

Transitions Can Be Dangerous

Most traffic accidents are not caused by excessive speed, slick roads, or even intoxication. Transitioning from one lane to the next is dangerous! But cars aren't the only things that change lanes. As families living with disabilities go through life, they will hit a number of transitions that are potentially dangerous for their inclusion in the body of Christ. Understanding some of these life transitions can help us, as the church, smooth these transitions where possible and ride out the bumpy parts of life with them when it's not. But what are the key transitions to look out for?

Initial Diagnosis

Receiving a diagnosis or prognosis for yourself or your child can result in any number of responses. But it will trigger a response. The emotional high of learning you are pregnant followed by the discovery that your child carries a life-altering genetic defect can throw any parent for a loop. Hearing the words, "You will never walk again," will trigger difficult thoughts and emotions. There's no "one" reaction and no one way a church should respond. Grief can be natural and good. As an individual (or church) you do not need to have all the answers. But by committing to walk alongside the family in and through their confusion and grief, you can help show that God is there, too! The best way to gain confidence about the future of an uncertain or unexpected diagnosis is to see that people like them have a meaningful place in the body of Christ. The question like, "Why would God allow this?" will come with time. Helping wrestle with tough questions begins with relationship. The gift of your presence and friendship is invaluable at this stage (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Missed Milestones

While the shock of an initial diagnosis will eventually wear off, the wound can be reopened by missed milestones. The process of grief can begin anew as other children begin to walk, talk, read, get their driver's license, go to college, get married, and have kids. Many parents also find themselves "reverse empty nesting" when their child's educational opportunities run out, and their days are no longer filled. Children who are not doing what their peers are doing are likely aware of this. They may be asking question like, "What am I here for?" "Would anyone ever want to marry me?" "Will I ever find a job?" Churches need to demonstrate that God has a plan and purpose for everyone's life. They need to reflect the reality that God has called them for a purpose and equipped them for that purpose (Jeremiah 29:11).

Legacy Planning and Long-Term Care

As parents age and begin to need care, many rightly worry that their child will not receive the care and attention that they need without them. They are uncertain about their child's financial security and emotional well-being. "When I'm gone, who will take care of my child?" A church community who views people with disabilities as friends and family will go a long way towards alleviating these anxieties (James 1:27).

Conclusion

There is no one plan of action for helping families navigate these transitions. But being aware of the danger can help us to look more closely when we see a transition coming and stand with families through the different stages of their life.