

1

SESSION 1

Foundations



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Session 1 Introduction

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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



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How Your Church Can Include People with Disabilities



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Discussion Question

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

Church Culture and Disability



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



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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](#)



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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.