



Myth Busting: How to Get Senior Leadership Onboard for Disability Ministry

Stephen "Doc" Hunsley, M.D.

SOAR Special Needs Executive Director & Founder

Overland Park, Kansas

doc@soarspecialneeds.org

Twitter: @DocHunsley

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What is Pastoral Care Ministry versus Disability Ministry?

- **Care Ministry:** Only adults, all churches have parts of this, but not all aspects; tends to focus on more elderly
 - Benevolence
 - Counseling
 - Hospital/Nursing Home/Homebound Visitation also prison
 - Weddings/Funerals
 - Prayer Teams
 - Support Teams and groups (meal train, handyman, moving team, transportation teams) (Grief Share, Divorce Care)
 - Respite Care – very small minority of churches do this for elderly
- **Disability Ministry:** Children and adults, few churches
 - Buddies for weekend service
 - Family Support Groups
 - Respite Care
 - Mission Trips
 - Camps
 - Bible Studies
 - Sibling Groups

Why is a Disability Ministry Important?

- **90%** of individuals with special needs don't attend church. Largest unreached people group in the United States!
- The main concern families have is that the staff and volunteers at the church will not be able to adequately care for the needs of their child, or they just don't feel accepted. Families are concerned that they will be a burden to the church.
- **11%** of evangelical churches in the US have an active disability ministry.
- **89%** do NOT have an active disability ministry!

Disability Statistics:

- 2014: 1 out of every 6 children in the US has special needs (**17.5%**); 1:5 adults in the US are affected by some form of disability; Autism: 1:44 births (2021).
- The divorce rate for families with special needs: **90% (estimated)**; if medical issues are present = **95%**.
- Parenting a child with special needs is a stressful, 24/7/365 job without ever having a break!
- Hidden disabilities: Statistically, for every person you've seen who looks disabled, you've seen at least four more who are disabled but don't look it.
- Hidden disabilities include:
 - Psychiatric Disabilities—Examples include major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc.
 - Traumatic Brain Injury
 - Epilepsy
 - ADD
 - Learning Disability (LD)
- 1 out of every 5 children have or will have a serious mental illness (NAMI).
- 1 in 5 adults in America experience mental illness (NAMI).
- Half of all chronic mental illness begins before the age of 14, three-quarters by the age of 24 (NAMI).

Including Individuals with Disabilities:

- The vast majority of pastors I've met want their church to reach people in their community and grow.
- So, where is the disconnect when it comes to families with disabilities?
- If the pastor hasn't experienced disability through a friend or family member, then they are probably ignorant of the fact that disability affects every community, all ethnicities, all ages, and all social classes.
- This is also why Care Ministries exist in every church; every pastor and individual has personal experience with individuals needing help or assistance through these ministries.

Seeing Value in Disabilities:

- If your senior leadership sees value in including children, youth, adults, and senior adults, then they should see the value in including persons with a disability, because disability affects every one of those groups.
- So, why isn't there a massive movement to include people with disabilities in the church? I believe that the vast majority of pastors have no idea how to include people with disabilities and their families into the life of the church. It is simply a lack of understanding and education.
- God created and welcomes all people into fellowship with Him; who are we to discriminate based on someone's ability?
- It is the senior leadership's lack of understanding and education that leads to fear and an unending list of concerns they have in starting a disability ministry!
- Help your senior leadership see value in individuals with disabilities by inviting your pastor and his family to dinner along with family with a child with special needs and their family.

- Breaking bread together and hearing stories from a family is a fabulous way to help open their eyes to what is happening.
- Have the family share how difficult it is to attend church with a child with special needs, the difficulties of everyday life, and the general challenges of having a child with special needs, and the desire to have community in a church.
- At the same time, have the family share stories of the joy and love of being a parent of a child with special needs.

Common Myths from Senior Leadership:

- Top Myths from Senior Leadership! These are all real statements from senior leadership from around the country! I'm sure you have heard a few of these!
 - We don't have anyone with disabilities in our church; why do we need a ministry?
 - Other churches near us have a disability ministry; therefore, we don't need to have one – just send them there!
 - I'm just too concerned about liability issues and being sued.
 - It is too expensive, and we just don't have the budget.
 - We don't know where or how to start!
 - It's just too hard and scary!
 - What if we mess something up or say the wrong thing – we don't want any backlash from anyone!
 - We don't have people with the right qualifications to lead a ministry like that, nor do we have the resources.
 - Our outreach ministry already supports a group that assists people with disabilities.
 - We don't need another ministry!
 - We are a small church; only big churches need to do it.
 - We don't want to be overrun by needy families
 - The staff is already extremely busy and are unable to oversee another ministry, even if a lay leader manages it.
 - If we "start it, they will come!" We just can't handle that!
 - It doesn't fit with our mission statement.
 - It's just not a need at our church.
 - We don't have the room!

What is a Disability Ministry?

- Disability ministry exists to impart the Word of God in the heart of all individuals in an engaging and understandable manner and to teach them to love, to know, and to honor God.
- The **church needs to be a place of refuge for families with special needs** where the parents know that their child is loved on.
- Definition of special needs or disability in regards to ministry and the church:
 - Any need a family member may have that requires some forethought in order to ensure that the family's church experience is meaningful and safe. This includes severe allergies, medical issues, or cognitive differences.
 - A disability ministry is actually a ministry to the **ENTIRE** family, not just the individual with special needs!
- **3 GOALS OF A SPECIAL NEEDS/DISABILITY MINISTRY – FOR A CHURCH:**
 1. Open the door to share the Gospel with families affected by special needs and introduce them to a personal relationship with God

2. Integrate those with disabilities into the life of the church and give them opportunities to actively serve God
3. Enable the church to serve as a witness to the community by meeting the spiritual, physical, and social needs of families affected by special needs.

• **5 SPECIFIC GOALS OF A SPECIAL NEEDS/DISABILITY MINISTRY – FOR THE MINISTRY:**

1. To integrate students into an age/developmentally appropriate classroom
2. To make all feel welcomed and loved within their class
3. To provide buddies to students/adults who need assistance
4. To allow each student/adult to feel God's love through their buddy
5. To share Christ's love

Biblical Facts on Disabilities?

• **View of Jesus:**

- People with disabilities are no different from those without; they belong to a body of believers and are capable of using their unique giftedness to do God's work!
- Our attitude toward disabilities needs to be shaped by God. There are many diagnoses and descriptions of disabilities, but ultimately we are talking about *people*, not conditions or syndromes or labels. Just remember that each person is created in the image of God and has immense innate value!
- A disability—no matter what kind, or what severity—does not make anyone less of a human being. Every living, breathing person has a spirit that is capable of responding to the Holy Spirit. Never assume that anyone is beyond the ability of God to touch their lives in some significant way.

3 C's of Disability Ministry Understanding:

1. **Comprehend – Understand inclusion**

- Changing philosophy of ministry: Inclusion ministry is less about starting a ministry to persons with a disability than it is about changing your philosophy of ministry to include persons with disability (they are already in your church!)
- It's not adding a new ministry; it IS including individuals with disabilities into the existing ministries.
- You don't have to hire a special education teacher or medical professional to include people with disabilities! – Children with special needs are born every day to parents with no prior experience who simply love their child and get to know them.
- Comprehension of inclusion comes from relationships! The only requirement there is to serve in a ministry is the ability to be a friend!

2. **Communicate: Cast the Vision!**

- Communicate What, Why, and How, BEFORE you do it with leadership and team! This helps them understand, and then they can communicate this to the congregation prior to anything launching.
- Includes how to properly address – First Person speech!
- Effective communication starts at the top and trickles down. Need to create an "elevator speech" to share your vision – short 60-90 seconds (length of an elevator ride). Make sure the whole team can share this.

- Prevent vision leak among your team, meet frequently.
- Great Commission: "*Go and make disciples*" doesn't differentiate with and without a disability! Not told only to go to those with IQ above 100!

3. **Collaborate: Work towards Inclusion!**

- All existing ministries need to work together to be most effective. The majority of kids and adults with disabilities can be included in your existing ministries with a little support or adaptation. It is that changing the philosophy of ministry to include individuals of all abilities.
- All teams need to be on the same page. Parking lot attendants, greeters, teachers, all need to be trained
- Start with what you have! SOAR started with three now with over 900 individuals!
- Develop a plan and goals.

Myth Busting: Handling Objection! Turning your Objections into Objectives!

• **Myth/ Objection:**

- Senior leadership is usually uncomfortable with the unknown. The world of special needs and inclusion ministry is a huge black box of the unknown! Even elderly respite care is unknown for many leadership teams.
- Due to a lack of knowledge, these unknowns are usually quickly dismissed.
- Change the objection into objectives!

1. **Objection 1: Lack of interest in the ministry** – due to lack of understanding

- **Objective:** When we include individuals with special needs into the life of the church, we are showing love and compassion to an unreached people group who are frequently marginalized and misunderstood; this leads to an engaging and exciting ministry! Having a leader who is passionate and able to share a vision will grow interest in others both within and outside the church.

2. **Objection 2: Lack of budget/money for the ministry**

- **Objective:** Ministry is not expensive to start. The basis is relational and attention, like every other ministry. Most sensory items are free or could be donated. A sensory room could be started for as little as \$250-500 and grow as your ministry grows. Ministry can function on whatever size budget you have or don't have.

3. **Objection 3: Liability issues for the ministry**

- **Objective:** Ministry will be messy and risky sometimes. Just read the Gospels in the Bible and see! Have an action plan to avoid being negligent (never have anyone just 1:1) and decrease liability: training of all volunteers, application & background checks of volunteers, waivers signed by families, church insurance policies usually cover everything without additional coverage.

4. **Objection 4: Safety issues for the ministry**

- **Objective:** Have parents/caregivers complete a plan of care to know how to best care for their individual with special needs. Meet with the family and address any concerns. Create action plans for

elopement and other safety issues. Talk with your security team and have them be a part of the elopement plan. Create behavior teams.

5. Objection 5: The ministry will grow too fast, or "If we start it, they will come!"

- **Objective:** This is a myth! Focus on who you currently have at your church and do ministry to the best of your ability. Families of special needs will NOT come to your church until they know you are able to handle their individual with special needs and hear good complements via other families by word of mouth. This usually takes at least 18-24 months after starting a ministry – even for us at SOAR!

6. Objection 6: The church already has a shortage of volunteers.

- **Objective:** Special needs ministry raises up a whole new class of volunteers not currently serving or engaged in your church. Youth ministry and grandparents are two great sources with a new passion for this ministry. Don't forget to think out of the box and recruit volunteers outside the church – NHS students, college students – SPED, OT/PT, community service hours

Contact Information:

Stephen "Doc" Hunsley, M.D.
SOAR Special Needs Executive Director & Founder
doc@SOARspecialneeds.org
SOARspecialneeds.org
Cell: 816-506-1305
Twitter: @DocHunsley
YouTube: SOARSpecialNeeds
Facebook: SOARSpecialNeeds