Beginning and Growing a Disability Ministry in Your Church

Suggestions by Caring Hearts (Disability) Ministries of the Zanesville Christian & Missionary Alliance Church
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Building God’s Kingdom
Through Disability Ministries

Our Mission Statement:

The heart’s desire of Caring Hearts Ministries is to share Christ’s love and hope with people who have disabilities and their loved ones.

“Our friends with disabilities remind us of God’s grace. For without Christ, you were once disabled spiritually, unable to move into His Kingdom, as well as blind to His purpose, and deaf to His voice. But by His grace you are being made whole . . .”

--Joni Eareckson Tada
The Need: 
Reaching an Often Forgotten People Group

In the World

It is estimated that worldwide there are up to 600 million people who live with a disability; 54 million are in the United States. The majority of these people with disabilities do not attend church. It is our desire for them to come to know our loving Jesus Christ as their own personal Lord, Savior and Friend.

In the United States

54 million or 20.6% of people in America live with some level of disability.
26 million have some form of severe disability.
4 million children and adolescents under the age of 18 are affected by a disability.
Taking care of a child with special needs rates 97 points out of 100 on the Holmes Rahe Stress Test.
80% of families with a disabled member experience divorce.
The unemployment rate among the disabled is 63%.
17.5% of disabled people live below the poverty level.
Abuse, alienation and depression are common in this segment of the population.

In the Church

Joni and Friend’s (founder Joni Eareckson Tada) Studies have found that less than 11% of churches do any type of intentional outreach to people affected by disability. Only 15% of families affected by disabilities are raising their children as part of a church community.

In the Family – Parental Perspective:

Dashed expectations
Grief and fear of the unknown
Increased demands
Isolation
Rejection and fear of rejection
Difficulty finding a church to embrace them
Feeling their child was born by mistake or because of an uncaring God
Many caregivers are motivated by pity
Feeling Overwhelmed and often seeing little productive purposes in their experience
Difficulty finding loving caregivers

As you can see, Christ’s Church is needed to bring hope and love to people who have disabilities and their loved ones. God has a purpose and plan for all people!

All facts on this page obtained from a Joni and Friends publication entitled, “Disability Information and Statistics” and a JAF Presentation.
## Why?

### Biblical Basis for Disability Ministry

1. **God is our Creator:**
   - Genesis 1:26-28, 31
   - Exodus 4:10-12
   - Psalm 139:13-18

2. **God has a purpose for life:**
   - Jeremiah 29:11-13
   - John 3:16
   - I Peter 2:9-12

3. **God is glorified through people with disabilities:**
   - Psalm 119:71-77
   - John 9:1-12

4. **God loves people with disabilities:**
   - Psalm 119:130
   - Luke 14:12-23
   - John 4:34-35
   - John 15:9-17

5. **God’s hope is rehabilitative:**
   - Isaiah 51:11
   - Romans 8:37

6. **God’s provision for those in ministry:**
   - Proverbs 11:30b
   - Luke 5:17-26
   - John 15:5-8, 12-17

7. **Godly servants:**
   - II Samuel 9:1-13
   - Matthew 19:13-14

8. **God’s ways are not our ways:**
   - Psalm 46:10
   - Proverbs 3:5-6
How To

Begin and Grow a Disability Ministry in Your Church

“‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame...
Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.’”

Luke 14:21b, 23

1. Involve Church Leadership and Pray

2. Disability Awareness Ministry Team

☐ Form a ministry team to pray and seek God’s direction for your church in reaching this often-forgotten group of people with Christ’s love.

☐ Ask people who are affected by disabilities to be on this planning and praying team.

☐ Write a mission statement.

3. Disability Awareness Sunday

☐ Plan a special Sunday service to make your congregation aware of “The Need, The Why, and The How To” of Disability Ministry.

☐ A special speaker or your pastor can address the need to reach out to families challenged by disabilities with the love of Christ.

☐ Survey your congregation to build your ministry. (See sample form in appendix.)

4. Starting Point: One Person

☐ Minister to one individual who has a disability or to a parent who has a child with a disability in your congregation and/or neighborhood.

☐ Watch how God blesses your church as you pray and reach out to people who have disabilities in your community.
27 Practical Ideas for Disability Ministry

1. **Accessible transportation**  
   Your County Board of Developmental Disabilities may run a bus for their clients on the weekends at reasonable rates. Contact laura.davis@zanesvillecma.org for more information.

2. **Adult Caring Hearts Sunday School Class**  
   Provide a Sunday school class for your friends who have intellectual disabilities. We have a special class using Access Curriculum by Lifeway Church Resources. [www.lifeway.com/specialneeds](http://www.lifeway.com/specialneeds).  
   (*see article at the end of this list for details*)

3. **Be a friend to a person with a disability**  
   Call, take them to fun places, offer to read the Bible to them, or do a Bible Study with them.

4. **Bible Study at a nearby group home or assisted living facility**  
   We recommend Access Curriculum Learner guides for adults who have intellectual disabilities: [www.lifeway.com/specialneeds](http://www.lifeway.com/specialneeds)

5. **Call a friend** who is facing the challenges and perhaps isolation due to their disability, on a regular basis.

6. **Caregiver Support Group**
   a. Caring Heart’s Ministries of Zanesville Alliance Church has successfully had a Caregivers Support Group since 2001. Our group meets simultaneously with our monthly Friendship Parties for an hour and a half. Caregivers enjoy an ice breaker, a short devotional which goes along with the Children’s Bible story, a craft and fellowship time over refreshments. We also pass around a prayer request & praise list to share via e-mail with all our volunteers and families.
   b. Ideas for Caregiver’s support  
      - Pray, give a devotional book, phone calls, e-mails, home and hospital visits. When their child is in the hospital send Mylar balloons and sometimes a toy (see Sensory Toy list in appendix for ideas) from the hospital gift shop. Give hospital gift certificates so families can eat in the hospital cafeteria or shop in the gift shop. Snack baskets are also helpful for parents who want to stay by their child’s side. Households ideas – help with meals, mow grass & trim, rake leaves, shovel snow, clean, do laundry, babysit, help with financial needs, provide a date night or a movie night basket that includes a good Christian movie, popcorn, pop, and theater candy, etc.

7. **Celebration Dinners**  
   Host socialization events, such as holiday dinners, talent nights, summer BBQ’s with programs for people in the community who have various disabilities.
8. **Children’s Ministries** Here are some excellent resources for leaders:


9. **Compile a folder of helpful resources for parents of children with special needs** This folder could contain brochures and flyers from area agencies and churches that offer services to people with disabilities. Other ideas could be a devotional book from Joni Eareckson Tada, a Praise Baby CD from a Christian book store, etc. Ask medical professionals, hospitals and support groups if they would distribute these as needed.

10. **Disability Awareness Sunday (DAS)** A great way to use the talents of people in your congregation who face the challenges of disabilities and to get others involved in ministering to them. Your pastor can preach or you can have a special Christian speaker who has faced the challenges of disabilities. Service can include an inspirational speaker, a parent testimonial, special singing, updates on your ministries. Annual Disability Awareness Sundays can help your congregation wrap their arms around this ministry and give their support and acceptance. Special note: Since 1998, Caring Hearts Ministries has been blessing their congregation with these inspirational annual Disability Awareness Sundays.

11. **Deaf Ministry**

   a. Joni and Friends [*www.joniandfriends.org*] – can help people locate a church that has a deaf ministry from the *Churches and Organizations with Disability Ministries List*. 818.707.5664 and TTY 818.707.9707

   b. LifeWay Church Resources [*www.lifeway.com/specialneeds*] 800.458.2772 and TDD 615.251.3927.

   c. Caring Hearts ministries of Zanesville C&MA provides our children who attend Friendship Parties an interpreter. We also have an interpreter available for our church services.

   d. Our parents like *Signing Time* DVD’s that teach all children to learn sign language in interactive play times. These secular tapes are available at [*www.signingtime.com*] or check your local library.

12. **Disability Ministry Training**

   a. Joni and Friends have field offices across the U.S. that are willing to set up individual workshops with your church to train them in disability ministries. You can also find out about upcoming *Joni and Friends Through the Roof Seminars, Conferences and Summits* at their website [*www.joniandfriends.org*]. Contact Church Relations Coordinator Mike Dobes for more information at churchrelations@joniandfriends.org

   b. Download PDF’s of National Disability Organizations at [*www.joniandfriends.org/help-and-resources*]
13. Encourage an Injured Veteran

14. Family Retreats  “Joni and Friends Family Retreats” are held at accessible conference centers across the U.S.  These retreats provide dynamic programs that refresh and strengthen the whole family and they are a wonderful training ground for your church staff and disability ministry helpers.  For further information contact [www.joniandfriends.org/family-retreats](http://www.joniandfriends.org/family-retreats).

15. Financially support a Christian ministry that is serving the disabled community such as Joni and Friends

16. Friendship Children’s Parties/Caregiver Support Group  Great monthly outreach ministry for entire families because often children with disabilities are not invited to many parties.  Monthly Friendship Parties plus a Caregiver Support Group have been a huge success at the Zanesville (OH) Christian and Missionary Alliance Church since they were initiated in 2001.  Friendship Party Guide, which contains suggestions, advice, sample forms, testimonials from our parents & pastors, and much more, is a free downloadable manual at [www.caringheartsdisabilityministries.org](http://www.caringheartsdisabilityministries.org).

17. Friendship Partner (Inclusion Advocates)
   a. Our youth (with adult supervision) and young adults volunteer to partner with children, teens, and adults who have disabilities in an effort to include everyone in all church activities.
   b. Friendship Partners give parents a needed break and allow them to attend classes and/or church services with the assurance that their child is in good hands.
   c. Enables the teacher to effectively teach the lesson to all the children.

18. Friendship Youth Group
   a. Monthly meetings to provide opportunities for teens with disabilities to enjoy typical teen fun with members of the local church youth group.  Can be held monthly or more often and includes a Bible lesson with visuals, typical teen recreational fun, music, snacks, etc.  We recommend using Lifeway’s Access Curriculum Learner & Leader Guide(s), available at their website [www.lifeway.com/specialneeds](http://www.lifeway.com/specialneeds) as a possible way to teach the lessons.
   b. At Caring Hearts Ministries in Zanesville, Ohio, we hold our Friendship Youth Group on the same days that we have Friendship Parties.  All our teens with disabilities join 2-3 teen helper friends and adult leaders to learn a Bible story, put on costumes and act out the Bible stories for the younger children who attend our monthly Friendship Parties.  After teaching the Bible story they enjoy typical teen fun, like a game, craft, and snack in their own room.  They enjoy occasionally making snacks for all our party children such as pudding, pizzas or s’mores.

19. Join Joni and Friends “Churches and Organizations with Disability Ministries List” – register information about your church’s accessibility and services by calling the Joni and Friends area ministry nearest you and ask to speak with a church relations representative.  [www.joniandfriends.org/area-ministries/](http://www.joniandfriends.org/area-ministries/)
20. **Kids’ Ministries - Disability Awareness Training**
   c. Kids’ Corner at [www.joniandfriends.org/kids-corner](http://www.joniandfriends.org/kids-corner) Interactive internet page designed for all children that provide activities, disability awareness and friendship ideas.

   a. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.” Luke 14:13-14a
   b. Invite local people to a festive dinner, have a person affected by disabilities share his/her testimony, singing, a drama, gifts and possibly survey attendees for needs.

22. **Make your church accessible** Find possible helps at [www.joniandfriends.org/christian-fund-for-the-disabled](http://www.joniandfriends.org/christian-fund-for-the-disabled)

23. **Pamper a Caregiver**
   a. Treat a parent or caregiver to lunch, stimulating conversation, a round of golf, or whatever gives them a break and makes them feel special.
   b. Collect donations of gift cards from local restaurants and offer respite care for their children so that couples of special needs children can have a nice free evening out.
   c. Spa packages and movie baskets

24. **Respite Opportunities** Days and/or nights out for families who are caring for a person with a disability. Respite can be offered at your church for several families or by a care team in the family’s home. Respite at your church can include pairing up each special-needs child and sibling with a partner and moving as a group(s) to different fun centers: singing, puppets, Bible story, movies, games, craft, play centers, snack, etc.

25. **Sensory Room** Set up a sensory room in your church that is staffed with volunteers (according to your church’s safety policy) that has all types of sensory toys in it. Children can enjoy this room during parts of the church services as needed by caregivers. See Sensory Room list (compiled by a mother who has a child with autism) in the Appendix for possible items that people can donate.

26. **Vacation Bible School (VBS)** Welcome children with special needs to your VBS by offering inclusion advocates such as Friendship Buddies/Partners, etc. See Joni and Friends VBS resources listed in #20 above: *Kids’ Ministries - Disability Awareness Training*.

27. **Wheels for the World** Collect used manual wheelchairs, foldable walkers, aluminum crutches and canes for *Joni and Friends Wheels for the World*. Equipment is refurbished by prisoners across the U.S. These items are shipped into developing countries, fitted by qualified volunteers and the gospel is given to the recipients of the equipment. Contact [www.joniandfriends.org/wheels-for-the-world](http://www.joniandfriends.org/wheels-for-the-world) for further information.
This adult Sunday school class is a vital ministry because the young children eventually grow into adults who need love, encouragement and a helping hand to run the race that God has given them, to finish the race and to obtain their eternal crown. It is a privilege to be part of their lives and to teach them. Another lady in our church and I share the teaching on a rotating quarterly basis.

I am impressed with the loyalty and diligence of the members of the class. They have many obstacles to overcome just to get to church each Sunday. We have three ladies in wheelchairs and others with a variety of physical ailments, but they come – cheerfully and with the joy of the Lord on their faces and in their hearts. Our class has grown and changed over the years as folks come and go, but we have a core group who are very faithful.

We begin each class session with prayer time. We identify prayer requests and we take time listening to their prayer needs and what has happened in their lives through the week. They pray for each other and they pray for me.

We use the Access curriculum from Lifeway Christian Resources. It is colorful, on a reading level that they can manage, and whose lessons apply the subject being studied to everyday life. Lifeway has created a 5-year study plan that covers Old & New Testament lessons. Because most of our adults are operating at an adult level in their everyday life, I add commentary as the Lord leads to make the lesson fuller and richer for their spiritual nourishment.

The class also enjoys fellowship outside the regular scheduled meetings on Sunday morning. Class Parties throughout the year include a fall Harvest Party, Christmas Breakfast before Sunday school, a Valentine Party, an Easter Breakfast during Sunday school, and a late spring or early summer party. At one of these parties several years ago we made a class scrapbook that includes our class song, “O God You Are My God,” group pictures, and individual pictures with scripture verses that they chose for their own. They worked together and decorated the pages.

We have had many opportunities to minister to these dear people. Three of our class members have gone on to be with the Lord. One of them, Denny, lingered between life and death for several weeks. The men of our church stepped up and ushered him into glory by staying by his hospital bedside as much as possible, reading the Word, singing praises and lifting him up in prayer.

One time, one of our wheelchair ladies asked me if she would get a new body when she goes to Heaven. I was excited to share Philippians 3:20-21: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like His glorious body.” These ladies cannot physically stand, but they stand firm in the hope that Jesus’ power will transform their bodies to be like His glorious body someday. They often speak of it and they are eager for the Lord to take them home in His time.

I see the physical and mental limitations that our Caring Hearts Class has and the struggles that they endure every day. But they love Jesus. They have a special bond with each other. They joyfully are a part of the body of believers here in Zanesville and they have hope. Isaiah 40:31 says: “…but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” I know that the Lord will keep this promise to my class as they put their trust and hope in Jesus and it’s a joy to see them reaching out to others as they invite their friends and neighbors to participate and find that Hope as well!
Appendix

Sample Forms

The following pages include sample forms for the various aspects of Disability Ministries. Feel free to adapt these forms and/or have them checked for approval by an attorney for use in your situation/state.

Disability Awareness Sunday Commitment Sheet
Sensory Toy List/Sensory Room Bulletin Inserts

*“First Aid Book” Forms located in Friendship Party Guide
or find others in Joni & Friends’ Smart Pages

*Please note: All minors need legal written permission in order for their photos or video footage to be taken for ministry or promotional purposes. We also ask that all of our adults (with or without legal guardians) sign a Photo Release Form.
Disability Awareness Sunday Commitment Form

How will you respond to what you have been challenged with today?

I am interested in helping with the disability ministries in the following way(s)

_____ Prayer Warrior

Caring Hearts Sunday school class
(for adults w/intellectual disabilities)

_____ Sunday school teacher
_____ Help with special events

Deaf Ministry
_____ I can help interpret during a church service or at Friendship Parties

Friendship Children’s Parties
(one Saturday afternoon per month)

_____ Helper Friend
_____ Activity Leader
 (music, craft, kitchen, etc.)

Friendship Youth Group
(during Friendship Parties)

_____ Helper Friend
_____ Leader

Caregivers’ Support Group
(meets in conjunction with monthly Friendship Parties)

_____ Leader
_____ Devotions
_____ Craft
_____ Refreshments

Financial Assistance
_____ Caring Hearts Ministry Sponsor
 ($35/year covers ministry expenses for one adult, child or teen)
_____ Purchases for Sensory Room
_____ Gift to help with costs of accessible bus
_____ Contribution for spread of disability ministries around the country

Inclusion Advocate

_____ One-on-one helper to a special needs child in Sunday school or children’s church class

Sensory Room
(during regularly scheduled worship services)

_____ Helper once a month/twice a month
_____ Donate gently used items: (see list)

Transportation Ministry
_____ Driver for church-owned accessible vehicle

Joni and Friends “Wheels for the World”

_____ I have an item that I can donate
 (accepting manual wheelchairs, aluminum foldable walkers and canes)
_____ I want to help with a wheelchair collection drive

CONTACTS

_____ I know someone who would benefit from this disability ministry. Please call me for the information
_____ The following person would benefit from this disability ministry:

Name _____________________________________
Phone ___________________________________
E-mail ___________________________________
Address ___________________________________

I would like to be part of this exciting ministry in the way(s) indicated above. Please contact me:

Name _____________________________________
Phone ___________________________________
E-mail ___________________________________
Our church is setting up a “Sensory Room”
to benefit our children with special needs and their parents
during our church services and disability ministries events.

If you have any of the specific toys listed below
(new or gently used) appropriate for age 3 and up) that you
would like to donate, we would greatly appreciate them.

- Sensory Balls of all types —
  e.g. glitter and water,
  knobby, weighted, squishy
- “Pin-pression” box
- Toys that contain oil or water
- Hoberman Sphere
- Sand animals — e.g. whale
  filled with sand
- Tangle (puzzle)
- Silicon pot holders — with
  textures
- Set of diving rings — weighted
- Band instruments — such as
  First Act, Fisher Price,
  Melissa and Doug, etc.
- Exercise ball
- Remote control car
- Sensory Dominos (textured)
- Make Up Brush
- *Finding Nemo* DVD —
  Collector’s Edition with Ocean
  and Aquarium Screen Savers
- CD player with headphones
- Headphones
- 2 Lava Lamps
- Wildlife/Nature Sounds CDs
- Night Lights
- Lamps (used instead of
  buzzing fluorescent lights)
- Christmas Lights (new, please)
- Glow in the dark decals
- Regular set of ear muffs
- Ribbon Twirling Sticks
- Cheerleader pom poms
- Light up toys with flashers —
  balls, hand held fan, etc.
- Large Foam beads or large
  wooden beads to string —
  chunky Melissa & Doug
  Preschool ones
- Sewing Cards
- Bean Bag chairs— Kids’ and
  adults’
- Children’s Rain Sticks
- Natural Sponges
- Large Duplo blocks
- Visual Timers like a traffic
  light or digital clock to help
  in transitions
- Kitchen timer
- Puppets
- Large Wipe off board
- Slinky and Pop Toobs
- Tactile Fidget Balls — e.g.
  Adam balls, O Balls,
  Spaghetti or beaded balls
  (Mondo Company)
- Squid yo-yo
- Spectra light twirler
- Play Cube (like in Doctor’s
  Office)
- Jiggly worms
- Money to purchase storage
  containers for these toys