

Equipping the Church



SUPPORTING CHURCH LEADERS TO
INCLUDE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



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

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Updated 2026

Welcome

Approximately 70 million people in the USA have a disability. ([Baptist Health South Florida, 2024](#))

Worldwide, the number soars to about 1.3 billion people ([World Health Organization, 2023](#)). 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 to change 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.

Including people who have disabilities 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 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, people with disabilities are there.

This guide is designed to equip church leaders with tools and techniques to include students who have disabilities in all facets of ministry within the church. We pray that by taking steps to create an inclusive children's or youth ministry, your church will provide spiritual growth and discipleship to individuals and families affected by disability.

Inclusive Classrooms

What's an Inclusive Classroom?

- Some students can participate in a classroom amongst their peers, but may benefit from some additional assistance when necessary.
- An inclusive classroom encourages a learning environment where students of all abilities, needs, and skills can learn together in a general classroom.



Creating an Inclusive Classroom

- Be aware of the student's needs and triggers to make accommodations as necessary.
 - **Ex:** Johnny is overstimulated by loud music. Try giving Johnny noise-reducing headphones so that he can participate when the class sings songs.
- Try sitting the student next to a peer that can model situation-appropriate behavior.
- Implement inclusive activities.
 - Give breaks, use visual aids and props, incorporate movement in the lesson, and try to make lesson content relevant to the student's likes.
- Provide adaptations when necessary.
 - **Ex:** Johnny may not be able to complete the same activity sheet that his age group is working on. Modify the activity sheet so that Johnny can also participate.



Buddy System

What's a Buddy?

- A buddy can be a peer, teen, or adult who provides assistance to a student who needs additional support.



The Role of a Buddy:

- The job of the buddy is to provide effective ways for a student to engage in the life of the Church. This can be in various settings within the church such as: Sunday School, worship service, church activities, serving, etc.
- The purpose of a buddy is to assist the student as needed, NOT to hover over them.
- In an article titled, *Utilizing Buddies at Church*, Ashley Belknap writes:

"The primary purpose of a buddy is to help a student grow spiritually and become fully enfolded and assimilated into the [life of the] church."

- Buddies can put together a "Sensory Bag" to carry tools that assist the students while engaging and participating in various activities within the church (see p. 10).

Sensory Rooms

What's a Sensory Room?

- A sensory-based classroom, also known as a self-contained classroom, promotes alternative learning styles and unique interventions for students whose needs may not be able to be met in a generalized classroom.
- The intent for these rooms is NEVER to hide the students but to best meet their needs.

Building a Sensory Room

- Get Creative!
 - Lego wall to practice fine motor skills.
 - Hang a rug on the wall for soft touch.
 - Mirror wall can be used to teach emotion.
 - Bean bags for comfortable seating.
 - Body socks to model compression.
- Try to establish structure and routine within the room that also allows flexibility.
 - Help the student create a schedule to which he/she can refer.
 - Try setting up learning stations.
 - Incorporate sensory things the student responds well to into a planned lesson.



Visual Aids and Tools

First / Then Statements

- Statements using terms like, “first” and, “then” help students conceptualize and understand what’s happening now and what’s going to happen next.
 - **Ex:** First we will do the lesson, then we will play with the fidget popper.

Redirects and Prompts

- Redirects help students shift their attention onto what is happening in the present.
 - **Ex:** Johnny is fixating on where he is going to eat lunch after church. You can help Johnny redirect his focus onto the lesson about Noah’s Ark by asking, “Johnny, have you ever been on a boat before?”
- Prompts can also help students refocus their attention.
 - Gestural Prompt
 - Point to the activity sheet you are working on with Johnny.
 - Verbal Prompt
 - “Johnny we are talking about Noah’s Ark at the moment.”
 - Visual Prompt
 - Show Johnny the schedule for today’s class.
 - Physical Prompt (Hand over Hand)
 - Hold Johnny’s hand and together circle the question on the activity sheet you are working on with him.



Visual Aids and Tools

Redirects and Prompts (cont.)

- You can also pair multiple prompts together
 - *Point to the activity sheet's question and ask Johnny to re-read the question.*

Schedules

- Some students are fine seeing a schedule on the wall, while others may prefer one they can carry.
- Picture Cards
 - Flash cards with images on them that represent things that are happening.
 - These help students visualize what is happening now and what is going to happen.
 - They also give students the opportunity to advocate their wants and needs by allowing them to take part in the creation of the schedule.
 - You can also use picture cards to tell a story.

1



God told
Noah to
build an ark

2



The animals
got on the
ark

3



God
flooded the
earth

4



God sent a
rainbow
and dry
land

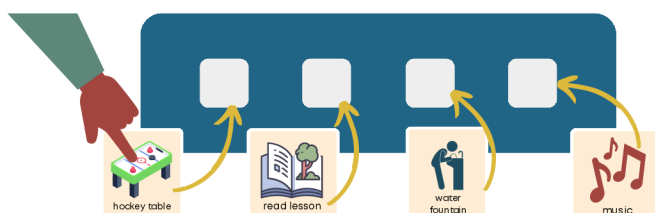
Visual Aids and Tools

How to use Picture Cards

- The picture cards should relate to the things that typically take place during the schedule of your time together (include options for breaks).
- At the beginning of class, sit down with the student, and lay out the card options.



- Next, help the student select activities and place them onto the velcro sheet in order of the sequence of events.



- Then, use the schedule as a visual tool to help the student know what's happening now and next.



Visual Aids and Tools

Behavior Chart

- Helps students visualize and monitor their behavior.
 - Colors: *Green, Yellow, Red*
 - Stamps or Sticker Chart

Get Creative!

- Print out emoji's and use them to help describe what a character in the lesson is feeling.

Sensory Bag

- Put together a personalized sensory bag for a student! Fill a drawstring backpack with tools the student uses consistently.
 - **Ex:** *Purchase a drawstring backpack or bin and fill with things like: noise cancelling headphones, a picture schedule, and a few fidget toys.*



Lesson Modifications

Learning to be Creative With What you Have and What They Like

- **Puzzles**
 - **Ex:** If you're learning about creation, use a puzzle with pictures of fish.
- **Picture Cards**
 - Print out pictures about the lesson and have the students put pictures in order of sequence of events (see p. 8).
- **Velcro Word Sentences**
 - Print out a statement from the lesson, cut out each word, and have the students rearrange and velcro the words back in the the statement's order.



- **Dry Erase Pocket**
 - Laminate an activity sheet and have the students trace statements about the lesson.
- **Music & Videos**
 - Music and videos are great interactive ways to teach.
- **Silly Putty, Slime, and Play Dough**
 - Put beads with letters on them in a ball of putty and have the students pull out the beads to spell a word from the lesson.
 - If you're learning about creation, have the students cut out a mold of a fish using a play dough cut out tool and talk about the fish that God created in the sea.
 - Hide mini fish charms in the putty or slime and have the students pull the fish charms out of their putty.

Lesson Modifications

Other Accommodations

- If you know your student loves the color purple, incorporate purple in every opportunity!
- **Assistive Devices**
 - *Some students will have assistive devices to help them learn. Connect with the parents to learn how the student uses their device and how you can incorporate it into your lesson.*
- **Flexible Seating**
 - *Try having options like yoga balls, rocking chairs, or bean bags.*



- Just because a student cannot talk does not mean that they are incapable of learning and answering questions.
 - **Ex:** Allow students to use pictures, props, and gestures to respond to questions.



Alternatives

How can this student best bring glory to the Lord?

- Every student is different!
- Some of the tools discussed will work for some students and not others, and that's okay!



Think About it

- What is the expectation of each part of the church service, lesson, or activity?
 - If you're learning about the story of Noah, what is the intent?
 - *The intent is to learn about God's role in the story of Noah. Can you do this standing up? Playing with a fish puzzle? Listening to a song about Noah? The intent of learning the story of Noah is not to teach students how to sit in a chair for 30 minutes or color inside the lines of a picture. The intent is to learn about God's role in the story of Noah. So, how could we do this in a way that the student can follow and understand?*
- How can students respond to activities within the church in a way they can understand?
 - **Ex:** *During worship, the expectation is to stand and participate through song by reading lyrics off the screen with an outward physical expression. However, what if you have a student who likes to run during worship?*
 - The answer is to allow them to worship in a way that is meaningful to them. For instance, the student that runs during worship, create a space for him to run within boundaries because running is worship for him.

Conclusion

- Every student is different!
- Be creative using what you have.
- Trial and error is not failure!
- Disability does not equal an incapability of learning.
- Bestow grace on yourselves and the students.
- How can this student best bring glory to the Lord?
- What is the intent of the church or this activity?
- How can this student learn and respond in a way they understand?

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 in the life of the church.

Notes

Notes

Meet the Authors



ALLIE MCCARTY

McCarty served as The Banquet Network's Communications and Operations Manager. McCarty worked as a Skill Building Specialist with adults who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, and has also served at Arrowhead Bible Camp for individuals with disabilities in Brackney, PA. Although McCarty is no longer on staff at The Banquet Network, she loves pursuing God's beloved children and equipping the local church to welcome individuals and families affected by disability into the full body life of the church.



KATIE MATTHEWS

Matthews is a mom of two, and was The Banquet Network's Executive Director until 2024. She is the director of a disability ministry called Bethany Blessings, and a pastor's wife. She is passionate about bringing the gospel to families of individuals with disabilities and seeks to train other church members on how to minister to these families. Prior to The Banquet Network, she served as her church's children's director for 8 years. Her desire is for the church to love individuals who have disabilities as best we can on this side of eternity so that they would one day be able to meet Jesus face to face.



KRIS BUCKMAN

Buckman serves as the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware's children's and youth ministry consultant. Buckman has served in children's ministry for over 18 years. She has taught Sunday school for children of all ages, directed VBS, planned and coordinated special events, served as AWANA Commander, and traveled with kids to summer camp. She has the desire to encourage ministry leaders everywhere to confidently and effectively minister to students who have disabilities.