

# *Come as You Are*

*Actively Welcoming and Involving Individuals  
with Special Needs in the Church*

# The Need

Individuals with special needs or their families are:

- less likely to attend church-related activities
- more likely to experience fatigue when having to seek-out the necessary supports
- more likely to participate in church activities when the individuals with disabilities are younger

Dingle, 2016, February 9

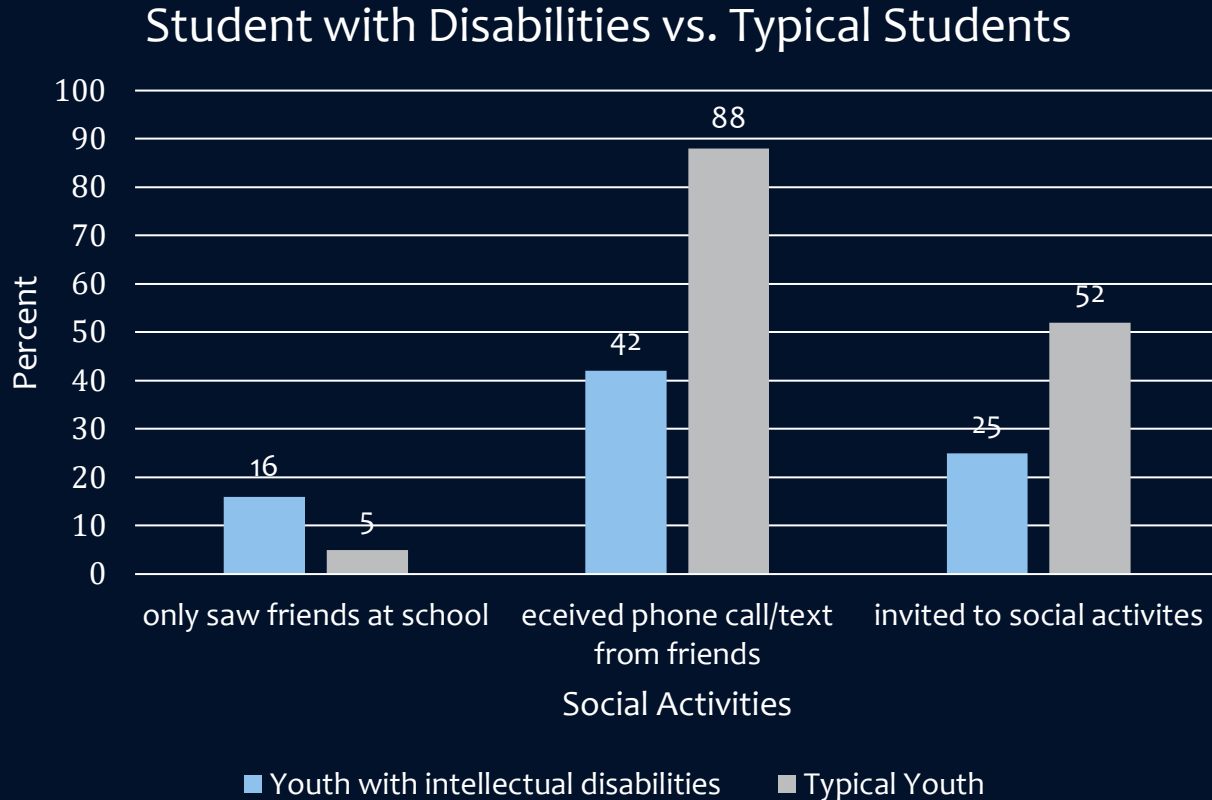
- **largest** unreached people group in the world
- only mission field that exists everywhere in the world

Wolfe, personal communication, January 13, 2021; Mowry, personal communication, January 22, 2021

- Individuals with special needs and their families are easy to reach, i.e. “low-hanging” fruit

McCarty, personal communication, January 14, 2021

# The Need: Statistics



# The Call

“Jesus reached out to people who were blind, deaf, lame, and mentally tormented.”

Redford, personal communication, January 14, 2021

Make actively welcoming and embracing individuals with disabilities be part of the church’s DNA.

Wolfe, personal communication, January 13, 2021

“Shift from a posture of exclusion to a practice of embrace...”

Carter, E., 2017, p. 39

“Reach out in the same way Jesus reached out – with love for God and others.”

Redford, personal communication, January 14, 2021

# The Call: The Bible Commands It

“On the contrary, those part of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... now you are the body of Christ, and every one of you is a part of it.”

1 Corinthians 12:22, 27, 1995/1973, New International Version (NIV)

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me.’”

Matthew 25:40, 1995/1973, NIV

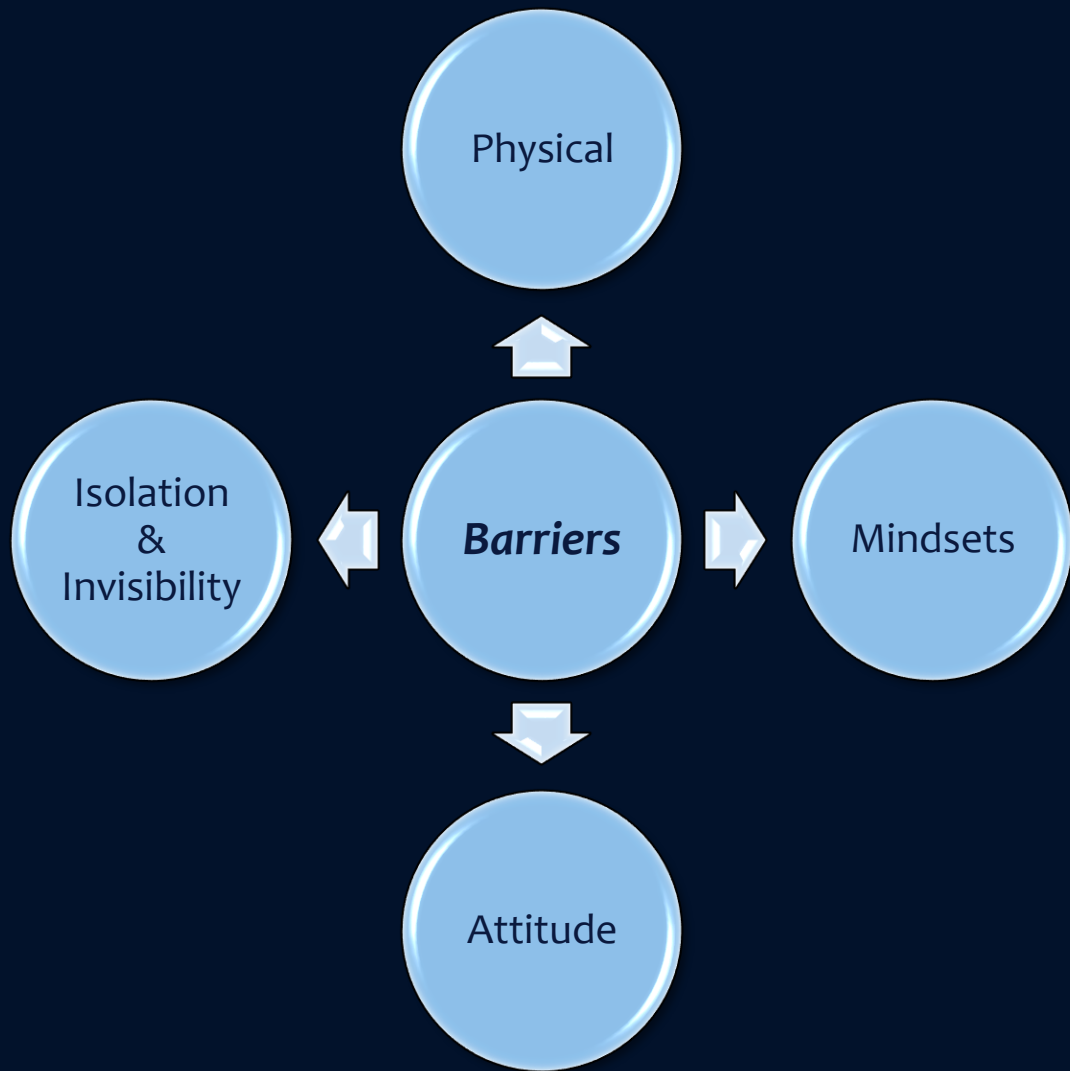
“...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind...”

Luke 14:13, 1995/1973, NIV

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1:27b-29, English Standard Version (ESV)

“But if we are the body,  
Why aren't His arms reaching?  
Why aren't His hands healing?  
Why aren't His words teaching?  
And if we are the body  
Why aren't His feet going?  
Why is His love not showing them there is a way?”



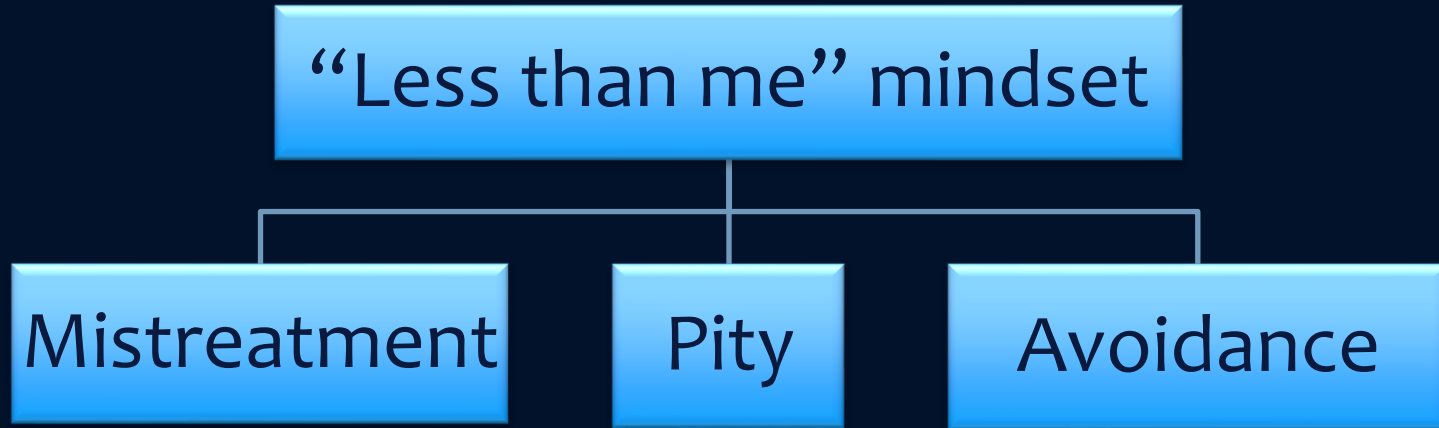
# Barrier #1: Physical

- **Building Accessibility**
  - Older building may not meet ADA requirements:
    - Ramps
    - Handicap restroom
    - Pews
  - Accessibility of hallways/rooms
  - Volume of music
  - Signage
- **Website Accessibility**
  - “Dress code”
  - Connection form
  - What to expect
- **Classroom Accessibility**
  - Lack of trained volunteers/staff
  - Set-up of classrooms

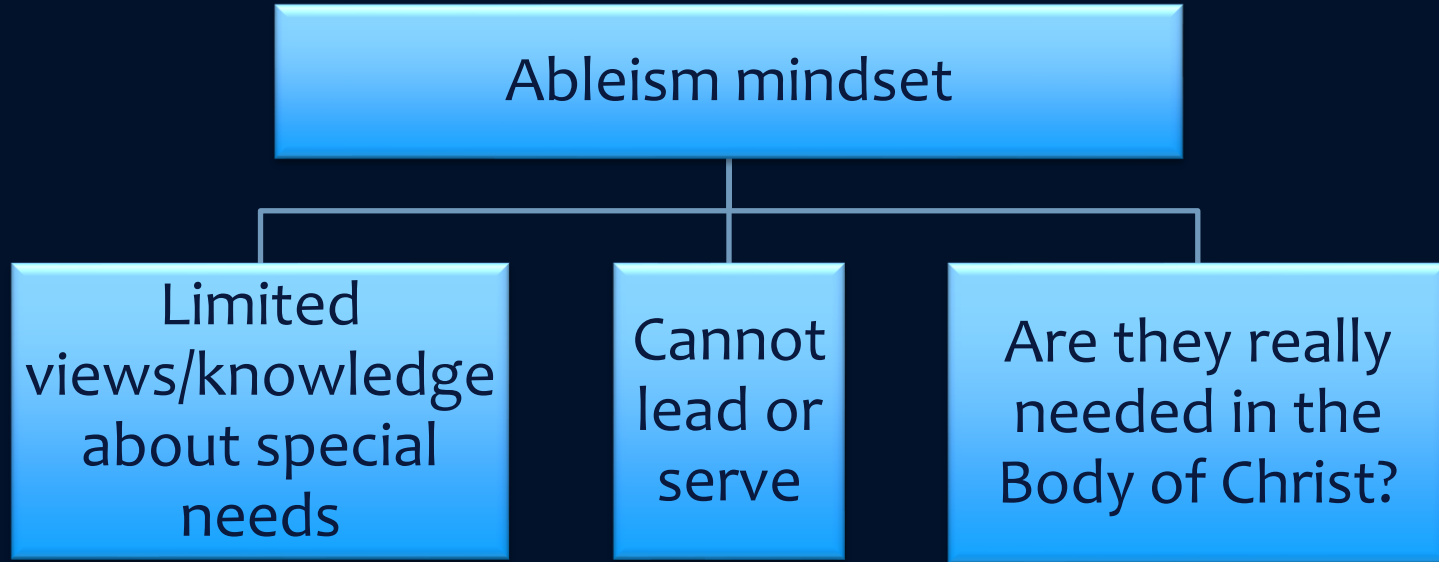
Wolfe, personal communication, January 13, 2021; McCarty, personal communication, January 14, 2021; Long, personal communication, January 19, 2021; & Golick, personal communication, January 18, 2021



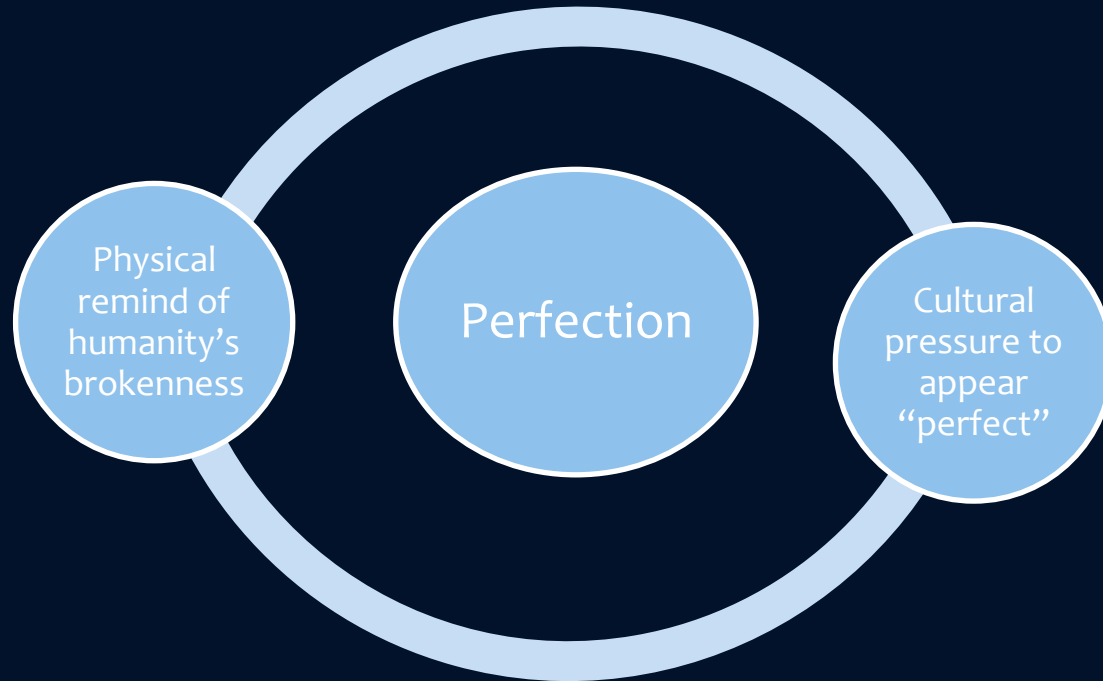
# Barrier #2: Mindsets



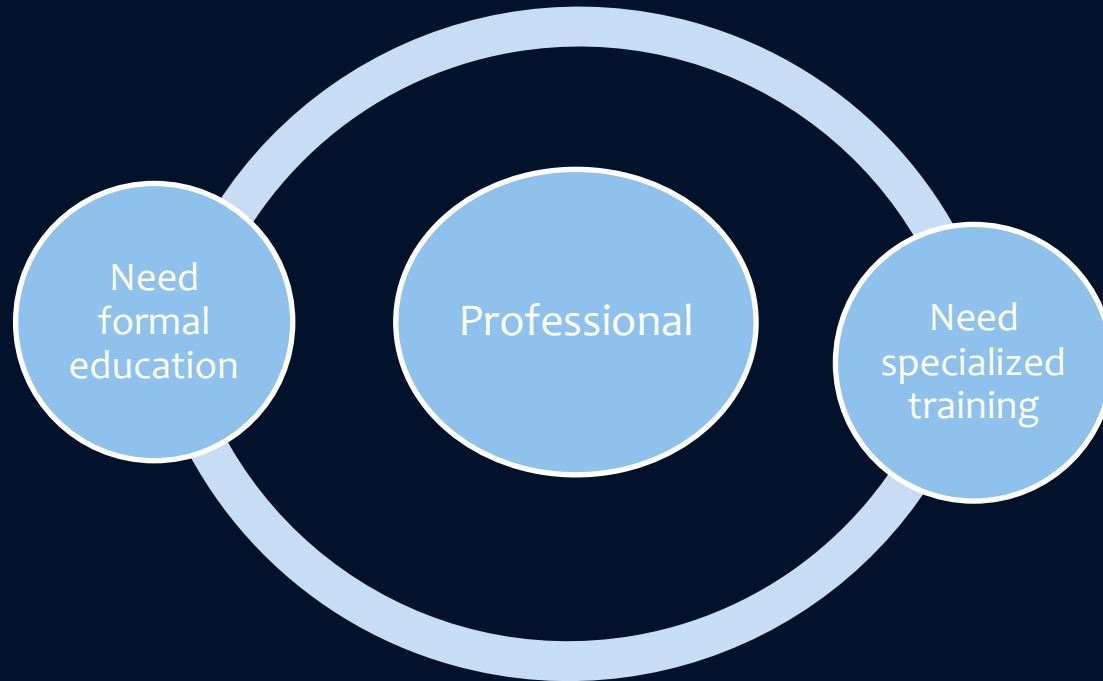
# Barrier #2: Mindsets



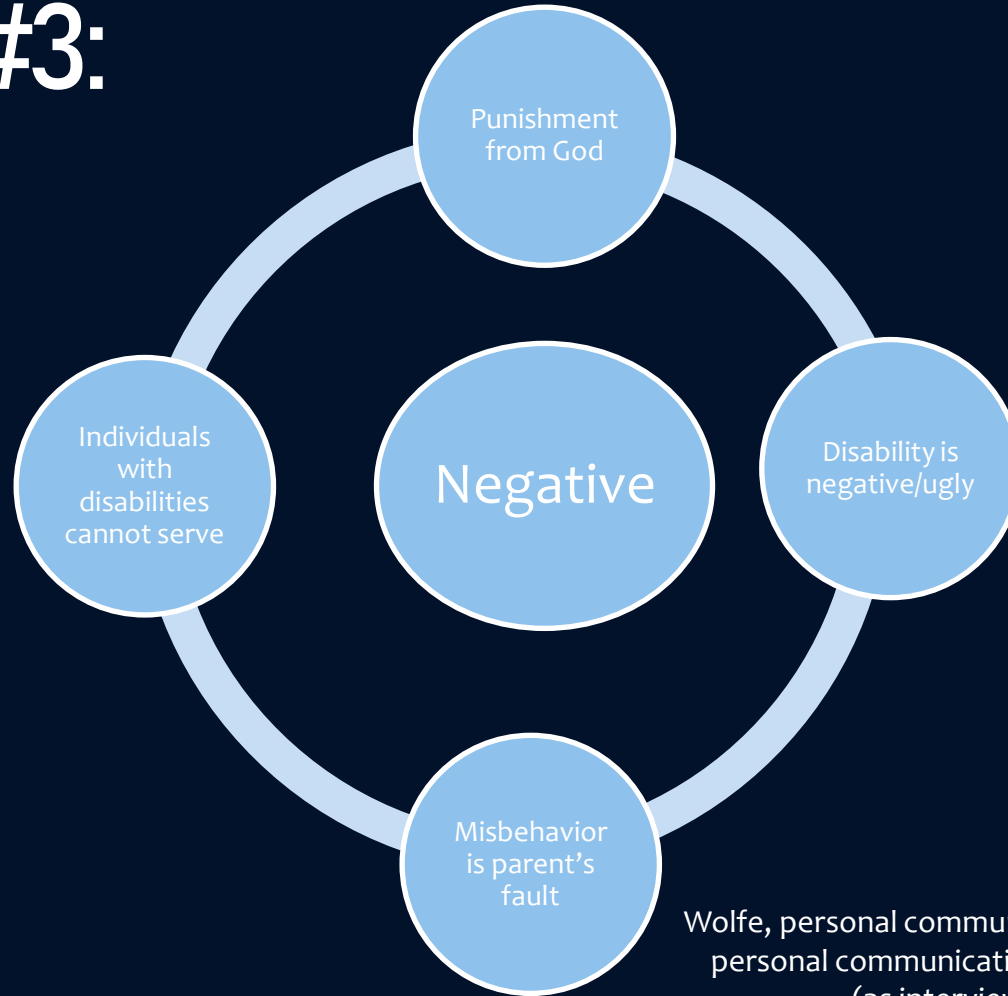
# Barrier #3: Attitude



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Wolfe, personal communication, January 13, 2021; Long, personal communication, January 19, 2021; Honeycutt (as interviewed on GCAC Livestream), 2021.

# Barrier #4: Isolation & Invisibility

Individuals with special needs and their families may experience isolation or feel invisible:

- ‘They have their own friends (or support groups)’
- ‘God is punishing them [the parents] for their sins’
- ‘They [the parents] must be saints’
- ‘They [the parents] have it all figured out’
- ‘Their [the individuals] disability is a curse’
- ‘They [the individuals] have nothing to offer’
- ‘They [the individuals] cannot grow in their faith’

Wolfe, personal communication, January 13, 2021; McCarty, personal communication, January 14, 2021;  
Mowry, personal communication, January 22, 2021; & Bell, personal communication, January 22, 2021

# Barrier #4: Isolation & Invisibility

“Too often, individuals with disabilities become the quintessential “other” in the community – known about, but not known personally.”

Carter, 2020, p. 175

“Mere attendance does not automatically ensure that others in the community come to know someone well.”

Carter, 2020, p. 175

“People with disabilities are at the bottom of the world’s ladder”

Toda, 2021

Culture Shift

Educate

Train Volunteers

Provide  
Opportunities

Show God's Love

Solutions



# Solution #1: Culture Shift

## 5 Stages of Disability Culture Change



Ignorance

Pity

Care

Friendship

Co-  
Laborers

# Solution #1: Culture Shift



# Solution #2: Educate

Expose people to individuals with special needs.

Long, personal communication,  
January 19, 2021

Individuals with special needs *want* to be welcomed and wanted.

Having a disability does not mean that a person is less than.

Long, personal communication,  
January 19, 2021

ANY church can welcome individuals with special needs and their families.

Redford, personal communication,  
January 14, 2021



Hines, personal communication, n.d.(a)

Disability is not the result of poor parenting or hidden sin.

Golick, personal communication, January 18,  
2021; Mowry, personal communication;  
January 22, 2021

# Solution #2: Educate

Act normal. Be yourself.

Honeycutt, interview by GCAC  
Livestream, January 31, 2021

Grieving the disability is  
not “one and done.”

Long, personal communication,  
January 19, 2021

Individuals with special  
needs have interests and  
hobbies too.

Use people-first  
language.

Mowry, personal communication,  
January 22, 2021

It’s okay to talk about  
special needs.

Golik, personal communication,  
January 18, 2021

Individuals with the  
same disability are  
different individuals

Redford, personal communication,  
January 14, 2021

Special needs are not  
always visible.

Yurko, personal communication,  
January 25, 2021

# Solution #3: Train Volunteers

How should  
volunteers be trained?

Teach volunteers to have a  
“ministry *by and with* people with  
disabilities” mentality

Bedard, et al., n.d., para. 2

Encourage them to have a special  
needs ministry that comes  
alongside current ministries



# Solution #3: Train Volunteers

What can volunteers do to support individuals with special needs and their families?

Have a trained nurse (or other medical professional) on site

Offer small group or one-on-one support

Long, personal communication, January 19, 2021

...

# Solution #3: Train Volunteers

Text or email pictures of or notes about the child with special needs participating in church activities

Redford, personal communication, January 14, 2021




Shimo, 2019

# Solution #4: Provide Opportunities

“We must show those who walk through the world differently from us that we have thought about them and have made room for them. It’s not their job to pave the way. It’s our job to make the way easier for them first.”

Sumner, author of *Eat, Sleep, Save the World*, as quoted by Earls, 2020, March 10



“A disability ministry isn’t so much programmatic as it is relational... it’s all about the gospel, all about simply making it as accessible as possible so that the blind can see it, the deaf can hear it, the people with intellectual disabilities can understand it, and the people with physical disabilities can get into church to hear it.”

Hubach, as cited by Zylstra, 2014, para. 14

Hines, personal communication, n.d.(b),



# Solution #4: Provide Opportunities

On the website, churches can provide

- ✓ List of accommodations
- ✓ Visiting family comment form
- ✓ electronic options for event registration

McCarty, personal communication, January 14, 2021; Long, personal communication, January 19, 2021

Involve individuals with special needs in serving on Sunday mornings:

- greeters
- hand out bulletins
- assist with collecting offering
- teach/assist with a children or youth Sunday School class

Redford, personal communication, January 14, 2021

# Solution #5: Show God's Love

Experience life *with* them



Hines, personal communication, n.d.(c),

See people as they are



Hines, personal communication, n.d.(d),

Embrace them



Hines, personal communication, n.d.(e),

Everyone deserves to feel welcomed  
and wanted in the body of Christ and  
be able to call a church home.

Who can you welcome?

# Interviews

- **Allie McCarty**
  - Communications & Operations Manager at the Banquet Network
- **Beth Golik**
  - Operations Director at Key Ministries
- **Brad Mowry**
  - Young Life Capernaum Coordinator (Eastern Division) & father of a young adult with disabilities
- **Denise Bell**
  - Loving HANDS Ministry Director
- **Erik Carter**
  - Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University,
- **Katie Long**
  - Administrative Assistant at Arrowhead Bible Camp
- **Margie Redford**
  - editor for HeartShaper Children's Curriculum
- **Ryan Wolfe**
  - President and Executive Director at Ability Ministries
- **Toy Hine**
  - Special Needs Director at Thomas Road Baptist Church
- **Tracey Yurko**
  - mother of a young adult with disabilities

# Questions

- Why is disability ministry important?
- What are some barriers for involving individual with special needs in the church
- What are some common misunderstandings people have toward individuals with special needs?
- What are some common misunderstandings people have towards special needs families?
- What can people who don't have special needs do to help people with special needs, and their families, feel welcomed and become involved in the church?
- Are there general ways church activities can be adapted so they are more accessible for everyone?
- People with special needs need to be embraced and welcomed. How can churches do that?
- How can churches show/tell the families in the community are special needs friendly?

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Hine, T. (n.d.c.). [*kids on a train*].

Hine, T. (n.d.d.). [*boy building a block tower*].

Hine, T. (n.d.e.). [*child and woman coloring pumpkins*].

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