



Facets of Ministry

Early Snapshots from the
National Disability and Ministry Study

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Project Overview

Like anyone else, people with disabilities and their families want to know and be known by God, to love and be loved by their neighbors, to serve and be served by others, and to discover and live out their calling. Like anyone else, they want to explore, share, and deepen their faith in the midst of a caring and committed community. Like anyone else, they bring gifts, talents, and passions that are needed by others. Like anyone else.

The call on churches to be places of inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities and their families is both clear and compelling. The Scriptures are replete with commands to welcome the stranger, to invite the overlooked, to break down barriers to Jesus, to affirm the image of God in every person, to move the margins to the middle, to see every person as utterly indispensable, and to love one another deeply.

A growing number of churches across the country are striving to invite and embrace people with disabilities and their families. Indeed, there is burgeoning interest in widening the welcome in this way. But what does this look like to move from exclusion to embrace? Every local church is unique with regard to its culture, traditions, priorities, resources, size, and membership. It is not surprising, therefore, that the movements they make and the impact they experience can vary widely. Yet there is much to be gained from learning about how other churches are moving forward and the lessons they are learning.

In this first-of-its-kind study, our team interviewed 200 people across 48 states who were actively involved in leading intentional disability ministries at their churches. We wanted to learn what churches were currently doing in this area and why, about the complexities of this work, about the difference it is making, and about the resource needs of ministry leaders. We designed this project so that our findings will help encourage and advance the work of churches, parachurch organizations, and denominations in this essential area of ministry.

We are honored that you each shared your time and stories with us. Your investment in this area of ministry makes us smile. We are also grateful to Leila McCoy and David Jespersen for funding this study. We pray these findings will both encourage and challenge you. May we all be faithful in the work of creating flourishing communities for everyone.

Regards,



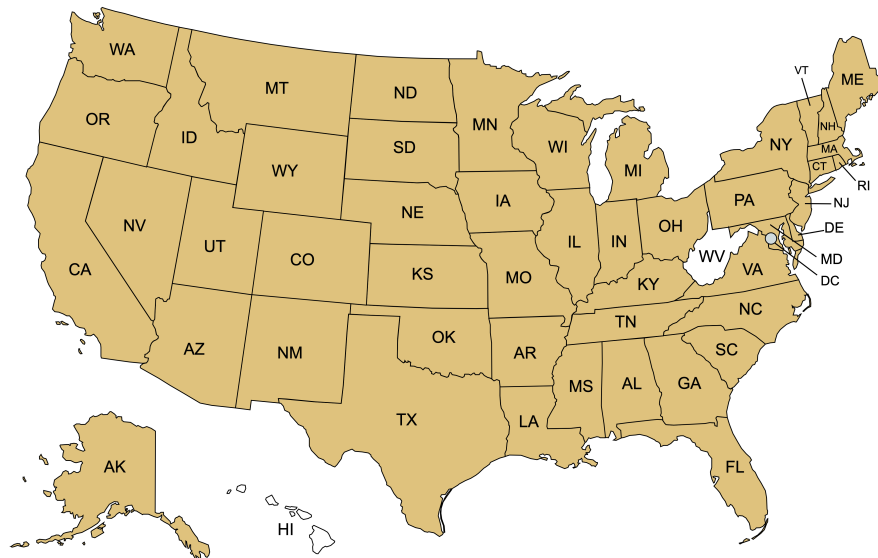
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P.S. Please remember that these are early findings that may change somewhat as we dive deeper into our analyses. Updated reports will be posted online at www.disabilityministry.org.

Overview of Participating Churches

We interviewed ministry leaders from 200 churches that have established intentional ways of supporting and serving people with disabilities and their families. These churches are located in 48 states and represent myriad denominations. Because there is no comprehensive list of churches focused on disability and ministry, we used a combination of approaches to recruit a large and diverse sample (e.g., through parachurch ministries and networks, social media interest groups, internet searches, snowball sampling). As a result, it is important to note that these findings cannot be fully representative of the broad spectrum of churches nationally.



Denominations

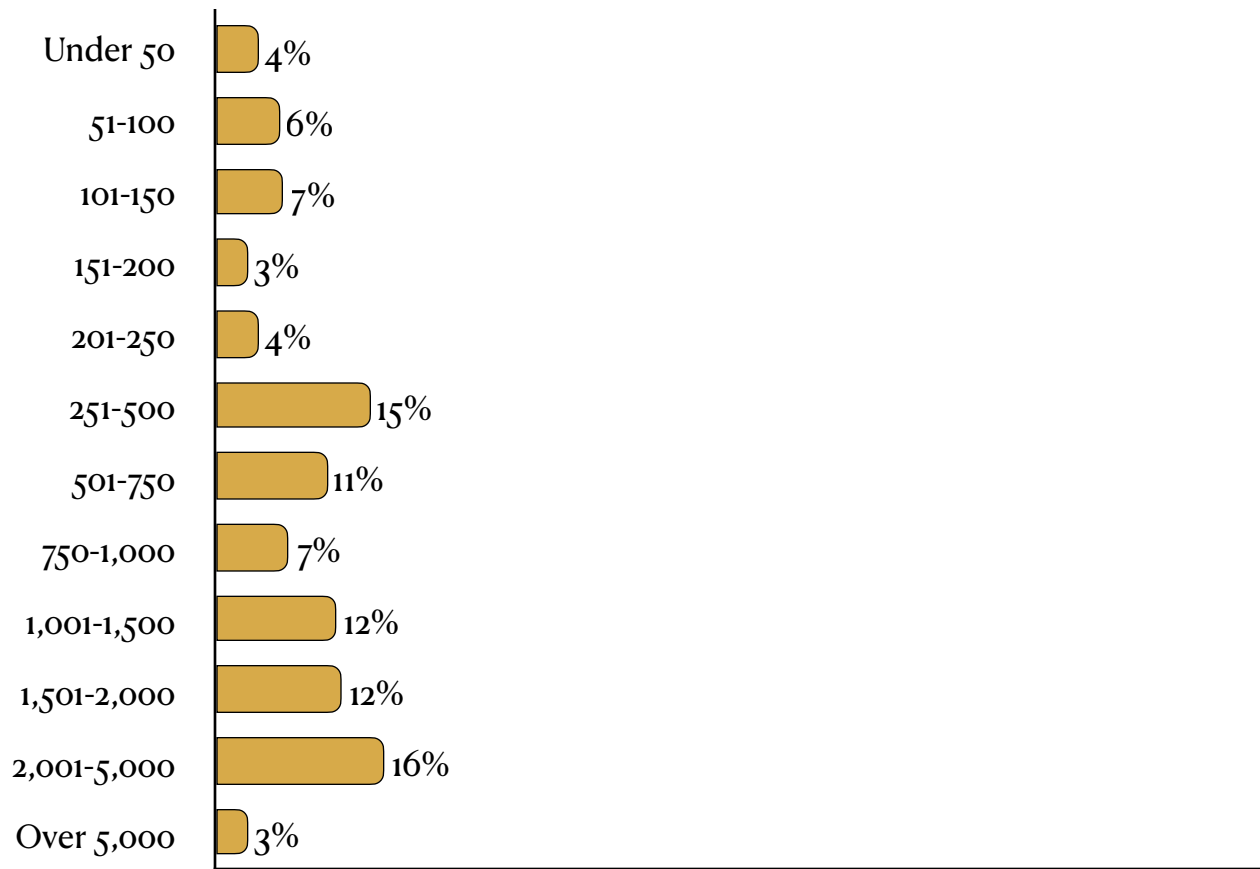
These churches represented 42 denominations. The largest participation was among churches that were non-denominational ($n = 56$), Southern Baptist ($n = 32$), United Methodist ($n = 18$), Evangelical Lutheran ($n = 9$), United Church of Christ ($n = 7$), Evangelical Free ($n = 6$), Catholic ($n = 5$), Presbyterian Church of America ($n = 5$), and Presbyterian Church USA ($n = 5$). Other denominations involving fewer than 5 churches included:

- African Methodist Episcopal Church
- Anglican
- Assembly of God
- Bible Church
- Catholic
- Christian and Missionary Alliance
- Christian Reformed Church
- Church of Christ
- Church of God
- Church of God of Prophecy
- Church of the Brethren
- Congregational
- Converge
- Disciples of Christ
- Eastern Orthodox
- Episcopal
- Evangelical Covenant Church
- Evangelical Free Church of America
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Evangelical Presbyterian Church
- Foursquare
- Free Methodist
- Freewill Baptist
- Grace Brethren
- Kingdom Network
- Mennonite Church USA
- Moravian
- Nazarene
- Non-denominational
- Orthodox Presbyterian Church
- Presbyterian Church of America
- Presbyterian Church USA
- Reformed Church of America
- Seventh-day Adventist
- Southern Baptist
- The Wesleyan Church
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist
- Vineyard



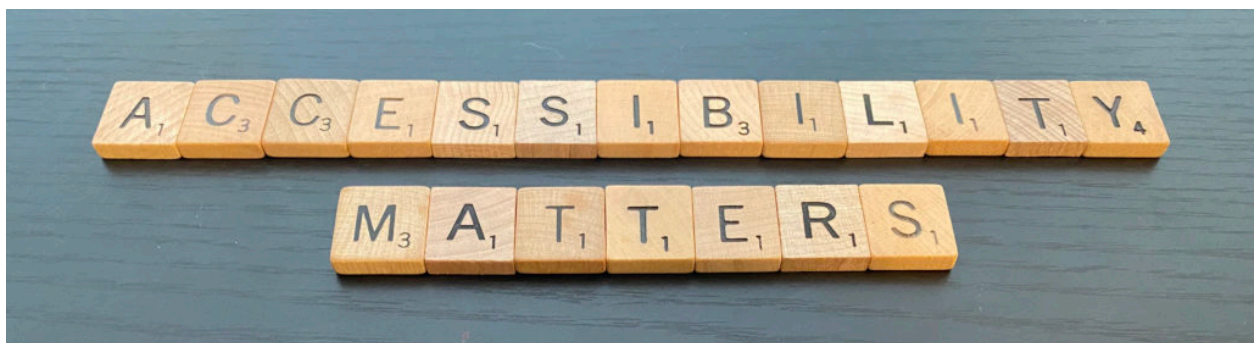
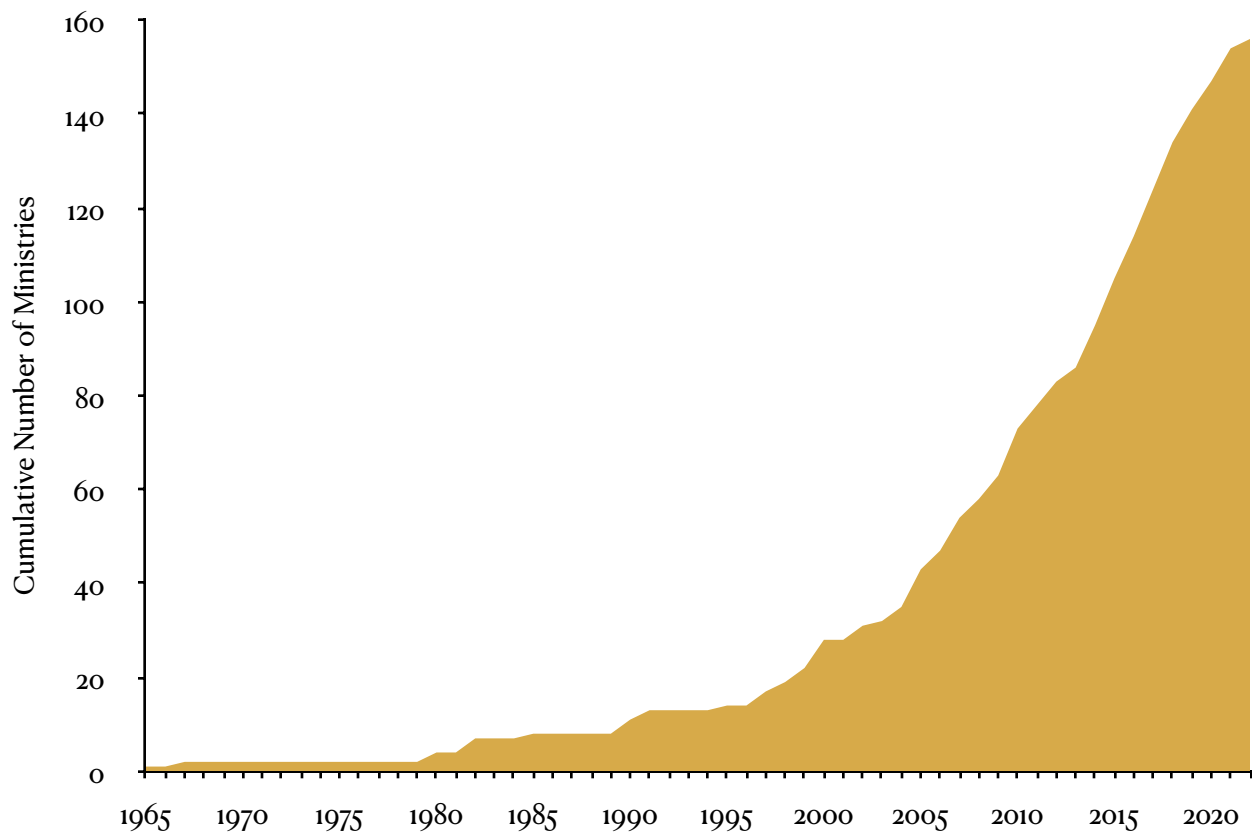
Church Size

These churches varied widely, both in size (median = 800; range, 25 to 20,000) and in the communities they serve. These included rural communities (21%), suburban communities (75%), and/or urban communities (27%).



Ministry Launch

In the figure below, we display the years in which each church's formal ministry efforts were launched. Every increase in the height of the line reflects new ministries being launched. In 44 of the churches, the leader we spoke with—often because they were newer—was uncertain of exactly when the ministry formally began. Therefore, the total number of ministries summarized below is 156. The earliest ministry began in 1965, but over half (59%) launched since 2010.

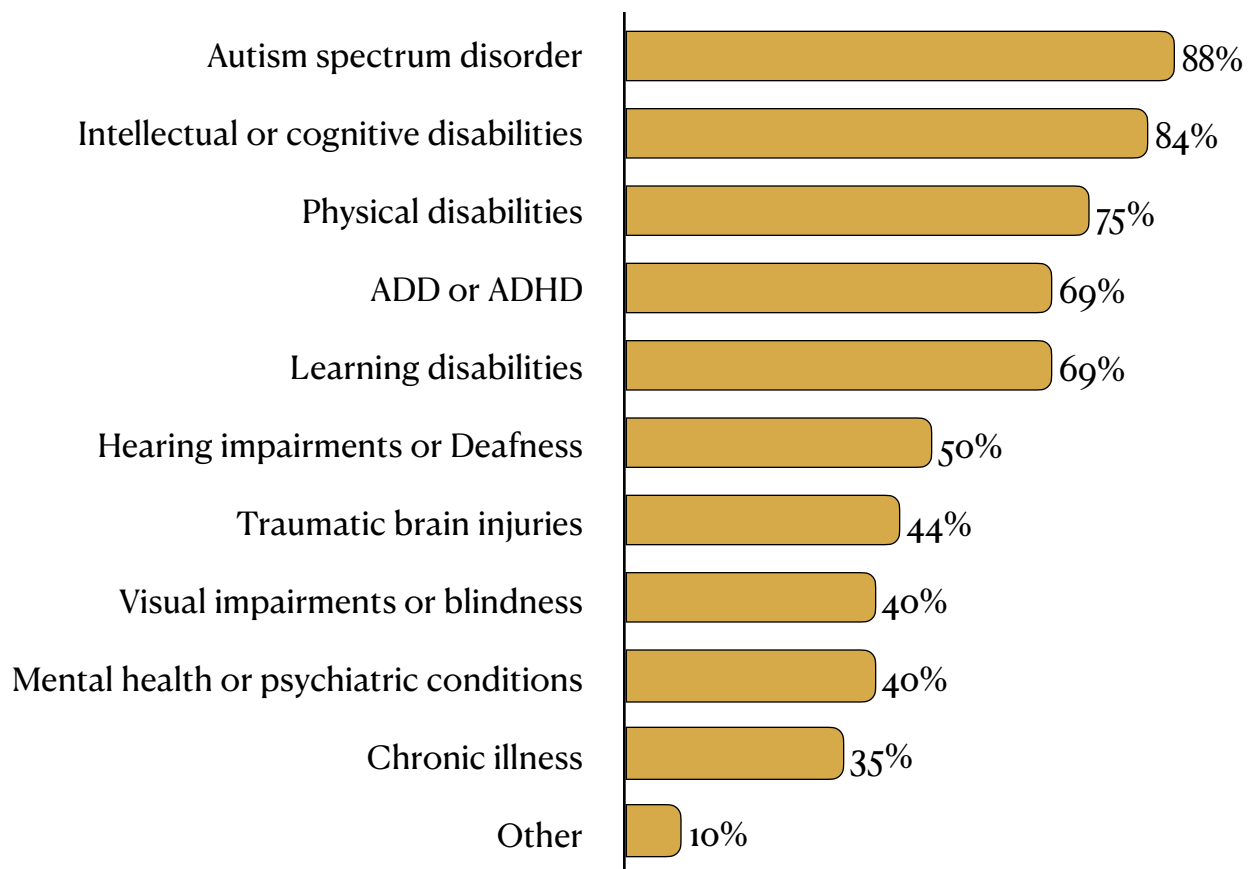


The Individuals Who Are Impacted

We also asked a series of questions about the individuals and families who participated in or benefitted from intentional ministry activities.

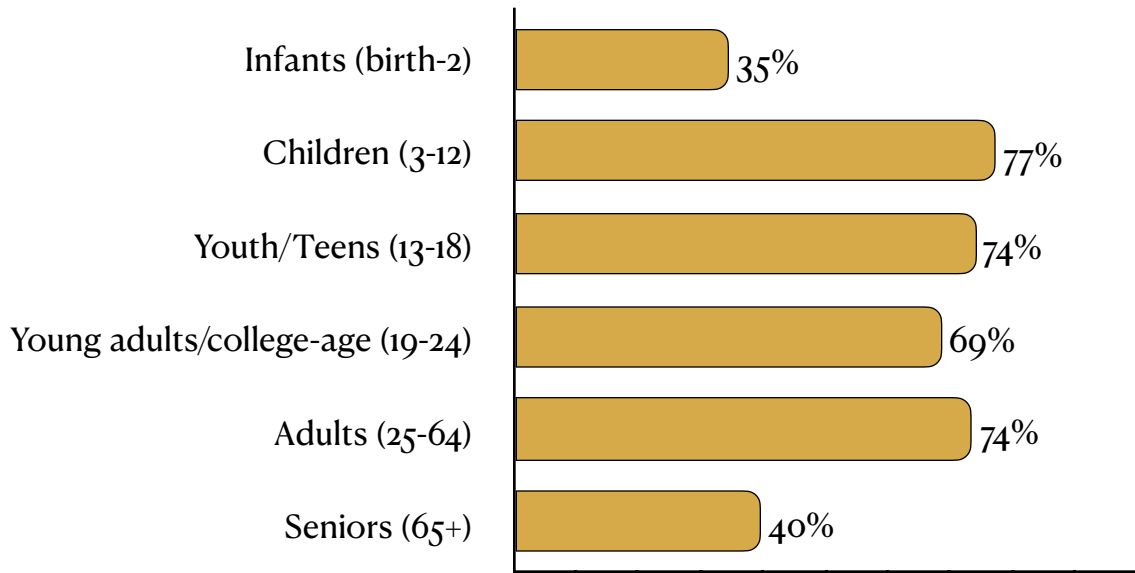
Types of Disabilities

We asked leaders about the individuals with disabilities who were directly involved or impacted by their ministry. We provided a list of disability categories and asked them to select all that applied. As indicated below, these ministries served individuals who experienced a wide array of disabilities. The average number of different categories addressed by ministries was 5.9.



Ages of Individuals

We also asked about the ages of these individuals with disabilities. We provided a list of age categories and asked to select all that applied. The average number of different categories addressed by ministries was 3.7.



Key Facets of Ministries

In each of our interviews—as well as in accompanying surveys—we asked leaders to tell us about their church’s ministry and the breadth of ways it serves and supports people with disabilities and/or their families. Our questions were open-ended, but we also followed up with leaders later to ensure we did not miss any aspects of their church’s work. Our initial analyses focused on identifying distinct forms of ministry and then organizing them in meaningful ways. However, it is important to recognize that various churches may be *implementing* each facet of ministry in somewhat different ways.

In the figures that follow, we organize these facets of ministry into eight major categories:

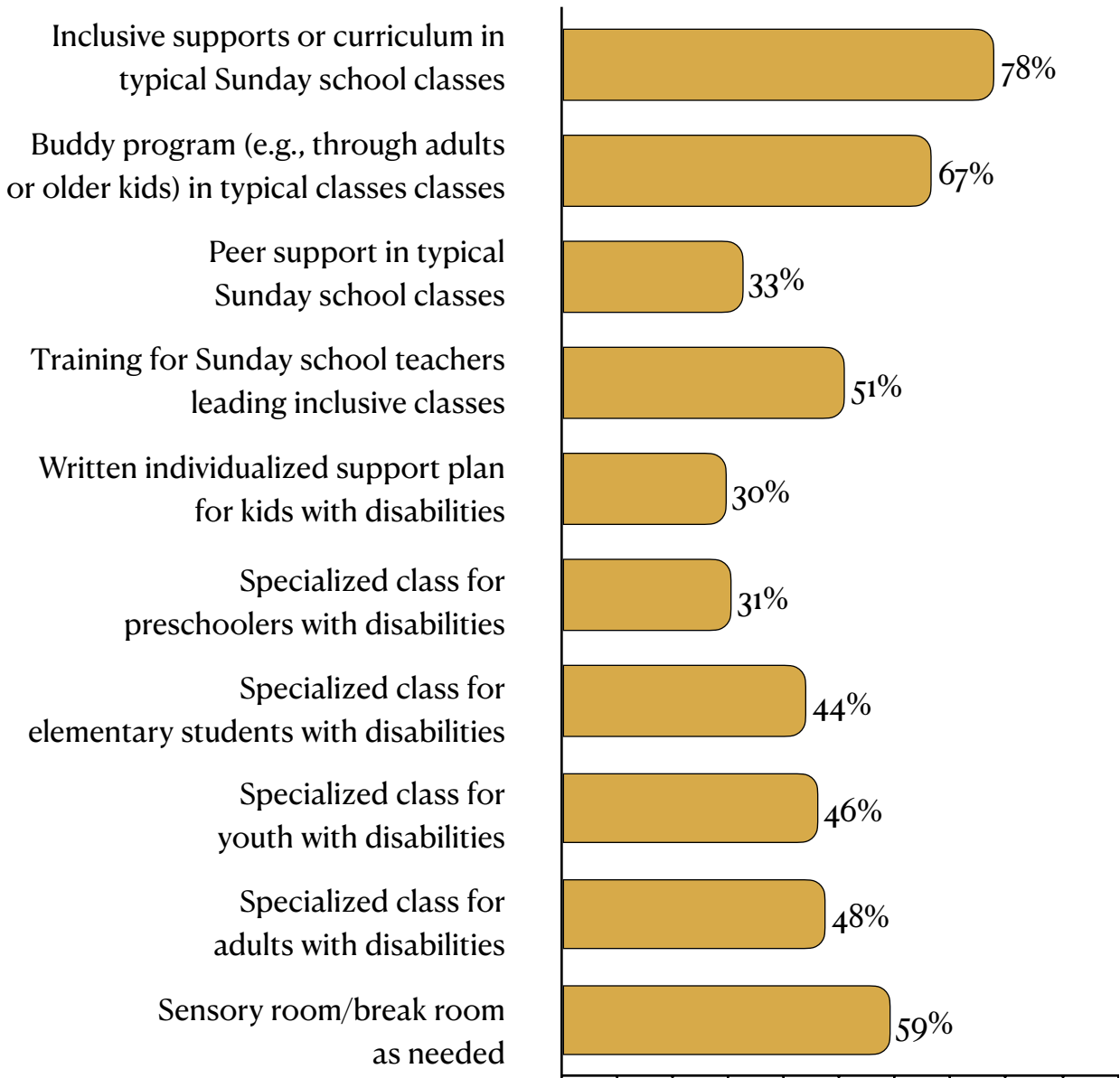
- Sunday religion education programming
- Worship services
- Ministry to families
- Service activities
- Fellowship events
- Weekday supports
- Disability awareness activities
- Other ministry facets

For each facet of ministry, we indicate the percentage of churches that reported being actively engaged. In future reports, we will unpack each of these facets of ministry in more detail. In the meantime, this provides a portrait of the varied ways churches are moving to welcome and weave people with disabilities and their families into life and worship together.



Sunday School and Religious Education

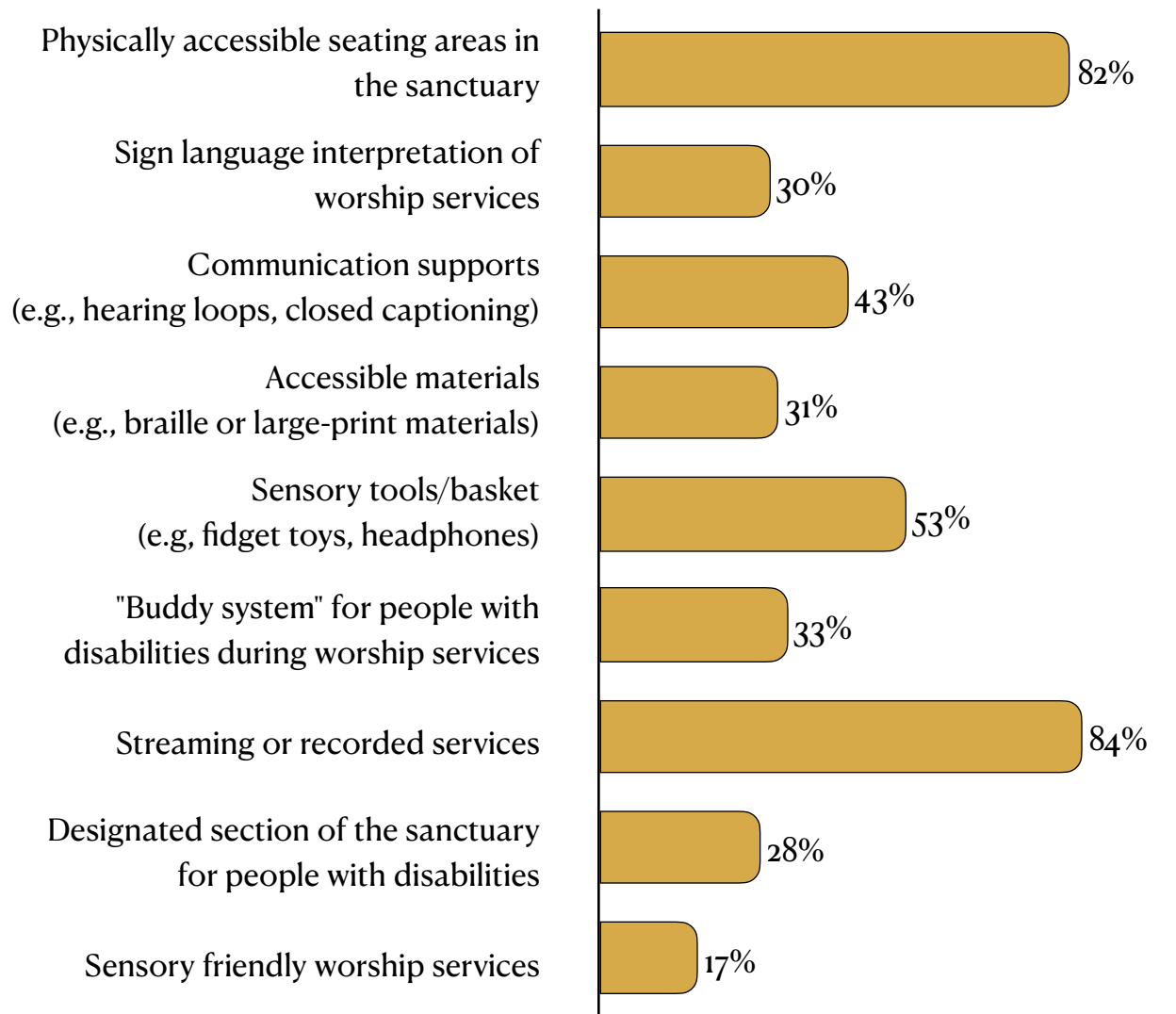
Ten primary facets of ministry focused on Sunday school and religious education programming.



Most (82%) of the churches offered *at least one* of the first five offerings for supporting inclusive religious education. Nearly three quarters (74%) of churches offered *at least one* of the last five specialized or separate options for religious education. Many offered a combination of both.

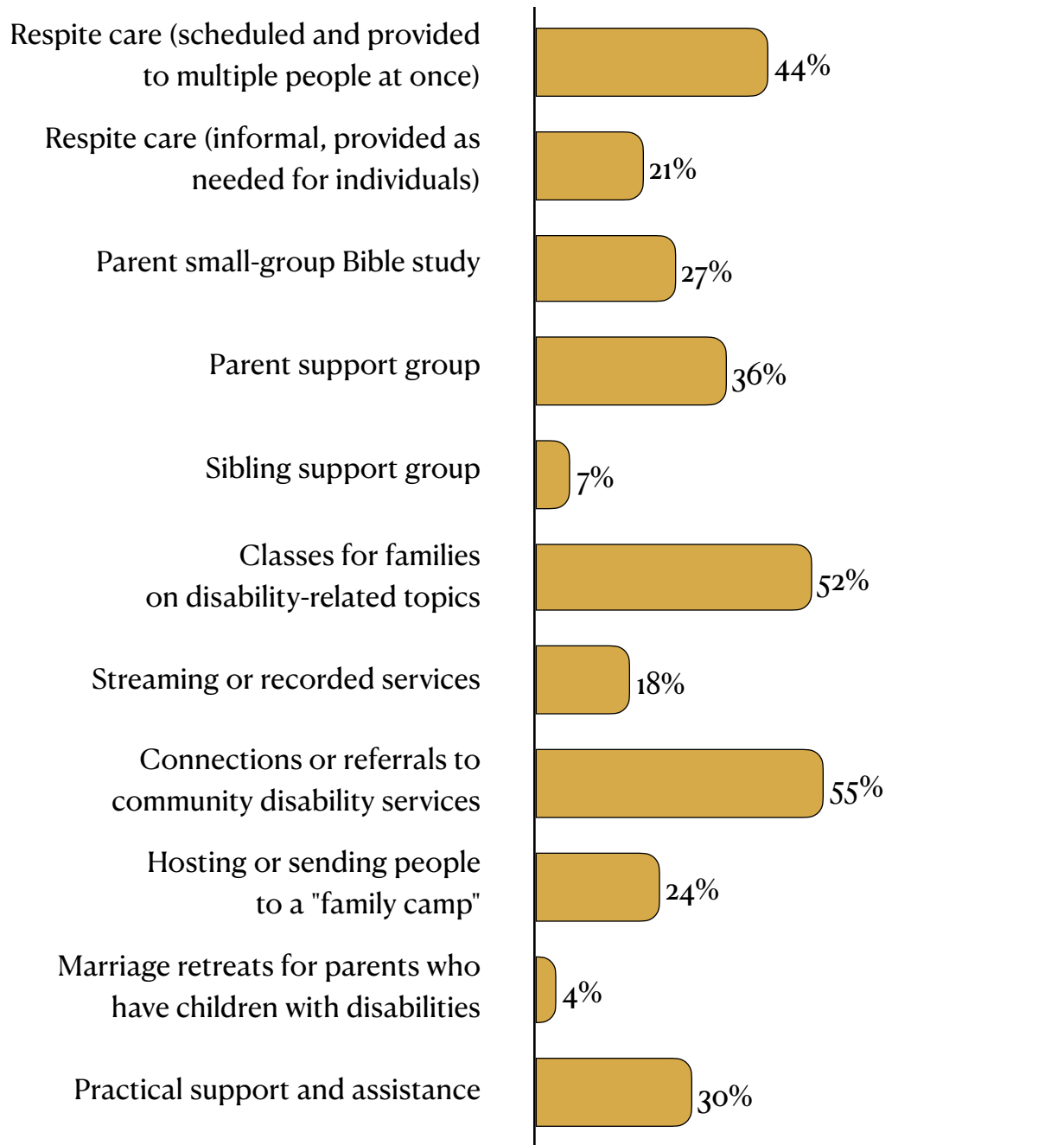
Worship Services

Nine primary facets of ministry focused on weekly, corporate worship services. Nearly all (94%) of the churches addressed *at least one* of these facets of ministry.



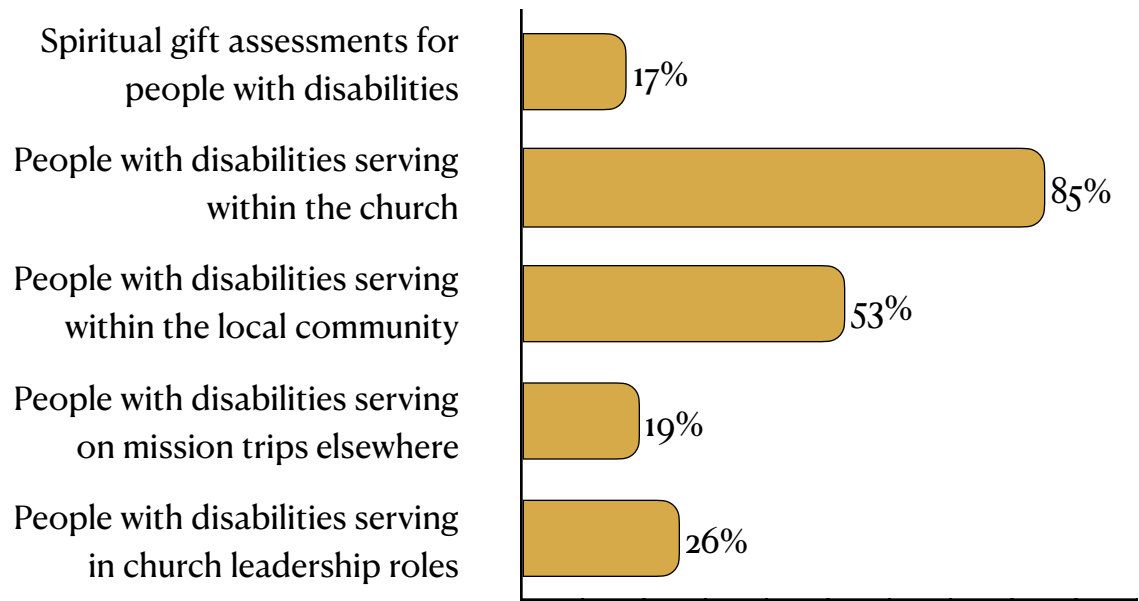
Ministry to Families

Eleven primary facets of ministry focused on families of individuals with disabilities. Most (94%) of the churches addressed *at least one* of these facets of ministry.



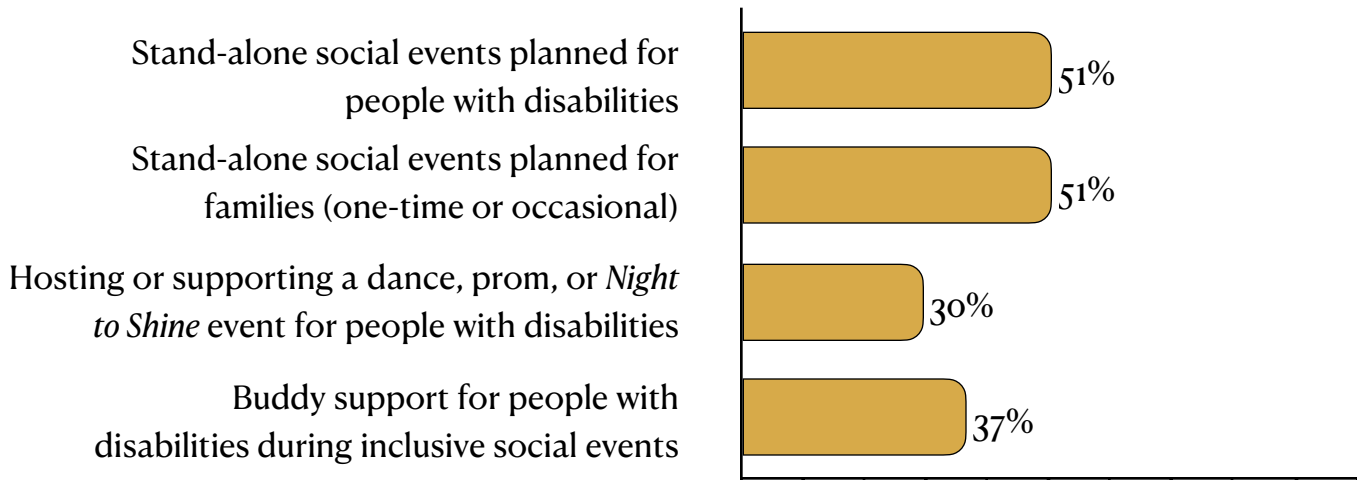
Service Activities

Five primary facets of ministry focused on service in and beyond the church. Most (87%) of the churches addressed *at least one* of these facets of ministry.



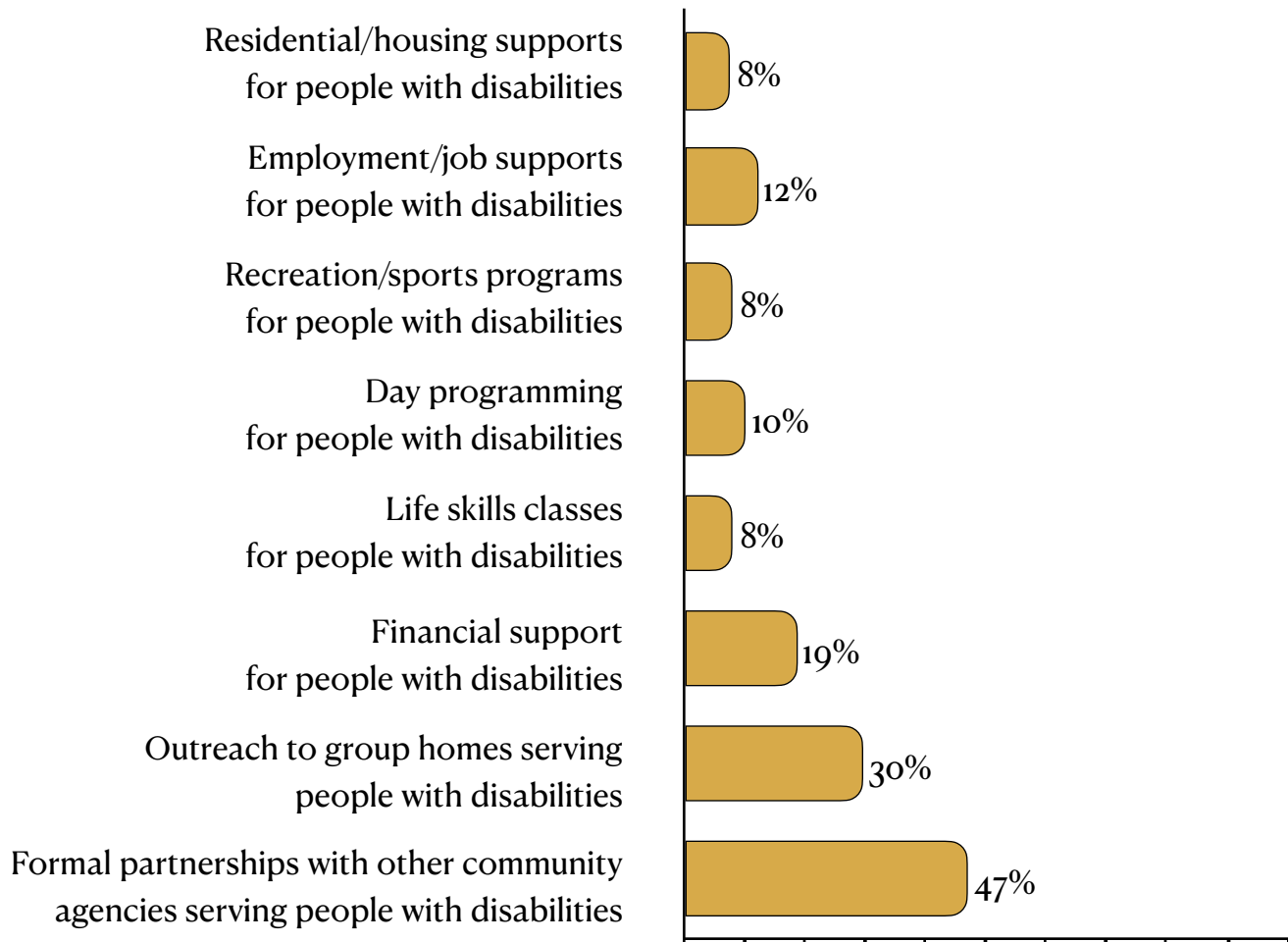
Fellowship Events

Four primary facets of ministry focused on fellowship events. Most (70%) of the churches addressed *at least one* of these facets of ministry.



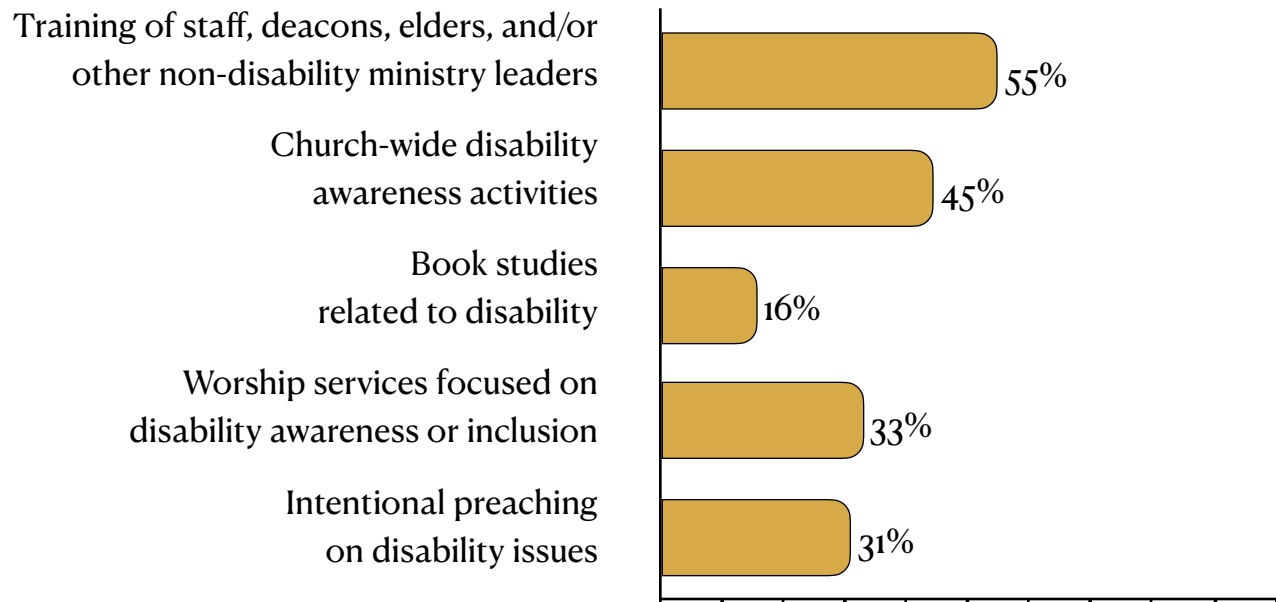
Weekday Supports

Eight primary facets of ministry focused on supports that promoting the flourishing of people with disabilities all seven days of the week. Two thirds (65%) of the churches addressed *at least one* of these facets of ministry.



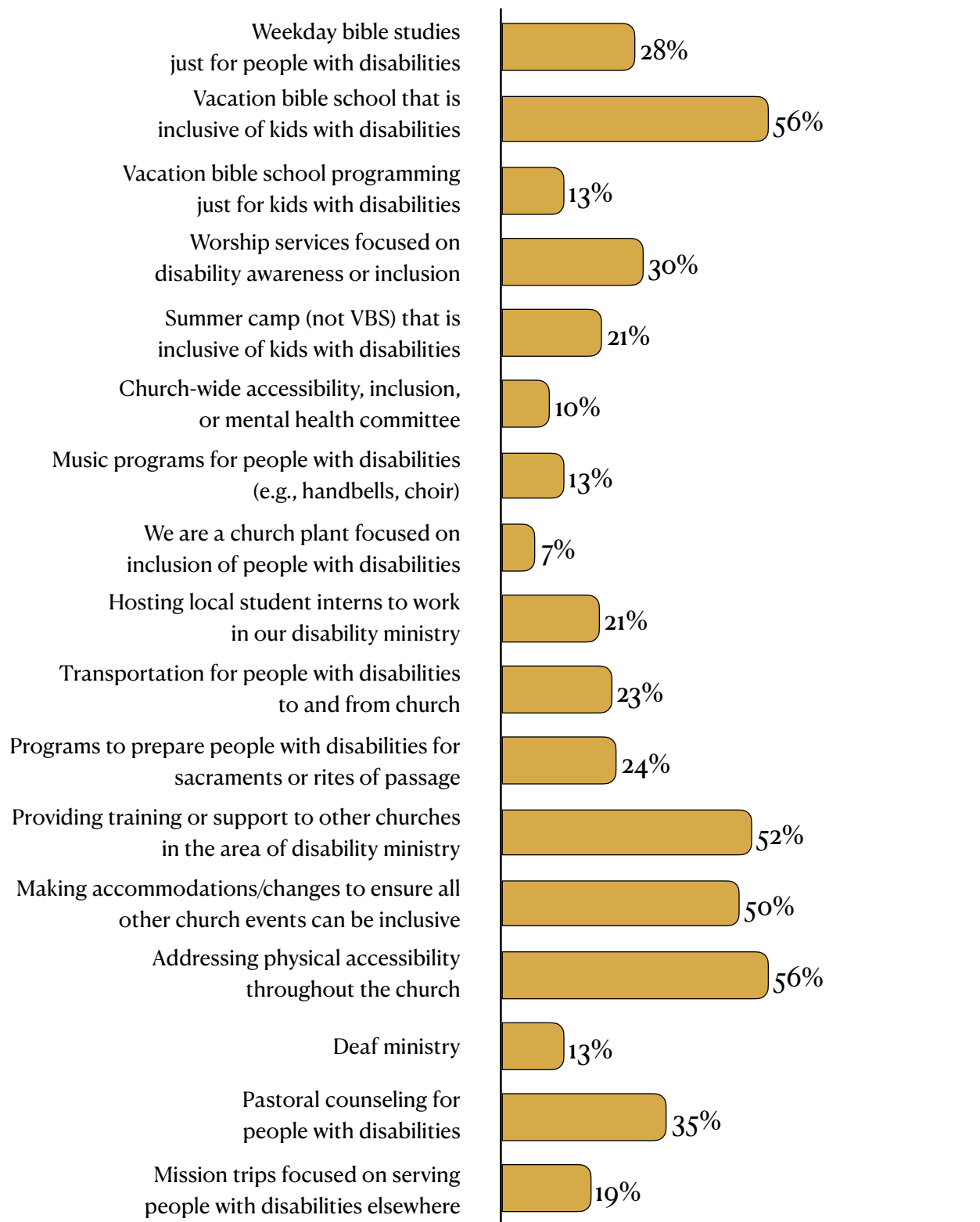
Disability Awareness Activities

Five primary facets of ministry focused on promoting greater awareness of and about disability. Most (75%) of the churches addressed *at least one* of these facets of ministry.



Other Ministry Facets

Seventeen other primary facets of ministry were raised.



In addition to these 17 facets of ministry, the following activities were also mentioned by one or more ministry leaders:

- Designating staff or volunteers as “inclusion advocates”
- Hiring or contracting with behavioral support staff
- Arranging for a paid nurse to address medical care
- Offering a medical equipment lending library
- Hosting special appreciation events for ministry volunteers
- Hosting special appreciation events for community members (e.g., special educators, disability support providers)
- Hosting support groups for people with disabilities
- Creating accessible family restrooms
- Encouraging church members to foster children with disabilities
- Developing adapted curricula
- Adopting universal design principles throughout the church
- Teaching church members to learn sign language
- Developing online education and awareness resources
- Creating a YouTube channel of sermons for people with disabilities
- Providing childcare for church events
- Creating an accessible playground
- Providing individualized support for people with disabilities throughout the week
- Hosting a Facebook group for church families and community members with disabilities
- Addressing accessibility of the church’s website
- Creating a quiet room outside of the sanctuary
- Conducting collection drives for disability organizations in the community
- Passing church resolutions related to disability
- Creating a newsletter specifically for disability ministry events
- Hosting a Circle of Friends
- Creating a website of resources for ministry volunteers
- Disseminating congregational surveys about needed church improvements
- Undertaking policy advocacy
- Offering a new member class for people with disabilities
- Offering a retreat for ministry volunteers
- Providing needed therapies for people with disabilities
- Meeting weekly with parents and doing home visits
- Offering gluten-free elements/communion
- Hosting condition-specific support groups (e.g., mental health, dementia)

Concluding Thoughts

We hope this first snapshot of our findings intrigues you and inspires you. Perhaps you caught ahold of a new idea for how your church might expand its current ministry efforts. Perhaps you recognize key gaps in our collective work to meet needs that are right in our midst. Or maybe you noticed new ways to pray for the movements of the church in this area. We will continue to develop additional reports that unpack other aspects of this important and insightful study. Of course, we welcome your questions at any time.



Note

We are grateful for the contributions of Haley Bower, Allison Koehler, Caroline Parker, Hannah Rowley, and Emilee Spann to data collection and analyses. To learn more about this project and its findings, please reach out to Erik Carter at erik_carter@baylor.edu.