

Buddy Ministry Invites Participation in the Church

A buddy ministry is a program of the church that provides someone with a disability a one-on-one support person so they can better participate in the mainstream programs of the local church.

A buddy is a means of facilitating access and removing barriers that might otherwise keep someone from participating in church life. Not every person with a disability will need a buddy, nor will every buddy provide the exact same thing. Buddies provide individualized support that is as unique as the individual they are serving. How a buddy serves may vary, but what a buddy provides is straightforward.

What Does a Buddy Provide?

Discipleship

Learning to follow Christ as a disciple is what it means to be a Christian! A buddy proves in word and deed that people with disabilities are loved by Christ and essential to the body of Christ—they reflect Christ's heart for people of all abilities! And more than that, they provide access to teaching, worship, and fellowship: a vital part of any believer's walk. Buddies also allow parents, caregivers, and siblings to relax and be disciples themselves. Instead of having to stay with their child (or worry about being called every couple of minutes), parents can trust their child is being loved and cared for. A buddy serves the whole family.

Friendship

Whether a buddy is a peer or an older adult depends on the needs of the person with the disability. Though a peer buddy more easily provides friendship, an older adult will still provide access to peers. Friendship isn't automatic, but a buddy provides the opportunity for someone with a disability to spend time with their peers. The buddy models how to act around people with disabilities and can be a bridge to further relationships.

Safety

Certainly, physical safety is a major consideration. But buddies also provide a safety net for people who might be ignored and marginalized. A buddy serves as an advocate and bridge, bringing people with disabilities from the fringes into the center of church life. If someone is out of sight, they're out of mind. A buddy helps the person with a disability become a part of church life and avoid the danger of being forgotten.

So, who should be a buddy?

What Does the Ideal Buddy Look Like?

Discovering the ideal buddy requires understanding what a buddy is meant to accomplish. A buddy is not a babysitter, a therapist, or a doctor. A buddy allows someone with a disability to participate in church life. A buddy's motivation is nothing less than fulfilling the Great Commission: to make disciples! While it might be tempting to immediately start looking for people with experience in special education or behavioral therapy, it is crucial to remember that expertise does not qualify someone to be a buddy! Conversely, having no experience does not disqualify someone from being an effective buddy.

So, what does make a great buddy?

A Vibrant Relationship with Christ

Disability ministry is a ministry. While the world often looks to give the bare minimum to people with disabilities, Christ is looking to lavish his love on them. An effective buddy is one who is seeking the heart of Christ and looking to share it with others. Why we do what we do is at least as important as what we do. A desire to make the love of Christ known is a fuel that can sustain long-term volunteerism.

A Willingness to Learn

Every person is unique. Even for those who have expertise in disability, the willingness to learn about an individual is more important than any field of specialization. Remember that we do not serve a diagnosis; we serve individuals. You don't necessarily need to know anything about a person's disability, but you do need to know a lot about a person! Learning about their needs, experiences, and dreams is vital to creating opportunities for them to pursue God's heart and discover God's will for their life.

A Desire to Serve

Do you struggle to recruit volunteers? It's worth considering your sales pitch. When a leader seeking volunteers says, "Does anyone want to serve in our disability ministry?" the listener might hear, "Is anyone here an expert on disability?" This may be severely limiting your potential volunteer pool. Instead, highlight the joy in what God is doing in and through people with disabilities in your church and invite people to join what he is doing. Explain that anyone with a heart to help others grow in Christ and a willingness to learn is a perfect volunteer.