He’s trying his best, but despite the admonishments and warnings of his leaders, Nick can’t settle down and focus on the time of teaching. At this point, there are a few things the leaders might try.

- First, they might contact Nick’s parents and tell them that unless he can calm down, he’ll have to sit in the main service with them. This scenario misidentifies the problem as disobedience and would result in nothing more than Nick being overstimulated in the main service. If that same approach were taken in the main service, his parents might soon hear, “Unless your son can behave himself, he can’t sit in the main service.” What is the family to do? They have effectively been kicked out of the church.
- Second, the leaders might take Nick aside during the teaching, trying their best to help him in a smaller setting. The problem appears to be the time of teaching, but in reality the problem began during worship, even if no one noticed. Correlation does not imply causation, and the fact that Nick can’t calm down during the message does not mean that the message is the part of the service causing the problem.
- Thirdly, and most helpfully, the leaders could (together with Nick’s parents) work to identify the reason for Nick’s struggles. In the real scenario this story is based on, Nick’s parents were able to identify his sensory needs. The leaders then employed a hybrid model in which, during worship, Nick, a leader, and a few of his peers would go to the lobby and worship in a place where the volume and lights were lower. This allowed Nick to come back in afterwards and participate in the game and lesson. The leaders also made a point to check in on Nick and ask if he was becoming overstimulated. Nick, in turn, learned to more often take stock of how he was doing and communicate with one of his leaders when he felt he needed a break.

Hybrid and specialized models do not mean that the individual in the specialized environment needs to be alone. In Nick’s example, some other kids came along to worship with him. This “reverse inclusion” demonstrates that Nick is not forgotten or excluded, but a valued member of the group. Forcing Nick to remain in the church during worship would not have been beneficial to anyone, including Nick!

Conclusion

When we have a clear goal in mind for what disability ministry is meant to accomplish, we are well positioned to wisely apply these three ministry models. While it would be great to have everyone in one place together, this is not always what’s best for someone with a disability. Hybrid and specialized models (possibly with reverse inclusion) create environments where people with disabilities can encounter God, form friendships with their peers, and ultimately their place of belonging in the body of Christ.

3

SESSION 3

Creating an Action Plan



Watch This Video
Session 3 Introduction

▶ Watch Video

In This Session...

In session 3, we will explore models for integrating people with disabilities into the ministry of your church. The big idea to remember moving forward is that disability ministry isn't just a program; it is anything that enables a person with a disability to grow in Christ...

We will also define a ministry structure for sustaining ministry that includes the disabled, and the types of supports that a family living with disability might need.

Discussion Question

Refer to the Disability Ministry Models article from the Session 2 assignments. How would you decide which models are best for those you are serving in your church (integrated, hybrid, and specialized)?

Ministry Structures

Disability Ministry Models and Case Studies

Put the Disability Ministry Models to work by applying the principles to the case studies below. Frame your responses in terms of the three disability ministry models and removing physical and social barriers. Imagine these taking place in your church. Insert yourselves into the story. And try to avoid looking to one person in the room for “the answers.” If there is a pastor or disability ministry lead going through this training, avoid simply defaulting to them. Make this a discussion and work the process together.

As you read the following case studies, consider these questions:

- What are some potential barriers?
- What would you do if these scenarios played out at your church?

Case Study 1

A family comes to your church for the first time. The parents are Christians but haven't been to church since their son was an infant because of behavioral problems that developed when he became a toddler. They've been podcasting sermons for a while and are anxious about bringing their son to Sunday School. The first week, he has a meltdown and hits another student. They tearfully apologize, and leave saying, “Thank you so much for trying. I'm sorry that happened... I just don't think this is going to work.”

Case Study 2

A group home in your area starts bringing a group of their residents to church unannounced. One middle-aged woman really enjoys church. She participates by laughing loud and long whenever a joke is told, and by asking her questions loudly and as soon as she has them. Other members of the church begin to complain. You are tasked with coming up with a solution.

Case Study Explanation



Watch This Video
Case Study Explanation



Watch Video

How Disability Affects the Family

Now that we have an understanding of the social and physical barriers that inhibit access for people living with disability, we need to apply it to the real world, and the real people in our community. While there is no universal experience when it comes to disability (and the barriers they encounter as a result), there is some common overlap. Each person's story is unique, but as we are reminded in Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing new under the sun."

As you gain an understanding of families living with disability in general, you'll be better equipped to serve the particular families in your church. **Loving the families being served requires knowing them.** The insights in the next video will lay a foundation for getting to know the families living with disability in your church.



Watch This Video

How Disability Affects the Family



Watch Video

Discussion Questions

What is your biggest takeaway from the video?

How do you invite people from your church who live with a disability to be a part of the process of church culture change?

How does your church find out about the needs of those in your church? For example, hospitalizations, births, deaths, etc.

Structuring Your Ministry

Leadership Structure

The success of your ministry that includes people living with disability depends largely on creating a solid structure. There is a reason the pyramids are still standing after thousands of years, and a house of cards can't withstand a sneeze.

The leadership structure includes three distinct liaison roles with church leadership, volunteers, and families. At the start, all three roles may be filled by one person, or two roles filled by one person, and one role filled by ten! The beauty of this model is its flexibility and scalability. Watch the next video on structuring your ministry and discuss what a solid leadership structure might look like in your church.



Watch This Video
Structuring Your Ministry

▶ Watch Video

Discussion Questions

Who will fill each of the three roles?

Leadership Liaison:

Volunteer Liaison:

Family Liaison:

Are multiple people needed in any of these roles?

Which church leaders need to be aware of who is filling each role?

Next Steps for Your Church

Consider using a rubric, such as the one shown below, to begin planning for how your church will respond to everything you've discovered during this exercise. The specifics of your "disability ministry" will emerge in response to what you find here.

Name <i>(person with a disability)</i>	Where are they struggling to engage?	What barriers may exist?	How can you help?

Assignments

1. Listen to the stories of people living with disabilities in your church
 - a. Identify one, or better yet, three families with disabilities in your church (perhaps families you thought of as you completed the surveys at the end of session 1).
 - b. Do you have their contact information? Reach out and find a time to get together with them.
 - c. Spend quality time with this family and ask about their experience at your church (Do they feel welcome? What do they wish could change?)
 - d. Share what you learn with your team.
2. Form a Leadership Structure and Assign Roles
3. Get started!



Learn more about the Christ-centered programs and outreaches of Joni and Friends, which are making an impact every day, in the United States and across the globe. We'd loved to get to know you better, welcoming you as one of the “friends” of Joni and Friends.

Church Training Resources

Helping churches welcome and embrace people with disabilities. Access more free resources at joniandfriends.org/church.

Wheels for the World™

According to the World Health Organization, the majority of people in the world who need assistive technology—such as a wheelchair—have to do without. Through our *Wheels for the World* program, Joni and Friends changes the lives of individuals and families living with disability by hand-delivering wheelchairs and Bibles to people in need.

Joni's House Programs

Through *Joni's House* programs, Joni and Friends identifies and meets the needs of people living with disabilities through local support. In the U.S., *Joni's House* offers respite care to families. At international locations, *Joni's House* is raising the standard of care for people with disabilities, offering physical, economic, spiritual, and social support, all in the name of Jesus.

Retreats & Getaways

Each day families living with disability face difficult spiritual, emotional, and financial challenges. Our *Retreats & Getaways* offer a unique setting where the love of Christ surrounds these families.

Learn more at joniandfriends.org



Biblical Commission

“Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame... Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.”

LUKE 14:21, 23 (NIV)

Vision Statement

A world where every person with a disability finds hope, dignity, and their place in the body of Christ.

Mission Statement

To glorify God as we communicate the Gospel and mobilize the global church to evangelize, disciple, and serve people living with disability.

