OPEN HEARTS, OPEN MINDS, OPEN DOORS: INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN MINISTRY

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M. Alyssa Barnes
North Georgia College and State University

Abstract: Families with children who have special needs often roam from church to church, never finding a true "home." Parents are typically more interested in locating a supportive group that accepts their child before identifying a place they feel comfortable to grow and develop spiritually. In turn, many children's ministry leaders are now questioning the readiness of their programs, volunteers, and facilities to minister to children with special needs. This paper examines the teachings of Jesus and how to implement the Christian calling. Woven throughout is a realistic but fictional account of a family in search of a spiritual home, the author uses Scripture to reinforce the importance of God's acceptance of all individuals. Finally, based on Carter's (2007) framework, the article provides an outline for children's ministers interested in developing an inclusive ministry program.

Key Words: Children's ministry programs, Inclusion, Special needs, Program development and creation

Introduction

Tightly gripping the hand of a curlicued, shaggy-headed 7-year-old, Candice bursts through the bright red doors of the brick façade building. Papers publicizing upcoming events are taped to the inside of the door and catch the gust of wind from the door opening, causing the papers to soar past her face. Hair standing on end as if she had rubbed her head with a balloon, Candice feels the rush of the cool-blowing air conditioning. Her mind immediately taken back to her previous home in Chicago, her heart yearns for family, friends, and the church family she knew so well. The loud and out of breath shout, "Mom, wait up!" pulls Candice back into the reality of her new home in the small and quaint town of Columbia, Mississippi. A quick glance back at her oldest son brings rushing fury back to Candice who had pleaded with her husband to preview the church. "Hurry up!" she mutters as her eyes roll back in her head, frustrated that he can't keep up. Turning the corner, Candice begins pulling Jordan up the stairs past the

vibrant colored bulletin boards, all promoting God's endless love. She scurries past the signs directing her to the church's main office. The southern drawl of the receptionist once again instills a heavy weight on Candice's heart as she remembers she is far away from her beloved Chicago. As the receptionist directs Candice into the office of the director of programs, Candice is engulfed by anxiety as she wonders if this church will be accepting of her family.

The integration of children with special needs into general education classrooms is a common practice in schools nationwide. In turn, church ministry teams are experiencing an influx of families wanting similar services and support within their faith-based organizations. In fact, Carder (1995) believes the question is no longer *will* churches create a ministry for individuals with special needs, but *when* churches will construct these essential ministries.

In Matthew 19:14, Jesus said, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (English Standard Version). When Jesus declared heaven as a refuge belonging to children, he left out the footnotes dealing with how to handle situations involving individuals with disabilities. Many church leaders remain uneasy with this aspect of children's ministry programs. In turn, children and families may feel isolated and unwelcome in Christian communities.

Throughout this paper, I provide five arguments supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in church ministry programs. Within these arguments, I provide the scholarly and religious basis behind each claim. In addition, I discuss the research base regarding barriers to successfully including individuals with disabilities and strategies to overcome these obstacles. Finally, I provide a framework for spiritual leaders called to embark on this endeavor.

As the dark-haired director of programs plops down in the raggedy, worn, and well-used chair, Candice pulls out her ballpoint pen and opens her leather day planner to a page full of questions. Clearing her throat, Candice introduces herself and breezes through the introduction of her two children who are engrossed in handheld electronic games. The program director reaches down to her handwoven basket and pulls out four shiny, crisp pamphlets. Opening the first brochure, Sara's smile reassures Candice that the church has plenty of ministry opportunities available to include her children. As Sara rambles on about the service projects, overnight church lock-ins, and activity outings for children, Candice's muscle-clinched neck eases as she begins to think she could make the move to Columbia work. For the first time in months, the sides of Candice's face begin to move upward into a smile as the thought of an accepting church home warms her body. As Sara finishes explaining the program offerings of the church, she asks Candice and the boys to follow her down the hall to meet the children's minister, Katy.

Definition of Inclusion

The definition of inclusion of children with special needs differs from person to person. Many definitions are based on the premise that inclusion occurs only within school settings. For example, Janney and Snell (2000) define several characteristics of an inclusive environment. First, inclusion occurs in neighborhood schools and facilities in order for children with disabilities to interact and build meaningful relationships with the peers they see daily. Additionally, team members work collaboratively to make individualized decisions regarding appropriate services and planning. However, Odom and Diamond (1998) broaden their definition of inclusion. They believe that "the single commonality across definitions of inclusion is that children with and without disabilities are placed in the same setting" (p. 6). For the purpose of this article, I will use Odom and Diamond's definition of inclusion.

Including individuals with disabilities was an essential component of Jesus' ministry. For example, Jesus told a follower in Luke 14:21, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." Jesus wanted the church to be full with all people, so everyone could have the opportunity to know God's grace. Thankfully, God does not see these differences within his kingdom. Because of our one belief in Jesus being the resurrected and omnipotent God, we "are one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:28b). The Bible instructs us in Isaiah 35:3–4 to "strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, He will come with vengeance; with divine retribution He will come to save you.'" This direction given to us signifies the importance of accepting all individuals, especially those with special needs. By doing so, God promises in Isaiah 35:5–6, 10b, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. . . . They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." This promise and calling is a demonstration of God's desire to include all individuals within his ministry and his unyielding gift to those who take part.

Eager to get the boys involved at the church as soon as possible, Candice hurries them through their morning routine and herds them into the car to join the group of children from the church that is headed to the zoo. Pulling up to the bus swarming with children, Candice collects the sack lunch she packed for Jordan and passes Jonathan 10 dollars to purchase his own food. Spotting Katy in the distance, Candice heads in that direction, holding tightly to Jordan's arm as she approaches the check-in area. Excited the new family in town is so eager to be in-

volved, Katy leans out to hug Candice who looks like she could use a few extra hours of sleep. As Candice steps back, she passes Jordan's lunch to Katy and begins to explain. "With Jordan's autism, he doesn't always like the texture of foods. So, I pack his lunch to make it easier." With her mouth gaping open, Katy stands in disbelief. Unsure of exactly what to say, Katy explains "We don't have any kids in the group that are disabled, and we just aren't equipped to take Jordan. But if there is nothing wrong with Jonathan, we'd love for him to join us." Shocked by what she hears, Candice feels the muscles in her neck begin to tense back up. Fighting back tears, she grabs the hands of Jordan and Jonathan and rushes them back to the car. Chasing behind, Katy calls, "Candice, you forgot Jordan's lunch."

Excluding a Population

"Jesus answers, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6).

When comparing the participation rate of individuals with and without disabilities within faith-based ministries, a 13% gap exists (National Organization on Disability/Harris Interactive, 2004). Specifically, 44% of individuals with disabilities claimed to have a faith-based home that they attended at least monthly, while 57% of individuals without disabilities made a similar claim. Furthermore, Wagner, Cadwallader, and Marder (2003) surveyed parents of children with autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities about their participation in faith-based groups during the previous year. Over half of the respondents reported "no participation." In a similar study, Orsmond, Krauss, and Seltzer (2004) surveyed over 200 parents or children with autism about their participation in religious-sponsored events. More than two-thirds of the participants claimed that their children did not participate in any weekly spiritual events and only slightly over 10% of children participated more than once or twice a month. Hayden, Lakin, Hill, Bruininks, and Copher (1992) found that students living in a group-home environment displayed similar behavior patterns. Of the participants surveyed, one-fourth claimed they attended church "sometimes," while one-third asserted they attended church "practically never." Carter (2007) attests, "God invites *all* people to worship, to fellowship, to learn, and to serve. This invitation is never diminished by disability; it comes without qualifiers or footnotes" (p. 17).

The overall theme outlined in the participatory research displays a gap between the inclusion of individuals with and without disabilities participation in religious activities. Each of the studies above reported barriers to participation ranging from building accessibility to participants not feeling

accepted. These barriers are examined in further detail below. Regardless of the barriers and potential hypotheses about why this gap exists, a population just outside the sanctuary is missing the Word of God. Carter (2007) argues, "When an entire segment of the population remains absent from the body of believers, that community not only remains less than it *could* be, it remains less than it was *intended* to be" (p. 18). If Jesus is "the way, the truth and the light," then churches need to reevaluate their ministry efforts.

Benefits of Inclusion for Students with and without Disabilities

"You my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:13–14, New International Version).

Research regarding inclusion demonstrates benefits for children both with and without disabilities. For example, children with disabilities display less isolated play and fewer inappropriate behaviors due to the existence of age-appropriate role models (Holahan & Costenbader, 2000). In addition, Stahmer, Carter, Baker, and Miwa (2003) found students with special needs included in general education settings demonstrated improved gains in language, cognitive and motor development, as well as play skills. In addition, Odom (2000) found positive outcomes for development and attitudes, while Grenot-Scheyer, Jubala, Bishop, and Coots (1996) found increased communication and social interactions, age-appropriate models of behavior and skills, active participation in the life of the school community, increased individualized educational goals and objectives, access to the rich core curriculum, and opportunities to build a network of friends and other social relationships as advantages of inclusion for children with disabilities.

Katz and Mirenda (2002a, 2002b) conducted two different literature reviews regarding the educational and social benefits for students with and without disabilities included in the general education classroom. The multiple articles evaluated by the authors demonstrated a positive correlation between time spent in the regular classroom with typical peers and increased opportunities for socialization (Brinker & Thorpe, 1984). Additionally, Hunt, Staub, Alwell, and Goetz (1994) found that children with multiple disabilities included in collaborative groups and settings increased communication output and motor skills, while typically developing students provided verbal, visual, or gestural cues and prompts for the students. Most importantly, these students generalized their behavior over multiple settings. Furthermore, these results are of even more significance when understanding Helmstetter,

Curry, Brennan, and Sampson-Saul's (1998) comparison of instructional time between segregated and inclusive settings. They reported that peer-to-peer instruction was 18% higher within inclusive settings. In the same analysis, Helmstetter et al. determined that the time spent on non-academic teaching in the small group classroom was 23% higher than in the inclusive setting. Furthermore, certified educators rather than paraprofessionals provided the information and instruction presented in inclusive settings most often.

In addition, Alper and Ryndak (1992) and Hunt and Goetz (1997) conducted meta-analyses investigating the difference between an inclusive setting and a small group setting. By determining the effect size based on the mean and standard deviations, the researchers concluded that there was either a positive or no significant effect between the two settings. Consequently, Katz and Mirenda (2002a) concluded, "Most of the research studies that have studied the relationship between class placement and educational outcomes have found positive effects for inclusion" (p. 15).

Although most of the research regarding inclusion focuses on children with disabilities, research regarding typically developing children exists too. Stahmer et al. (2003) found typically developing children demonstrated advanced social skills, fewer disruptive behaviors, less prejudices and fewer stereotypes, increased responsiveness and helpfulness, increasing awareness of the needs of others, and higher rates of acceptance. Furthermore, Grenot-Scheyer et al. (1996) claim children without disabilities who participate in inclusive environments demonstrate increased skills acquisition, improved self-esteem, intensified positive attitudes and comfort around individuals with disabilities, strengthened commitments to moral and ethical principles, and no loss of engaged time as a result of having students with disabilities in their regular education settings.

Opportunities for Teaching Christian Principles

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22–23, New International Version).

One of the benefits of inclusion for students without disabilities is a strengthened development of moral and ethical principles (Grenot-Scheyer et al., 1996). When children with and without disabilities participate in activities within the same environment, they often develop meaningful friendships. Researchers investigating the friendships of individuals with disabilities report students with disabilities have few relationships outside of their family and paid support staff. In a research study investigating the friendships of teenagers and adults with an autism diagnosis, 46% of individuals

were reported having no friends of similar ages (Orsmond et al., 2004). However, as students participate in similar activities and become more comfortable and understanding of one another, friendships develop. Within friendships, the same fruit of the Spirit described in the Bible emerge within these relationships. Children begin to possess love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Hoeksema (1995) maintains that

> faith or religion should not be equated with knowledge, though it's partly that, of course. Faith also involves the elements of trust, loyalty and commitment to someone or something. It is a matter of both head and heart. It is part idea, part feeling, part commitment, and part action. It is something known, and it is also something experienced. (p. 290)

These friendships between individuals with and without disabilities promote faith and understanding while encouraging the same Christian principles taught by Jesus.

What Would Jesus Do?

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35, NIV).

The Bible portrayed numerous examples of Jesus' acceptance of individuals with hardships. In Matthew 9:9–13, Jesus called Matthew to follow him and leave behind his previous life. Jesus chose Matthew as one of his 12 disciples in spite of Matthew being a tax collector. When asked why he ate with sinners, Jesus responded, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12–13, NIV). Jesus continued this pattern of accepting individuals not traditionally recognized by society with the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10. The Lord called Zacchaeus down from the sycamore tree and pronounced he wanted to stay the night at Zacchaeus's house. As the crowd erupts, Jesus spoke again stating, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:1–10, New International Version). Another depiction of Jesus' acceptance occurred in Samaria. As Jesus stood at the well, a Samaritan woman approaches him. He describes the woman as having had five husbands and living with a different man. Jesus once again displays his acceptance as he speaks with her at the well (John 4:1–42).

The most important example of God's acceptance was the day he was nailed to the cross on Calvary. He accepted all of us while knowing we always fall short of his example. Jesus continually displayed his love, compassion, and acceptance of others when he acknowledged individuals not commonly recognized within the community.

Barriers to Inclusion and Strategies for Overcoming Them

I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord.
(Ps 77:1–2, New International Version)

Providing inclusive environments is not always an easy task. Numerous barriers exist within classroom settings, and some of these barriers parallel with common issues identified within religious settings. Norman Vincent Peale (1967), a Protestant clergyman, claims, "Every problem has in it the seeds of its own solution" (p. 83). Therefore, brainstorming with a group of individuals who share the passion for including students with disabilities is essential when problem-solving barriers arise. Five of the most common barriers to inclusion include (a) training, (b) physical accessibility, (c) attitudes, (d) programmatic barriers, and (e) behavior management.

Training

The role of educators in the nation's public school classrooms continues to change as new policies and practices are implemented. The diversity within each classroom provides more challenges for some teachers who do not feel prepared to handle the varying needs of students. Many teachers report a lack of preparation when teaching the wide range of students now in the general education setting (Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad, 2003). In fact, the lack of preparation and focus on individuals with special needs within higher education teacher preparation programs is identified as a barrier to the success of inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Burke & Sutherland, 2004), and potentially the cause for negative perceptions and attitudes toward inclusion that are often expressed by general education teachers (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006).

Not surprisingly, this barrier corresponds to church settings too. Many teachers and leaders in children's ministry settings are volunteers. Unless these individuals work in settings geared toward individuals with disabilities, they often lack the necessary training to successfully include students with

special needs in worship activities. Furthermore, because many churches work within limited budget constraints, it is difficult to send volunteers to training programs geared toward including students with disabilities.

Although this barrier exists in both school and ministry settings, it is possible to overcome in both settings. Many churches have special educators or therapists with years of experience within their congregation. These individuals make inexpensive and great resources for training teachers. Furthermore, sending the special needs or children's ministry coordinator to a workshop and having the leader return to train the remaining volunteers provides an inexpensive option for churches pinching pennies. Furthermore, nonchurchgoers are often willing to share their expertise with volunteers because they have a passion for individuals with disabilities. Do not hesitate to reach outside of the congregation if other resources do not seem present.

Physical Accessibility

With the 1990 enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the government required all public buildings to accommodate individuals with disabilities. Therefore, many buildings and parks that were previously off-limits for individuals with disabilities were revamped to provide opportunities for all individuals to enjoy them. However, church facilities were not held to the same standard because they are private buildings. Therefore, many worship locations remain inaccessible to individuals using adaptive equipment. However, the use of signs to guarantee easy access to locations that are accessible or planning events in alternative locations are ways to overcome this barrier and provide a welcoming environment to individuals with increased accessibility needs. Haythorn (2003) claims,

> I will never forget a church that had a sign in front of its sanctuary that declared that the building was "handicap accessible." A ramp led up the side of the steps to the sanctuary, and then one-step remained to enter the church. For many people with disabilities, that one step serves as an apt metaphor for how the church has welcomed them. (p. 344)

Oftentimes these one-step barriers can be overcome by small ramps built by congregational members. However, it takes someone acknowledging the issue and bringing it to attention before the issue can be resolved.

Attitudes

Attitudes about the inclusion of individuals with disabilities are displayed in numerous ways. Some individuals may whisper something to a

neighbor; others may stare at the uncertainty of devices or physical impairments. Some attitudes are expressed more abruptly when children's ministry staff informs parents there are no programs available for their child with a special need. However attitudes are expressed, many families of individuals with disabilities are sensitive to these behaviors. Often, the attitudes are expressed subconsciously and inadvertently. For example, when I visited a church to witness one of my former students with autism in his Easter play, I was dismayed by what I heard from another adult. Not intending to offend anyone, a congregational member asked me, "You're here to watch that crazy kid?" That crazy kid was my favorite student, and the fact that he stood on a stage and participated exactly as he was taught was spectacular. As his teacher, I could not have been prouder. However, the experience was overshadowed by a churchgoer's attitude and misunderstanding of the child.

Similar situations are likely to occur; however, there are multiple ways of overcoming these issues. A children's ministry team must provide constant education of not only volunteers but also the congregation to fend off negative attitudes about individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, exposure to the diversity and differences of others decreases the novelty that comes with a new experience. Therefore, time will also be a factor in the attitudes of church members.

Programmatic Barrier

Some students with special needs may require additional assistance to fully participate in activities within the church community. Some churches use a buddy system where students with increased support needs have a buddy assigned to assist the student with transitions, toileting, and other areas that need addition aid. As an educator interested in self-determination and independence for individuals with disabilities, I encourage churches to provide additional volunteers within the classroom, but not to allow the buddy to be a shadow of the student with special needs. Rather, the assistant would support all students within the classroom while keeping special attention on the student with special needs.

In addition to human assistance, some students may require alterations to readings or activities. For example, the use of abridged text, audio-recorded text, picture text, or large print may be necessary to help students fully participate in educational programs (Brock, 1998; Rogan & Havir, 1993; Thurlow, 2002). Furthermore, students may need frequent breaks (Brock, 1998), opportunities to work with a partner (Brock, 1998), or headphones to decrease the sound in loud auditoriums. Amy Fenton Lee (n.d.), author of the blog entitled "The Inclusive Church: Helping Churches Successfully Include Children with Special Needs," outline five methods to encourage more

participation from students with special needs. These five methods include (a) classroom size and teacher ratio, (b) time, (c) vary input and output, (d) degree of difficulty, and (e) substitute and enhance. Fenton (n.d.) suggests that a smaller student-to-teacher ratio provides a less chaotic environment and more individualized attention for students with increased support needs. Furthermore, too much time for an activity increases the opportunity for boredom and students may display inappropriate behaviors during this free time. Therefore, the use of breaks or "filler" activities for down times provides students more structure and fewer opportunities for misbehaving. In addition, many activities require students to produce answers to activities using skills that are not fully developed. For example, a student with deficits in fine motor skills may struggle to write answers to questions from a story. This could lead to increased frustration levels within the student and in turn negative behaviors. Therefore, altering the way the student participates in the activity is an option for the student. For example, the student may verbally provide answers or glue correct responses to coordinate with the questions of the story. Furthermore, students with special needs may struggle with multi-step directions, changes in routines, or completing a task within the provided rules. Consequently, teachers can reduce the directions or break them into smaller steps, provide ample prompting regarding changes in the routine, or alter the rules to meet the needs of individual students (Brock, 1998; Thurlow, 2002). In addition, students with special needs may lack the skills to fully participate in activities. For example, a fifth-grade student with Down syndrome may need an abridged version of the Scripture story to fully understand the lesson (Rogan & Havir, 1993). Therefore, teachers and volunteers must preview the material to ensure that students within their class can fully participate in the planned activity. In turn, the teachers and volunteers can provide additional materials or enhance the components already in use. Silverstein (2000) declares,

> Sometimes these attitudinal and institutional barriers are the result of deep-seeded prejudice. At times these barriers result from decisions to follow the 'old paradigm' of considering people with disabilities as 'defective' and in need of 'fixing.' At other times, these barriers are the result of thoughtlessness, indifference, or lack of understanding. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain precisely why these barriers exist. (p. 1695)

Overall, programmatic changes are determined individually by the needs of the child. Therefore, it is essential to speak with parents about the use of accommodations and brainstorm with the children's ministry team about the best way to meet the student's needs. Furthermore, as the student becomes a

consistent participant in the ministry programs, volunteers will be able to quickly identify the needs of each student based on the weekly planned activities.

Behavior Management

Many children, regardless of whether or not they have special needs, display behavior problems that may interfere with their learning or that of their peers. Students may interrupt instruction by shouting out, refuse to participate in activities, or lack the focus needed to complete tasks. These issues should not hinder the participation of students in ministry programs. Instead, accommodations utilized within school systems may help increase student participation. For example, establishing routines is a common strategy used within classrooms. When students know what is expected and where to go when they enter the Sunday school environment, they are less likely to display inappropriate problems. Furthermore, establishing a set schedule, posting it within the classroom for students to see, and referring back to it throughout the day is essential for many students who require structure to their learning (Gunter, 2003; Rogan & Havir, 1993). In addition, teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all the students (Brock, 1998). This allows students with short attention spans or multiple modality learners to participate more frequently in learning activities. Finally, using student interests to engage student learning is essential for students with and without disabilities (Brock, 1998). This method provides the instructors with a way to engage and motivate the students to learn. Overall, there are many useful strategies to engage students in learning, and in turn decrease behavior difficulties. When students are excited and motivated about learning, the behavior problems decrease because they are actively engaged in their learning.

Barriers to inclusion exist in public school settings and are likely to exist in church settings too. However, the use of problem-solving methods to approach each student's individualized needs will help the student meaningfully participate in religious activities.

Where to Begin

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not

doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:2–7, New International Version).

Entering the conference room, Katy sighs loudly and announces, "We have a problem!" Recounting the previous day's encounter with Candice, Katy acknowledges she has no idea what to do and would like any guidance the programming team can give her. David, the weekday ministry coordinator, speaks up and explains he might be able to help since the preschool program is fully inclusive. In an attempt to reassure Katy, David explains, "Megan Jenkins, who belongs to the God's Light Sunday school class, is a speech therapist. She's helped us develop an action plan to implement when we first started our program. Why don't we schedule a lunch meeting together?"

Carter (2007), an assistant professor in the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, claims that most inclusive programs emerge from a need within the church body. For example, one churchgoer may have a child with special needs who is officially old enough to participate in children's programming. In turn, there is no specific test to determine what student can and cannot be included in church ministries. Some more developed ministries may expand their programs to include children with higher support needs, while programs just beginning may begin with more common disabilities. This decision is one that must be made by the church leaders and based on the level of support available. However, as Carter claims, many times churches are simply answering the need of their congregation. Welcoming a family that has a child with Down syndrome may start an inclusive church ministry program that was never on the radar.

Carter developed a framework that identifies five essential steps for churches to go through when establishing inclusive children's ministry programs. These steps include (a) establishing a planning group, (b) identifying a program approach, (c) identifying a coordinator, (d) seeking out supports and resources, and (e) revisiting program procedures.

As the lunch meeting concludes, Katy has a list of items to mull over. The first is to establish a larger working committee to help include students with disabilities. Heading back to her office at the church, she beings to think of several congregational members who would be perfect for the group.

Establish a Planning Group

"Thank you all for coming," Katy says as she begins the meeting. "After evaluating our children's ministry program, we've noticed an area that needs work. Right now we're not equipped for kids with disabilities, and we need to make

some changes to ensure everyone is included. I asked you all here because I think you could help us get there." Finishing her welcoming remarks, Katy introduces Candice to the group. As Candice begins to speak, she pauses to catch her breath. With her voice quivering, she gathers her thoughts and thanks everyone for helping to make this dream a reality.

The old saying, "two heads are better than one," proves true when establishing new programming within church environments. Invite individuals to join the committee who share a passion for including students with special needs. Include a diverse group of individuals including parents, teachers, volunteers, lay members, etc. Seek out church members who have experience working with disabilities or have friends and relatives with special needs. With the team, brainstorm ideas and strategies for successfully including individuals with special needs within the faith-based community. During the initial planning stages, conduct a needs assessment to determine what programs, procedures, and practices already exist and what areas need additional improvement.

Identify a Program Approach

As Candice describes her son to the group, she wipes away tears that stream down her face. Trying to hold back additional tears, she explains that her dream is for Jordan to have friends. She describes the church ministry program Jordan left in Chicago and the community of support there. Hearing the benefits for Jordan and the other children in the ministry group, the team decides they want to implement a similar approach within their church.

The scope of this paper encompasses inclusive children's ministry programs; however, other approaches do exist. Similar to schools, churches must identify what approach to provide within the spiritual setting. For example, a church may desire a small group setting where all students with special needs are in one classroom without the involvement of any typically developing peers. With the assistance of the planning group, determine what approach suits the makeup of the church community and create a plan of intervention. It is possible to provide more than one approach or a hybrid of multiple approaches. However, when beginning a program, it is essential to stabilize one setting and array of policies before expanding the options to multiple program approaches.

Identify a Coordinator

As the meeting continues, Jennifer, a young teacher giddy with excitement, bombards the group with ideas of ways to include Jordan throughout the church.

Candice's face lights up with every idea Jennifer explains. When the meeting wraps up, Katy approaches Jennifer and asks her if she's interested in coordinating the inclusive ministry program. Even with butterflies swarming in her stomach, she takes a leap of faith and accepts the charge.

From the planning group, identify one or two members responsible for coordinating the inclusion program. This person works directly with the activities coordinator (i.e., children's minister, preschool coordinator) to assure that the needs of students with disabilities are not overlooked. In addition, this person serves as a liaison between the staff of the church and the families of children with disabilities who participate in the church community. Furthermore, Carter (2007) claims this person's responsibilities could include

> . . . extending invitations to families within and beyond the congregation; coordinating or directly providing training to teachers, helpers and other lay volunteers; maintaining communication with families; seeking out helpful resources for teachers; developing new avenues for meeting the needs of children and families; and keeping the leadership informed of emerging needs, inspiring success, and future plans. (p. 93)

Most importantly, the coordinator should share a passion for including students with disabilities and advocating on their behalf.

Seek out Supports and Resources

Being a teacher in the local school system, Jennifer has a lot of experience making something from nothing. Always in need of supplies or assistance, her school developed a "wish list" on its web site. Imagining the giving congregation of her loving church, she asks the administrative assistant (who is also in charge of the web site) to add a link to the web site with a list and cost of specific items of need. As Jennifer leaves the receptionist's office, she remembered her bulletin announcement, seeking volunteers to assist with the new ministry program. She sprints back into the office and drops off her handwritten notice.

As Monday morning rolls around, Brian, the senior minister of the church, hangs up his jacket on the back of the door and prepares for his busy day of sermon preparation and hospital visits. As he presses the grey circular button on his laptop, Jerry, a balding 56-year-old, pops his head into the office. "Can I disturb you for a moment?" Jerry is a lifelong member of the church, but seldom participates in activities outside of Sunday morning worship. Sitting in one of the two chairs across the desk from Brian, Jerry begins to choke up. "I don't talk about this often, but I had a child with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He died three weeks before his 16th birthday." Wiping away tears, Jerry pulls out a small rec-

tangular piece of paper. "I want to donate this money to the ministry y'all started. I wish it had existed when my son was alive."

As discussed previously in this article, including students with special needs is not always an easy task. However, Jesus did not promise his followers a rose garden. Rather, he provided us with his teachings, his ear, and a support group of other believers. Establish a list of available supports and resources. Invite church members, educators, parents, and all who have experience with including students with special needs to be an active part of the ministry. When challenges occur, bring in mentors, whether churchgoers are not. Inviting in experts as a way to problem-solve solutions may even encourage these individuals to become active parts of the church community. However, what is most important is being proactive. Do not wait for a problem to arise and then react. Rather, intentionally problem-solve situations that might arise and have a plan of action.

Revisit Program Procedures

As Candice approaches the children's hall, she reassures her friend Samantha that her daughter will be just fine while she and her husband worship in the sanctuary. Katy sees Candice walking toward her, and rushes up, throwing her arms around her neck. Samantha steps in and introduces herself and her 5-year-old daughter, Sophia. Candice explains that Sophia may need a little extra help with the bathroom, but for the most part is extremely independent. Disclosing that her daughter has Down syndrome, Samantha explains her anxieties about leaving her during worship for the first time. "Candice assures me she'll be just fine," Samantha says halfheartedly. Katy begins explaining the policies of how the volunteers will post her corresponding number on the sanctuary screen if there is a problem. "And before you leave, will you fill out this registration card?" Katy asks as they make it to the front desk of the children's area.

Children's ministry programs have set policies in place to ensure the safety of children and volunteers. These policies range from a "hands off" policy in the bathroom to having two adults in each classroom at all times. Some policies may conflict with philosophies of working with children with disabilities. If a student with special needs does not have the fine motor skills to maneuver buttons and snaps, a volunteer will be required to help with these difficulties. Therefore, it is essential to alter program procedures as needed to best meet the needs of the individual children.

When making decisions regarding students with disabilities, it is essential to make individualized and specific decisions to match the needs of each child. This is the integral aspect of special education. Broad decisions are not always applicable to everyone. Each individual person is different and his/her

needs may require distinctive decisions. Therefore, be open to change and altering the policies and procedures to meet the needs of the ones they affect.

Including individuals with disabilities within church ministries is beneficial for children with and without special needs. The Bible urges Christians to accept and love their neighbor. Carter (2007) claims,

> It is not enough for congregations to simply mirror the rest of society when it comes to including people with disabilities. Rather, they are called to be leaders in transforming the culture—to graciously, lovingly, and actively influence their communities. When congregations push toward a higher standard than the rest of society; when they demonstrate leadership, rather than lagging behind; and when their efforts stand in stark contrast to those of others in their community, it sends a powerful message. (p. 17)

The message we all should strive for is not a message of hindrance, but rather of acceptance. This is just as Jesus delivered when he stated, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:14, English Standard Version).

Resources for Churches

Blogs:

- The inclusive church: Helping churches successfully include children with special needs. http://theinclusivechurch.wordpress.com/

Books:

- Breeding, M., Hood, D. K., & Whitworth, J. E. (2006). *Let all the children to come to me: A practical guide to including children with special needs in your church ministries.* Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.
- Carter, E. W. (2007). *Including people with disabilities in faith communities: A guide for service providers, families and congregations.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Luurtsema, K. S., & Newman, B. J. (2009). *G.L.U.E. training manual.* Wyoming, MI: CLC
- Newman, B. J. (2001). *Helping kids include kids with disabilities.* Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources.
- Pierson, J. O. (1989). *No disabled souls: How to welcome a person with a disability into your life and your church.* Cincinnati, OH: Standard.

Churches with established special needs ministries:

- First Baptist Church: Elk Grove, CA http://www.fbceg.org/
- Grace Church: Greenville, SC http://www.gracechurchsc.org/
- Woodmen Valley Chapel: Colorado Springs, CO http://www.woodmenvalley.org/
- Capital Christian Center Church: Sacramento, CA http://www.ccconline.cc/
- Montgomery Community Church: Cincinnati, OH http://www.woodmenvalley.org/
- Church of the Apostles: Atlanta, GA http://apostles.org/
- Shades Mountain Baptist Church: Birmingham, AL http://www.shades.org/
- Saddleback Church: Lake Forest, CA http://www.saddleback.com/
- McLean Bible Church: Washington DC Metro Areas http://www.mcleanbible.org/

Conferences:

- Accessibility Summit: http://accessibilitysummit.org/index.html
- Lifeway's Kids Ministry Conference: http://www.lifeway.com/event/4/
- Children's Ministry Expo: http://www.childrensministryexpo.com/

On-line Articles:

- Mauro, T. (2011). *Five ways to make your church more inclusive: Positive and faith-filled strategies for change.* http://specialchildren.about.com/od/communityparticipation/a/Five-Ways-To-Make-Your-Church-More-Inclusive.htm
- Lee, A. F. (2010). *Adapting your Bible lesson for children with special needs.* http://ministry-to-children.com/adapting-lessons-for-special-needs/

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AUTHOR

M. Alyssa Barnes (Ph.D., University of Georgia) serves as Assistant Professor at North Georgia College and State University, Dahlonega, GA. E-mail: abarnes@northgeorgia.edu