What's the Goal?

The goal of any ministry should be *ministry:* creating opportunities for people to encounter God through fellowship, worship, and the teaching of God's Word. Disability ministry is not necessarily about creating a new ministry but ensuring that existing ministries are accessible and welcoming to people of all abilities.

Worship

The natural response to seeing the goodness of God is worship. Worship is a posture the heart takes and is not limited to people with particular abilities. Because we are called to worship "in spirit and in truth," we must be sure that we are not excluding anyone from taking part in communal worship.

Fellowship

One of the first things we see in Scripture is that "it is not good for man to be alone." People with disabilities and their families often experience isolation. When we understand that every believer has a spiritual gift given to them by God for the benefit of the church, then isolation is not just something that hurts those with disabilities; the church is deprived of their unique gifts! First Corinthians 12 tells us that the church is the body of Christ. And although we are made up of many members, we are all united in Christ. Having one member isolated from the rest causes the church body to be incomplete.

The Word

Though language skills and intellectual capacity may limit someone's ability to write or understand a book on systematic theology, Isaiah 55 tells us that God's Word "does not return void." We don't need a degree in theology to "taste and see that the Lord is good." Because God speaks to our hearts, His Word is not only for those with typical learning styles, intelligence, or verbal ability. Engaging a variety of learning styles and understanding how someone with an intellectual disability learns is a team effort. Ask questions of parents and caregivers to determine the best ways to communicate.

What's Next?

When someone is having a hard time participating in one or more of these three areas, we need to ask why. Identifying barriers to full participation and inclusion extends the love of Christ to all people. We can't have accessible churches unless we recognize the barriers and hurdles that are inhibiting access. Broadly speaking, ministry happens in the context of two environments: physical and social environments. The physical is *where* ministry happens and the social is *who* ministry happens with! People need to be able to get through the door and they need to find a welcoming group of people waiting for them inside.

Physical Barriers

Some barriers can be purely physical. A staircase or narrow doorway can make a space inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair. Loud noises, bright lights, and strong scents can make a space inaccessible to someone with sensory processing disorder. Lack of transportation can make it impossible for someone to get to church. These barriers are physical in nature and require physical solutions.

Social Barriers

Some barriers are not visible but may exist in the attitudes and expectations of those in the church. Unwelcoming attitudes may be beliefs that, *People with disabilities are not created in the image of God,* or *People with invisible disabilities need to just get over it.* The expectation of absolute silence during a worship service, for example, may mean someone with involuntary repetitive movements or vocalizations can never fully participate. Social barriers are the more difficult types of barriers to remove, since people may not even realize they exist.

1. **Removing Barriers**

    A simple change to the physical or social environment may be all that is needed to make a space accessible. Building a wheelchair ramp is a modification to the physical environment that makes it more accessible. An awareness event or sermon on the theology of disability may help change the hearts and minds of the congregation, modifying the social environment to become more welcoming.

2. **Providing Supports**

    If a change to the environment is not possible or insufficient, providing supports may aid participation. A simple example is our everyday use of reading glasses. Text can only be made so large, so at some point modifying the environment (the text itself) becomes unfeasible. When this is the case, the use of tools like glasses aid participation. People with disabilities may require similar supports, ranging from seeing eye-dogs for people with visual impairments, noise-cancelling headphones for people with autism, or a one-on-one buddy for someone with developmental delays.

3. **Creating a Specialized Environment**

    In some rare cases, modifications and supports will prove insufficient and a specialized environment will need to be created. This may be as simple as a breakout sensory room allowing someone to "cool down" and avoid a meltdown, or a companion bathroom with an adult changing table. Even when a specialized environment is available, the goal is always integration and mainstream participation whenever possible.