

Making Changes that Lead to Real Inclusion



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and Jim Pierson

CCFH Ministries wants to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and their families. One of the ways we seek to accomplish this goal is by providing booklets like this one for congregations and individuals to use. However, we ask that you contact us for permission to reproduce any portion of this publication.

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preface

Dear Reader,

We agree serving people with disabilities in the church should not be special. It needs to be approached with the love and concern the Lord has put in the hearts of his followers. When the need arises, meet it—even if a program is not available.

Our interest in meeting the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of people with disabilities has made us friends and colleagues.

We met in Knoxville, Tennessee, and discussed what information we wanted to share about the topic. After a couple of days of talking and taking notes, we divided the topics and wrote; then, the two manuscripts were blended. The results are the contents of this booklet.

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introduction

Time has changed community and church programming as they pertain to persons with disabilities. Prior to the 1960s, it was thought to be appropriate for persons with disabilities to be placed for life in separate residential state-run facilities, truly not integrated or included as part of the community. It was “out of sight, out of mind.” As the anti-institutional philosophy took hold and poorly-run state facilities began to shut their doors, the public school system began to feel the impact of persons with disabilities living in the community and developed special education programs.

Even in special education the approach was separate, segregated classrooms. Although students with disabilities were now in the schools, they were kept separate from the general student population. In the 1970s, under federal mandate, school administrators moved towards the idea of creating an inclusionary culture, teaching students in the least restrictive environment and moving those students with disabilities out of their “special classrooms” and including them in general education classes with appropriate supports and modifications. What a beautiful thing – classrooms rich with diversity, ability levels, and skills sets – an opportunity to create and teach life lessons on acceptance and unconditional love, lessons on loving your neighbor as yourself, even when he or she may be very different.

“moving those students with disabilities out of their “special classrooms” and including them in general education classes”

As the country had gone through a paradigm shift regarding persons with disabilities, education, and community living, the church and its leaders began to follow suit with regard to their spiritual development. So often in the past, God’s people did not do a wonderful job in making the church fully accessible, not only in the physical sense of building structure, but also in the attitude and condition of the heart. Even those churches that have programs to include persons with disabilities; whether child, youth,

or adult, are moving away from special programs to the idea of full inclusion and integration with the Body.

The history of including people with disabilities in the life of the church has been fairly consistent. Generally, Christian education to persons with intellectual disabilities has been the norm across faith groups. In addition, efforts have been made to include people who are deaf in church services by providing interpreters or developing separate congregations for them. Further, people who are blind have been accommodated with materials in Braille. It appears the church follows the method the public school system is using at any given time. When the special class was the approach, the church followed suit. When inclusion became the trend, the church copied the approach. How can a congregation make the shift toward total inclusion? In other words, how can a person with a disability find a functioning place in his or her local church?



are we in a rut?

Is it time to challenge the status quo and
move to another level of service?

Let's discuss some factors that could help:

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change what we call our service

Using the term disability ministry might throw people off course. The term suggests a program with staff, budget, ample space, and lots of volunteers. The term disability ministry is often not clear. At some point, and I do not know when, somebody, and I do not know who, started using the term disability ministry. Earlier terminology of our work with people with disabilities was more descriptive: classes for children with cognitive disabilities, services signed for the deaf, people with disabilities are welcome. On the other hand, the term disability ministry conveys a more formal approach to ministry, say, like the youth program in a church.

My assumptions recently received a degree of confirmation during two seminars I did at a church conference in Virginia. I opened by asking three questions. First, does your congregation have a disability ministry? In the two groups, the answers were hesitating “No’s.” Second, do you know a church in your town that has a disability ministry? There was only one response in both groups. Third, do you know a church in the Commonwealth of Virginia that has a disability ministry? Neither group could name one. (I knew my friend Jackie’s program was in Vienna.)

“The term disability ministry is often not clear.”

Something interesting happened as I explained the nature of ministering to people with disabilities and their families: the participants rethought their answers. A participant raised her hand to report, “We have a special needs nursery. We had several babies with special needs and decided to include them in our church nursery program.” Another added, “I provide a peer tutor for one on the students in my class who has cognitive problems.”

The discussion took on a different tone when a blind lady chided two of the churches represented for saying they did not have a program to accommodate people with disabilities. She explained when her husband, also blind, moved to town, a church helped him with the details of the move. She explained the church they now attend

provides them with transportation and help with shopping and other sighted activities. She concluded they could not have been at the conference if it were not for the members of the congregation. Then, a mother told the group how her church had included her daughter with severe disabilities in the music program. In all three cases, the people ministered without naming their services. They just responded to the needs of people in their church.

What do we call what we do in church every day, meeting the needs of our members in the name of our Lord? We find disability ministry is known by the workers, the recipients, and staff members; but the person in the pew does not always know. Programs like ministry to seniors and youth are well known and supported. Disability ministry, or whatever we call it, is not engrained in the minds of the members. Maybe the answer to this is a more aggressive marketing program. Let the members of the church know what the need is and what the church will do to meet it.

When we do seminars, we hear a lot of talk that not much is happening. If it is a formal program, maybe not; but on an informal, natural basis, my guess is it is happening. It may not be a formal program but, steps or plans that do include persons with disabilities.

It is time to rethink our approach to including people with disabilities in the life of the church. It needs to match the way we do church for people without disabilities. In short, we need to move from the special class to an approach that makes the person with a disability a fully-functioning member of the church. [To be clear, severe behavior and functional problems will prevent some students from inclusion in some programs of the church.]

“We find disability ministry is known by the workers, the recipients, and staff members; but the person in the pew does not always know.”



change the double standard

Get rid of the double standard. A 21-year-old man who moves to town to work on a Ph.D. will be sought to be a volunteer in his selected area of service. What about the 21-year-old man with Down syndrome who lives in a residential facility down the street? Will we find his talents and plug him into a slot that will use his talents?

“The efforts to maintain and grow this person in the church are not just the duty of the staff responsible for members with disabilities.”

When that inclusive approach happens, it should be in every part of the church’s ministry. The efforts to maintain and grow this person in the church are not just the duty of the staff responsible for members with disabilities. They should be a part of every ministry in the church. Staff members who work with teens should plan what will happen to the children that are passed on from the children’s department. How do we move persons from one program to another as they age out? What do they move into? It should be a seamless transition. The involvement minister should be prepared to include the volunteer services of every member of the church.

change our biblical directive to the real motive

In our discussions of the scriptural reasons for what we do, we cite Jesus’ encounters with people with disabilities and point out His acceptance of them; we should follow His example. The subjects of His miracles and healings were often people with disabilities. Every community has people with disabilities. Follow Jesus’ lead.

Paul’s chat with the Corinthian Christians about “weaker members” and Luke’s telling the parable about filling empty chairs at a banquet with people with a variety of disabilities are often quoted. The passages encourage our efforts; however, the

clarity of the Great Commission provides a natural motive to include our members with disabilities in total ministry.

“Every community has people with disabilities.
Follow Jesus’ lead.”

The strongest motivation should be the same as it is in every ministry of a church’s programs, aiming to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). Christians are to go into the world community and take the message of Christ’s love to everyone. There is not a footnote that reads, “Everyone is limited to people with heights over 5’7”, 20/20 vision, able to hear, IQs of 100 or higher, acceptable public behavior, etc”.

change the scope of whom we serve

Previously, the church’s focus was on people with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, and visual impairments. We are convinced much of the current interest in the church’s ministry to the disability community is in the staggering number of people with autism. It is now 1:91.

As a result, including people with disabilities in the ministry plan of the church has changed for other reasons. One change is the increase in the number of churches providing disability ministry. Another is the increase in the number of children’s ministers. Another change is all disability groups are included. Today, the needs of students with autism, learning disabilities, hearing and vision problems, and behavior and emotional disorders—the entire gamut the public school system includes—are being addressed. Think about these facts:

- Another change is the percentage of students with emotional and behavioral problems; it is approximately 20%.
- Over 50% of students served by special education in the public school system are diagnosed as learning disabled.

- Some have obvious challenges, but not a specific diagnosis.
- Behavior problems are more difficult to manage.
- The number of children on the autism spectrum continues to grow.
- There are children who are at risk and need the attention of the church.
- New terms appear, such as Fragile X, Attachment Disorder, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

The most important fact is to realize we are working with human beings, with families that care, and God sees them as valuable and worthy of our attention. God’s Son set the standard. Jesus was comfortable with people with leprosy, physical disabilities, blindness and deafness, mental illness, and other human maladies. He touched them. He walked with them. So should the Christians of His church. A welcoming atmosphere in any group happens when people are embraced for who they are and not what they are expected to be.

A man with Down syndrome offered the opening prayer for a disability awareness program. After the service, I told him I liked his prayer. When I learned his church was the center of his world, I asked, “Why do you like coming to church so much?” His response: “In this church, I am just like everybody else.” In God’s sight, judgments are not made by a diagnosis of cerebral palsy, autism, or intellectual disability. He sees our hearts. Cerebral palsy, autism, and intellectual disability do not change the value of a person.

While it is exciting to see these changes, a more important change is the reason for it being done. At one point, the motivation for ministry was keeping up with other churches, reacting to parental requests, and being empathetic to the situation. Today, the motivation should be same as any ministry in the church—to share the Good News about Jesus. A diagnosis does not alter the soul’s need for God’s love.

change the attitude toward providing ministry

Is there really an option to ministering with people who have disabilities? We might not have a ready-made program that fits, but responding to the need requires a plan and not a program. The belief a church may or may not serve people with disabilities has caused hurt to many families. Often, families report the leadership of a church has asked them not to return because they have nothing to offer.

“Have nothing to offer?” The church has the most healing, positive message of any community organization. Jesus loves us, cares about us, and died to give us everlasting life. Being the owner of that information can make a change in any situation.

A well-meaning worker in her church told me they were praying to determine if God wanted them to include children with disabilities in their Bible School classes. I responded with a smile, “I’m not God, but He will say, ‘Yes.’ He does not want you to turn anyone away.” Do not pray the prayer, should we include all but how do we include all.

“The church has the most healing, positive message of any community organization.”

A mother and father made an appointment with the minister of an exciting, growing church. They were attracted by the church’s outreach to the community and the warmth they felt when they visited. They wanted to join this dynamic church and wanted to be sure there would be a place for their son with autism. When they asked the pastor during the meeting if there would indeed be a place for him, he responded the church did not have anything for their son; however he would help them find a church with a disability ministry. The parents left the meeting sad and disappointed.

Meanwhile, back at the church office, the minister was having a change of heart. As he thought about his statement to the family, he realized Jesus would have handled the opportunity differently. While they were still in route home, the parents received the minister’s cell-phone call apologizing and asking them to bring their son to church the next Sunday. A place and a plan would be ready.

change the approach of leadership

The approach to disability ministry should have the enthusiastic endorsement of the senior minister and congregational leadership. Strong disability ministries are found in congregations where the leadership team wants to make disciples of every person, regardless of ability.

During a training session for volunteers in the disability ministry of a large church, I was impressed with the fact the deacon who was assigned to oversee the disability ministry attended. His role was twofold: to pray for God’s blessings on their activities and to stress the importance the leadership placed on people with disabilities and their families.

Senior staff must make a clear statement about what inclusive ministry means. Discussing the following questions will lead to a consistent approach:

- When decisions are made, will every member be included?
- Will you serve from cradle to grave?
- What is a typical member?
- Will we change the person with a disability or embrace his or her unique differences?

For most churches, disability ministries or outreaches originated from external forces and not from internal strategic decisions to reach out to this large people group, likely as a result of a person with disability or family impacted by disability making the case to church leadership to create a place for them or every member of their family on Sunday mornings. In Access Ministry, we have heard repeatedly from families who wanted very much to be connected in community with their local churches but were unable to do so since there were no steps in place or staff trained to care for their loved ones with disabilities.

Church leaders are often caught off guard; unaware of the fact their church may have non-welcoming barriers that prevent persons with disabilities and their families from



being fully included. In the United States alone, there are 54.5 million persons with disabilities and 600 million worldwide, a very large people group in need of access to Jesus Christ. The three main barriers are architecture, modes of communication, and attitude.

architectural barriers

Architectural barriers deal with the physical structure of buildings, such as handicap parking, curb cuts, ramps, elevators, automatic doors, handicap-accessible restrooms, family bathrooms, and pew cuts. How accessible is the church for a person in a wheelchair or one who is visually impaired?

communication barriers

Communication barriers create a need for knowledge. Are the methods of communication in the disability community available? For example, large-print materials for persons with visual impairment closed captioning and American Sign Language interpreters for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and pictures for people with cognitive problems.

attitudes-of-the-heart barriers

Attitudes-of-the-heart barriers are the most difficult to overcome. As God's chosen people, we are to be a reflection of His love and grace, a people ready and willing to seek and find the lost and defend the cause for the needy and oppressed. We are to go out and preach the Good News to all God's people, which, as far as I can tell, means ALL people, not just those with an IQ of 70 or higher or those of sound mind and body. If we are accurately portraying the love of Christ, the answer to the Call must be a resounding "Yes!"

change our plan to accommodate people with disabilities

by an inclusive culture...

What would happen at your church on Sunday mornings if a family arrived at the Welcome Center? The couple has two children, a nine-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son with autism. Ideally, the parents review a list of available adult classes, and the daughter is shown to her class; but how is the son accommodated?

In some churches, the volunteers at the Welcome Centers assign specially-trained people to be the children's attendants during Bible School and Children's church. In other churches, the regular teachers are given aides to handle children with disabilities. In either case, the families know their children's needs have been anticipated and staffed.

The goal for every church should be to move a child, a youth, or an adult with a disability to the highest level he or she can achieve, with the ultimate goal of him or her being a member in good standing with the congregation. With that goal in mind, the barriers that keep this from happening can be systematically removed to allow full inclusion to occur. The disability-outreach movement was birthed for that reason. Just as the community's view of persons with disabilities and their place and worth in society has greatly changed over the years from a mindset of isolation to one of full inclusion within the community, where educational, employment, housing, and recreational/leisure goals are now being fulfilled, so has the church's mindset begun to shift from the idea of a "special classroom" or "special program" to that of being a fully-inclusive culture.

“The goal for every church should be to move a child, a youth, or an adult with a disability to the highest level he or she can achieve.”

How is an inclusive culture different from a “special classroom or program”? Think of it like this: any person, regardless of age or ability level, would have choices about the programs, small groups, or services in which they would like to participate. They or parents/caregivers would have input regarding where they would like to be plugged in, connected, and serve. Frequently in times past, we have “well intentioned” made those decisions for persons with disabilities without regard to their particular wishes or desires.

My friend Don is a young man in his twenties with Down syndrome. Don lives in a group home in his community and rides public transportation to his government job each day. He manages all aspects of his life well, with some assistance from his case manager. When Don showed up for worship at his local church, the greeters that Sunday morning smiled, looked at him, and told him he would need to go the “special class” down the hall for people like him. Don lives independently as a full member of his community — he did not need a special class.

Don ignored the kind greeters and asked where the worship would be held and proceeded to attend church on his own. After service, he went to the newcomers meeting to learn about how to get connected to a small group and service team. Don is now in a men's small group and serves in multiple places at the church. Full inclusion allows Don to choose where and in what programs he would like to participate at his church. His disability does not define him – he is defined as being made in God's image and a one-of-a-kind masterpiece. We, as church leaders, need to look past the “dis” in disability and find the potential in all persons, so they can be integrated into the Body of Christ.

by strong biblical teaching..

Likely, the most important part of the program is teaching the Word to our members. If our approach is to change disability ministry from a special class to a fully-integrated part of the body, our teaching must reflect that.



Spiritual formation is a fancy way of saying “instruct students in the Scriptures.” In that regard, nothing takes the place of a good teacher who wants to do the job. The teacher has the following items on his or her agenda:

- Teach the Bible;
- Teach the elements of faith: prayer, baptism, giving, and sharing Jesus;
- Teach the students to grow, connect, share, and serve;
- Encourage the family to help in the process; and
- Engage all the senses; use a sensory-enriched approach.

Good teaching is good teaching. It is a process of investing in the student’s life. Having an understanding of a student’s learning style will enhance learning. One of the factors that make a good teacher is the ability to modify the material to meet the student’s need. When the teacher understands where the student is, the teaching part is easier. The teacher needs to know the student, including where he or she lives and works, what transportation is available to him or her, and whether he or she has a supportive family.

Sometimes the teacher needs to just close the classroom door and ask, “What bothers you?” The results will make for a lot of lessons. You will hear: “I don’t like it when people make fun of me,” “I don’t have many friends,” “I don’t know why my parents don’t want me to live with them.” Knowing what a student’s daily routine is like and how he or she feels about his or her disability are two factors that will make your lesson more meaningful and help you advocate for his or her needs in your church family.

by knowing when extra support is needed...

Make no mistake: there is a place and time for “special classrooms and programs”, but the church should offer steps and strategies to include those with disabilities more fully in church life. Persons with disabilities should be able to have a church life experience like that of yours and mine, with as much independence as possible. Do not do for someone what they can do for themselves. Yes, it may take longer and be more difficult, but in the long run, independence is being taught. Be patient

when that young student with limited use of hands struggles to tie his or her shoes; he or she is doing it! Celebrate the victory with him or her. Encourage those with disabilities to complete tasks and skills on their own, offering assistance only when absolutely necessary.

“Do not do for someone what they can do for themselves...it may take longer and be more difficult, but in the long run, independence is being taught.”

As churches begin to embrace the idea of an inclusionary culture more and more, it may mean having to equip and train volunteers and staff on disability awareness and etiquette, such as working with children and youth leaders on how to create accessible environments, modifying/adapting programming, and reminding all teachers and communicators each person learns differently and has a preferred learning style. There are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners, and by involving the senses and varying modalities in a lesson, something is learned by all; the more senses you engage, the more memorable an event becomes. In an inclusive classroom or program consisting of typical students and students with disabilities, it is not uncommon to see students doing different activities simultaneously. Some students may be working independently, while some may require assistance.

Assistance or support can come in many shapes and sizes; one may be a natural support, where peers or classmates work together or a more formal buddy program. A buddy program is a good idea for students/participants that need one-on-one support in a classroom or during an event. Ideally, the buddy and person with disability would have a familiar relationship in which the buddy has knowledge on how to best support and engage the person with disability.

Keep in mind, many persons with disabilities can be fully included in existing church programs with very little support or modifications. For example, giving a student with intellectual challenges more time to complete an activity is a simple modification. Another uncomplicated example would be providing a student with an alternate

activity for the loud, crazy one in which the group is participating because he or she becomes easily agitated by noise. A further example would be allowing for movement in a classroom for a student that cannot sit still but is happy pacing back and forth during lesson time, or affording that student the opportunity to sit and bounce on a therapy ball. As leaders, teachers, and communicators begin to vary modalities and teaching to be more inclusive, it benefits every participant, not just the person with disabilities. A sensory-rich environment in which all senses are engaged creates the best learning environment for all.

“Keep in mind, many persons with disabilities can be fully included in existing church programs with very little support or modifications.”

As churches move away from the mindset of “the only way to include those with disabilities is in a ‘specialized program or classroom’” and instead travel down the road of a fully-inclusive culture at all levels of church life, it is exciting to dream of all the possibilities God has in store for His people. Imagine a church where persons with disabilities are encouraged to be baptized, become members, use their spiritual gifts through service, and be in places of leadership, a place where no matter the age or stage of a person with disability, there will always be a place to fit in and be all they can be. We have come a long way.



a worthy idea

A contemporary approach is the special-needs room, a room/space in the church building designated for the disability ministry. The staff is available to handle children with disabilities. No child or family has to be turned away. The area has multiple functions. It can be a classroom. It can be an observation area for determining a student's placement in a regular class. It can serve as a behavior modification area. A child who acts out in class can be referred to the room with a plan to help change the behavior. It can be an isolation area for a child who needs time to calm down. It can serve as the site for respite services for parents. It can be the meeting place for a weekday program.

When used as a classroom, it will be for students whose physical and behavioral needs are so extensive they can best learn in a self-contained setting. In this arrangement, every child's spiritual needs are met in a positive environment. The room is equipped based on the needs of the students. Some possible sections include a music/listening area, motor area, interactive play area, nature area, reading area, computer area, and outdoor play area.

The room can be developed according to the church's financial and special limitations. On one hand, it can be large with expensive furnishings; on the other, it can be a section of an existing classroom closed off when a student with a disability attends.



by ministry with the family...

The family experiencing disability needs the encouraging support of its church family. Do not see the family as a mission field; minister with them, not to them. Like you, they are part of the church and need the support and encouragement it offers.

Talk to the parents about the needs of their child. Inclusion of the student in the church goes smoother if the parents are involved. Before the student comes to Bible School, interview the family and record the information. Ask questions like: Does the person have allergies? Is he or she on medication? How does he or she communicate? What are his or her behaviors? How do you control those behaviors?

“Do not see the family as a mission field;
minister with them, not to them.”

Discuss the parents' expectations. What do they want from the church experiences especially as they relate to the family's journey with disability? While parents experiencing disability often start church ministries, recruit families without disabilities to maintain them; and encourage the parents to volunteer in other ministries in the church.

Some specific ways the church can help:

- Be alert to the needs of a family with disability.
- Childcare is often a big need; be sure it is a part of your program.
- Know what happens in divorced families.
- Use the family's strengths in your ministry.
- Send parents to retreats.
- Be an advocate for them with the school system.
- Refer to the church's counseling program.
- Pay for outside counseling if feasible.

by planning for transition...

Churches need to assure the families they are interested in ministry for the long haul. Often, churches do a good job with children and adults. Sometimes teens with

disabilities present a challenge. The problem lessens if the congregation is prepared for it. Passage from the children's department to the youth department can be a difficult time. Acceptance and companionship give way to popularity and coolness. A youth minister can instruct a few more mature teenagers in the fine art of including other people. They become the catalyst for helping their peers with and without disabilities become a part of the group. A California church handled the situation by having an overnight retreat for the teens with disabilities being promoted to the youth group with the existing members. The first session to the group after the retreat was easier—there was no ice to break.

“A few mature teenagers...become the
catalyst for helping their peers with and without
disabilities become a part of the group.”

Adult transition is often easier. Adults without intellectual disabilities should be included in a class with their peers and treated like any other member. Others should obviously be kept from any activity that might be hampered by their disabilities.

Young adults with cognitive disabilities often prefer to be part of classes consisting of their peers. The mental age of the group alters social levels and interests. While young adults without disabilities are dealing with issues of income, job security, rearing children, and further education, counterparts with cognitive disabilities are more concerned with their jobs in sheltered employment, relationships with the opposite sex, and other interests at their mental age level, rather than chronological.

Developing a special class to meet the spiritual needs of adults with cognitive disabilities is a positive approach. Additionally, include them in other parts of the life of the church. Identify meaningful ways they can serve the church. Encourage typical members of their age group to plan social events with and for them.

[ACCESS Ministry is a pace-setter in service to people with disabilities. To ensure a more rounded approach to ministry, they have added regular involvement in the community and actively located places of service for their members with disabilities. The following two sections are full of ideas to use in a church of any size.]

change to working in the community

The inclusive ministry approach uses serving in the community as a necessary part. Oftentimes, church service opportunities and ministries take place inside the four walls of the church. One of the best ways for the local church to do outreach and bring in the lost is to serve and partner with community agencies - schools, local government, and nonprofits. When it comes to reaching out to persons with disabilities, the local church can have far greater impact if they seek to bring in those with disabilities who have often been excluded from religious participation in their local churches.

“One of the best ways for the local church to do outreach and bring in the lost is to serve and partner with community agencies”

Over the years, Access Ministry has strategically focused on outreach and community involvement with other organizations that support or provide services to those with disabilities. In our early years, we partnered with organizations to gain a better understanding of various disabilities and technical skills necessary to provide quality programming. Before we launched our community respite program, we tapped into the expertise of the local Arc chapter that trained our church volunteers on respite care.

There have been many other instances when partnering with neighborhood experts in the school systems, medical professions, and therapy offices have not only helped develop technical skills in church staff and volunteers, but also provided much needed information to parents caring for children with disabilities.

We actually invite experts from the community to participate in our Access Community Lecture Series, a monthly informational workshop geared towards parents and guests, dealing with a variety of topics including special needs trust planning, Applied Behavioral Analysis therapies, the newest medical treatments, how to become an educational advocate for your child, and everything in between.

Inviting community professionals make two things happen:

1. Those professionals are now exposed to a church in which they might never otherwise have set foot; and
2. A place has been created where parents can network and feel comfortable bringing their non-churched friends to visit us.

By being a ministry in the outside community and not just inside church walls, many opportunities have become available where we can partner on local causes and participate in disability events. By choosing to network and being part of a shared love and concern for persons with disabilities, awareness of Access Ministry and the church has increased. Many more people come to Access because of the presence in the community that has been created with local agencies, school systems, medical offices, and government.

Over the years, Access staff has been involved and served on many community boards and committees, frequently as the only faith-based representative. What better way to be living out our faith than by being the hands and feet of Jesus — putting love into action. There are plenty of organizations with which to potentially partner or create alliances ... the question is, “which ones?” Give some thought to what the goals are and where the biggest impacts would be. Look into the local disability organizations and boards, such as Early Intervention, Community Services Boards, and The Arc.

Similarly, we have created some wonderful partnerships with medical and allied health professionals, children’s hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, and therapy offices. What a wonderful way to create a natural networking system, the sharing of information, and, at times, resources; and what about volunteer opportunities with such partnerships? Currently, Access young adults reach out to a local nursing home and rehab facility by providing music and activities for the residents. Every Christmas, all of Access Ministry comes together to adopt 36 pediatric residents and provide them their Christmas wish-list items.

Access has been involved with sponsoring and/or supporting adaptive sports programs and leagues in the community, either by providing sponsorships or through volunteer

hours for organizations, such as Challenger Baseball and Special Olympics. Each summer, Access sponsors the end-of-season pizza party for one of the local adaptive baseball teams.

Because of Access Ministry's community mindedness, the ministry has been invited to be a part of many community-wide disability events, such as resource/vendor fairs, community family events, and local disability association outreaches. People outside the church tend not to worry about the fact Access is part of an evangelical church but instead that we first have a heart to serve and impact those with disabilities and live that out in the community and church. Access first invests in the outside community and its members and then invites them to be a part of what is happening at McLean Bible Church.

“What better way to be living out our faith than by being the hands and feet of Jesus — putting love into action.”

We are called to be in this world but not of it. We cannot do that if we close the church doors and only have an inward focus. We need to have an outward focus to care and defend the cause of the needy, poor, and oppressed; therefore, in disability ministry and outreach, we need those that are called to go. The best way to do this is to have an impact through action in the community. After all, look where Jesus spent his time: with the sick, lame, disenfranchised, blind, mentally ill, and paralyzed. Isn't the goal to be more like Him? We are to be the hands and feet of Christ.



change from serving them to them serving us

In most churches, we are calling for more volunteers to serve in the Body and to use their talents, time, and treasures for Kingdom Impact. There are many reasons for serving. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12, the church is like that of a body, and each member is like a specific body part. God has given each of us a “spiritual gift”, a special way in which the Holy Spirit will work through us to help others come to know and grow in the Lord. Volunteering or giving back can have a meaningful and positive impact in the church and community. Some of those positive impacts are a sense of community, membership, and friendship.

Have you ever noticed how most of the people serving in your church are able-bodied folks of sound mind, yet your church may indeed have a special-needs ministry whose participants are often discouraged from serving or told they are not able to serve? When it comes to making service opportunities available to those with disabilities, we fail to do that. The mindset “Let us serve you, and we will take care of you” is prevalent in the community as well as in the church when, in fact, many persons with disabilities have the same desire to serve and reap the same benefits by doing so.

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For many years in the employment industry, it was believed persons with disabilities could have jobs in only three areas: food, filth, and flowers.

Food industry is that of food service, filth represents janitorial or custodial care, and flowers stand for horticulture. Nowadays, employers have broadened their view on the worth and value of having persons with disabilities gainfully employed in many more industries. The church ought follow suit and encourage all to serve, regardless of ability level, where their passions, gifts, and abilities lie.

Of course, having persons with disabilities serve in the church may at times call for some creative thinking and the possibility of building support systems. There may be service opportunities where safety becomes a concern; but, generally speaking, service opportunities abound in your church and mine for persons with disabilities.

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Approximately five years ago, there was a paradigm shift from Access Ministry being viewed as a disability ministry whose participants all needed to be served and cared for to one where individuals took ownership of the ministry and could use their gifts, skills, and talents to bless the church. Keep in mind, in the community the model of “custodial care” has long fallen by the wayside to the view that Access participants, who are all God’s perfect creatures, have much to give and contribute to the Body of Christ. Leaders in Access began discussing ideas like “a life like yours and mine”, meaning in the church the components of church life are worship, community, and service. Once those areas were identified, we began building a ministry around them. One of those key areas was looking at the ways in which we could create and build service opportunities for the young adults with disabilities in the church, community, and world.

One of the first things we taught was the lesson of tithing and offering. We started taking a collection each week in our adult community class, and as a group, the members voted for one of three missionaries they would support. The collected offering is sent every month to their missionary of choice, and they communicate via emails and cards with her as she travels around the world spreading God’s word.

Our adult community group started being placed on the rotation with other adult community groups to serve at services as ushers, greeters, and those passing out bulletins. The nice thing about this type of serving is it already occurs in the church. A few of our adults need buddies to help serve, but many more are able to serve independently and feel very important as they wear their official greeter name badges.

How nice it is to walk into McLean Bible Church and be greeted by so many smiling faces. Our adults with disabilities are eager and enthusiastic to serve!

Other areas in the church where we integrated our Access adult population are the clothing and food pantry ministries. The church feeds and clothes thousands of community residents, and each week, it takes many volunteers to sort and hang clothes, stock food on the shelves, and prepare shopping orders. Again, the adults are serving in the church, while concurrently reinforcing so many life and vocational skills. One of the fun benefits of serving in the clothing ministry was, afterwards, all volunteers were able to pick out one outfit. Our young ladies from the local group homes loved that; not only did they pick out an outfit, but they accessorized as well with coordinating belts, purses, and shoes! It was like a shopping spree!

A few of our female adults with developmental delays volunteer in the nursery with our children's ministry. Often before serving, Children's Ministry staff will talk to Access staff about the best way to set these volunteers up for success. We review a few basic tactics and strategies regarding the best ways to communicate the strengths and abilities of the volunteers and what sorts of tasks/responsibilities they could undertake.

“By serving side by side with a person with disability, not only will that person blossom, but we might just learn a thing or two about God's grace and goodness.”

Every summer, Access Ministry runs a dynamic day-camp program, Soaring Over Seven. It is a camp specifically designed for children with disabilities and their typical peers. Each year, it takes about 120 staff members and volunteers to pull off the four-week camp, and we are intentional about hiring and creating volunteer opportunities for teens and young adults with disabilities. What an amazing role model for a young camper with disabilities to see one day he or she may be working at the camp, just like his or her counselor with disabilities!

Access Ministry has strived to teach the value of being a contributing member of both church and community, and God came to seek and find the lost. Often in our service projects, we need to look past the walls of the church into the community. Our young adults' creative arts club has done just that. The group has gone on tour and performed for a couple of local nursing homes. The nursing home residents love it, and our students just beam! This past Christmas, we took a group of our young adults to a nursing home to play Christmas-carol bingo, do crafts with the seniors, and partake in Christmas-cookie decorating. A fun time was truly had by all.

There are so many ways in which people with disabilities can and should be serving in the church. It is our job as staff, volunteers, and ministry leaders to be open to exploring those ideas and trying things out. By serving side by side with a person with disability, not only will that person blossom, but we might just learn a thing or two about God's grace and goodness. The benefits of serving and giving back are the same for all of us: making contributions to something bigger than ourselves, a sense of social inclusion and community, acquisition of new skills or knowledge, the creation of new friendships, and satisfaction. We were all created by a perfect God for a plan and a purpose.





inclusion brings blessings

Inclusive ministry is reciprocal. People with and without disabilities will learn from each other. We grow in our faith in a community of acceptance and respect. With myriads of abilities and gifts, God can use all of us in His church. All we need do is to see our members with disabilities as worthy of God's love, recognize their gifts, and find them a place of service in the congregation.

Build an inclusive ministry in your church, and it will last a life time and make a difference to some wonderful people even in eternity. Take the Great Commission to heart.

