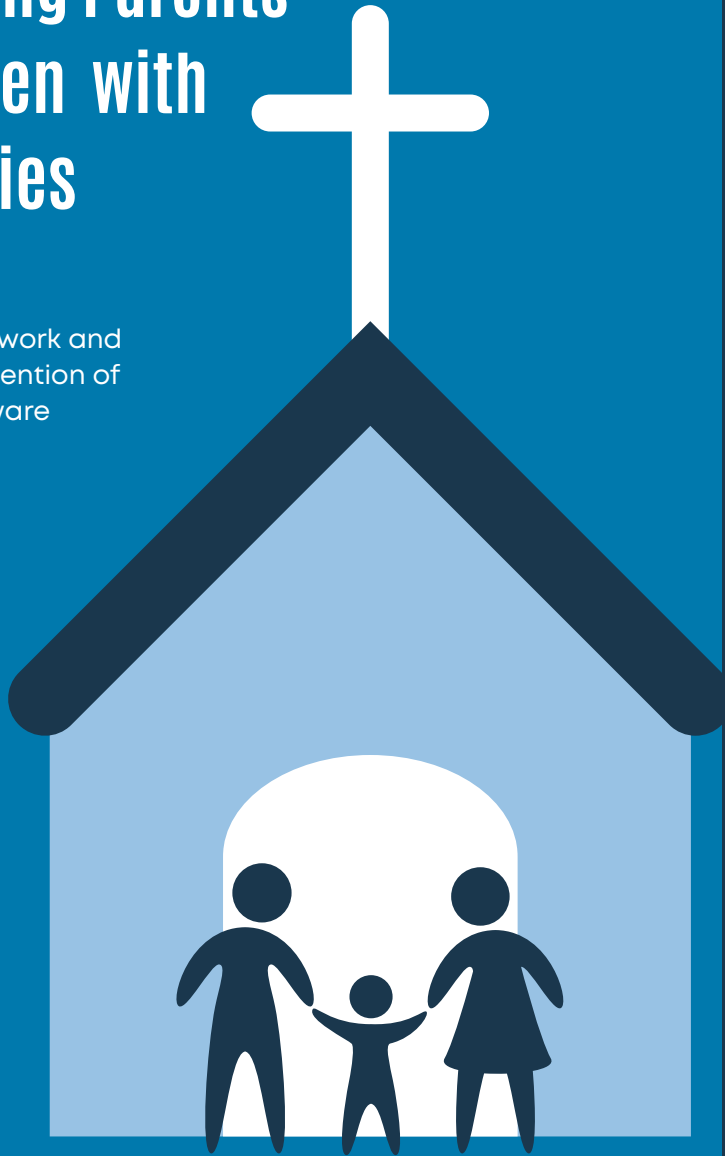


EQUIPPING THE CHURCH:

Supporting Parents of Children with Disabilities

The Banquet Network and
The Baptist Convention of
Maryland/ Delaware
Partnership



Welcome

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 61 million people in the USA have a disability. Worldwide, the number soars to about 650 million people. Yet, many of these individuals are lost. Unfortunately, most churches do not make sharing the gospel with individuals affected by disabilities a priority. The Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware (BCM/D) and The Banquet Network (TBN) have linked arms to partner in inspiring and assisting churches in changing this paradigm.

Together, we want to help churches embrace these precious individuals. We want to help churches see that God has a plan and a purpose for their lives, and the church is not complete without them. The unique partnership between the BCM/D and TBN seeks to equip and resource churches to reach, serve, and include individuals and families whose lives are affected by disability.

If you have questions related to welcoming individuals and families affected by disability into the full body life of the church, contact TBN at info@thebanquetnetwork.com or go to our website at thebanquetnetwork.com to learn more!

We Believe

We believe that individuals affected by disabilities are “divinely designed with God’s purpose in mind” (John 9: 1-3).

We believe that becoming a church that is effective in ministering to individuals and families affected by disabilities begins with a knowledge of what scripture says and obedience to God’s commands.

We believe Jesus died for all people.

We believe all people are created in the image of God.

We believe the church itself is disabled when individuals affected by disabilities are not included.

A Note to Ministry Leaders

It's ok to do something small. But everyone needs to do something.

Supporting families affected by disability does not mean you have to add a line to your church budget, start a new ministry program, or overhaul everything you're doing. The most important thing you can do is consider individuals and families affected by disability as you contextualize your services, events, and ministries to where God has placed you. This awareness alone will have a transformative impact! It's ok to do something small, but you have to do something. Every community consists of people who have disabilities, so no matter where you are making disciples, there are families affected by disabilities there.

This guide is designed to equip church leaders with simple considerations to better support families affected by disability in all facets of ministry within the church. We pray that by intentionally supporting the families of children and students who have disabilities, your church will provide spiritual growth and discipleship to them through meeting their basic needs.

Introduction

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” (NIV)

Proverbs 12:18

We have all experienced the truth of this scripture verse. We understand that words hurt. We know that words can be weaponized with the intent to inflict damage. However, the speaker may not have intended to weaponize their words. Sometimes, the person believes their words are providing comfort, but instead their words have brought pain. Other times, the hearer believes the words are weaponized when they were not intended to be.

As followers of Christ, we must be careful with our speech. It is a common problem for each of us. Oftentimes, we don't know what to say, so rather than bridle our tongues and listen, we recklessly speak in a failed attempt to connect or show understanding. Families affected by disability are not strangers to this. They often are impacted by words that pierce like swords as the Proverb states.

What not to say

Below are real statements that have been said to both of our co-authors.

“So you have an autistic son.”

- I have a son. His name is Jimmy. He is affected by autism. Please acknowledge his humanity first.
- If your son had cancer, I would not say, “you have a cancerous son.”
- God says that my son is special. God desires a relationship with Jimmy. God speaks to Jimmy in the ways that Jimmy can understand.



“For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (NLT) Ephesians 2:10

“You and your wife should go out more.”

- We would love that! We would love to have a date night by ourselves and go on vacations together, however, our children cannot be left alone, and leaving them in the care of another is easier said than done. We would love your help so that we can!



“You obey the law of Christ when you offer each other a helping hand.” (NLT) Galatians 6:2

What not to say

“I know what you are going through.”

- With all due respect, you have very little idea of what I or my family is going through. Not all cases are the same. There are times of great joy and times of intense suffering, some of which may be difficult to relate to.



"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight."

(ESV) Romans 12:15-16

“If you had more faith, God would heal your child.”

- My child was divinely designed with God’s purpose in mind.

"For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wondrously made. Your works are wondrous, and I know this very well."

(CSB) Psalm 139:13-14



What not to say

Below are additional real statements that have been said to both of our co-authors.

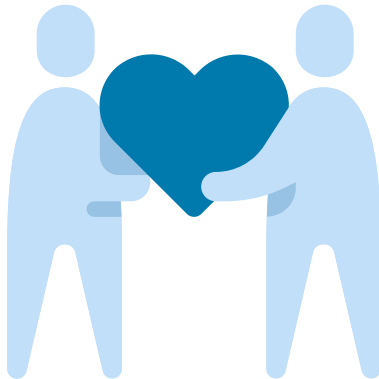
Other Examples:

- “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”
- “God only gives special children to special parents.”
- “He’s just one of God’s special angels.”
- “Why didn’t you tell me or ask for help?”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “But your child looks normal.”
- “What’s wrong with him?”
- “Some people go through more than you.”
- “It’s not as bad as it could be.”
- “Have you tried this natural herb, pill, or prayer?”
- “My coworker’s cousin’s best friend has [*insert disability*] too!”
- “I don’t know how you handle it. I couldn’t do it.”
- “He’s acting so [*insert disability*].”



What to Say

- “I don’t know what you’re experiencing, but I’m here for you.”
- “How can I pray specifically for you?”
- “Are there any tangible things I can do to support your family?” And follow up with examples.
 - *Can I bring you a meal this week?*
 - *Can I take your other child(ren) out for a few hours?*
 - *Would you be comfortable if I helped run errands for you or picked up the groceries?*
- “What’s your favorite coffee order?” (*This is the best way to love our co-author momma, Katie!*)
- “I can be a listening ear.”
- “How can we better accommodate you at church?”
- “God loves you and He loves your child.”



What not to do

It is not enough as a church to only accommodate, we must include! Inclusion will only come as a result of the development of deep relationships and strong friendships with these very special individuals and families!

Refer to children or students by their disability.

- Such as, “the family with the autistic boy.” Learn the family’s names and who they are as individuals.

Make Assumptions.

- Don’t assume what families can and cannot do. Instead, ask them.
- Don’t assume someone cannot communicate or understand you. Speaking louder and slower to a person with a visual impairment doesn’t make them see you. Many families can participate in the full body life of the church with only a few accommodations.



What to do

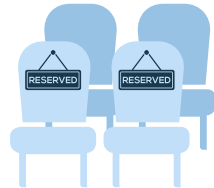
The church can also support parents by what it does because parents love their children so much that when the children are cared for, the parents also feel supported. We encourage you to be the hands and feet of Jesus for families impacted by disability.

Introduce Yourself.

- It's simple. So often this gesture is avoided. A child with a disability may look different or intimidating. Saying "Hello" acknowledges such a basic need. And it's FREE!

Reserved Seating.

- Ask the family with a child who has a developmental or intellectual disability if they would benefit from reserved seating. This could provide easy access to an exit in the case of bathroom emergencies, quick breaks, or an unexpected meltdown.



Facility Renovations.

- Install ramps or create a space for comfortable seating in the sanctuary. You may consider redesigning bathrooms or widening doorways. We understand this is no small task. Start somewhere and see where it leads you!

What to do

Respite Care.

- This provides a small window of time for parents and caregivers to take a break from the responsibility of the 24/7 care they give. If this isn't something that the church can do as an event, train a few people to go to the parent's home and care for the child(ren).

Meal Trains.

- We asked several special needs families how we could best serve them, and they appreciate food drop-offs! The last thing a parent wants to do after a hard day of caring for their child is stand in front of the stove. If the church could routinely provide a meal, it would allow the families to plan other tasks or take a break.
- Gift cards to carry-out places or delivery services could also be helpful when a family is in crisis.



Rethinking your church service.

- Establish a Buddy System.
 - A buddy can be a peer, teen, or adult who provides assistance to a student who needs additional support.
 - A church can train buddies to learn how to best support the individuals in need of assistance.

What to do

Rethink your church service (cont).

- Create a Sensory Room or Quiet Space.
- A sensory-based classroom promotes alternative learning styles and unique interventions for students whose needs may not be able to be met in a generalized classroom or space.
- If you are unable to dedicate an entire room, purchase bins with sensory toys and place one in each classroom.

Drop off Coffee (or their favorite drink).

- A simple gesture to show you care can go a long way! (*Again, our co-author, Katie, runs on the good Lord's faithfulness and caffeine*).



Pray.

- Even when no one knows! Commit to continuously praying for these families, because they need it.

Meet the needs you see.

- See a need? Find a way to meet it!



Considerations for Siblings

The sibling is not the secondary caregiver.

- Just because the sibling knows how to care for the student doesn't mean that they should be the one teaching you. Allow the sibling to serve in another capacity that they might enjoy.

Allow the sibling to be an individual.

- A lot of the sibling's life is overshadowed by the needs of the child who has a disability. Allow the sibling to have a space to be themselves and not constantly the "sibling of someone who has disabilities."

Avoid bringing up the home struggles.

- Siblings of children with disabilities experience a lot of stress at home. Asking about their home life might seem helpful, but it can also be a reminder of their pain. Instead, ask them about themselves and how they are doing. Allow them to choose if they want to open up to you.



Conclusion

- Families understand that you're going to make mistakes.
- When you ask, or try, it shows that you care.
- Bestow grace on yourselves and the families.
- Trial and error is not failure!
- Ask yourself: How can we be the hands and feet of Jesus to this family?
- Treat the family how you would want your family to be treated.
- Consider the individuality of the sibling to someone who has a disability.

The Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware (BCM/D) and The Banquet Network (TBN) have linked arms to partner in inspiring and assisting churches to make sharing the gospel with individuals affected by disabilities a priority. We believe that all people were created in the image of God, including people who have disabilities. Therefore, the BCM/D and TBN work together to communicate that the church is disabled when it doesn't include people who have disabilities into the full body life of the church.

Meet the Authors



KATIE MATTHEWS

Matthews is a mom of two, The Banquet Network's Executive Director, the director of a special need's ministry called Bethany Blessings, and a special needs art teacher. She is passionate about bringing the gospel to families of individuals with special needs and seeks to train other church members on how to minister to these families. Her desire is for the church to love individuals who have special needs as best we can on this side of eternity so that they would one day be able to meet Jesus face to face.



TOM STOLLE

Tom Stolle, Associate Executive Director at the BCM/D, developed a passion for special needs ministry through his youngest son, Jimmy, a young man with autism. Tom passionately serves churches in effective special needs ministries, including leading seminars and conducting trainings through the BCM/D. He also enjoys participating in events that raise awareness for special needs causes, such as walks for autism.