



Beacon Church Collaborative

**Digital Archive**



# BCC Digital Archive

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# Beacon Church Collaborative

Date	Link to Audio Recording
March 3, 2022	<a href="#"><u>First Meeting Audio Link</u></a>
June 2, 2022	<a href="#"><u>Second Meeting Audio Link</u></a>
August 4, 2022	<a href="#"><u>Third Meeting Audio Link</u></a>
March 9, 2023	<a href="#"><u>Fourth Meeting Audio Link</u></a>
June 1, 2023	<a href="#"><u>Fifth Meeting Audio Link</u></a>
August 3, 2023	<a href="#"><u>Sixth Meeting Audio Link</u></a>



Bridge Disability Ministries

# Meeting Summary- March 3, 2022

*This meeting had two guest speakers, who also participated in the discussion.*

## Topic: How Can We Become a Welcoming Church to People with Disabilities?"

Guest Speaker 1:

Anna Dickman - *Spiritual Connections Assistant, Bridge Disability Ministries*

Anna shared about her personal experiences with disability and the church. She highlighted physical and social barriers to her access to faith communities. She mentioned how she was treated by congregants when her attendance waned. She also expressed the loneliness and hopelessness she felt when she was excluded from these communities and explained the barriers to finding more accessible ones- namely lack of information about accessibility, and lack of community inclusion when she was unable to attend in-person frequently.

Guest Speaker 2:

Spencer Miller, *Ministry Relations Manager Northwest, Joni & Friends*

Spencer covered a strategy to becoming a welcoming church:

### **1. Move from Ignorance to Awareness**

Work on church education and culture

### **2. Identify the Barriers**

Physical & Social

Ask people with disabilities about their experiences in your congregation

Can people with disabilities access EVERY ministry of the church?

### **3. Remove the Barriers**

Make a Plan & incorporate it into your goals and budget

Commit your plans to the Lord

Offer congregants hands-on involvement with the disability community

Consider if the Holy Spirit calls your congregation to minister to a specific disability community via a specialized help such as ASL interpreters, an accessible bathroom with an adult changing table, a sensory room, special considerations for the immune-compromised, or other such considerations

### **4. Move from serving to Friendship and Contribution**

The importance of viewing folks with disabilities as equals who can contribute to our communities rather than people we do things for. We must not neglect those with needs; but rather, we need to listen to their perspectives with respect.

We must also remember that people with disabilities are given Spiritual Gifts and are therefore essential to the health and function of the church.

# Meeting Summary- March 3, 2022

General Notes from the discussion:

**Question: Has your church identified any barriers to accessibility, and if so- what did you do about it?**

**Answers:** One church identified that they needed automatic doors. First, they addressed the outside entrances. Later, they realized the sanctuary was still lacking accessible doors, so after raising the necessary funds, they were able to make that happen as well. They also placed disability identifiers on the sanctuary floor to reserve space for wheelchairs and help those who needed that space, find it easily.

We touched briefly on the fact that it is important to PUBLICIZE events and accommodations which the disability community can enjoy because most folks with disabilities will feel that it is better to be lonely at home than to be lonely at a church where you cannot enter the sanctuary or use the restroom. They will assume a space is inaccessible/unsafe for them unless expressly stated otherwise, often due to the frequency of facing such problems.

It was also mentioned that there was a church who placed a sign out front of their church building which affirms the inclusion of folks with disabilities and this was celebrated in the discussion because if a church has a mission statement about “inclusion” or “welcoming everyone”, then it needs to explicitly stated.

**Question: How can we find out how to accommodate people without asking rude or invasive questions about their health history? Or what if they don't have a diagnosed or recognized disability?**

**Answers:** Have greeters ask EACH person who enters: “What accommodations would make this service/event more comfortable for you?”

It is important not to assume physical or mental ability based on physical appearance, lack of mobility aid (such as wheelchair or walker), or the length of time you have known a person. People often develop disabilities over time or have the same condition which worsens.

Asking people what they need takes the focus off of asking them to explain WHY something is needed to simply focusing on the practical decisions at hand such as: Where to seat them, how to ensure they can engage in worship and fellowship, and access a bathroom when needed (bathrooms need to be accessible discreetly and with dignity; folks will forgo a toilet if they need to be carried down a flight of stairs by strangers, even if the strangers are well-intentioned).

**DISCUSSION CHALLENGE:** Churches challenged to have their greeters/hospitality teams ask, “What accommodations would make this service/event more comfortable for you?” and then return to our next meeting with notes about which accommodations they COULD make for congregants/visitors, and which ones they could NOT.

**Question: How we can learn more about disability etiquette?**

**Answers:** Immersive experiences like the camp hosted by Joni & Friends is a great way to learn.

Additionally...

# Meeting Summary- March 3, 2022

Bridge Spiritual Connections webpage also has a Resource Library which is continually updated. And there are YouTube videos and blog articles by people with disabilities which can be very helpful. These articles can be broad like disability etiquette or more specific like information about certain health conditions and how they impact ability and lifestyle.

**Question: What can a church do when folks with disabilities require accommodations that cannot be met by a particular church- Should they be directed to a church which can accommodate them? Is there a resource listing among churches with this information?**

**Answers:** This is the purpose of Bridge's Beacon Church Collaborative- to make these connections and find this information. Perhaps a listing can be created that is organized by church and accommodation and made available to all churches.

In some situations, creative thinking can mitigate the problem. For example, if a person can access the sanctuary but not the fellowship hall, ensure that a few congregants spend time with them in the sanctuary or foyer during the allocated fellowship time.

We should also consider that some folks can never attend in-person, and we should be considering how to meet those people where they are so that church services are accessible to them.

During the discussion, a story was shared concerning a person who has cerebral palsy. While his disability can make his speech very slow at times, he has sharp intellect and a deep knowledge of history and language which contribute richly to the Roots and Wings Bible study. Learning to have patience with this friend's slow speech was part of the attitude shift that helped them understand the value and equality of congregants with disabilities.

**The discussion ended with the point that it's important for us to adjust our hearts to the fact that our friends with disabilities have a lot to contribute, even though it may look or sound different from how others contribute.**

# Meeting Summary– June 2, 2022

## Topic: Moving from Ignorance to Awareness: Church Education and Culture

**Question 1:** Did any of your churches do what we talked about at our last meeting- having greeters ask every guest how they can accommodate their needs/facilitate a comfortable way for them to participate?

If so, what were the results of that practice?

- *Were there requests which were easy to accommodate?*
- Were there any requests you were not able to accommodate?
- Did any guests who requested accommodations return on other Sundays?

### **Answers:**

Participants from our last meeting met with their church hospitality team and gave them this question.

Congregants seemed to feel more comfortable making conversational requests for accommodations, even if not necessarily in the moment they were asked.

There was a need for sound system modifications which still needs to be addressed. One person didn't know what kinds of accommodations would help their hip pain, only that the chairs were uncomfortable. The group discussed some ways to navigate these situations- such as suggesting a variety of simple accommodations (a cushion, a place to elevate feet, a good place to stand and pace). It was also noted that accommodations will only be utilized if a person can do so with social dignity; they may not want accommodations if it causes congregants to stare or be otherwise visibly disrupted.

We also spent time discussing the challenges to making services accessible to those who are hard of hearing. Several suggestions were shared from ways to use the sound system, to ways of arranging the service to make it more accessible (this included having text to follow for the sermon, and reserved seating near the front if a projector is the primary way to read along).

### **Question 2:**

**What are 2 or 3 questions you could ask a new acquaintance to help them feel you see THEM and not just their disability?**

**Answers:** Basic small-talk type questions: “How are you?” “What did you do this week?”

One person pointed out the importance of following up about things you remember about a person you've already met- things they've expressed concern about, hobbies they enjoy, etc.

Another person said they like to ask a person's opinion about something- whether that be the sermon, the weather, a new song, anything! And he said another way he likes to help folks feel valued is to ask for their help (in ways they are able). For example, “Do you know which way the sanctuary is?”

# Meeting Summary– June 2, 2022

## **Question 3:**

### **How does it change your perspective to learn that almost every person will develop a disability within their lifetime?**

Participants thought about this for a while. One person said it helps them to think of everyone being equal instead of from different groups.

*How can this help us think of people with disabilities as equals who are simply in a different stage of life?*

Participants said it's important for them to remember that disability can onset at any age, for any number of reasons. No one is guaranteed perfect health or ability. Considering the needs of the disability community is really considering our own needs too.

## **Question 4:**

### **How do you and your fellow congregants treat members who only attend once every few weeks or months? What kinds of thoughts do you have about people who do not participate regularly?**

Participants had varying responses- some said their congregations struggled more with these kinds of perceptions than others.

### **What are some reasons a person may not be able to be in-person very often?**

Participants discussed various reasons attendance can be different/challenging- from limited energy/ chronic fatigue to issues with schedule, accessibility, or even the availability of childcare/caregivers for dependents. Some medical treatments are also specifically administered over weekends because they cause severe side effects. Folks with mental health conditions may self-isolate for periods of time. Additionally, those with compromised immune systems may be selective about which kinds of gatherings they feel safe attending.

### **Knowing these common causes for absence, how has your attitude shifted?**

One participant shared concern about how to help people feel included when they struggle with these things. What can we say to ensure that people know it's okay to participate at their own pace, but also shows we recognize absence and want to mitigate it when possible?

One participant shared that in her experience of feeling excluded by the church, what would have made a difference would have been a few congregants reaching out and saying something like, "Hey, we have missed you at church! Do you need anything to be able to attend and enjoy our events? Or, would you like someone to check in on you every so often?" She shared that when folks don't know what to say, they tend to avoid interaction completely.

### **How do you think this understanding could be shared with your congregation?**

One group member added that their church has a committee who follows up with folks who haven't been at church in a while. She said having an organized system helps prevent anyone from slipping through the cracks.

It was also added that when leaders make announcements to new members about how to get involved, they could use inclusive options such as offering multiple choice options to select how frequent, or what type of, involvement a person is comfortable with on a questionnaire. There could even be space to request accommodations. This would help congregants and newcomers alike see that church culture will respect each member, regardless of how often they are able to attend in-person.



# Meeting Summary– June 2, 2022

## **What could you say when you hear gossip that is rooted in misunderstanding?**

Defend those who are spoken ill of. It could be something as simple as, “There are many valid reasons a person may not be able to show up every Sunday” or, “I prefer not to gossip.” Let’s also remember that passive aggressive prayers can be hurtful; and it’s rude to bring up sensitive subjects in group prayer if the person who shared it with you has not consented to it.

## **Question 5:**

**Sometimes people think or say phrases like “There by the grace of God go I” when interacting with someone who has a disability. This cliché is often seen as a statement of compassion, but when we reflect more deeply- what does it really say?**

One group member shared about how hearing this phrase became very painful after her husband was diagnosed with a chronic, terminal illness. She felt that it implied that those who were facing challenges were somehow beyond God’s grace.

Another group member shared that she’s had a similar experience living with genetic disease at an age when her peers are frequently posting family announcements. Seeing phrases like, “We are so glad God blessed us with this HEALTHY baby” is hurtful to those who know what it’s like to experience the other side of that mentality. Those who experience miscarriages as well as those who are born with deformities or genetic disease aren’t less precious to God. Healthy children aren’t a reward that God gives to “good” people. God isn’t dividing his children into categories based on ability nor is he expecting every person’s body to function perfectly either.

It was shared that God is never surprised by disability. He anticipates it the way he anticipates everything else and he has a plan for every person regardless of ability. His family is diverse just as he designed it and everyone has a place in it.

**How do you think congregant attitudes may shift over time if leadership became more intentional about how they taught on subjects which often make folks with disabilities feel excluded?**

**(For example, having more tenderness when approaching stories about physical healing, changing prayer etiquette, and adding modifiers to phrases about sitting, standing, kneeling, and clapping)**

**Can you think of some ways your leadership could help shift attitudes with the type of language they use?**

One member shared that their congregation already modifies these action phrase to “as able”, but they think more could be done. Maybe another approach could be, “You may express your devotion through whichever posture you feel comfortable and moved toward.”

Another participant shared that their congregation has a very academic/intellectual focus. They could see how it would feel exclusive to folks with cognitive disabilities. Could they perhaps place less emphasis on memorization and book knowledge as a congregation? What would this look like?

One member expressed that their leadership has done a beautiful job of allowing space to listen to and validate those with speech impediments and cognitive disabilities during their prayer time. He said that it’s important to recognize the Holy Spirit understands utterances we cannot, because he can see our hearts. We should celebrate when those with disabilities feel safe to engage in worship, prayer, and every other activity of the church.

# Meeting Summary– August 4, 2022

Topic: Identifying the Barriers to Inclusion

Guest Speakers: Crystal Martin and Nate Alden

The focus of this meeting was identifying barriers to inclusion within our own congregations. Some of these barriers will be physical, but many will be emotional/social as well. Please remember that we can only make progress if we are honest about our flaws; every criticism is meant to be constructive.

The most important thing to take away from this conversation is this: **you can only accurately identify barriers if you seek the perspectives of the people who are being blocked by the barriers.** We ultimately go over some ways to gather this information, but first, we hear from two guest speakers who have experience with being excluded due to their disabilities.

First we introduced Crystal, long-time friend and volunteer with Bridge. Our moderator asked her if she would tell us about an experience she had that prevented her from participating in part church activities that she wanted to join?

Crystal told us about how she had tried to join a bible study group that was supposed to be inclusive. The woman leading the group proceeded to call Crystal on the phone repeatedly, to be included in the group comfortably and safely. She was occasionally absent or late, or would need to eat during a meeting due to the struggle of using Access transportation service. She also could not take notes by hand. Because of how aggressively this woman tried to change and exclude Crystal, she chose not to continue trying to be part of that study group.

Our moderator asked Crystal what barriers made her feel excluded in this specific scenario.

Crystal responded by telling us she was made to feel like she was an inconvenience or a burden. She felt the people in the group couldn't be bothered to try to include her.

Our next speaker was Nate, who leads our monthly accessible bible-study group. The moderator asked him about any experience he had that prevented him from participating in a church the way he wanted to join?

Nate told us about when he was younger and visiting different churches with his friends. He went to a "tent revival" in which the minister fixated on trying to "heal" Nate by exorcising demons from his body. Naturally this did not work- it's not demons which have put Nate in a chair, but rather cerebral palsy. Not only was this offensive, but uncomfortable to have the attention drawn to him like something was wrong with him. He told us that because of this experience he avoided religion for nearly two decades. It was only after finding a congregation which welcomed him as he is which he became willing to give faith another try.

Our moderator asked him what barriers he felt he faced during his experience.

# Meeting Summary– August 4, 2022

Nate answered that he felt hurt that people thought they needed to “fix” him- that they did not want him to participate as the disabled man that he is. He also felt disrespected and unequal how the attention was all drawn to him and he did not get a chance to participate in any regular activities like worship, prayer, or communion.

Moderator transitioned to discussion on these points: The barriers which may make a person feel unwelcome can vary. And, usually when a person is hurt like in the stories shared today, they do not return to a congregation. This can make it challenging to find out what needs to change to make your church a welcoming and inclusive space. Questions to Nate and Crystal were highly encouraged.

One participant made a very eloquent point about how teaching needs to shift in the church. If the congregation gains a better understanding of Christ’s interactions and teachings about disability, it will be reflected in how they treat one another.

Another asked Crystal and Nate what they look for in a safe space.

Their answers were essentially the same- neither one wanted to be met with attempted healing, they may look to see if there is any explicitly mentioned disability ministry or accommodations online/in promotional content (but they will be wary of this), and just like anyone else they both choose their communities based on personal interests and where the Holy Spirit pulls them. Crystal said she takes note on the attitudes of congregants when she wants to participate in an activity.

The next question for Nate and Crystal was about how the pandemic influences accessibility at churches.

Nate answered that he appreciated congregations which prioritized setting up a good livestream for their services. He mentioned that many did not prioritize this and it made participation too much of a challenge for himself and many others.

Crystal shared that it has been increasingly difficult to find afternoon/evening and Saturday services. Mornings are a huge challenge for her to arrange due to physical conditions as well as transportation. Our moderator, who lives with chronic illness, agreed that night services have been a challenge to find in recent years.

One participant shared about asking a congregant about his experience at her church through his hearing aid. She said she was humbled to learn his biggest concern was being a distraction to others or meeting social scorn. After that she also learned that some improvements needed to be made to their accommodations for him. She was thankful she had asked and encouraged other participants to do the same.

We closed on our challenge:

**Ask your congregation during an announcement: “Do any of you feel excluded from church activities or ministries which are important to you due to lack of disability accommodation and/or etiquette?” Offer an anonymous way for congregants to respond- either on written paper, or maybe at the confessional. \*We included materials to collect this information in a follow-up email with participants and would be glad to share with you. Email [annad@bridgemin.org](mailto:annad@bridgemin.org) and request BCC Q3 Challenge Materials.**

# Meeting Summary- March 9, 2023

## **Becoming a Welcoming Church: Let's Ponder and Plan**

Leaders: Jackie Kieszek and Anna Dickman

Number of Participants: 10

Number of Churches: 5

This meeting involved a lot of reflection questions as the Spiritual Connections team wanted to discern the best direction to steer the group in 2023.

Those of you who were involved last year- What did you learn through the Beacon Church Collaborative meetings of 2022?

One member answered that she learned about outreach. She became more aware of ways to find fellowship with people who cannot attend church every week.

Another group member answered that he appreciated having a group to hold him & his congregation accountable to their inclusion goals.

He also learned to ask every person what they need, and that accommodations can be very individual. He learned how to focus this question on needs rather than diagnosis to respect the dignity & privacy of every person.

What did you learn and/or appreciate at our Table Talk in October 2022?

One participant appreciated the presence of members of the local disability community to advocate and educate. He said it's not always easy to gain that perspective, and it was helpful to hear from each of these people.

A different group participant found continued encouragement in the concept of ministering *with* rather than *to*.

The next question was a bit more challenging. What have you learned about your congregation this past year as you have engaged with the disability community?

Several participants agreed It's been hard to get enthusiastic participation, especially from volunteers and congregants since we have come out of the pandemic. And many acknowledged this has been for very valid reasons. Some expressed that COVID increased congregations awareness of accessibility in some ways; some changes (such as zoom worship and prayer groups) have been a benefit to both the church and the disability community.

A beautiful observation was that church members have been remembering guests.

One member realized his church was accessible in many ways except for the fire safety exits as these emergency precautions were not an aspect of accessibility they had considered. Anna referred the group to these links:

[Red Cross Inclusive Disaster Preparedness](#) and [ADA Measurement Guide](#)

# Meeting Summary- March 9, 2023

Next, the group was asked: What did your church do in the past 12 months to become more inclusive, accessible, and inviting? As part of this question we reviewed the 10 dimensions of belonging that Erik Carter presented during our Table Talk Conference in 2022.

The 10 elements that a person needs to feel they belong in a community are: Present, Invited, Welcomed, Known, Accepted, Cared For, Supported, Befriended, Needed, and Loved. Participants were gently reassured by moderators that these could be small steps like attending the annual BCC conference or sharing our devotional with their Bible study group, or replacing tricky faucets and heavy doors.

One group member shared many things their church has done:

- They enlarged the font on their church program/pamphlet that has announcements
- They introduced fidget toys into the children's areas
- They release podcast sermons for folks to listen to remotely
- They have attended Bridge events
- They purchased audio equipment to facilitate better hearing aid accessibility
- They remembered to consider accessibility and inclusion for every age group

Another member listed a resource he found- the "Beyond Suffering Bible".

One participant said that as they've had new training seminars for staff at his church, they have been incorporating disability etiquette and some basic safety training into their programs.

What does your congregation plan to do or what are they already doing to further these goals in the coming year?

One group member mentioned working toward accessible bathrooms and needing to install the hearing aid tech they had purchased for the building.

Another shared his excitement about Bridging Hearts Easter bag deliveries at area Adult Family Homes.

One church's goal is to produce a video of their layout and accessibility accommodations to publish to their main website (this was celebrated by the group members who live with disabilities)

Another goal involved seeking a grant from a Lutheran institution to further education about inclusion and etiquette, possibly in partnership with Bridge

Next, we asked our participants: Do you feel the need for more discussion time during our meetings, or more study?

Participants said they would enjoy some deeper dives into theology and church culture, perhaps via scriptures or books.

We shared a short devotion from *Disabled and Devoted* (2022 edition) and ended in a closing prayer.

# Meeting Summary– June 1, 2023

## Disability and Practical Theology

Leaders: Jackie Kieszek and Anna Dickman    Guest Speaker: David Anderson

Number of Participants: 15

Number of Churches: 7

**This meeting featured a talk by author and educator David Anderson, followed by discussion time. At the end we recommended books and resources.**

David Anderson's Talk:

Is your church disabled? A fully able church . . .

- Includes individuals and families affected by disability (Luke 14:21ff)
- Is a "judgment-free" zone (cf. Matthew 19:14)
- Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."
- Ministry is led by and not merely for people with disabilities

The absence of people with disabilities in a church suggests:

- The heart of the gospel is not fully understood
- Misconceptions about disability and people who are disabled
- Wrongly connecting disability with sin and punishment
- Incorrectly equating "good" health as God being pleased, and with being spiritually "strong"
- Misinterpreting scriptural promises and stories

Why do most churches fail to reach out to people with disabilities?

- Our thoughts are self-directed
- We think we are "normal" and fear difference
- We are uncomfortable around people who have a disability
- Lack of relationship/not knowing where to begin
- The assumption that all disabilities cause suffering
- Assumption that people with disabilities cannot contribute to their faith communities
- We have an incorrect biblical/theological understanding of disability

There are many reasons that people with disabilities may not attend church. Here are some of the most common reasons:

- They have PTSD from negative church experiences
- They struggle to find congregations which are accessible & safe (due to lack of outreach, and lack of information about accessibility)
- Fear of being wrongly judged, or simply ignored by the able-bodied church members
- Assumption there will be resistance to having their disabled child participate in Sunday school or youth activities

If the church fails to engage in disability ministry, it has severe implications for both the church and the community we fail to reach. There are **two main ways the church fails: ignoring or excluding** people with disabilities and **failing to reach out** to people with disabilities.

# Meeting Summary– June 1, 2023

When the church ignores or excludes, the consequences are:

- Diminishing the humanity of those excluded or ignored
- Diminishing the church
- Diminishing the humanity of those *doing* the excluding or ignoring

When the church fails to reach out, the consequences are:

- Furthering the already chronic isolation of people with disabilities
- Isolating the Church
- Limiting our own spiritual development
- Dishonoring God

Because the church is the body of Christ, it is supposed to be on the side of people who are marginalized.

- The church must recognize that people with disabilities have spiritual gifts *essential* to the health of our congregations
- The church needs to be a physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe place for people with disabilities
- The church is called to proclaim and show that God's kingdom is inclusive (book of Acts)

We worship a God who values our weaknesses. There are countless biblical examples of God doing great work through limited people and limited resources. Some of these examples include:

- Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, the Widow with flour and oil to sustain Elijah (1 Kings 17), the young girl to point Naaman to Elisha (2 Kings 5), a child to teach disciples humility (Matthew 18:1-6), David, Mary, Jesus' disciples

"God's story in Scripture uses these characters to highlight their weakness, their inability, their brokenness. And in so doing, God's glory and God's grace are magnified all the more!" Quote from Michael S. Beates (2012), *Disability & the Gospel*, p. 25.

As believers, we have **confused** a **cure** with **healing**.

*A cure is the permanent eradication of a disease or disability.*

- Jesus sometimes miraculously cured a person of their disability or illness in order to demonstrate that he is God-incarnate
- Jesus did not cure everyone who had a disability
- Everyone with a disability or chronic illness does not have to be cured; it is not a scriptural promise to be healthy or "able"

*Healing indicates a change in relationship. This can be healing in relationship with God, or with other people.*

The Church is meant to bring spiritual healing, not physical cures. So how do we become a healing church to people living with disabilities?



# Meeting Summary– June 1, 2023

How do we become a healing church to people living with disabilities?

- Build and maintain a caring relationship
- Regularly share teaching that affirms the value of people with disabilities
- Invite people with disabilities to lead, serve, and contribute in a variety of ways
- Welcome different ways of worship (for example- when a person shouts with joy, or jumps up and down)
- Embrace the whole gospel by demonstrating:
  - Love for others
  - Commitment to justice
  - Value for the presence and giftedness of people of all abilities
  - Proclamation & demonstration of the good news

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Colossians 3:12—14

Acceptance and welcome are not the same as belonging; reliable access alone does not reflect true belonging (though it can be a first step). Developing a genuine relationship is needed to feel acceptance and belonging. To belong, you need to not only be present; you need to be missed when you are not present. To miss someone you need to love them and/or rely on them as a member of the community.

Toward a theology of belonging:

2 Corinthians 5:20	“Christ’s ambassadors”
Romans 8:16, 1 John 3:1-2	“Children of God”
Matthew 28:18-20	“Take gospel to all people groups”
Philippians 2:4-5	“Have the same attitude as Christ”
Luke 10:25-27	“who is my neighbor?”
Matthew 25:40	“as you have done to the least”
John 13:12-17	“I have set you an example”
2 Corinthians 3:3	“You are a letter from Christ”

Erik Carter’s work explores “10 dimensions of belonging”- these are 10 elements of community that are necessary for a person to really feel they belong and are valued. These 10 dimensions are: Being present, being invited, welcomed, known, being accepted as is, being cared for, supported, befriended, needed, and loved.

Many of us think of church as a place where everyone knows your name; its what most of us crave. **Belonging is not a special need; it’s a universal human need.** Change is needed not *because* someone with a disability *is* present, but so *that* someone with a disability *can be* present.



# Meeting Summary– June 1, 2023

Some practical ways of ministering to individuals and families with disabilities include:

- Accept them as they are
- Welcome, serve, teach & befriend
- Invite them to contribute and serve as they are able
- Include them in fellowship groups, Bible studies, events, church meetings, vacation Bible school, camps, and retreats
- Treat them with dignity and kindness
- Defend them before others, and refute gossip about them
- Ensure greeters & hospitality teams are trained in disability etiquette and first aid
- listen to them and verbally encourage them
- help with errands and/or household tasks if they express need for it (*some will prefer help from their professional caregivers, or may value their independence*)
- Ensure Sunday school teachers and nursery staff/volunteers are trained in disability etiquette as well as basic first aid regarding: severe allergies, seizures, diabetes, hypermobility, and safe handling of immunocompromised people (*these trainings are simple and can even be completed by teens*)

**With both individuals and families the important factor is this: Build a relationship!**

*At this point we opened up the meeting for discussion and questions. We began by asking our participants if they had any questions for David.*

The first question that was brought up came from a participant who has both personal and professional experience with people with disabilities. She said that when new acquaintances learn about her career choices and personal relationships, they say things like “Oh you are such a saint!” or “I could never do that kind of thing, but I guess some people are just gifted.”

Her question was: **What is the best way to respond to these remarks politely, while informing people that everyone can engage with people with disabilities? How do we explain it is not a special talent that can only be wielded by a rare few?**

Several participants chimed in to say that they have encountered these same remarks before as well; each person offered their usual responses:

“I’m told to love people. These people need love just like any other. God loves them and I try to live in God’s will.”

“I do not actually believe that is true– here’s why.”

“I think anyone is capable of this, and that God wants us to participate in this.”

“This is my community. I like to be with them and to help them.”

“Why would I not want to be involved? These people are just as worthy of love and connection as anyone else.”

One group member shared that she has been guilty in the past of making ignorant remarks. She did not grow up around disability and was unaware of how isolating these words could be. She said something that really made a change for her was when she read David’s book *Reaching Out and Bringing In*. It convicted her to make disability inclusion a serious part of her faith.

Another participant shared a personal story about how they had felt discouraged when they were first engaging in disability ministry, because they saw so much need but could not “do it all.” They said that their turning point also came through a good book– this one was titled *I Can’t Walk so I’ll Learn to Dance*. The book taught them that they could and should overcome their anxieties, because they have something to contribute. It showed them it’s less complicated than they expected. “Just be present.” There’s no special qualifications or degree needed.

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Anna made a comment after that, that it is good to remind people that engaging with the disability community is just that. Social engagement. When people with disabilities need specialized caregiving or nursing, they rely on professionals who are certified to do those tasks.

**The next comment came from a participant who lives with a disability. They said that they appreciated that David’s talk validated church trauma as a reason that people with disabilities may either struggle to attend or choose not to attend church.**

They mentioned that they previously left the church after very traumatic experiences, and only returned to a church at all because of their deep need for community. They mentioned that False teaching and physical inaccessibility can be equally traumatizing, especially in a space that is meant to be welcoming.

Anna thanked the participant for sharing and mentioned that while religious trauma is already common in general, it is especially common amongst people with disabilities. She added that once a person has PTSD, their responses to triggering stimuli will not be rational. So a person with religious trauma may not ever be able to enjoy a Sunday morning worship service, or whatever sorts of events and ceremonies are associated with their traumas. It is important to respect trauma triggers as another kind of disability, and create many diverse kinds of community experiences to accommodate. For example, if a person with PTSD is triggered by hearing hymns, they may still be able to enjoy a quiet prayer group or a modern style worship service. It is important to validate their faith even when they must engage with it differently than “normal.”

The next question that was raised was:

**How do we get our churches to care about physical accessibility when they are not required to by law? Has anyone made good progress on this issue?**

David gave a brief answer that sometimes working on the theology and culture in the church can help bend hearts toward wanting to make those changes; but on the other side to that, physical accessibility will mean nothing if church culture and teaching do not reflect the same attitude of inclusion.

(There is also a great deal of information about physical accessibility in our meeting notes on pages 10-11 of this document.)

Another question raised by a group member was:

**When friends with disabilities look for a church, what is appealing to them?**

Participants with disabilities answered this questioned with surprising unity:

Churches need to ADVERTISE and PUBLICIZE their accommodations (or lack thereof). Ideally the church website will have very specific accessibility information.

For example: *“We have 6 disabled parking spaces, all near the front entrance. The entrance has no ramp and 3 small steps up. We have captions & Bluetooth capabilities for our hard-of-hearing guests. There are 3 disability accessible restrooms, one of which has a mid-sized changing table with a weight limit of 80 lbs. Gluten-free communion elements available upon request. Doors are heavy and not automated, but greeters are stationed at every entrance.”*

The second most common concern from members with disabilities was this: Are people with disabilities invited to serve, to participate in small groups, and other community activities? When people with disabilities see members of their own community being valued and celebrated in a faith community, they are much more likely to return.

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**Another member asked more specifically about why people with disabilities might not show up after being personally invited to a church– they asked about what methods of outreach are most effective.**

Anna warned against door-to-door solicitation. She reminded group members that people with religious trauma can be upset when this content is brought into their safe space without warning, and it could deter them from an otherwise welcoming congregation. She encouraged everyone that there are many other great ways to publicly advertise without invading the privacy of strangers (such as via bulletin boards and online ads).

After this, a few group members with disabilities agreed that one common reason an invited person may not attend is the time of day or day of the week. Many people with chronic conditions spend their weekends receiving medical treatments, resting, and otherwise focusing on survival. One way to increase accessibility in this way is by having multiple kinds of services at different times of day– for example a prayer or worship night, Sunday morning lesson, weekday meal or communion service. Mornings can be *especially* difficult for people with disabilities for a multitude of reasons– so keep this in mind when inviting people to services.

Anna added that there will always be some people who are uninterested in church. You cannot make them feel differently than they do. All we can do is show that the space exists, is accessible and welcoming, and trust that God is doing the work in their hearts to get them wherever they need to be.

**One group member asked for recommendations of churches which are welcoming, or what to do with her church that is not, because she has struggled to find community she feels at home with.**

David answered that it can be a real struggle because pastors are not taught about any of this in seminary school. Very few church leaders are aware and involved with disability inclusion. He told her it may be best to try out some different churches if possible.

**The person who asked clarified that their church has a great pastor, but the other congregants have not been as welcoming when they wanted to engage with small groups and volunteer opportunities.** They feared maybe it was not their place to bring it up with leadership.

David shared that leaders cannot do better until they know better; if they are not aware that they are causing issues then they cannot begin to change.

Anna encouraged the group member to gently invite her church leaders or small groups to be part of our Beacon Church Collaborative, Table Talk, and other Bridge Disability Ministries events.

One group member said it can be helpful when members with disabilities make themselves present in uncomfortable situations so that people have to address their own prejudices. Anna quickly followed this with a reminder that people should only do this when they have the emotional fortitude for it, and only with people who are genuinely trying their best to do what is right. If a person is determined not to be respectful or helpful, *please do not endanger yourself for the sake of educating them.*

**Anna then moved into a brief overview of when it is appropriate to pray for physical healing.**

First and foremost: it must be requested *specifically!*

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Compassionate prayers about disability can sound like requesting:

- God's will to be done
- God to comfort them during suffering/uncertainty
- God to guide their doctors, nurses, therapists, and/or caregivers
- Justice and provision with social security applications and hearings
- Successful symptom management through a new therapy or treatment
- Presence of loved ones to alleviate isolation
- Rest and reprieve to recover from a flare in pain and/or fatigue
- Patience from & for the people they encounter who are ignorant

This concluded our discussion time. It was followed by a brief devotion from our upcoming edition of *Disabled and Devoted*.

**After this we recommended David Anderson's books on disability & theology:**

- Toward a Theology of Special Education: Integrating Faith and Practice (2012)
- Reaching Out and Bringing In: Ministry to and with Persons with Disabilities (2013)
- Forty Days: Finding Refuge in the Arc from the Storms of Disability (2018)
- Reading Paul through the Eyes of Disability: Practical Theological Implications for Inclusive Ministry (2021)

Participants were also reminded that our Resource Library has undergone its quarterly update and has some new resources. These can be found at [www.bridgemin.org/resources/](http://www.bridgemin.org/resources/)

We concluded with a prayer.

# Meeting Summary– August 3, 2023

## **Diving Deeper: Continuing the Discussion on Practical Theology**

Leaders: Jackie Kieszek and Anna Dickman

Number of Participants: 7 Number of Churches: 7

**This meeting reviewed some key points from author and educator David Anderson, but dove deeper into discussion questions. Some questions were aimed at our members with disabilities, and some questions were for church leaders.**

### **Review: Why people with disabilities may not go to church:**

- They have PTSD from negative church experiences
- They struggle to find congregations which are accessible & safe (both due to lack of outreach, and lack of information about accessibility)
- Fear of being wrongly judged, or simply ignored by the able-bodied church members
- Assumption there will be resistance to having their disabled child participate in Sunday school or youth activities

*Question for our members with disabilities:*

**What are some adaptations to church schedule/liturgy that would make church more accessible to you?**

Answers:

The first response was from a member with a vision impairment. She stated that it would be helpful for the liturgy, hymn/worship lyrics, and other information to be available in large-print bulletins. She stated that most hymnals and Bibles are too small for her to read.

Another member who has had progressing disabilities, shared that a big concern for her at church is knowing who will be able/willing to help her. She wishes for clearer communication about who she can go to for physical assistance (like eating or finding a seat) when she needs it at a church service or event.

The next response was that offering church services in both the morning and the afternoon/evening can make a big difference for people with disabilities. Many folks feel unwell in the mornings, and Access transportation services tend to be overburdened at that time. Offering churches services in the evening– even if it is just once a month– can increase opportunities for people with disabilities to participate.

The previous point led into another suggestion: for churches to offer weekday opportunities for fellowship. One chronically-ill member mentioned having to receive medical treatments on the weekends, making weekend services impossible to attend.

*One church leader asked:*

# Meeting Summary– August 3, 2023

## **What kind of information about accessibility do you look for before going somewhere?**

### **Where do you look for the information? Do pictures and videos help?**

All of the participants with disabilities were excited to respond to this question. The universal response was that the website is where people with disabilities will seek this information, before considering attending a new venue of any sort. They added that videos are a helpful addition, but should not be the only method of communication. It is important to have text descriptions and measurements as well. Additionally, it is important to include information about multiple kinds of accessibility; not just wheelchair accessibility.

Is there air-filtration for the safety of immunocompromised individuals?

Are the doors heavy?

How wide are doorways?

How tall are steps or thresholds?

How many accessible restrooms are there?

Are there non-gendered/family toilets?

Are young children present for the service or event being advertised?

Is there space to stand and pace or elevate feet if needed?

Are the pews/chairs cushioned or are there cushions for them?

Are the lights all fluorescent?

Is there Bluetooth capability for hearing aids to connect during the sermon?

Is there text to read along on a screen or program?

Is there a drop-off zone for Access vans/cars with ramps?

Are there automatic faucets, soap dispensers, and towel dispensers?

Is there space to fully turn around in a wheelchair in an accessible bathroom stall?

How many accessible parking spaces, and where are they located/how far from entrance?

Accessible fire exits?

Our moderator, Anna, added that even if you do not have many accommodations, it is still important to explain. Such as, “We do have a ramp, but we do not have automatic door openers.” or “We do not have a ramp. We have 3 steps up to the front entrance that are 4 inches each.” Because disabilities are diverse, this is still helpful information for many people.

Another member added that social media stories are a great way to communicate and share accessibility. And, because this is a common source of networking within the disability community, viewing accessibility stories from social media can be a great way for churches to learn more and gain inspiration.

Another member who is a wheelchair user said that he would like to see neighborhood churches collaborating with each other. For example, if one is accessible and another is not, coming together to share facilities and staff/volunteers for certain events. He pointed out that the barrier to accessibility that many congregations are facing is small numbers, so combining resources could benefit everyone. Even sharing facilities so that a mid-week small group could meet in a more accessible space would be a blessing to many.



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## **Additional helpful changes to schedule/liturgy before we move on:**

- a quick warning before music or loud sounds
- liturgy that does not *rely* on getting up and down frequently  
*Foster a culture in which no one feels pressured to hurt their body for the sake of worship, fellowship, or prayer. Trust that God is seeing our hearts.*
- consider accessibility of communion and prayer rituals  
*Organization, consistency, communication, and a safe space for congregants to anonymously share accessibility concerns*
- share liturgy in advance on website/bulletin/newsletter
- give advanced warning when infants and young children will be present

## Review:

**Change is needed not because someone with a disability IS present, but so that someone with a disability CAN be present.**

People with disabilities will not start showing up until there is safe, comfortable space for them to be invited into.

## **Scripture Review:**

Let's consider these familiar scriptures in the context of disability inclusion:

- 2 Corinthians 5:20 ..... "Christ's ambassadors"
- Romans 8:16, 1 John 3:1-2..... "Children of God"
- Matthew 28:18-20..... "Take gospel to all people groups"
- Philippians 2:4-5 ..... "Have the same attitude as Christ"
- Luke 10:25-27....."who is my neighbor?"
- Matthew 25:40....."as you have done to the least"
- John 13:12-17....."I have set you an example"
- 2 Corinthians 3:3....."You are a letter from Christ"

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Colossians 3:12-14

*Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Widow with some flour and oil to sustain Elijah (1 Kings 17), the young girl to point Naaman to Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-12), a little child to teach the disciples humility (Matt. 18:1-6), David, Mary, Jesus' disciples-*

"God's story in Scripture uses these characters to highlight their weakness, their inability, their brokenness. And in so doing, God's glory and God's grace are magnified all the more!"

Michael S. Beates (2012), *Disability & the Gospel*, p. 25.

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**Consider the scriptures and Bible stories that we just reviewed from our last meeting. Did you gain a new perspective on any of them since joining our discussion group?**

One of our members who has slow speech shared that when she tries to engage with strangers they often look uncomfortable and do not respond to her. She asked how to improve those interactions.

Jackie assured them that they should never stop being friendly and confident. People ought to be challenged and exposed to new experiences.

Anna told them she can ask the other person if they need her to repeat herself; often people do not know what is the polite thing to do when they cannot understand someone, and so they freeze or shut down. Once they know they are not offending the disabled person, they are likely to relax.

Jackie asked a participant about a specific outreach ministry she has been involved in, and how she got involved.

**She asked what qualities a person needs to get involved in disability outreach.**

The participant shared that she is naturally the type to like one-on-one conversations, so that is the type of ministry she pursued. It already fits with her interests and personality type. But she also shared that the first few meetings were hard for her. Getting to know people can be challenging, especially when they communicate differently. She said the keys were persistence and patience. With persistence and patience her relationships with these people blossomed into uniquely rewarding friendships.

Two members with disabilities shared about how much of a challenge it is to find and maintain a congregation that is fully comfortable with and welcoming to people with disabilities. One said that she felt the only solution was to increase involvement of people with disabilities and therefore exposure to the disability community in churches.

Education was also mentioned, as members shared about struggles with bringing guide dogs into public spaces. Very few people understand how to respect the boundaries of these working animals, and how it impacts the safety of their owners. Better education about topics like this would improve accessibility and safety.

**Have any of you begun to introduce inclusive teaching into your congregations?**

One member with disabilities shared that the reason she found her church and began going there was due to an “inclusivity statement” they had on their website, which affirmed many diverse ways to worship and show devotion.

Another shared that a pastor at their church signs the benediction at the end of every service.



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## **Have any of you adapted leadership training in your congregations to support accessibility and inclusion?**

One member asked if we had training resources through Bridge– and Anna assured her that we do. We have etiquette training PowerPoints, as well as the Resource Library for Churches and Organizations, which has book recommendations, video & podcast links. E-mail [annad@bridgemin.org](mailto:annad@bridgemin.org) for the Slideshows, and check out [www.bridgemin.org/resources/](http://www.bridgemin.org/resources/) to find the Resource Library.

One church shared that they had greeter/usher training but that it needs to be revisited.

Jackie chimed in to encourage folks to invite leaders from their churches to our in-person conference in October.

## **Review: Confusing a Cure with Healing**

Jesus did cure people of physical ailments. He did not cure every person with a disability that he met during his time on earth, though. He did not promise health or able-bodies on earth.

Jesus can offer relational/spiritual healing to all people and does so constantly. This is available to people of every ability during any stage of life.

## **Summing it up:**

How to become an inclusive church:

- Build and maintain caring relationships
- Regularly share teaching that affirms the value of people with disabilities
- Invite people with disabilities to lead, serve, and contribute in a variety of ways
- Welcome different ways of worship (for example- when a person shouts with joy, or jumps up and down)
- Invite people with disabilities to events, retreats, and meetings.
- Do not gossip, or pass judgement on unexpected behaviors. Trust God to know the hearts of others.

**We concluded with announcements, a brief devotion from our Spiritual Connections Vision Team member Paul Jeganathan, and a prayer.**