

Outreach to the Disability Community

“Our church wants to include people with disabilities, but we don’t know how to reach the disability community.” Perhaps you are reading this because you desire to see your church grow in its ability to welcome and embrace people living with disability. That’s good! But first, we need to define what it means to include people with disabilities.

“Disability ministry” must not be thought of as a novel, optional, or segregated ministry (like a food bank, daycare, or clothing drive), but as a methodology that allows existing ministry to be accessible for everyone. The fundamental needs of those with disabilities and “special needs” are not any different from anyone else. They need community, acceptance, and most fundamentally the gospel. When planning outreaches focused on people living with disability, it is important to also plan for welcoming and including these same people in your weekly worship services and ministry events. It is not uncommon for a church to host a special event (such as a special needs prom, respite event, or support group) without first preparing their church to receive those they invite. To learn more about preparing your church to welcome and embrace the guests attending your special event, read *Removing Barriers* on joniandfriends.org/church.

A few tips to reaching out to the disability community...

Make Your Outreach Relational

The easiest way to form new relationships is through existing relationships! Just think about how evangelism works; Jesus calls those he has relationship with to introduce him to others. Jesus knows you, you know someone else, and now that someone else knows Jesus, too. Begin within your own church; reach out to those affected by disability already in your church. People with physical disabilities are easy to identify, but what about those silently carrying a hidden disability like chronic pain or mental health issues? Seek to understand the struggles and successes they have experienced in your church. Also consider who else is “affected by disability:” family members, caregivers, neighbors, coworkers, clients, and friends of those with a disability. Purposefully letting your church family know how your church has prepared to welcome people with disabilities will encourage those already in your church to share their needs and confidently invite others.

Provide a Welcome Sign for Seekers

Seekers may be Christians looking for a church home or non-believers who are curious about God. Both are looking for a church. While many people searching for a church may simply “try out” a new place of worship, people with disabilities may do a little research first. They may look ahead of time for wheelchair accessibility, special needs programs for children, or a sign-language interpreter. Does your website clearly welcome people living with disability? Simply adding the words special needs, disability, autism, deaf, and wheelchair to your website provides a digital “welcome sign” for people of all abilities. Even better, add a tab titled Special Needs under “Get Involved” or “Ministries.

Seek the Lost

In addition to welcoming those looking for a church home, how do we seek out those who are yet to know Christ as their Lord and Savior, or those affected by disability who may have given up on looking for a church home? When going out to your community to find the disabled, keep in mind people in the disability community have experienced a lot of rejection and often been misunderstood and marginalized. They have no reason to expect the Church to be any different. With this in mind, we must approach this community of people with humility and a servant's heart. This list will be far from exhaustive, but here are some keys ways to start developing relationships in your community:

- Find disability providers in your community, letting them know about the programs available in your church. Picking up the phone is easy!
- Build relationships by serving the disabled where they already gather: day programs, after-school programs, respite programs, assisted living facilities, rehabilitation centers, YoungLife Capernaum groups, etc.
- Grow relationships as a learner. Remember, people are more than their disability; we serve individuals, not a diagnosis. Find out about a person's goals, hopes, dreams, struggles, and barriers to belonging. Do not assume that someone's disability is the most pressing issue on their mind, or the most important thing about them.
- Make invitations to accessible events prepared to accommodate their needs: a church picnic, worship service, children's ministry event. The power of saying "you are wanted here" is massive.

Conclusion

Your desire to reach out to the disability community reflects Christ's heart and mission. Christ came to seek and save the lost; God is already seeking those with disabilities, and as our churches mirror that, we become more like Christ. So before anything else: pray! Pray for God's heart and blessing on your ministry endeavor.