

Leader Guide and Bibliography

Churches often don't know where to start when it comes to evaluating their readiness to meet the needs related to starting a new ministry or revisiting their current ministry with people with disabilities. This study was crafted using stories to help connect and build relationships. By naming our experience with people with disabilities, the experience of a person with a disability, the biblical story and then a common theme of land which lends to our identity, the study group will be able to discern their heart for disability ministry and growing edges that need to be addressed.

The study has been crafted in five sessions: Where Have We Come From, Challenges, Invisible Barriers, A Ministry for All God's People, Advocacy in Action. Each session is saved as a PDF and is intended to be copied double sided, creating a bulletin -size lesson guide. (Large print versions and Word format are available upon request.)

Each session focus connects students with stories and scripture. While guiding questions are including, the study is not meant to be a fill-in-the-blank style – just as no church or ministry style is a one-size-fits-all. The study encourages participants to engage in the questions – some of which may not have an easy immediate answer but encourage participants to be in dialog and relationship amidst themselves, the congregation, and the community. Every church/ participant will have the opportunity for self-reflection and a focus for their prayer and next steps in planning Disability-focused ministries in days ahead.

Each session should flow as follows:

1. Opening prayer
2. Focus One – **EXPERIENCE** – What has been our experience as individuals, church and society?
 - a. Looking at the image on the page and sharing what that message the image relays pertaining specifically to people with disabilities.
 - b. Then read the accompanying text and answer or discuss any questions in bold at the bottom of the section.
3. Focus Two – **EXPLORE** – Narrative of a person with disabilities.
 - a. Read the text provided and discuss question(s) that follow.
4. Focus Three – **ENGAGE** – Scripture story.
 - a. Using one's own Bible, read the passage noted. If possible, read from more than one translation or paraphrase.
 - b. Use questions that follow to guide discussion on this part. The questions are written to start creating a thread of understanding that connects the EXPERIENCE and EXPLORE sections.
5. Focus Four – **EXTEND** – extending your narrative from what you knew to what you have learned, and how you can respond. This section looks at how our identity is related to the land that God has created humanity and places humanity to live as community.
 - a. Read the text provided and discuss the statements and questions provided.
 - b. Each session raises up the importance of this identity as a shared experience and encourages participants to take next steps into vibrant ministry to and with people with disabilities.
6. At the end of the study, it is helpful for the leader to ask what new learning have been gained, and what next steps can move the church forward in being more inclusive.
7. Session should end with prayer.

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Extend your Narrative

Genesis 1 & 2 reminds us that all of humanity – with or without disabilities – are created by our One God from the dust of the earth – dust to which we will one day return. We are all created in God's image and given life by God's Spirit. As we are all created from the land and find our identity in the land (whether physical address or ancestral roots), we find our identity in God and in each other. But for that to happen, we have to start listen and learn from the land where God has planted us – to hear the stories that can diminish and erase our assumptions. To break down attitudinal barriers begins when we see the person first, before defining them by their disability.

The United Methodist Social Principles affirms inclusion of people with disabilities in our communities and in our churches:

We recognize and affirm the full humanity and personhood of all individuals with mental, physical, developmental, neurological, and psychological conditions or disabilities as full members of the family of God. We also affirm their rightful place in both the church and society.

We affirm the responsibility of the Church and society to be ministry with children, youth and adults with mental, physical, developmental, and / or psychological and neurological conditions or disabilities whose particular needs in the area of mobility, communication, intellectual comprehension, or personal relations might make more challenging their participation or that of their families in the life of the Church and the community.

We urge the Church and society to recognize and receive the gifts of persons with disabilities to enable them to be full participants in the community of faith. We call the church and society to be sensitive to, and advocate for programs of rehabilitation, services, employment, education, appropriate housing and transportation.

We call on the Church and society to protect the civil right of persons with all types and kinds of disabilities.

What assumptions do we carry about people with disabilities that may create attitudinal barriers that block us from being in true relationship with God and with our neighbors?

Disability and Ministry

Session One: Where we have come from



Experience

For many people, the accessible parking sign is a sign of what someone can NOT do; specifically, there are mobility challenges of a person which require additional space and close proximity to a facility or store. It is often said that a person who cannot do what a “normal” person can do is disabled or handicapped. By definition, “An individual with a **disability** is **defined** by the **ADA** as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.” The US Census of 2012 tells us that nearly 1 in every five people has a disability.

People with disabilities have existed through every age, in every part of the world and within every race, creed, culture, and socio-economic situation. So why is including people with disabilities as full citizens in our communities and in our churches so difficult?

Ned Stoller cited in *Making Churches Accessible to the Disabled*, (1998), "If people in your community are going to Wal-Mart in their wheelchairs but not coming to your church, a lot of times the church community calls them shut-ins. They're not shut-ins; they're just shut out of the church."

What was your first encounter or your first recollection with a person who had a disability. How did you feel? What did you do or not do?

Explore the Story –

Read the following story from Cynthia Erivo, an actress who portrayed Harriet Tubman in the 2019 movie, *Harriet*...

Most of us know the story. Harriet Tubman made multiple trips into slave-owning territory and brought out some 70 enslaved people on what was called the Underground Railroad, even though by doing so she could have been killed or returned to slavery herself. In the Civil War, she fought with the Union, the first American woman to lead a military expedition.

As an actor, you naturally study the character you're playing, read all you can about them. One reason I was cast was that I'm short like Harriet Tubman, a little over five feet..

To really master a role, every actor tries to find a way into the character she's playing. To play Harriet, I had to understand faith at its most elemental level. To understand her faith and courage, I needed to probe my own faith and call on it. Harriet never did anything without listening to God for guidance, being present to the dangers she faced and present to what could take her through them. "I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight," she once said. "And that's what I've always prayed for ever since."

The obstacles to the film were huge, but then the obstacles Harriet faced in her life were far greater. She suffered terribly. As an adolescent, she came between a violent slave owner and another slave. The owner hurled a heavy metal weight at the slave, but it hit Harriet in the head instead, injuring her permanently. For the rest of her life, she suffered dizziness, pain and seizures. During seizures that rattled her body, she would have visions, visions of God communicating to her.

I had to be strong like her, but I also had to feel—from the inside—what it would be like to be a slave. To be subjugated and abused. To have seizures and visions. Reenacting one, I felt wretched, raw, emotionally undone. Super-exposed. Which I imagine is how Harriet felt. It must have been unbelievably hard. But sometimes going through an illness can open you up to things you wouldn't be able to do otherwise. In suffering, we also find a new closeness to God

.(Excerpts from <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/inspiring-stories/stories-of-faith/cynthia-erivo-playing-harriet-tubman-changed-my-life>)

Many people do not realize that Harriet Tubman would have been labeled as a disabled person today. How can faith impact the disabilities we encounter in our lives? In others?

Engage the Biblical Story -

Read John 9:1-38

Discuss the following:

What disabling condition is described in the text?

What assumptions are made about disability in the text?

What happens to change the situation?

Did the healing of the physical condition automatically "include" the man into society?

How did the Pharisees assumptions become an attitudinal barrier that blocked them from accepting the healed man?

Where is discrimination seen in this story?

Where is the value of the person raised up in this story?

Extending our Narrative

Masanobu Fukuoka, a farmer theologian, noted:

“To the extent that people separate themselves from nature, they spin out further and further from the center.”¹ He added that “farming used to be sacred work... Farming, as an occupation, this is within nature, lies close to this source”. To be connected with one’s source is to be connected with one’s identity.

Over the years, people find their identity when they are connected to the land or to a location. Rural churches, which make up the majority of churches in our denomination, know well the power of the land in bringing the body of Christ together for one purpose. The challenge comes when we are separated from the source of our identity. Too often a person with a disability is defined by their disability and not by their identity in Christ upon which their life is rooted. We are all parts of the One body, and all are to be welcomed to the feast. ...now and in the Kingdom come. We are incomplete without people of all abilities in the church.

What challenges do you have with being a more inclusive church?

What challenges does your congregation have with being a more inclusive church?

Where are the gifts and voices of people with disabilities within the “lay of the land” of your church?

Session Two:

Challenges



Experience –

A broken arm in a cast can create challenges to basic life functions of eating and bathing. A bad head cold can create difficulty focusing and hearing. A particularly stressful time can create emotional and mental distress. All of these examples show situations that can cause one to be temporarily disabled. But what about when the challenge occurs and doesn’t change with time?

People with disabilities – whether from birth or occurring later in life – face possible isolation from others and denial of basic human rights. In some countries, a child born with disabilities is sent away from the general society and abandoned, neglected, or even killed because they are “less than” what is considered a “normal” person. Even in America, underemployment or unemployment, poverty, poor health care, lack of voice in government, and even only viewed as a charity focus in a church are challenges that face a person with disabilities.

Each year, United Methodist churches complete an accessibility audit to see how welcoming their church is to people with disabilities. Look at your church’s accessibility audit from last year: what areas have been addressed and what areas of your church and ministry are still inaccessible – either by physical or attitudinal barriers?

Who would feel left out coming to your church?

¹ Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution* (New York: New York Review Book, 1978) 21.

Explore the Story –

Read the story below -

*Frances Jane Crosby was born in 1820 and lost her eyesight in infancy. While most families would be devastated by such a crippling disability, Fanny's family saw the loss as a divine act of providence. Her mother, Mercy Crosby, taught her "that sometimes Providence deprived persons of some physical faculty in order that the spiritual insight might more fully awake[n]."¹ The family knew God as their "source of true pleasure and believed that all they had—meager or abundant—came from God's hand."*²

Fanny's grandmother challenged her to fight for her education. She spent countless hours reading to young Fanny long selections of literature and poetry and, most frequently, the Bible. As Fanny listened, she memorized whole chapters and long portions of both Old and New Testament writings. As a child she was able to commit the first five books of the Bible to memory in their entirety.

At the age of fifteen, Fanny's prayers for a formal education were answered when she was admitted to the New York Institution for the Blind. It was here, in New York City, where a whole new world of opportunities would open up for her.

Because of Fanny's prolific ability to write poetry and verse, she was introduced to and privileged to work with several very influential composers. Each noted her uncanny ability to hear a melody and quickly match deep and thoughtful lyrics to their tunes. Through these key relationships and the forging of friendships, Fanny found a home with many hymn publishers and a vast audience for her faith-filled lyrics. Over the course of her life she churned out over 8,000 hymns, publishing many under a variety of pen names. Fanny's hymns have stood the test of time and to this day are known, loved, and sung in churches.

What challenges did Fanny encounter?

Do those challenges exist in your church?

Engage the Biblical Story –

Read Luke 14:1-12

Where do you see people with disabilities in this text?

By context and the times in which the text was written, what do you think the Pharisees view of a person with disabilities might be?

Put yourself as a person with a disability in the middle of this scene with Jesus at the Pharisee's house. What challenges might you encounter? What emotions might you be feeling?

How does Jesus instruct us to meet the challenges of people who are considered "less than" by other members of society and even, at times, the church?

Extend your narrative

Each generation has narratives that hold hopes, fears, history, and faith of people across the ages. Each person has a story, and each church has a story. And the best stories were the ones told when we were at a place where we were open to receive. Especially in the rural community and small group settings, relationships were made and strengthened by shared stories.

The farmland found in abundance on the Delmarva Peninsula also told a story of seasons that are beyond human control but provide the necessary frame work for the growth of fruit in the land. Our life narratives bear witness to who God is and who we are, for our stories are markers of where we have been and where we are going.

Of the seasons of the land, there are times when the greatest growth and greatest transformation seems invisible.

To move forward to accept people with visible and invisible disabilities, we must open our eyes to what our church needs to be a church that includes and not excludes. Often our wants are based on our assumptions more than actual circumstances. For in every season, people need to know love and compassion. And for a person with disabilities, love can be communicated through acknowledgement, access and accommodation.

If your church's disability ministry was a farm field focused on bearing fruit, what season might it be in, refer to the examples below and discuss them as a group.

Fallow season – being still and prayerful before planting a new ministry; no people with disabilities actively involved in the church

Planting season – turning over the ground and growing seed specific to where our church is planted; can include equipping persons with disabilities for ministry roles

Growing season – managing, supporting and nurturing the growth of a current disability-focused ministry; empowering people with disability to have voice and presence in church missions and ministry

Harvest season – evaluating past ministry with people with disability for future growth; sending people with disabilities out into the church and community to share the gospel

Session Three:

Invisible Barriers



Experience –

In the painting of “Starry Night” by Vincent Van Gogh, scholars have noted that the color gold reflects God’s light found in the stars and depicted in the light from houses below. What is noticeable is that the gold color does not shine out from the small church building in the bottom center of the painting. And that was done for a reason.

While society and the church has responded to the needs of people with readily identifiable physical disabilities (adaptive structure and equipment) and sensory challenges (braille, hearing aids, captioning), some invisible disabilities have gone neglected or misunderstood.

People with ADHD, Dyslexia, Arthritis, Autism and Deafness are among those who have often been marginalized and denied voice in society and in church; largely due to lack of communication and understanding.

Have you ever encountered some one you thought was “different” and didn’t know what to say or what to do?

If you had a challenge that no one could see, how might that be difficult for you to be included in the mission and ministry of the church?

Explore the story –

Vincent Van Gogh's father was a Dutch Reformed minister and as he grew up in the Netherlands, he developed a fervent faith, and a passion for ministry. He wanted to study theology, but failing the seminary entrance exam, he instead became a missionary to coal miners in Belgium. To the impoverished community there Vincent embodied a life of radical self-sacrifice and servanthood, selling everything he had and tending to the needs of the afflicted.

'Vincent was a very generous man. He understood that unconditional love of God extended to unconditional love for others. He would never recognize love that was not an action,' said William Havlicek, author of Van Gogh's Untold Journey.

Despite his commitment to Christ-like sacrifice, Vincent was fired for being overzealous, for his ineloquent speech and for his scruffy appearance. Returning home, Vincent suffered a nervous breakdown, and his struggle with mental health and depression would pervade throughout his life. Nonetheless, he resolved to serve God instead through artistic expression, and he mastered his own take on the Post-Impressionist style. He wrote: '...to try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God. One man wrote or told it in a book, another in a picture.'

<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-profound-christian-faith-of-vincent-van-gogh/106440.htm>

What misunderstandings or assumptions can occur if a disability cannot be seen?

How can we turn the “light” on visible and invisible disabilities so that people of all ability levels can be a part of “being a light unto the world” for Christ?

Engage the Biblical Story

Read Mark 5:1- 20

1. Re-tell this story from the man’s point of view. Remember – the man is only defined by his disability and not by a name.
2. How would we see a person dealing with “inner demons” or mental illness treated today? By comparison with the scene set in the biblical passage, do you see similarities and difference to our society today?
3. Do we find ourselves “in the tombs” in different seasons of our lives? Discuss your thoughts.
4. In Mark 5 we read of one that needs healing and needs to be with those who care. The epilogue to this story is found in Mark 7:31 when Jesus returns to the community. What has changed and why?
5. Mental illness is only one kind of invisible disability that can separate a person from life in community or even ministry within the church. Discuss what other invisible disabilities may be present in the lives of people within your church, and how does your church show Christ’s love to those who have been pushed to the side by society?
6. It has been said: Churches role is not to treat people with disabilities as missions, but as partners in ministry. What does this statement mean to you and your church?

Extend your narrative

Read these statements:

- **People with disabilities are invisible and anonymous... what is needed are programs and institutions that support people in their quest for independence and respect..."**

(James Charlton, *Nothing About us without us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, pg. 84)

- **Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."**

(https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them?language=en)

These statements remind us of the power of "loving neighbor"; that is, to see the disability in light of our shared humanity, not instead of it. The church is perfectly positioned to engage and educate those who are able bodied, and to equip and empower those who are disabled to join as ONE BODY in ministry and mission to the world.

The church is called to work the land of the Kingdom of God for the glory of God, for it is a land in which our shared identity is rooted and grown. Like in an endeavor to bring in a crop, all help is needed and there is a place for everyone – able and disabled in the eyes of the world, all beloved children in the eyes of a loving God.

A church may want to help a person with disability, but to do that, the person with disability must first be asked what they need. Disability often brings poverty cycles which are hard to break, isolation from family and community, and socio-cultural stigmas. Often the most immediate need is ACCEPTANCE

In a review of this study, a person and their church must begin with the end in mind: loving neighbor so that the neighbor can receive salvation in love and grace offered by Christ. For that is what we all need, able and disabled alike.

In review, where are you and your church and where is God calling you to take the next faithful steps to join with people with disabilities in the mission and ministry of Christ?

Session Four:

A Ministry to All God's People



Experience

With the passage of Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the 1990 signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the government took a political stand on addressing bias and discrimination of people with disabilities.

As Bishop Peggy A. Johnson wrote in her book, The Church and People with Disabilities: Awareness, Accessibility, and Advocacy, **disability issues touch everyone as disability is a part of the human condition."** The church, which in 1 Corinthians 3:6-9, the Apostle Paul calls *God's Farm*, is the space where all people can be part of bringing in the crop for the Kingdom of God, including those with disabilities.

Loving our neighbor and being one church are key parts of being a community of faith. It is by coming face to face in relationships with people with disabilities, by listening and acknowledging our shared humanity that we can begin breaking down barriers – attitudinal and physical – that cause us to stumble in our work as the Church.

Have you ever taken time to actively listen or spend time with a person who has a disability? Is so, why and what was result? If not, why?

Explore the Story –

When Father Tom Coughlin began seriously considering a priestly vocation in high school, little did he realize how long and winding the road would be to becoming the first deaf priest ordained in the United States.

Fr. Tom began applying to various seminaries after he graduated from high school, but was turned down from one after the other due to the fact that he is deaf. Instead, he went on to study and graduate from Gallaudet University in 1972 with a BA in English and then in 1976 obtained his MA in Religious Studies from Catholic University. He entered the Trinitarians in 1972 and was finally ordained by Cardinal Lawrence Sheehan of Baltimore in 1977.

He met with so much opposition before and after ordination that he almost quit, explained Fr. Tom to Sr. Lou Ella Hickman of the South Texas Catholic Newspaper. “Most people were not prepared to welcome a deaf person. I was all alone, but the vocation director Father Joseph Lupo told me ‘You have to open the door. You have to suffer so others won’t.’ And I saw his point.

Following Christ, you have to make sacrifices. One has to enter the mystery of suffering in order to pray better. Mary, Joseph, the apostles all suffered but they understood the meaning of God’s love.”

How can you and your church better advocate and include people with disabilities in the ministry and mission of the church – not just a focus of charity but an agent of change?

Engage Biblical story -

Read 2 Samuel 4:2-4 and 2 Samuel 9:1-10

What was Mephibosheth denied due to his disability? How is this story reflected in people with disabilities in our community and church?

How did King David engage in radical social inclusion in regard to Mephibosheth?

Iris Marion Young asserts, “Encounter with the disabled person again produces the ambiguity of recognizing the person whom I project as so different, so other, is nevertheless like me.” (Eisland, The Disabled God, 1994. 94)

How do we see this in the biblical texts shared in this study?

Are there additional biblical texts which come to mind, reminding us we are One in faith and One in the Lord – not separated by ability or disability? If so, discuss them.

Extend Your Narrative

How terrible it will be for those who make unfair laws, and those who write laws that make life hard for people. They are not fair to the poor and they rob my people of their rights. They allow people to steal from widows and take from orphans what really belongs to them." Isaiah 10:1-2

Prayer and action are key to being the church in the world. After taking it to God in prayer, we are to ACT.

A – Acknowledge the need and learn everything you can about it. Finding information on who is affected and how helps you understand the injustice from a personal level. For example, in church host a disability day, volunteer at a local shelter, or invite someone with a first-hand experience to share with your congregation. Don't assume what a person might need – ask. A conversation with a person who is disabled may give insight to a systemic problem that may need to be made public.

C – Communicate the injustice in a clear concise message. Books and studies are good, but the most effective first witness is one that is easy for people to remember. A slogan or even an image can often grab a person's attention to which point they may ask for the rest of the story about what is going on that is pushing people to the margins. One such saying has been **"nothing about us without us"** in 2014 that noted able persons need to include people with disabilities in all stages of change.

T – Take it to the people. In courthouses, classrooms, and churches, there is one constant: people. People who need to be educated, equipped, engaged, and empowered to make a change. People who need to know that God calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as we stand up for ourselves, those with disabilities do not always have the ability to do so. Advocacy can range from protest and statements to government officials to providing support for a family member

Christians are called to the scriptural mandate to do what is right and just (Micah 6:8) and to love our neighbor (Mark 12:31). It is what our Lord requires of us.

How are we responding? And how can we do better?

Session Five:

Advocacy in Action

Experience

A protest to pass the ADA laws into effect in the late twentieth century proves as a reminder that people with disabilities face injustice.

Some people think that with the passage of that law all barriers – physical, medical, educational, and attitudinal – were demolished. The truth is...there is still work to be done. Just ask any person with a disability.

Calling out injustices in our society and government is one example. Rebekah Jordan Gienapp wrote in an article entitled, "Should Christians engage in Advocacy" and said the following:

"as Christians, we know that God calls us to use all of our gifts and graces in service to God and our neighbor. What if one of the gifts that we can use is our citizenship? As Paul used the influence of his Roman citizenship (Acts 22), Christians can use the democratic process to call on government to protect and provide for all of its people."

Personally, as a parent of children with disabilities – one deaf and the other with learning disabilities and mild cerebral palsy – I provided a model for my children on the importance of fighting systemic injustice and attitudinal barriers related to their disabilities. As a former special education teacher, I taught my students that they need to speak up over and over if necessary, in order for their perspective to be heard. As a pastor, I have educated and equipped my congregation to engage in meaningful relationships with people with disabilities and to stand with them when injustice presents itself in society. Advocacy takes many forms, and all are necessary.

Have you every protested or questioned laws or guidelines because of how they specifically affected people with disabilities? If so, what happened? If not, why not?



Explore the Story -

Part of statement made by Frank Stephens, disability advocate, before Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Committee on Appropriations U.S. House of Representatives October 25, 2017

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to be here today as part of this panel. Just so there is no confusion, let me say that I am not a research scientist. However, no one here knows more about life with Down syndrome than I do. If you take nothing else away from today's hearing, please remember this, I AM A MAN WITH DOWN SYNDROME AND MY LIFE IS WORTH LIVING.

Why do I feel the need to make that point? Across the world, a notion is being sold that maybe we don't need to continue to do research concerning Down syndrome. Why? Because there are pre-natal screens that will identify Down syndrome in the womb, and we can just terminate those pregnancies. In places as widespread as Iceland, Denmark and South Korea, government officials have proclaimed that these government encouraged terminations will make them "Down syndrome free by 2030." It is hard for me to sit here and say those words.

Let's be clear, I completely understand that the people pushing that particular "final solution" are saying that people like me should not exist. They are saying that we have too little value to exist. That view is deeply prejudiced by an outdated idea of life with Down syndrome.

Seriously, I have a great life. I have been a guest lecturer at major universities. I have contributed to a best-selling book, had a feature role in an award-winning film, guest starred on an Emmy winning TV show, and spoken to thousands of young people about the value of inclusion in making America great. I've even been to the White House twice, and I didn't have to jump the fence either time. Seriously, I don't feel I should have to justify my existence...

- **How do you feel about Stephens' statement?**
- **Where is God in this situation?**

Engage the Biblical Story

Read Luke 18:1-8

Why did the woman go see the judge?

Why did the woman persist in seeking justice after being told no?

Gienapp wrote:

She persists because she knows that this political leader is the only one who can ensure a fair outcome, and perhaps even her survival. The same kind of persistence is required of today's advocates who speak up with those who need justice.

Do we as a church that "seeks justice" show such persistence when it comes to people with disabilities?

Read Luke 5:17-20

How did the paralyzed man get the help he needed?

What happened when the friends were not able to find a way to Jesus by the regular door that everyone else used?

How might these passages speak to us about being advocates for people with disabilities?