Supporting the Inclusion and Belonging of Individuals with Disabilities at Faith Communities in the Nashville Area

Brianna Griffin, OTD/S
Expert Mentor: Dr. Erik Carter, Ph. D; Faculty Mentor: Dr. Tamara Garvey Lemmonds, Ed. D, MSOT, OTR/L
Belmont University School of Occupational Therapy

Abstract

The prevalence of individuals with a disability in the United States represents a significant percentage of the population (Erickson, Lee, von Schrader, 2010). Due to the increase in accessibility for buildings, employment opportunities, housing, schools, and transportation, inclusion is now expected to extend into faith communities and religious services. There is a gap between people who desire to participate in worship services, and people who actually participate (“Keasler Foundation and National Organization on Disability”, 2010). There is a gap between what is available in the church and what is perceived as useful according to individuals with disabilities (Austin, Collins, & Carter, 2013a,). There is a gap between perceptions of family and perceptions of church leaders on the supportiveness in the church (Miller, 2014).

The passage of 1 Corinthians 12, expressing the aspects of the body of Christ, serves as a foundation for inclusion within the church. These verses provide implications for the concepts of spiritual gifts, which will guide us in viewing every member of the church as a channel through which divine love can be experienced (Broek, 2011). Churches need to start with the foundation of the body of Christ, and expand these ideas into actions of inclusion. Once we start to give, receive, and share the spiritual gifts we have with one another, we begin to become one body in Christ (Swinton, 2012). The relation between the Bible, the church, and disability comes down to offering support in the spiritual needs of individuals with disabilities.

Methods

The project is guided by the belief that all people should have access and be welcomed in to a community where their faith can grow. The hope is to make this a genuine possibility within the Nashville area by equipping and educating churches about disabilities through the provision of resources.

Literature Review

Previous research has determined the importance of faith to individuals with and without disabilities. It also reveals that congregations are not adequately equipped to support all individuals in their spiritual journeys. Therefore, the current project was developed to begin bridging the divide with the goal of granting access to faith communities and more fully including individuals with disabilities into these environments. In partnership with Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, community conversations were implemented, which allowed members of the community to come together and talk about the topic of inclusion in faith communities. A manual was created to serve as an educational pamphlet and a guide for congregations when considering where to start with inclusion, faith, and disability. Additionally, a needs assessment was performed at a church and then practical ideas for how to begin to break down architectural, attitudinal, communication, and systemic barriers were given. The outcome is increased awareness and knowledge of disability for the church community and a desire to actively begin inclusion in to the congregation. This will shift the focus from ministry “to” or “at” disability to “with” and “by” individuals with disabilities. The project is guided by the belief that all people should have access and be welcomed in to a community where their faith can grow. The hope is to make this a genuine possibility within the Nashville area by equipping and educating churches about disabilities through the provision of resources.

Learning Goals & Outcomes

1. To develop educational materials that will inform church leaders of the resources available to help integrate individuals with disabilities into faith communities
2. To evaluate the current perceptions of and resources afforded to the individuals with disabilities and their families in the church
3. To collaborate with the church leaders of the Nashville community in order to implement the programming offered for individuals with disabilities in the church
4. To engage community conversations, with contributions from planning team, to begin together stakeholder groups focused on the inclusion of faith
5. Created a PowerPoint presentation presented at TOYX Conference
6. Put together a manual on inclusion and disability
7. Completed a literature review
8. Created a needs assessment
9. Completed needs assessment at churches
10. Developed strategies to address the weaknesses
11. Generated discussion questions
12. Advertised and recruited for the event
13. Recorded notes of attendees

Needs Assessment

Barriers:
- Congregational level
- Individual level
- Attitudinal
- Communication
- Architectural
- Systemic
- Program
- Room signage
- Alarms
- Parking spaces
- Website content
- Entrance/exits
- Lighting
- Walkways
- Alternative media
- Restrooms
- Ramp
- Doors
- Involvement
- Water foundations
- Programs
- Worship space/seating
- Observation

Curricular Theme

“As members of a global community, occupational therapists should advocate for the inclusion and equal treatment of individuals with disabilities.” (AOTA, 2004c)

Faith-Based Advocacy

Client Factors

Areas of Occupation

Invaluable Activities of Daily Living (BADL)
- Religious observance

References


