Critical Conversations: Disabilities & Specialized Needs

Session 1: Small Group Curriculum: *"Seeing the Full Image of God"*

Video Length: Approx. 20–30 minutes
Small Group Discussion Time: 30–40 minutes
Audience: Church leaders, volunteers, parents, ministry teams, or general church members

Session Overview:

This session invites participants into a deeper biblical and relational understanding of disabilities and specialized needs ministry. Through Jared Leach's story and discussion, participants will confront discomfort, explore the image of God in every person, and consider how the local church can become a place of belonging and honor for individuals and families impacted by disabilities.

Key Concepts:

1. Fear and discomfort are often rooted in unfamiliarity

Many people feel uncertain around disabilities because they lack exposure, education, or confidence. Growth begins with honesty and willingness.

2. Behavior communicates a need

What may appear disruptive or unusual is often communication of an unmet need rather than defiance or disrespect.

3. Every person reflects the image of God

Disabilities are not obstacles to God's glory or evidence of lesser value. Every person uniquely reflects God's creativity and character.

4. The church is called to radical welcome

The local church should reflect the inclusive love of Christ by intentionally making room for people of all abilities.

5. Ministry is mutual

People with disabilities are not merely recipients of ministry; they also minister to the church through their faith, honesty, joy, and love.

Suggested Group Flow:

Segment	Time
Opening Prayer & Introductions	5 min
Watch Video Session	20–30 min
Discussion Questions	25–30 min
Scripture Reflection & Prayer	5–10 min

Opening Prayer:

"Lord, open our hearts to see people the way You see them. Help us move beyond fear, discomfort, or assumptions and into compassion, humility, and love. Teach us how to reflect Your love and Your Kingdom more fully. Amen."

Key Scriptures:

1. **Psalm 139:13–14**

"For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb…"

Reflection: God's intentional design includes every person. Human dignity is not dependent upon ability, productivity, or social comfort.

2. **Exodus 4:11**

"Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?"

Reflection: God is neither surprised nor absent in human differences. His image and glory are revealed through diverse people and experiences.

3. **James 2:1–4**

"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes…"

Reflection: The church must examine whether our spaces, systems, and attitudes unintentionally communicate exclusion or partiality.

4. **Luke 14:13–14**

"When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind…"

Reflection: Jesus consistently elevated those marginalized by society and invited them into places of honor.

Watch the Video:

Suggested viewing time: 20–30 minutes

Discussion Questions:

Icebreaker Question

1. When you think about disabilities or specialized needs ministry, what emotions or thoughts come to mind first?

Understanding & Awareness

2. Jared shared that he initially avoided working with individuals with disabilities because he felt uncomfortable and unsure. Why do you think many people feel this way?
3. What stood out to you most from Jared's personal story?
4. The conversation emphasized that "behavior is a need." How might this perspective change the way we respond to children, teens, or adults who seem disruptive or difficult?

Biblical Reflection

5. How does the idea that every person reflects the image of God challenge the way our culture often views disability?
6. What do you think Jesus modeled through His interactions with people who were marginalized or overlooked?
7. Jared suggested that people with disabilities often teach the church something about faith, love, and dependence on God. Have you ever experienced that personally?

Church & Community

8. What barriers — physical, emotional, social, or spiritual — might unintentionally exist in churches today?
9. What practical changes could help your church become more welcoming and honoring toward individuals and families with specialized needs?
10. How can pastors, leaders, parents, and volunteers help create a church culture where all kinds of people feel they belong?

Leader Notes:

If conversation becomes emotional:

Many families affected by disability carry exhaustion, grief, or isolation. Allow space for listening rather than rushing to solutions.

Encourage honesty:

Participants may admit discomfort or uncertainty. Normalize learning and growth rather than shame.

Keep bringing the conversation back to:

- dignity
- belonging
- the image of God
- hospitality
- mutual ministry

Practical Challenge for the Week

Choose one intentional action this week:

- Introduce yourself to a family affected by disability
- Observe your church environment through the lens of accessibility
- Pray specifically for families navigating specialized needs
- Ask a ministry leader how your church currently supports individuals with disabilities
- Read one Gospel story where Jesus engages someone marginalized

Closing Reflection

"Who might be missing from our church community because we have not yet made room for them?"

Allow a few moments of silence before praying together.

Closing Prayer:

"Jesus, thank You for welcoming every person with dignity, compassion, and love. Forgive us for the ways we have overlooked, misunderstood, or excluded others. Help our churches become places where every individual and every family experiences belonging, honor, and spiritual community. Teach us to see Your image more clearly in one another. Amen."

Critical Conversations: Disabilities & Specialized Needs — Part 2

Session 2: Small Group Curriculum: *"Belonging, Regulation, and Dignity in the Church"*

Video Length: Approx. 20–30 minutes
Small Group Discussion Time: 30–40 minutes
Audience: Church leaders, volunteers, parents, ministry teams, or general church members

Session Overview:

This session explores what true belonging and inclusion mean for individuals with disabilities and specialized needs in the local church. Rather than asking how people fit into our systems, we begin asking how the church can become a place of dignity, safety, relationship, and spiritual formation for every person.

This conversation also introduces practical concepts like regulation, sensory needs, emotional support, individualized ministry approaches, and language that honors people as image bearers of God.

Key Concepts:

- Belonging vs. mere inclusion
- Seeing individuals, not categories
- Regulation and dysregulation
- Grace-centered responses instead of behavior management
- The role of relationship in discipleship
- Understanding different types of disabilities
- Creating emotionally safe ministry environments
- Person-first language and humility in learning

Suggested Group Flow:

Segment	Time
Opening Prayer & Introductions	5 min
Watch Video Session	20–30 min
Discussion Questions	25–30 min
Scripture Reflection & Prayer	5–10 min

Opening Prayer:

"Jesus, thank You for seeing every person with compassion, patience, and love. Teach us to slow down and truly notice the people around us. Help us create spaces where others feel safe, known, and valued. Give us wisdom to respond with grace instead of judgment, and humility to learn from one another. Form our hearts to reflect Your kindness so that every person who enters our churches experiences dignity, belonging, and the love of Christ. Amen."

Key Scriptures:

1. **Romans 12:4–5**

"For just as each of us has one body with many members… so in Christ we, though many, form one body…"

2. **1 Corinthians 12:22–26**

"Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable…"

3. **Galatians 6:2**

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

4. **Mark 2:15–17**

Jesus consistently created belonging before behavior change.

5. **Psalm 139:13–14**

Every person is intentionally created and deeply known by God.

Watch the Video:

Suggested viewing time: 20–30 minutes

Discussion Questions:

Opening Reflection

1. What stood out to you most from this session?
2. What challenged your assumptions or expanded your understanding?

Belonging & Inclusion

3. Jera describes belonging as more than simply "being present."
   What is the difference between inclusion and true belonging?
4. Have you ever experienced a situation where you were physically present but did not feel like you truly belonged?
   What created that feeling?
5. What are practical ways churches can help individuals and families feel known, seen, and valued rather than merely accommodated?

Grace vs. Behavior Management

6. The conversation contrasted behavioral control with dignity-centered responses.
   Why do churches often default to behavior management?
7. How does Jesus model compassionate engagement with people who are struggling, overwhelmed, or misunderstood?
8. How might ministry environments change if we viewed dysregulation as communication rather than disobedience?

Regulation & Emotional Safety

9. What are some signs of dysregulation mentioned in the conversation?
10. Why is emotional safety important for learning, participation, and spiritual formation?
11. The conversation noted that many regulating behaviors (fidgeting, stimming, stepping away, quiet spaces) are actually coping tools.
    How does this shift your perspective?
12. What practical adjustments could your ministry or small group make to create calmer, more supportive environments?

Seeing Individuals, Not Labels

13. What are some dangers of placing all disabilities or specialized needs into one category?
14. Why is relationship essential in understanding someone's actual needs?
15. Which part of the discussion about physical, cognitive, emotional, or sensory needs helped you better understand people around you?

Language, Humility, and Learning

16. Why does person-first language matter?
17. Jera encouraged leaders to become "students" of the people God places in front of them.
    What does humility look like in this context?
18. How can fear of saying the wrong thing sometimes prevent meaningful relationship?
19. Why is it important that churches become places where both leaders and families can learn together without perfectionism?

Practical Ministry Application:

Choose 1–2 practical next steps:

- Add sensory tools or fidgets to classrooms
- Create a calming sensory-friendly space
- Train volunteers on regulation and emotional support
- Reevaluate classroom expectations
- Meet personally with a family to learn their child's needs
- Examine whether your ministry culture prioritizes belonging
- Practice person-first language intentionally
- Develop individualized support plans instead of "one-size-fits-all" responses

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Leader Notes:

Important Concepts to Reinforce:

1. **Belonging**

   Belonging means:

- being known
- being safe
- being heard
- having choices
- participating meaningfully in community

2. **Regulation**

   Dysregulation is not always rebellion or disrespect. It is often:

- overwhelm
- anxiety
- sensory overload
- emotional stress
- difficulty processing environments

3. **Grace-Centered Ministry**

The goal is not simply behavioral compliance.
The goal is helping people feel safe enough to engage, grow, and belong.

Optional Group Exercise:

Ask participants:

"What helps YOU regulate when you feel overwhelmed?"

Examples:

- coffee
- taking a walk
- stepping away briefly
- fidgeting
- quiet spaces

- music
- deep breathing

This exercise helps normalize support needs and build empathy.

Closing Reflection

Read 1 Corinthians 12:22–26 aloud together.

Invite the group to reflect silently:

"What would change if our church truly believed every person was indispensable?

Closing Prayer:

Jesus,
Thank You for creating every person in Your image with dignity, value, and purpose. Teach us to slow down, listen well, and become people who create belonging. Help our churches become places of grace, safety, and relationship where every person can encounter You. Give us humility to learn, courage to grow, and compassion that reflects Your heart. Amen.

Critical Conversations: Disabilities & Specialized Needs — Part 3

Session 3: Small Group Curriculum: *"From Vision to Practice"*

Video Length: Approx. 20–30 minutes
Small Group Discussion Time: 30–40 minutes
Audience: Church leaders, volunteers, parents, ministry teams, or general church members

Session Overview:

Creating a church culture where individuals with disabilities and their families experience belonging, support, discipleship, dignity, and celebration.

Key Concepts:

Disability Ministry Includes the Whole Family

Families often carry invisible exhaustion, isolation, and grief.

Big Ideas:

- Parents may experience chronic caregiving fatigue.
- Siblings may feel overlooked.
- Families often struggle to participate fully in church life.
- Inclusion ministers to caregivers too.

Suggested Group Flow:

Segment	Time
Opening Prayer & Introductions	5 min
Watch Video Session	20–30 min
Discussion Questions	25–30 min
Scripture Reflection & Prayer	5–10 min

Opening Prayer:

"Lord, thank You for calling Your church to reflect Your Kingdom through compassion, welcome, and service. Give us courage to take practical steps toward creating communities where every individual and every family feels seen, supported, and needed. Help us not wait for perfection, but to faithfully begin where we are. Teach us to value relationship over efficiency, people over programs, and love over comfort. May our churches become places of joy, celebration, and belonging that reflect the heart of Jesus. Amen."

Key Scriptures:

1. **Galatians 6:2**
   "Carry one another's burdens…"
2. **Romans 12:15**
   "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."

Watch the Video:

Suggested viewing time: 20–30 minutes

Discussion Questions:

1. Start Small and Start Somewhere

Churches do not need a perfect program to begin.

Practical Starting Points

- One-on-one buddy system
- Parent-supported inclusion
- Simple sensory-friendly spaces
- Adaptive activities
- Family events and celebrations

Scripture- Luke 16:10
"Whoever is faithful with very little…"

Discussion Questions

1. What keeps churches from starting disability ministry?
2. What is one realistic "first step" our church could take?

2. Inclusion Shapes the Entire Church

Disability ministry is not merely accommodation — it forms Christlike character in the whole congregation.

Key Ideas

- Children learn empathy and compassion.
- Fear and unfamiliarity decrease through relationship.
- The church becomes more reflective of the Kingdom of God.

Scriptures-

Luke 14:13–14
"Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind…"

1 Corinthians 12:22
"The parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable."

Discussion Questions

1. How does inclusion disciple the broader church community?
2. What would change if disability ministry became part of a church's "DNA" instead of just a program?

3. Celebration Is Ministry

Joy, play, sports nights, and special events communicate dignity and belonging.

Examples Mentioned

- All-abilities sports nights
- Christmas celebrations
- Night to Shine-style events
- Peer partnerships

Scripture-

Zephaniah 3:17
"He rejoices over you with singing."

Discussion Questions

1. Why do celebration and fun matter spiritually?
2. How can churches create spaces where individuals with disabilities feel honored rather than managed?

Practical Ministry Ideas:

Easy First Steps

- Create a buddy ministry
- Meet with parents before placement
- Offer sensory tools (weighted blankets, dim lighting, fidgets)
- Adapt games using softer/larger equipment
- Host an all-abilities event
- Train volunteers in calm, simple communication

Leader Notes:

Important Principles

- Progress over perfection
- Relationship over expertise
- Dignity over efficiency
- Community over programming

Helpful Reminder

Many volunteers are willing, they simply feel unqualified. Simplicity and encouragement help people step in.

Closing Reflection:

Ask:"*What would it look like for our church to become a place where families affected by disability feel fully known, welcomed, and needed?*"

Closing Prayer:

Jesus,
Give us eyes to truly see people, not labels.
Teach us to create spaces of belonging, dignity, patience, and joy.
Help our church become a community where every person is welcomed as an image-bearer of God.
Show us where to begin, and give us courage to take the first step.
Amen.