# **Flourishing Together**

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH

Grand Rapids, Michigan





Disability & The Church





Our churches are incomplete without the presence, gifts, and friendship of people with disabilities and their families. Yet many congregations still struggle to gather and worship in ways that welcome these indispensable members. How can our churches become communities of belonging and full participation for people of all abilities? How might we flourish together as one body?

More than 100 people convened at Calvin Theological Seminary on the evening of June 25 for a unique "community conversation" on disability and the church. The purpose of the gathering was to explore together how churches throughout the region might become more accessible and supportive for every member of the body including those with disabilities and their families. Over coffee and desserts, we discussed our ideas, experiences, and hopes for how our churches might widen their welcome and deepen their embrace.

Nearly one thousand ideas were shared for how churches might become places where people with and without disabilities can worship, serve, learn, and fellowship together as a faithful community. This report provides a snapshot of the evening and highlights many of the creative suggestions people offered. May this resource spur your thinking about the movements toward inclusion and belonging to be made within your own church.

### **Gathering Overview**

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

The evening event lasted 90 minutes and was organized around three rounds of smallgroup 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 so many people with disabilities and their families, as well as the struggles they often have finding 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. Eric Willinger, who attends Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, then shared about his own involvement in and love for the church.

The rest of the event focused on three questions:

- What could we do to welcome and include people with disabilities and their families well on Sundays?
- What could we do to come alongside people with disabilities and their families between Sundays?
- How could we work together to make this vision a reality in more area churches?

For each round of small-group conversation, attendees shared their ideas with others at their table. They drew upon their own experiences or expertise to suggest how faith communities might gather, preach, teach, connect, and support one another in ways that promote inclusion and belonging. They reacted to and built upon the ideas others offered. Each table had a facilitator who wrote down every idea and helped keep the conversation focused on solutions. After 20 minutes, everyone (except the facilitator) switched tables and shifted to the next question. "I love Calvary Church. I need Jesus and Jesus needs me. My favorite part of church is singing and praising His name. The church has a dinner every Wednesday night where I meet friends and sometimes I help clearing tables and cleaning them. Then I go to GoGetters and learn, sing, and worship Jesus.

I love church so much. It makes me happy."

- Eric Willinger

To wrap up the event, we asked each of the twenty table facilitators to share one or two of the most promising or interesting ideas they heard throughout the evening. Everyone completed a short survey before leaving for home.



 What could we do to welcome and include people with disabilities and their families well on Sundays?

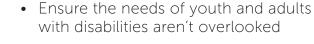
- Prepare everyone--including church leaders--to be welcoming of people with disabilities
- Make sure your buildings and spaces are accessible
- Ensure people using wheelchairs can sit throughout the sanctuary, not only in the back
- Encourage pastors to meet and spend time with families impacted by disability
- Connect members with disabilities with opportunities to serve and help through the church
- Find more ways for people with disabilities to serve in and through the church
- Introduce yourself to blind or visually impaired members
- Have your pastor address how noises and other "disruptions" are a normal and welcome part of being in community together
- Publicize how members can find assistance or support related to their disability
- Provide ways for people to learn what songs will be sung ahead of time
- Invite residents of local group homes to visit your church
- Communicate what accessibility looks like at your church through your website and materials
- Offer sign language interpretation
- Actively pursue the contributions and participation of people with disabilities
- Reflect on what is working and be willing to set aside what isn't working
- Be proactive and intentional about inclusion
- Learn about the strengths and skills of every member
- Incorporate the artwork of members with disabilities into the service or building

- ROUND
- Preach on the invaluable gifts every member of the body has to share
- Designate a point person who can share needed resources or guidance with families
- Invite local parachurch organizations to share about their disability work from the pulpit or at ministry fairs
- Connect interested new families with a "buddy"
- Anticipate that people with disabilities and their families will come to your church
- Prepare greeters to notice opportunities for offering assistance
- Publicize the most accessible routes through your buildings
- Create a culture that notices and welcomes people
- Involve people with developmental disabilities as greeters
- Establish a transportation ministry for those who cannot drive
- Meet with individual families to find out their unique needs

**MORE THAN 15** 

DENOMINATIONS

**ATTENDEES** 



- Cast a vision for inclusion and get all members on board
- Offer purposeful and valued roles for members throughout the church
- Create a culture that is not bothered by noise, movement, or behavior that seems different
- Encourage and welcome participation in all aspects of congregational life
- Involve people with disabilities on the worship team, just like anyone else
- Invite people to read scripture during worship services
- Suggest books and movies that promote awareness and encouragement
- Receive the gifts and contributions of people with disabilities in whatever form they come
- Provide assistance to children with disabilities in Sunday school
- Talk directly to people with disabilities rather than through others (e.g., parents, caregiver)
- Do not be anxious about interacting with people with disabilities
- Greet people as you like to be greeted
- Show people you are interested in what they are saying
- Treat every person as a child of God
- Sit down when having longer conversations with people using wheelchairs
- Incorporate icons and pictures to make bulletins more accessible
- Have a hearing loop system



- Offer large print bulletins
- Have members who are homebound participate in worship by recording videos of scripture readings
- Include people with disabilities in preaching and speaking from the pulpit
- Celebrate the exuberant gifts of people in the varied forms they come
- Ask people with disabilities how they want to serve and help others
- Print out the sermon or liturgy beforehand so people can follow along and participate
- Use language like "Rise in body or spirit" to give options to those who cannot participate with their bodies
- Have a ramp to the pulpit or stage
- Use your church bulletin to share the order of service
- Get to know people so conversations go beyond surface-level interactions
- Ask people what they need directly rather than assuming
- Survey the church members to discover what their needs are
- Intentionally invite people so there is no room for assuming they aren't invited
- Make sure your church's website is accessible
- Add the wheelchair icon to your website as a signal to others that you are accessible
- Choose to follow the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Use an accessibility checklist to reflect on your alignment with recommended practice
- Offer multiple spaces to worship and freedom to move about
- Display values that show your commitment to creating a welcoming environment for every member of the body
- Avoid staring at, hushing, or shaming people who make vocalizations or sounds



- Start with the simple things
- Install an adult changing table in the family restrooms
- Visit other congregations who do this work well to learn from them
- Select hymns that will be familiar to older adults
- Suggest interactive ways of praying (e.g. lighting a candle, walking around stained glass windows)
- Use chairs instead of pews, as these are more adjustable for accessibility
- Allow people to sit where they want by providing multiple options for accessible seating
- Create a "sensory tool" library so people who need them can check them out
- Normalize noise-canceling headphones, wiggle seats, and other aids to help people focus
- Create a room with low lights where people can sit and decompress
- Post social stories of what the upcoming church services will be like
- Use icons and pictures into sermons and lessons for members who cannot read
- Display a visual schedule to foreshadow the various parts of the worship service
- Offer information in braille for individuals with visual impairments
- Make sure people with disabilities are connecting with their peers
- Start including children with disabilities when they are young, so it becomes the norm
- Teach staff the importance of every person feeling belonging in church

#### ROUND 1

- Invite residents of group homes to sit with various families during worship services
- Reserve parking spots for families whose members have disabilities
- Incorporate the concerns of the disabled population into sermons
- Have a separate room with comfortable seating where people can watch the streamed service
- Intentionally interact with individuals who have complex communication needs or differences
- Adapt existing church programs so that people with disabilities may participate
- Ask family members about any specific needs their loved one with a disability may have
- Designate spaces for wheelchair users
- Get to know people personally, don't assume who has a disability
- Be observant of the needs of those with disabilities
- Create a team of people dedicated to improving accessibility efforts within the church
- Assign a church member to a person with a disability as a buddy volunteer
- Demonstrate care through actions
- Host regular meetings with people with disabilities and their families to hear about their needs and make necessary changes
- Create spaces for people to make their needs known
- Let people know that they are allowed to attend to their own needs however necessary
- Take the mission of the church seriously by being truly welcoming of all people
- Implement special education resources into your church practices
- Provide rocking chairs as an alternative seating option



- Re-evaluate the physical church environment and make any necessary changes
- Advertise any disability ministry offerings to increase awareness of available support
- Advertise supports available for those who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Ensure restrooms are physically accessible
- Ensure clear signage is available to point people toward particular locations (i.e. restrooms, elevators, sensory room, etc.)
- Include information about disability-related resources in the church bulletin
- Have a means for contacting parents when an issue arises with their child
- Provide a sermon notes outline prior to the church service
- Equip greeters to answer questions related to disability and ministry



### WE INVITED A WIDE RANGE OF PEOPLE TO ATTEND INCLUDING:

- Pastors and worship leaders
- Children, youth, and adult ministry leaders
- Disability ministry leaders and volunteers
- People with disabilities
- Parents, siblings, and other family members
- Staff from local disability organizations, programs, and agencies
- Leaders of other faith-based organizations and ministries
- Anyone interested in helping churches become more accessible and welcoming



- ROUND 1
- Personally introduce families to church leaders rather than just providing a phone number or email address to contact
- Ensure people with disabilities of all ages are able to participate in church services and programs
- Create opportunities for continued worship even after the close of the church service
- Ensure wheelchair users can sit where they have a clear view during church services
- Have persons available to open the door for people using mobility equipment
- Provide an option for valet parking
- Discover and encourage the use of gifts for every member of the church
- Use closed captions on all videos
- Use accessible fonts and color schemes
- Familiarize church volunteers with resources and opportunities
- Make disability ministry prominent on your church website
- Encourage families and congregants to share their experiences to raise awareness about disability
- Use respectful language when speaking about disability
- Dignify all people with options and boundaries
- Get people with disabilities involved in ministering to others (e.g., serving as a deacon, volunteering in nursery, joining the choir)
- Allow people the choice of where to sit or how to participate by making sure support is dispersed throughout the congregation

- Encourage people to sit alongside one another
- Help find solutions for transportation and other barriers that prevent people with disabilities from attending church
- Get people with disabilities involved with the jobs and routines of Sunday morning
- Include familiar songs in worship
- Treat individuals with disabilities like everyone else
- Expect that people with disabilities will grow in their faith and understanding of the Bible
- Include people with developmental disabilities in learning alongside other adults
- Design worship services to be responsive to different engagement needs and capacities
- Be mindful of food allergies, dietary needs, and restrictions
- Encourage and support involvement in service to others
- Design a sensory room or space
- Install two-way glass to allow visual connection between the sensory room and worship space
- Educate staff and volunteers about the safety and security needs
- Dedicate time and space for nurturing understanding of inclusion
- Equip people with disabilities for leadership roles throughout the church
- Discuss beliefs and traditions that inadvertently isolate people

#### ROUND

- Communicate widely what support is available in your church
- Provide information about songs and lesson topics ahead of time
- Consider that the music might be too loud for some members
- Recognize that some people may prefer more personal space than others
- Make ear plugs or noise cancelling headphones available
- Provide wiggle seats and rocking chairs to relieve anxiety
- Provide quiet fidgets
- Ensure disability is represented in your promotional materials
- Offer communication methods that will work best for each particular person
- Indicate awareness of and support for sensory needs on your website
- Be mindful of people's physical space preferences and personal boundaries
- Encourage your pastor to establish a culture of inclusion and set the tone for the entire





What could we do to come alongside people with disabilities and their families
between Sundays?

- Provide financial support so families can hire respite providers
- Identify people who can provide transportation to appointments or events
- Help families navigate social service programs and Medicare
- Bring coffee, snacks, and your presence to families whose children are hospitalized
- Be willing to visit and support families
- Visit group homes in your area
- Connect people with disabilities with other disabled people who share their lived experience
- Meet with families privately to ask about their needs
- Offer weekday events that parents can participate in with their children
- Form a team of people who can provide support to adults with developmental disabilities when parents cannot attend
- Foster social connections among children by creating neighborhood friend groups
- Create small groups or clubs based on common interests or needs
- Ensure all sacramental preparation programs are accessible to everyone
- Bring church to people who cannot come to church through home visits
- Offer respite care during the week
- Help congregation members learn how they can recognize and meet needs between Sundays
- Offer daycare programs that are available to all children

- Encourage members to shop at businesses that hire people with disabilities
- Explore ways your church could create employment opportunities for the disability community
- Ask congregants to share their ideas for coming alongside people between Sundays
- Encourage your own friends and family members to get involved
- Tap into local transportation providers
- Encourage volunteerism
- Offer a prayer group that meets during the week
- Share about community resources that can support the various needs of families
- Include young adults with disabilities in young adult activities (not children's activities)
- Ask people what they need directly rather than assuming
- Use technology as a way to include people (e.g., live captioning)
- Build relationships with people with disabilities
- Communicate what your church offers for families impacted by disability, such as respite
- Support local Special Olympic events
- Offer transportation to weekday events, not just church on Sundays
- Pursue friendships with those with disabilities so people don't fall through the cracks
- Listen when people need to be heard



- Nearly 1 million people reside in Kent County and the surrounding areas. One in five has disabilities-almost 200,000 neighbors. One in seven children in the local schools receives special education services-about 23,000 children and youth. One in three households includes at least one family member who experiences disability. The biblical question "Who is my neighbor?" has a beautiful and diverse answer.
- Ask about allergies when hosting an event involving food
- Actively look for opportunities to serve people
- Be flexible to change an event's programming or location so that all are able to participate
- Bring community and fun to the person themselves at their residence
- Invite people with developmental disabilities into everyday social groups, not just events specific to people with disabilities
- Ask the families directly what they need support with
- Host picnics at members' homes and invite people to join

- Connect people with disabilities to online groups available through your church
- Have a curiosity about what people with disabilities think about God
- Think of the whole family when creating social outing, including both children and their parents
- Don't think of people with disabilities as separate from the rest of the church
- Go to the movies together
- Come alongside parents
- Use time in the car as an opportunity to get to know someone
- Involve the youth group in volunteering to help families
- Teach ministry leaders how to interact with members who use communication devices
- Invite people with disabilities into your social life outside of Sundays
- Invite pastors to school-based individualized education program (IEP) meetings
- Create support groups for all members of a family, including parents, siblings, and individuals with disabilities
- Encourage and support church leadership in this work
- Tap into the church's network to help people find employment and housing
- Make sure that people are known
- Pray, eat meals, and do Bible study together
- Attend community activities (e.g., baseball games) together



- Make church vans available to address transportation needs throughout the week
- Have retired people hang out with other similar-age adults with developmental disabilities
- Check in on parents often to
   demonstrate your care for them
- Support residential and community living programs to help meet the needs of adults with developmental disabilities
- Host monthly gatherings for parents to bond as their children are cared for in another space
- Host a community night each month focused on meeting neighbors with developmental disabilities
- Create opportunities mid-week for both informal and structured activities
- Provide resources for families to engage in spiritual activities each day of the week
- Spend quality time together—it doesn't need to be anything fancy
- Accommodate the needs of others
- Reflect on the language you use and avoid unnecessary labels to ensure everyone feels welcomed
- Remember people's dietary restrictions and be mindful of them when preparing food
- Educate the congregation on how to engage well with people with disabilities
- Ensure the pastor is modeling appropriate language and actions toward people with disabilities
- Invite families with disabilities to have dinner together



- Provide day programming for people with developmental disabilities
- Host various inclusive activities throughout the week (e.g., devotional times, exercise classes, art classes)
- Connect college students to opportunities to facilitate inclusive church and community activities
- Provide support for transitioning into adulthood
- Offer intergenerational ministry opportunities e.g., Bible studies, events)
- Equip older children and youth students to serve younger children and youth as mentors
- Reach out to families mid-week to ask about and prepare for any anticipated needs for Sunday
- Offer childcare during support group meetings
- Offer to host meetings or events at your church for community disability organizations
- Support friendships for children and youth with disabilities by offering inclusive social opportunities with similarage congregation members

• Establish a support network where someone can accompany people with developmental disabilities in community activities (e.g., mini golf, movies)

**ROUND 2** 

- Go to ball games and concerts together
- Be a friend to others
- Provide short-term and long-term respite opportunities for parents
- Establish a network of people who regularly provide meals and visits to group homes
- Work alongside state agencies
- Make sure that there is always someone available within the church community to provide assistance and support
- Provide families with contact information for communication and support
- Nurture a sense of community among families and volunteers
- Establish a routine of reaching out via phone to say hello, encourage social connections, and offer support
- Host trainings for church members
- Send invitations well in advance to allow enough time to arrange transportation and plan for other necessary supports
- Develop a spreadsheet of the gifts, services, and abilities congregation members are willing to offer (e.g., shopping, childcare, cleaning, working out together)



## FAITH MATTERS

in the lives of many people with disabilities and their families. Like anyone else, we want to know and be known by God, to love and be loved by our neighbor, to serve and be served by others, to live into our calling and to be part of a caring community. Like anyone else.

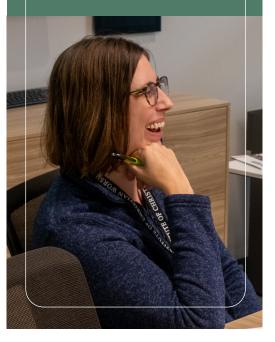


- Identify partners, friends, or buddies for companionship
- Use photos and videos to increase awareness and engagement around disability access
- Ensure that Vacation Bible School (VBS) and other summer programs are accessible to children with disabilities
- Administer a food pantry and grocery shopping project to support community members in need
- Engage in recycling projects and sorting
- Offer group craft projects together
- Organize social activities to provide a welcoming place for people to gather and hang out
- Invite members with disabilities to dinner and get to know them better
- Establish a transportation network that can support people with disabilities to get to and from work
- Develop a mentoring program to grow one-on-one friendships
- Offer opportunities to engage in hobbies and musical activities together
- Visit people in their homes
- Schedule shopping and errands together
- Identify volunteer opportunities and share them widely
- Hold a dance party
- Provide a resource guide for families on navigating community services and supports
- Provide phone calls or meals during the week to support the well-being of church members with disabilities
- Create a support network that wraps around families, recognizing the roles of interdependent

The church stories of people with disabilities and their family are rarely lukewarm.

Some people talk about their church as the most welcoming place in the community.

Others describe their church experiences as wounding and hurtful.





3 How could we work together to make this a vision in more area churches?

- Bring together groups of churches to discuss how we can all be more accessible and inclusive
- Partner with local colleges and universities to find volunteers
- Develop partnerships with faith-based disability organizations in the community

THRE

- Involve people with disabilities in decision making
- Invite churches to visit and see examples of accessible or innovative ministries
- Partner with local non-profits to provide educational opportunities to churches
- Rotate the hosting of training opportunities across churches
- Forge connections among churches that have shared ministry interests
- Host Bible studies for adults with developmental disabilities in a variety of homes
- Pray together for more shared ministry opportunities
- Bring people together for "community conversations" about this issue
- Host Zoom gatherings to connect people who feel isolated and lonely
- Identify disability professionals who can meet with and provide training to churches
- Identify ministry models that are working well and invite churches to learn about them
- Bring together church leaders who are involved in disability and ministry
- Host a conference focused on accessibility that involves the disability community
- Use social media to cast a collective vision for inclusion
- Host virtual gatherings of leaders to explore collaborations
- Host a book club and invite other churches

- Create and share short videos
- Facilitate a Friendship Group or support inclusive small groups within your church
- Share the church stories of families, including those who have felt excluded
- Encourage churches to reflect on their practices and connect with other congregations that are strong in areas of weakness
- Create a resource map of area churches to inventory available supports and programs
- Host sensory friendly events together with other churches
- Find people who are also trying to create belonging within church and begin to network.
- Attend community conversations or other local events to hear directly from those within your community

There are more than 600 churches in the Grand Rapids area. Each of these churches is called to be a place of community, sanctuary, belonging, and embrace. **OUR CHURCHES ARE** 

INCOMPLETE WITHOUT THE PRESENCE, GIFTS, FRIENDSHIP, AND FAITH OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES.

- Create a video highlighting the use of sensory tools
- Attend conferences to learn more and discover practical resources
- Find parachurch ministries that can consult with your church
- Find ways of connecting to local group homes
- Connect people to churches that serve their needs when your own church cannot do so
- Create a consulting group that can visit churches to support programs and encourage leadership
- Create a program that supports people with developmental disabilities of all ages so parents can participate in church
- Engage college students to get more community involvement and support for your church
- Train students in local seminaries on disability theology
- Read books from disabled authors
- Follow e-newsletters from organizations or other churches that are doing disability ministry well
- Share concerns across denominations
- Work together as churches to addresses accessibility fully
- Tell stories that encourage and challenge each other
- Assist church councils to catch the vision for this work
- Use advertising and social media to tell people about churches have to offer
- Make a space for those who care and have a vision for belonging

### ROUND 3

In one study, researchers found that **ONE IN THREE FAMILIES** left their church because their child with disabilities was not welcomed or included.

- Celebrate awareness months citywide
- Connect with popular Christian artists to bring awareness to disability
- Organize a network of churches around this issue
- Show respect for what other churches are doing
- Come together to pray and discuss common issues
- Create video resources to educate church leaders on disability and cast vision for disability ministry
- Build meaningful relationships with people with disabilities
- Host regular gatherings focused on specific topics to educate the community
- Connect with nonprofits that work with people with disabilities and their families
- Provide training and education on disability-related topics
- Host a disability symposium
- Support community housing for people with disabilities
- Survey people with disabilities and involve them in conversations about community-wide movements



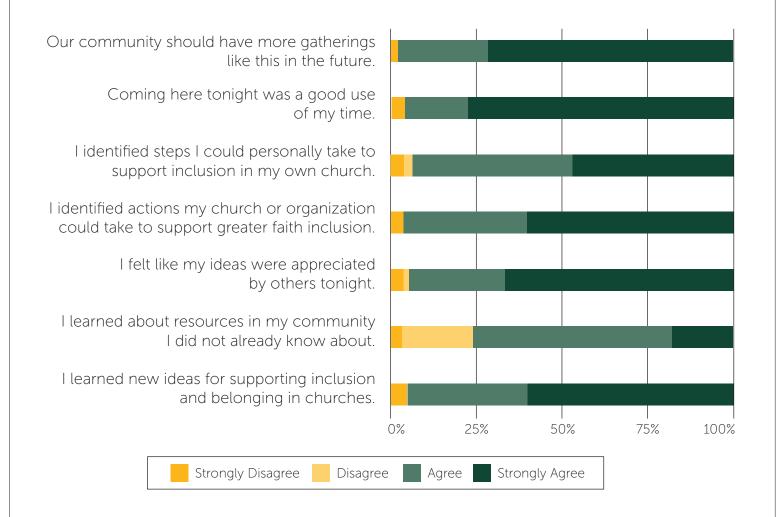
- Connect with other churches either within or across denominations to become better acquainted with what they offer
- Host a local forum to discuss disabilityrelated supports and ministries available
- Connect with other churches to increase awareness of available resources (e.g., ASL interpretation)
- Host monthly citywide gatherings for church leaders
- Help connect families to disability-related resources
- Host a form for disability organizations, business leaders, educators, attorneys, church leaders, and others to network
- Provide a single and easy-to-use website where people with disabilities can obtain information
- Provide workshops on the theology of disability
- Identify helpful books that churches can use to learn about this area of ministry
- Create a welcoming church environment for all people
- Be a resource and guide to local families
- Host social events as outreach and community building opportunities



- Support local nonprofits that serve people with disabilities financially
- Establish cohorts for clergy to learn about disability ministry and supports
- Participate in local Special Olympics events
- Share positive stories about disability inclusion to encourage one another
- Promote housing options that provide a stable and supportive living situation for people with developmental disabilities
- Learn from other churches
- Be intentional in nurturing relationships among churches
- Create an online discussion board to exchange ideas
- Offer small-group book studies
- Bring leaders together to strategize and lead disability initiatives
- Communicate meeting details widely so people are aware of events
- Partner with outside organizations to host events and share information
- Educate one another through conversations
- Normalize disability ministry
- Advocate to leaders
- Visit churches outside of your own denomination
- Pray together with community churches to foster a regional perspective
- Secure pastoral support to grow your inclusion efforts
- Promote community awareness by breaking down silos and fostering inclusivity in churches and beyond
- Create a database of community resources
- Hold a quarterly community partners lunch
- Conduct focus groups with people with disabilities
- Create an app or website that can list welcoming and accessible churches
- Share information by tagging organizations on social media
- Have a team of churches that rotate hosting inclusive opportunities



## Below is a summary of what attendees said about the event on an anonymous survey.



BAYLOR CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

## THIS COMMUNITY CONVERSATION EVENT WAS HOSTED BY THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS:



### Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

for the study and renewal of worship





Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities | bcdd.soe.baylor.edu Calvin Institute of Christian Worship | worship.calvin.edu Calvin University | calvin.edu With Ministries | withministries.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS EVENT AND ITS FINDINGS, CONTACT ERIK CARTER AT THE BAYLOR CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY.