



For Disability Ministry

Presented by



Disability Ministry Models

Thinking through the three options

What is a “ministry model?” 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 some level of 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 goal of disability ministry 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 on Sunday morning may just need someone to help them stay focused, navigate 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—a person who has no self-control, someone who will “never behave.” It is true that some individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities will not be able to attend a typical church service or children’s program. 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 to minimize. Perhaps there are developmental issues that will be resolved over time through behavioral therapy. But even if these behaviors cannot be resolved, 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 not be able to handle the sensory input of musical worship. Even with a support like noise-cancelling headphones, perhaps the visual stimuli are still too much. This person would probably 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 and they become overstimulated, they may be unable to settle down enough to listen to the lesson, causing the leaders to conclude that this person cannot be successful in their program. 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 application of ministry models The best way to minimize undesirable behavior is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. One church noticed that some of their more sensory-sensitive students struggled every week. They tried various types of behavior modification, but their efforts failed. However, when they looked beyond the behaviors and assessed the larger environment, they realized these children had to navigate noisy, crowded, echoing hallways on

their way to the classroom. The thronging mass of kids outside the check-in station flooded their senses, so between the parking lot and the classroom door they became overstimulated. By changing their check-in procedures, allowing them to use a back door, they were able to enter the classroom in a low-sensory environment. This provided them with the best chance of successfully participating.

Please consider these three ministry models that will allow people of all abilities to be a part of a church family: Integrated, Hybrid, and Specialized.

An Integrated model uses one-on-one buddies that allow individuals with special needs to participate in regular classroom programming. A buddy allows typically developing peers to learn side-by-side with their peers who have unique challenges. This environment teaches typical peers to naturally welcome their friends with disabilities. An integrated model is the most inclusive option and is therefore ideal whenever possible.

A Hybrid model invites those with special needs to spend some of their time in the regular classroom for worship, socialization, and/or the lesson, but also offers an environment that is better suited for learning, movement, or decompression. Hybrid programs allow those with special needs to participate in beneficial aspects of mainstream programs and provides regular opportunities for friends with special needs to interact with their peers and vice versa, an evaluation season for your special needs team to decide if a specialized classroom is warranted, and an easy path for becoming more fully integrated as they mature. The Hybrid model allows the individual to benefit from all aspects of a ministry program and avoids isolation and segregation.

The Specialized model is necessary in certain circumstances, but future integration is always the goal and hope. This model is conducted in a room set aside for individuals with disabilities so they can learn at their own pace and in their unique style, as well as interact relationally in an environment in which they are comfortable. Specialized programs require a designated teaching team and space providing a quality learning environment for those who are not thriving in a traditional classroom or hybrid program. Though a Specialized classroom feels like the simplest solution, too often it leads to isolation and segregation. Bringing typical students into the specialized space can help fight this tendency for isolation, and potentially provide a bridge to mainstream participation later.

Regardless of the approach that best meets an individual's initial needs, regularly reevaluate to see how a person's needs may have changed. Remember the goal is for people of all abilities to know and serve Jesus. Here's an example based on true events...

Nick is an energetic middle school student. Like his peers, he loves playing video games, riding his skateboard, and playing H.O.R.S.E. Nick also has a sensory processing disorder and quickly becomes overwhelmed by lights and sounds. Nick loves the start of church when he gets to see his friends and leaders. He even LOVES 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 vocalizations. 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, where the students are

encouraged to shout and get excited. “I can’t heaaaaar you!” says the youth pastor. Nick, thrilled to be part of the group, shouts back. As the game ends and most students begin to shift into a time of teaching, Nick is still bouncing and struggling to sit quietly and focus. He’s trying his best, but despite the admonishment (and even warnings) of his leaders, Nick can’t settle down and benefit from the teaching time.

At this point, there are several things leaders could do.

1. The leaders 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 (since we have the benefit of knowing the issue) would result in Nick becoming overstimulated in the main sanctuary. If the same approach were taken to his overstimulation in the main service, his parents might soon hear, “Please don’t come back to church until you’re able to control your son’s behavior.” The family has effectively been kicked out of the church.
2. The leaders take Nick aside during the teaching, trying their best to help him in a smaller setting. The problem appears to be about the time of teaching, but in reality the problem behavior began during the worship! Correlation does not imply causation; the fact that he can’t seem to settle down during the teaching doesn’t mean that the teaching is the problem.
3. The leaders, working together with his parents, learn that Nick becomes overstimulated by lights and sounds. They come up with a specialized worship solution for him, which allows him to return for the time of teaching without being overstimulated.

In Nick’s case, forcing full Integration ironically makes mainstream participation more difficult. But if a Hybrid approach is taken, the leaders may find that creating a (perhaps separate) specialized worship environment allows this particular student to come back and participate in mainstream teaching.

Hybrid and Specialized models do not mean that the individual in the Specialized environment is alone. By including typical peers in a Specialized environment, a person with special needs still has the benefits of being in community with the typical peers. This is called reverse inclusion and can be a bridge to mainstream participation. In Nick’s case, friendships are not the problem, and when he goes to his specialized worship environment, there are friends willing to go with him. He is not excluded, but included. He is not forgotten, but sought after.

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 find their place of belonging in the body of Christ.