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INTENTIONAL
inclusion

We are better together

*"God's dream is that you and I and all of us
will realise that we are family, that we are
made for togetherness." Desmond Tutu*

“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...”

1 Corinthians 12:21-22, Holy Bible (NIV)⁶



Robert has an acquired brain injury. He presented with some disruptive behaviours. Church leaders talked to Robert and his family. With better understanding of his needs, simple accommodations were made. Robert has great woodworking skills and he has repaired various items for the church. **“We noticed a change in Robert’s behaviour. We really appreciate his work and he is a valued part of our community.”** said the pastor.

“Some people living with disability feel isolated and lonely. “Negative attitudes are as big a barrier to social inclusion as lack of physical accessibility.” says Sara

Mother Teresa notes loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty. Everyone wants to feel genuinely included into family, community and church life. “Community provides social connectedness through genuine welcoming, respecting, valuing and actively involving people with disability.”¹ For social connection to occur communities need to

ensure all people are able to participate. To achieve that goal we need to reduce or remove the barriers that hinder participation.

As churches we seek to welcome every person. Many churches are doing this well by embracing their community and seeing abilities and possibilities in every person.

AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH:

- Affirms, respects and values every person as a human being made in God's image
- Has an open welcome to everyone as Jesus does
- Removes barriers that disconnect people from each other and from God
- Demonstrates the Gospel brings hope for all
- Brings together people with differing abilities as equals, because we need one another and we are better together.²

While most churches aim to include everyone, they can't be a perfect fit for every person and this is also true for people living with disabilities. Loud music and bright lights are terrific for some people, but may produce sensory overload for another

person. The key point when it comes to disability inclusion is to ask the person and their family to tell you what matters most to them. Then do your best within the parameters of what your whole community needs, to offer those things.

A FEW SIMPLE EXAMPLES THAT PROMOTE INCLUSION

- One church offers a 'Parents Night Out' for parents of children with special needs. Each month they connect with one another over a meal. Emily and John say they feel supported, and are making new and understanding friendships within church.
- Another church holds a 'Disability Awareness and Inclusion Service' once a year. People living with a disability are invited to speak about their life and lead the worship service. Many church members say it is a highlight in the church calendar because it is such a joyful celebration.
- A small church offers a family-friendly service called 'The Table'. They share a meal in an informal format. It's usually noisy and no-one expects the children to sit quietly. The message is simple and short, so children can easily engage. There is an evening Bible study for people who want deeper teaching.
- A regional church has a midweek craft group attended by people living with disabilities who use wheelchair. The person can be accompanied by their support worker if they wish. They can both stay for a lunch followed by a simple church service if they want to attend.
- A rural church asked for volunteers to help improve the church's accessibility. They found several experienced carpenters and an engineer who offered their time to construct a ramp. Installing equipment and making minor modifications had long-term benefits for many others in the community and the church grew.

Steve was thrilled when the church moved a table out of the way each Sunday so Steve could easily fit his wheelchair in the café area after church. That meant people came up to him to talk and he could socialise.

TOP TIPS FOR INCLUSIVE CHURCH

Marni has been attending her church for 12 years. Marni's daughter Sara is blind. Marni and Sara present their top tips to help your church be inclusive.

- **Include us in your church life**
My daughter and I just want to belong to a caring community the same way everyone else does. My daughter Sara is blind and she regularly deals with stereotyping, discrimination, bullying and patronising attitudes. Our society holds an 'ableist' perspective that can make Sara and other disabled people feel as if they are 'lesser' people. Sara dislikes being treated with pity, seen as a burden, treated as defective, or in need of a cure. She doesn't want people to pray for a healing miracle, but she would love you to pray for a more inclusive community. Sara is a demonstration of human diversity. She is valuable, easily accommodated, and made in God's image the same as you and I. She just wants to flourish and become all God created her to be, and as her mother that's what I want for her too.
 - **Use inclusive language**
Your words shape your thinking about people with disability. How you include me and behave toward me influences how I feel about myself. Language shapes attitudes and sends a message about how God sees me and other people with disabilities. So please choose your words carefully.
1. **Ask yourself, is your language:**
 - a. Reflecting Jesus' view of me
 - b. Respectful of my human rights
 - c. Promoting a positive attitude about me and others like me
 - d. Recognising my gifts and my abilities
 2. **I prefer 'identity-first' language rather than 'disability-first' language³**

'Disability first' language says I am 'disabled person' because I want people to know I have a disability. For example some people living with deafness, blindness, or autism, prefer to be called a deaf person, a blind person, or an autistic person. I don't! I prefer 'identity-first' language that says 'person with disability' because I first want you to see me as a person just like you, but I also live with a disability.

If you are unsure of which way you should speak to me, just ask me!

3. Don't describe us by 'function': My friend Bec has Autism. She dislikes it when you use 'high functioning' or 'low functioning' to describe her condition. She suggests using terms such as 'capable' or 'insightful', rather than 'high functioning'.^{4,5}

4. Please challenge common put-downs: I feel hurt when I hear people using insulting language in conversations. For example, calling a person a "retard" when they do something wrong, or "deaf" when they are not paying attention, or "blind" when they don't observe something! That language is insensitive and hurtful. It shapes negative stereotypes that promote discrimination, so please challenge it.

- **Focus on what I can do, not on what I can't do:** Train and encourage leaders and people at church to focus on my gifts.
- **Just ask:** I was happy when our youth group leader asked us how the church and the youth leaders could best support us so I could attend youth group and fully participate. I made suggestions and Beth followed them up. Now I join in most activities easily.
- **Include me:** I love it when I am allowed to use my Braille Bible and read the scripture for a worship service. There are many things people with disabilities can do, so just ask us how we would like to be involved, and then make it happen!
- **I love having an 'Inclusion Champion':** Jake is our church's inclusion champion and he and a couple of other people keep a disability focus in front of our church. They advocate for me, teach people, share with me about new services and supports I may not know about, and challenge unhelpful attitudes and practices that stop me and other people with disabilities participating in church life. Jake does it in a patient and positive way and mum loves that she doesn't have to do those advocacy tasks anymore.
- **Share it:** My youth group has five people who know how to help me meet my needs at church. It means mum can relax because she knows I have the right support. They rotate being my buddy.

Jake is undertaking disability studies. He is eager to be an Inclusion Champion. Jake ensures any person with disability experiences a good welcome. He asks the person and the family if they have anything the church can do to make their participation easier and more complete. He passes information to appropriate people to make sure these things happen and follows up that it is working as hoped. Jake is there to make sure the church is intentionally informed, deliberately inclusive and genuinely welcoming.

That means they can muck around some weeks at youth group in ways that I can't. I get to know different people and they get to know me. My circle of friends is growing this way and I love it.

- **Make the building accessible:** My needs are different from a person in a wheelchair, but how good would it be to know you'd already thought about us before we came, so it was easy for us to join in. If costs are an issue then stagger the modifications over several budgets.
- **You can use an accessibility checklist:** I look up venues on their website before I go to see if I can access them easily. It would be helpful if you added simple accessibility information to the front page of your church website. You can get online checklists that let you know what needs to be done to be accessible. My friends with disability and I would happily test things out and give you feedback as to what works best.

There are more inclusion resources available at www.baptistcaresa.org.au/connections with live links to websites that can help your church champion inclusion.

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⁵ Autism SA, 2018, The fallacy of high and low functioning autism, viewed 12/12/2018, <https://the-art-of-autism.com/the-fallacy-of-high-and-low-functioning-autism/>

⁶ Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](http://www.biblica.com)



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