

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.