

Beyond Sunday Mornings... Creating a Truly Inclusionary Culture

By Jackie Mills-Fernald

*I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb.
Before you were born, I set you apart.*

JEREMIAH 1:5 (NLT)

We have each been uniquely made by our Creator. Whether we're tall or short, skinny or large, dark-skinned or light-skinned, have disabilities or do not—God assures us that every person was and is a handcrafted, original creation with a purpose.

In science, there is a concept called biodiversity that states any ecosystem with wide and diverse forms of life is a healthier and more sustainable environment; it is a better, more balanced system than one without diversity. The same concept applies to our communities, schools, workplaces, and churches. Our churches should be a rich tapestry of cultures, races, backgrounds, and ability levels. We should embrace such differences in our churches, not just tolerate them. Why is it, then, that so many churches have struggled with or failed to include persons with disabilities in the Body of Christ as full participants and contributors?

Hearing the Call

Many churches big and small have begun to focus on accessibility. This goes far beyond having a building that is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The members of these congregations have had a paradigm shift. These are churches where the staff and members welcome those with disabilities and see them as people first, not defining them by their disabilities. The biggest disability in the church today is that of attitude and a hardened heart. We are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ and are called to be like him. In this case, we should love all people, especially those who are different—those with intellectual, physical, or emotional disabilities.

Over the past several years, more and more pastors, church leaders, and volunteers have begun to focus programs and support on including all individuals. Although I am certainly not a theologian, it is clear that when Jesus commanded his disciples to go out into the world and preach the Good News, it was an inclusive statement. He did not mean only those persons with IQs greater than 70, with strong, sound bodies—Jesus meant ALL people. He spelled it out for us in Luke 14; going so far as to say, “*Bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame . . . so that my house will be full*” (vv. 21, 23). We do not have to look any further than the four Gospels to see with whom Jesus spent his three-year ministry on Earth. Jesus shared his days with the lame, sick, blind, deaf, mentally ill, and crippled. If Jesus is our model, then we should be embracing persons of all ability levels into our churches.

I am encouraged as I travel the country and talk with church leaders about disability ministry and outreach. It is exciting to see churches intentionally developing programs to enable those with disabilities to experience and participate in worship services or classes. Yet how those with disabilities participate varies from church to church. The church may have a fully inclusive children's ministry program with specially-trained buddies to assist the children who need additional support. The ministry may take the form of self-contained classrooms for adults with developmental delays taught by special educators. For one church, it may look like a special worship service for those with sensory issues. Another church may educate their congregation about individuals who cannot sit still during corporate worship and help the members to anticipate occasional outbursts. The programming and types of services depend on church missions, leaders, staffing, resources, and the needs of the persons with disabilities and their families.

How amazing it would be for the family of a child with a disability or for an adult with a disability to walk into your church for the first time and be greeted with a warm welcome and a place to connect or belong. Unfortunately, this has too often been the exception and not the rule. Many first-time visitors have left churches feeling frustrated, hurt, angry or sad because staff or volunteers were not prepared to care for and meet the spiritual needs of their loved ones with disabilities.

A Broader Vision

As church leaders, we must continue to think about church ministry and outreach to this population. We must think in terms beyond just "making Sunday mornings work." There is a tendency to stop there, thinking Sunday mornings were successful when they've gone off without a hitch or hiccup. But we must broaden our vision. As a church, we should be developing a cradle to grave mindset—no matter the age of a person with a disability, there will always be a place or program where he or she can grow, feeling loved and included. Frequently, churches with existing disability ministries have a fragmented approach. They may either provide a children's program or a special-adult program, but not both. Although those programs can be a great place to start, we need to think in terms of a continuum of services. We should be creating a church experience and church life for persons with disabilities that mimic the church life of those without disabilities. The goal is for all persons to grow, connect, serve, and share in the Body of Christ. If your church already has a disability ministry, now is the time to begin thinking of what is next. If you have the Sunday morning routine down to an art, how do you continue to develop from a ministry of *disability* to a ministry of *possibility*?

I have a great colleague who is the director of a local disability advocacy group. Nancy likes to say, "A life like yours and mine." The quote is often used in the context of creating community, employment, housing, and transportation options for persons with disabilities. However, the premise could very easily be applied to the church. How do we create a church experience like yours and mine for all people? One of the keys is to define people not by what they *can't* do, but what they *can* do or *can* become.

Often, disability ministry is viewed as a ministry of deficits. This misses the assets and gifts that persons with disabilities can bring to the church. When we look at disability through the lens of deficit, our perspective is "ministry *to*" those with disabilities. It needs to become "ministry *with* and *by*" those with disabilities. We must move away from thoughts that disability ministry is a ministry of pity, to understanding it is a ministry of great possibility. We need to see disability as normal and diversity as good. How do we change mindsets to create a fully inclusive culture in which all people are integrated into the Body of Christ and are offered opportunities to grow spiritually, connect socially, serve and lead? Let me share a little about myself and my own journey of disability ministry.

Humble Beginnings

I have been on staff with Access Ministry of McLean Bible Church for almost 13 years. I am an ordinary person, and not at all qualified to be doing the work I do as the director of one of the largest disability

ministries in the country. But I have a God who daily covers all of my inadequacies and lack of ability. Over time I have learned my ineptness is covered by a God that is all-knowing, all-powerful, and full of grace.

Access Ministry began by providing childcare on Sunday mornings for four children with special needs. We now serve over 500 families impacted by disability and have a place for all family members regardless of their ability levels. The ministry continues to grow by creating a fully inclusive church culture that cuts across all ministries and throughout every level of leadership. An inclusive culture is much richer than merely having “special classrooms or programs.” We have an environment where parents and persons with disabilities have choices about the programs in which they will participate and actually have a voice or say. Persons with disabilities have the right to advocate for themselves and their wants and needs in church as well as in the community.

A few years ago I was asked to serve on the Operational Team, where strategic planning happens and large ministry events take shape. During these meetings, questions would arise, such as, “Will the event be fully accessible? Does it represent diversity? How can we modify/adapt the event so it is relevant to all?” These meetings have encouraged collaboration across ministry lines and continue to keep accessibility issues at the forefront of all major church decisions. We’ve wrestled with issues such as how we could modify full-immersion baptism for persons with poor motor skills or those who are non-ambulatory, without compromising our theology or statement of faith. As ministry leaders, we’ve mulled over how Access volunteers could support the youth ministry so a group of teens with special needs could attend a beach retreat, as well as how Access staff could train the children’s staff to make inclusion successful for different learners. As we plan church-wide outreach, we make sure materials are available in Braille and that there are American Sign Language interpreters available for the deaf community. We’ve come to realize that the ministry has two primary purposes: First, to provide specialized programming when needed, and second, to promote inclusion by working with other ministries to help make them fully accessible.

Serving Together

One of the ways to become a fully devoted follower of Christ is through serving and giving of time and talents. Access Ministry encourages and creates opportunities for those with disabilities to serve and give back. Many of our young adults with disabilities are greeters and ushers, while others serve in the food pantry or clothing ministry.

One special annual event is Turkey Outreach, where hundreds of volunteers help assemble 7,000 turkey dinners to be distributed in the Washington, D.C., area. This past November, we had a group of adults with disabilities serving shoulder to shoulder with other volunteers for hours on end. It was a beautiful sight as these young adults felt so valued and empowered while serving the hungry.

What about those individuals with artistic talents or gifts? Have you considered creating places in the worship service for them to serve and bless others? This past year, Access partnered with the Creative Arts Ministry to create a performing group called AMPA, Access Ministry Performing Arts. They meet most Saturday mornings to rehearse songs, drama, and poetry to later be performed in the church or local nursing homes.

There are so many ways to serve in the church. Everyone needs to feel they belong and are contributing members. Don’t make the mistake of assuming persons with disabilities don’t want to or can’t serve within the church. Ask them where they would like to serve, and then create a plan to make it happen. You may need to build in some supports, but many are just waiting to be asked and can serve without any additional assistance. What a testimony of the Body of Christ functioning as it was meant to be.

When you look around at leadership positions (staff or volunteer) within your church, how many positions are filled by persons with disabilities? Employing or hiring persons with disabilities in key leadership roles sends a powerful message. This is when the paradigm shift from “ministry *to*” to “ministry *with and by*” becomes a reality.

Every summer, Access Ministry runs a camp for children with disabilities and their nondisabled siblings. We hire many high school and college students, and a number of our staffers have disabilities. In the past, we've had staff with Down syndrome, Asperger's, and Spina Bifida—and they become positive role models to exemplify what can be accomplished when a person refuses to be defined by challenges or obstacles. Persons with disabilities need to be encouraged and empowered to lead in the church and be provided with opportunities to do so.

Making Connections

In most churches, believers from teens to adults are encouraged to get connected in small groups as a way of creating community and growing in faith. Does that same focus exist in the creation of connections for those with disabilities? If the answer is no, a concerted effort needs to go into ensuring all people are connected with an intimate, caring small group. In order for that to happen it may mean training small group coaches and facilitators on disability issues and awareness so the groups become accessible. It may require modifying or adapting small group materials or supplies. Additional supports, such as transportation logistics or creating buddy/mentor programs, may be necessary. By making a few modifications, we can make small groups a reality for all.

Looking at Logistics

For Christians to be fully integrated into the church and follow Christ, one will most likely be attending worship service, connected in a small group, utilizing gifts and talents, and quite possibly have gone through a membership process and/or baptism. How many persons with disabilities in your church have been baptized or are full members? We need to look at how to create opportunities for persons with disabilities to become members of the church as well as be baptized... just like you and I are able to do.

Churches may need to become more flexible in how they perform baptisms. For instance, McLean Bible Church believes in full immersion. Up to this point, all persons with disabilities have been baptized in the traditional method. However, as leaders, we have discussed the need to look at other options on a case-by-case basis for persons who may not be able to be fully immersed due to a physical or sensory issue. Another powerful component of baptism is verbally giving your testimony. Many persons with disabilities may not be able to verbally articulate their faith, though they could testify with the use of a communication device, sign language, or a reader. We need to be ready and flexible for those situations. We also need to look at the logistics associated with membership classes or membership applications. People with disabilities may need some assistance or support, which the church should be able to provide. That support may mean having a buddy or peer in the class, or a person to walk through what it means to become a member and complete the paperwork. It may involve having a friend or buddy attend congregational meetings with a person who has a disability. As our participants in Access Ministry grow into adulthood, we see more and more of our young adults being baptized and becoming members of the church.

Loving Like Jesus

As we continue to embrace and welcome all God's people into his house, our churches and church members become richly blessed as they experience a love like that of Jesus. A love that says, "Come one, come all!" This is a love that looks beyond color, beyond disability, beyond social status. *"The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."* (1 Samuel 16:7) I enjoy watching people, each one so different and uniquely made by our Creator. I am reminded of Psalm 139:14 where David said, *"... I am fearfully and wonderfully made."* We are each a masterpiece created in God's image. What an imagination he has! Those with disabilities and those without are all part of God's perfect plan.

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Jackie Mills-Fernald is the director of Access Ministry at McLean Bible Church in Washington, D.C. Her relationship with Access Ministry began in 1999 as a volunteer. Jackie joined the ministry staff that same year and in 2000, became the Assistant Director of Staff and Volunteer Development with a focus on recruitment, training, and overall program development. Since December of 2003, Jackie has served as the Director of Access Ministry and also oversees the Signs of Life deaf ministry.