



Belonging

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH



Orlando,
Florida



May
2024



Disability &
The Church



125
Ministry
Leaders



Many
Creative
Solutions

“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” - 1 Corinthians 12:24-27

The Apostle Paul’s image of the body of Christ encourages us to celebrate the unique contributions of each member. This vision includes people with disabilities and their families—all are indispensable members of the body of Christ. Yet, many people with disabilities do not feel as though they deeply belong within their faith community. Congregations often struggle with how to welcome and support these vital members and their families. How might churches more faithfully fulfill the 1 Corinthians 12 call for all to belong in the body of Christ?

In May 2024, more than 120 ministry leaders from across the country gathered in Orlando, Florida at the Disability and the Church Conference for a “community conversation” on disability and the church. Participants included pastors, worship leaders, youth and children’s ministry leaders, disability ministry leaders, and others who are passionate about accessible and inclusive ministry. The leaders discussed their successes and challenges in local church ministry and suggested creative solutions to improve the sense of belonging of people with disabilities.

This report includes hundreds of creative responses to the question, **“What could we do to foster belonging for every member of the body?”** These insights broaden our collective capacity for imagining true, Gospel-centered belonging in the church.

Gathering Overview

A “community conversation” is a structured approach for bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to address an important issue within their community. For this event, the conversation explored practical ways of addressing barriers that keep people with and without disabilities from participating together—fully and meaningfully—in the life of local churches.

The evening event lasted one hour and was organized around two rounds of small-group conversation. As people arrived, they signed in and sat around small tables with 4-6 fellow attendees. Erik Carter, Executive Director of the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities, welcomed everyone and provided a brief overview of the goals for the gathering. He highlighted the importance of faith in the lives of people with disabilities and their families, as well as the struggles they often encounter as they search for an accessible and supportive congregation. He also emphasized how the welcome and embrace of local churches can enable every member of the body to flourish together.

The remainder of the event involved facilitated table conversations related to accessible worship and belonging. This report contains insights on the topic of belonging. The discussion generated responses to this core question:

WHAT COULD WE DO TO FOSTER BELONGING FOR EVERY MEMBER OF THE BODY?

Attendees shared their ideas aloud with others at their table. They drew upon their expertise to suggest how faith communities might gather, preach, teach, connect, and support one another in ways that promote greater inclusion and belonging. A facilitator at each table wrote down every idea offered by participants. In addition, attendees were encouraged to write their ideas on paper placemats.

At the close of the event, everyone completed a short survey. In addition to providing basic demographic information, each person shared what they considered to be primary barriers to accessible worship and belonging in churches.

Moving From Barriers to Belonging

The remainder of this guide highlights a sampling of the ideas that emerged during this rich conversation among ministry leaders from across the country. We have organized their recommendations around 10 dimensions of belonging¹ that emerged in our prior projects.

TO BELONG IS TO BE:

- **PRESENT**
- **INVITED**
- **WELCOMED**
- **KNOWN**
- **ACCEPTED**
- **SUPPORTED**
- **HEARD**
- **BEFRIENDED**
- **NEEDED**
- **LOVED**



How might our practices and postures aim toward each of these areas? Although not every suggestion that follows will make sense for your context, this collection of ideas can still spur your creative thinking.

¹Carter, Erik W. (2022). A place of belonging: Including individuals with significant disabilities in faith communities. *Inclusive Practices*, 1(1), 6-12.



AS WE WORSHIP TOGETHER, LEARN TOGETHER, SERVE TOGETHER, AND FELLOWSHIP TOGETHER, WE COME TO SEE ONE ANOTHER AND OUR COMMUNITY DIFFERENTLY.

PRECONCEIVED IDEAS ABOUT THE "OTHER" OR THE "STRANGER" MELT AWAY AS LIVES ARE SHARED AND FRIENDSHIPS ARE FORMED.

WE SEE EVERY MEMBER AS HAVING EQUAL AND INESTIMABLE WORTH;

EVERY PERSON FEELS VALUED AND IS VALUED.



1 Present

Being present means participating in worship, learning, service, fellowship, and other activities of the church together. Sharing this time with fellow believers provides opportunities to meet and get to know others in one's community. Remove barriers that keep people from being present together.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Ensure people with disabilities can participate alongside their fellow church members
- Intentionally include people with disabilities in all activities and events
- Be proactive, rather than reactive
- Create events that keep everyone in mind from the very beginning
- Consider disability when discussing diversity
- Focus on recognizing and supporting people with disabilities who are already attending church
- Expand the boundaries of groups to include more people
- Create connections between neurotypical and neurodiverse peers
- Provide opportunities to foster intergenerational connections
- Build intentional relationships with church members
- Pray with all church members
- Pray with and for people with disabilities
- Ensure that all members of the church congregation can be present and engaged in the worship service
- Acknowledge the members watching online and show the congregation on video
- Offer multiple ways to be engaged in church activities
- Provide ways for people to be involved outside of the worship service
- Offer rides to church so more people can attend



“She took him to a church, and they said he was very loud. He was autistic, but he was very loud, and he would get very excited about worship and jump up and down and wave his hands and everything. And some pretty strait-laced lady came over and told them that he didn’t belong there.”

Elise, age 65



Photo by Ability Ministry on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

2 Invited

People tend to be more likely to come to church when personally invited. However, people with disabilities and their families are sometimes overlooked when invitations to church and other events are extended. Ensure your invitations to events and activities are extended in widely and generously.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Personally invite people to come to church
- Invite people to your home
- Reach out to church members who miss events and worship services
- Provide clear communication regarding ways to get involved in the church
- Facilitate accessible church activities throughout the week and ensure that all church members are invited
- Use your website to show the community that your church is prepared to include people with disabilities
- Invite people to events outside of church
- Provide ways for groups of people to participate in the service
- Notice people's gifts and invite them to serve using those gifts
- Advertise through shirts and bumper stickers



3 Welcomed

The ways people are greeted and treated at church impact their sense of belonging. Welcoming people with kindness and enthusiasm assures them they are a cherished part of a community. Look for ways to be generous in hospitality.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Have greeters welcome people to church
- Designate a "welcome station" for new members
- Welcome the whole family of a person with a disability
- Seek to include everyone
- Have members of your "welcome team" focused on building connections with new church attendees
- Provide time and space for greeting and connecting
- Create space to share prayer requests and follow up on those requests
- Foster connections to ensure everyone feels like they have a community in the church

A photograph of a man and a woman looking at a map together. The man is wearing a cap and glasses, and the woman has long brown hair. They are both smiling and appear to be in a public setting, possibly a travel agency or a museum.

4 Known

Every person has strengths and gifts that should be shared and celebrated. Too often, people with disabilities and their families are not well known or known well. Look for ways to help members connect more regularly and deeply with one another.

Photo by Ability Ministry on Disability Is Beautiful
(disabilityisbeautiful.com)

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Form connections with fellow church members who have disabilities
- Intentionally get to know people and learn their stories
- Learn about people and address them by their names
- Encourage everyone to wear name tags that reference their personal interests
- Encourage the mutual sharing of interests and information
- Facilitate introductions among new members
- Ask questions to get to know fellow congregation members
- Be present with people in the moment
- Ensure every member of the church is treated equally
- Be aware of people with disabilities in your church
- Discuss disability with the congregation
- Provide ways for church members with disabilities to share their stories
- Create space to learn one another's stories within appropriate boundaries
- Share video testimonies from families
- Use stories to provide examples of different ways people pray and communicate
- Intentionally learn every person's gifts and strengths
- Provide a spiritual gifts inventory for anyone who wants it
- Be mindful of cultural and linguistic differences



5 Accepted

No one should ever wonder whether they really belong in your faith community. The disability-related prejudices, stereotypes, and stigma that exist in our culture have no place in the church. Create a culture of acceptance that follows the example of Christ.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Lead the church by example
- Encourage church leaders to model church expectations
- Ensure the church leadership has attitudes of inclusion
- Recognize and appreciate the diversity in the church
- Expand the definition of worship and community to include people with disabilities
- Be aware of cliques and seek to include everyone
- Strive to transform the church culture regarding behaviors and individuals with disabilities
- Adopt a flexible attitude
- Create a culture of authenticity
- Clearly state your church's values and build a culture around them
- Be nonjudgmental about children's behavior and offer support
- Highlight the positive achievements of children with disabilities before addressing the challenging behaviors
- Create a safe, welcoming environment for people with disabilities
- See and value the humanity in every church member
- Build empathy for others
- Encourage the entire congregation to care for one another
- Repent when mistakes are made
- Communicate that standing during the service is not a requirement (e.g., "Stand if you are able.")
- Include people with disabilities in sermons
- Speak about acceptance from the pulpit



Photo by Emily Hoogerwerf on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

6 Heard

Being part of a community that yearns to hear your voice can contribute to a sense of belonging. To be heard, to be acknowledged, to be asked what you think, or to have an influence—each assures you that your involvement and insights matter. Seek out the input and feedback of people with disabilities and families in ongoing and meaningful ways.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Seek input from people with disabilities and their families
- Be aware of power dynamics in church; ensure everyone is heard and valued
- Create an advisory board
- Offer the chance for parents of children with disabilities to share their stories and testimonies
- Host “lunch and learns” where parents of children with disabilities can share their insights with church leaders
- Invite people to share their perspectives
- Use connection cards to get to know people and their needs
- Send a survey to parents to ask if their needs are being met
- Ask questions about belonging and accessibility on membership surveys
- Provide anonymous ways members can share their needs and challenges
- Ask families how you can support them
- Immediately and clearly respond to families’ needs
- Invite people with disabilities to help plan events
- Use real stories and examples from the congregation in sermons



“People greet me when I come in. People sometimes sit with me. They assist me in getting to communion. They’ll sit and chat with me after the service and before the service.”

-Lilith, age 67



7 Supported

Support is essential for fostering inclusion and belonging in our churches. Support makes presence possible; its absence often leads to exclusion. Find out what support and assistance are needed to ensure every person can participate fully and meaningfully in the life of your church.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Equip your leadership team to begin creating changes
- Ensure that all church members understand the church's belief system
- Respond to questions/requests quickly
- Empower other church members to work toward changes
- Provide clear signage so people know where to go and what is expected
- Clearly communicate church expectations, especially "unwritten rules"
- Let people know whom they can contact for support
- Create a photo board of different church ministries
- Wear name tags or lanyards that show the level of training people have
- Include information on the website about what to expect at the church and provide resources about disabilities
- Ensure every church member is connected to community groups if they desire
- Ensure that small groups are accessible for every member
- Create specific small groups for people in various situations or stages of life
- Form home-based small groups for people who live near one another
- Offer support groups through the church
- Offer respite care
- Connect caregivers in similar situations or walks of life
- Provide childcare so parents or children with disabilities can participate in small groups
- Have buddies be a part of support groups
- Provide mentorship for church members
- Hold events dedicated to building connections with others and ensure that they are well-advertised
- Seek to include people in all aspects of congregational life
- Develop loving and compassionate boundaries
- Pray for all church staff, volunteers, members, and their families
- Connect new members and longstanding members with one another
- Be proactive, rather than reactive, about potential needs
- Ask what accommodations would benefit people and provide them

- Provide individualized options to support those with disabilities
- Strive to help members who are struggling
- Have accessible seating throughout the worship space
- Provide information on becoming a member and being baptized
- Provide accessible activities that include everyone
- Keep siblings of children with disabilities in mind
- Utilize a flexible curriculum that is accessible for people with varying levels of ability
- Host events for children's volunteers and families to connect
- Host fun events without expectations or pressure
- Consider who will attend each event and be prepared to make it accessible
- Clearly communicate with families about the church environment and events
- Be mindful of food allergies and sensitivities
- Provide gluten-free options for communion
- Ask parents about dietary needs and offer sensory-friendly snacks
- Ensure no one feels judged if they are uncertain about how to interact with people with disabilities
- Have a prayer garden
- Develop practices that incorporate kindness and prayer for others
- Have interpreters
- Provide a valet service at church
- Address bullying with those who are bullying others and those who are being bullied (create boundaries so everyone can flourish)
- Be sensitive to the church hurt people may have experienced
- Ensure your church facilities are safe
- Disseminate helpful information to church members
- Broaden existing church organizations to include people with disabilities
- Offer choices to people with disabilities on where and how to get connected
- Provide transportation to church and church events
- Meet people at their cars to help them get into church
- Offer bilingual aspects of the service
- Offer a way to get baptized that does not involve water
- Help church members combat burnout
- Allow people to take breaks at church when needed
- Provide a specific place for people to ask questions and receive guidance after the church service



**"I never have to worry
about feeling like
I'm alone there.
Everybody knows me at
that church very well."**
- Paige, age 30



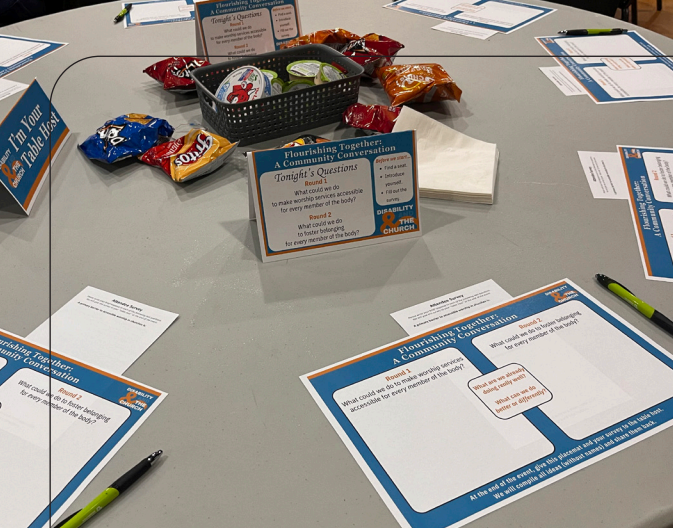
Photo by Jason Morrison on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

8 Befriended

Friendship should abound in every church. Close and supportive relationships contribute so much to our well-being—they give meaning to our lives, make us who we are, help us navigate challenges, and bring us joy. Find ways of creating connections and fostering friendships among all members of your church.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Build intentional and genuine relationships with all members of the church
- Create structures that enable relationship building
- Offer ways for people to get plugged in at church
- Start a “Dinners for Six” program or something similar
- Establish a place to meet for lunch after church and ensure all members are invited
- Offer a social hour after church
- Provide more time for fellowship at church
- Make communion a full meal to enhance participation and build community
- Find ways to connect with church members outside of church based on mutual interests
- Build connections with visiting families and help each member get plugged in
- Appoint family ambassadors to help connect similar families
- Intentionally meet one new person per week
- Create ways for church members to meet cross-generationally
- Create ways for different groups within the church to interact
- Consider each child’s specific strengths and needs when fostering connections
- Introduce children with disabilities to other children
- Create children’s play groups for children of all abilities



9 Needed

Every person has God-given gifts and talents that are needed within the body of Christ. People with disabilities and their families are no exception. Support every member of your church to discover and use their gifts to serve others as an expression of worship.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Provide a variety of ways to serve within and through the church
- Be flexible and creative when developing service opportunities
- Create volunteer and service opportunities for all church members
- Ask people how they would like to participate in church
- If people request opportunities to serve, make it happen
- Support people with disabilities to serve on a hospitality team
- Recognize the spiritual gifts of every member and provide service opportunities
- Encourage all church members to use their unique gifts to serve and lead
- Ensure that members with disabilities can serve if and where they desire
- Keep sensory needs in mind when finding service opportunities
- Express gratitude for the service of others
- Invite members with disabilities to serve the church in meaningful ways
- Create specific jobs for children in their classes with a title and purpose
- Encourage children to notice and name the gifts they see in others
- Find ways for people with specific experiences to share those experiences with others
- Provide opportunities for those with disabilities to disciple others
- Include people with disabilities on the tech team to get their input
- Offer people with disabilities the opportunity to read Scripture during the service
- Offer people with disabilities the opportunity to plan services
- Offer people with disabilities the opportunity to serve on church committees
- Encourage church members with disabilities to use their talents and gifts
- Assume people with disabilities can contribute to theologically rich discussions
- Offer a leadership track for people interested in serving the church

10 Loved

Everything we do and say should be marked by love. Authentic love—rooted in the example of Christ—should guide our interactions with every person in our midst, including fellow members with disabilities. When love overflows, belonging is much more likely to follow.

Photo by Emily Hoogerwerf on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Show hospitality at all levels of leadership
- Be selfless in caring for others
- Visit church members who are unable to attend in person
- Have church leaders visit members when they need support, such as surgeries or doctor appointments
- Establish a care team to support people with disabilities and their families
- Send cards to church members for major life events
- Attend major events of church members
- View all church members as brothers and sisters
- Celebrate the siblings of children with disabilities
- Notice when people are missing from church and reach out
- Specifically tell people they belong



“If I still wanted to listen to a sermon or listen to worship music, I could do that at my house, and it would be so much easier than being the odd one out. And so I think that people forget that there is this deep longing for community.... I’m not there to just sit in a pew. And I’m not there to check a box every week or to make my parents happy.

I’M THERE BECAUSE I REALLY WANT TO BE THERE.”

- Kelsey, age 23



+ Additional Ideas

In addition to addressing these ten dimensions of belonging, attendees shared other ideas for building community and connections within their churches.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Show videos featuring people with disabilities to raise awareness among the entire congregation
- Host “lunch and learns” where people can learn about disability
- Teach disability theology to the whole church
- Provide training about disability to church leaders
- Educate the church about disabilities
- Use social media to educate church members
- Use new member classes to teach information, church culture, and expectations
- Provide training on appropriate language and attitudes
- Show new volunteers how to greet and treat people with disabilities
- Recruit volunteers who are medically trained
- Find out about the needs of church members
- Include people with disabilities in all aspects of church life
- Be intentional with every aspect of the church experience
- Pray for the community around the church
- Foster a strong sense of community among all members of the church



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For more information about this event and its findings, contact the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities at Baylor University.
<https://bcdd.soe.baylor.edu>

Reference:

Erik W. Carter, Madeline Pettit, Kari Maddox, Jason Le Shana, Ashley Westover, and Grace Casper. (2024). *Belonging: A community conversation on disability and the Church*. Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities.