

DISABILITY AWARENESS SUNDAY



An annual Disability Awareness Sunday is a good way to enhance the process of including people with disabilities in your church. In South Africa, this event happens annually on the last Sunday of August. However, please celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday whenever it suits your programme. Here is a step-by-step process to help you plan such an event.

Step 1: Get interested people involved

Approach a group of people to assist you. Invite people from a variety of backgrounds to join your team: worship leaders, youth leaders, church leaders, church members with disabilities – adults and children - parents and family members of people with disabilities, friends of people with disabilities and professionals who work with people with disabilities.

Establish your vision with the team members. What would you like the outcome of this event to be? Well, wouldn't you like those who come to your church for the first time to keep coming? The aim of including people with disabilities should be to enable them to reach their God-given potential. You're halfway there if you have people with disabilities on your team:

Involve people with disabilities who are already in your church.

- Ask them to share their positive and negative experiences of the church with the team.
- Encourage them to contribute ideas for improvement. Survey the needs of people with disabilities in the congregation.

Has something previously been done regarding disability in your church? Assess it, and use the positive outcomes in your plans.

Involve your team in determining your objectives, which may include:

- Informing the congregation about the barriers people with disabilities encounter at the local church.
- Addressing access and inclusion needs of members with a disability.
- Building a team for ministry to and with people with disabilities in your church and the community.
- Praying together that God will equip you and each team member for disability ministry.
- Praying that your congregation will welcome people with disabilities.
- Teaching your fellow believers to recognise the potential of people with disabilities.
- Praying for opportunities to develop friendships with individuals who have disabilities.
- Praying for each team member. Ask God to provide you with the skills and sensitivity to work together in harmony.

When planning the date for Disability Awareness Sunday:

- Don't select a long-weekend, or Sundays close to any special events observed by your church.
- Select a Sunday on which leaders of your church are present, so they are able to endorse your efforts and address the subject of disability from the Bible.
- If you plan to invite a guest presenter with a disability, arrange this in consultation with your leadership. (Refer to resourceful people.)

Step 2: Develop a clear plan

Prepare a Disability Awareness Sunday document which:

- Informs your leadership of your vision for disability ministry.
- Provides a draft outline of the event.
- Notifies the leadership of any needs you have and how they can assist you.

- Express your team's willingness to take the lead in organising this event.
- Explain the importance of the leaders' support and involvement. Include the following benefits of a disability ministry:

Benefits to church members:

- A sense of completeness as the body of Christ ministers to one another;
- A greater appreciation for the compassion of Christ as members see Christ-like compassion in action;
- The blessing of God as unity is seen in the church;
- Praise and worship that results from seeing how God works in the lives of people with disabilities;
- The growth of the church as it becomes accessible at all levels.

Benefits to the disability ministry team:

- Building one another up through mutual ministry;
- Developing personal, spiritual maturity through service;
- Enjoying new friendships with people with disabilities and their friends and families;
- Receiving spiritual encouragement and edification offered by people with disabilities.

Benefits to people with disabilities who participate in the programme:

- Opportunities to socialise and make friends;
- Being introduced to Jesus;
- Praise and worship with other believers;
- Friendship, support and acceptance;
- Opportunities to minister to others, using the gifts God has given them.

Step 3: Prepare the congregation

If it is the first time you are planning a Disability Awareness Sunday, it may be advisable to sensitise and prepare the members of your congregation before inviting people from outside the church.

The following points will help you assess the readiness of your congregation to welcome people with disabilities:

- The accessibility of your facilities to people with a range of disabilities. See the document on accessible church buildings.
- Prepare your door stewards and leadership to welcome people with disabilities. See tips for ushers.
- Prepare the children's ministry to receive a child with a disability. Have a 'buddy' available to accompany a child with disability where necessary.
- Is the worship service you are planning accessible to a range of learning disabilities?

You might need only one Disability Awareness Sunday event, or a period of two or more weeks to prepare your congregation to welcome people with disabilities. When you feel you have completed your preparation, start advertising your meeting and write letters of invitation to special schools, rehabilitation centres and local disability organisations. See Disability links.

Ask your church members to invite friends, family members and colleagues who have disabilities, or who know people with disabilities.

Step 4: Activities on Disability Awareness Sunday

This can be a lovely day of meeting new people and developing new insights - don't miss the excitement.

To make the most of Disability Awareness Sunday, ensure that the person who welcomes your guests points out:

- The hearing loop system and where to sit to make use of it.
- The location of accessible toilets and pews with legroom for guide-dogs to lie at the feet of their owners.
- Have large-print hymn sheets, sign language interpreters and a 'buddy' for children with a disability on hand, i.e. a child who can accompany them to Sunday school.

The following items may form part of your order of service, but be sure to meet the expectations of your congregation. A service which differs too greatly from the norm may discourage future disability awareness programmes.

- Someone with a disability could lead the service, while people with different disabilities assume relevant functions. Example: A visually impaired person could lead the service, while people with intellectual disabilities could take up the offering.
- A story or testimony by someone with a disability, or a parent of a child with disability.
- Someone from a local disability organisation could talk about accessibility, discrimination, employment, faith issues and transport problems.
- Include examples of the achievements of people with disabilities, in both public life, but also those who live in your own community, who may be unsung heroes.

Many people with disabilities contribute to South African society.

Some are in the public eye, like Mr Justice Zak Yacoob, a judge of the Constitutional Court, who is blind; or sports champions like Oscar Pistorius and Natalie du Toit.

Others work as social workers, language practitioners and ministers of religion. Many teachers, motivational speakers or artists are drawn from the ranks of people with disabilities. Their disabilities do not define their role in society or how they see themselves.

Many unsung heroes use their expertise to improve the lives of others

You are encouraged to seek out these people in your own community, invite them to your church where you will be enriched by their contribution.

- Be on the lookout for music composed or played by people with disabilities and use it in the worship service.
- Make use of artistic expressions by people with disabilities such as poetry, dance, painting and sculpture. Ask around your community to discover such examples.
- Bible readings and prayers by people with disabilities and their family members or friends.

- A sermon, presented by your minister or by a guest speaker with a disability, could dispel erroneous ideas, such as the belief that disability is the result of sin and a lack of faith. See Resourceful people for names of people you can contact.
- Bible passages relating to disability that could be used in sermons are: Exodus 4: 10 -12; 1 Samuel 16:7b; 2 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 9; Luke 5: 17-26; Luke 14:15-24; John 9:3; 1 Corinthians 12:22-23;
- A short drama on the subject of disability – Who is at your entrance? Or develop your own skits showing right and wrong ways to relate to people with different disabilities.
- Group discussions about how to assist people with disabilities in accessing services.
- A special offering for enhancing accessibility in the church.
- Communion – ensure that the location where communion takes place is spacious enough for people in wheelchairs and people with guide-dogs.
- Have alternatives to wheat and wine available at communion.
- Ensure that people who don't have upper-limbs or hand control can receive communion. Ask them if you can be of assistance, and do so accordingly.
- A Children's programme on disability: Talk with those responsible for your church's children activities and develop interesting activities that include children with disability.

If you are extending an invitation to the wider community of people with disabilities, make sure there are extra helpers available to assist adults or children with disabilities who may visit for the day.

An annual Disability Awareness Sunday is a great place to start to become disability-friendly. However, also look beyond the day, and implement initiatives that will make your church a place where people with disabilities will find a spiritual home, along with everybody else. This as an opportunity that can enrich everybody's life.