

Practice Update: Faith-Based Disability Ministry Barriers and Inclusion

Background/Context

- Kingdom Workers Jesus Cares (JC) ministry strives to give people with intellectual and developmental disabilities a sense of belonging that serves their needs and empowers their faith. JC programs include thoughtfully designed worship services, specialized Bible studies, and fellowship events that connect participants to others and to Christ.
- The purpose of this joint research between Kingdom Workers, Baylor University, and the Meros Center was to study: 1) the barriers to and impact of implementing JC and 2) how inclusion is understood and implemented throughout the program.
- Kingdom Workers desired to use this information to inform the future direction and growth of the ministry.

Methodology

- The research team interviewed twenty-two leaders from JC programs in varying stages of activity level regarding barriers to program implementation and perception of inclusion.
- Leaders sent a survey to parents, caregivers, and volunteers regarding the program's impact on them and their perceptions of impact on people with disabilities and the congregation at-large. Fifty-three surveys were completed.
- The research team analyzed the interview data looking for themes and the survey data with descriptive statistics.

Key Findings

- Key barriers to program participation included group home complexities, lack of transportation, lack of support from church leadership, recruiting and scheduling, funding or appropriate facilities, teaching challenges, and lack of volunteers.
- Some leaders described ministries where people with disabilities were also active in mainstream congregational life volunteering, taking the sacraments, and serving as JC ambassadors. Other leaders described ministries meant to meet needs in a separate JC setting, not integrated as part of the larger congregation.
- As program leaders described inclusion, six elements came to light: presence, relationships, roles, attitudes, feeling loved and valued, and feeling supported.
- The study found positive impacts of JC among people with disabilities, caregivers, and volunteers. These impacts included joy, spiritual growth, and a sense of belonging or making a difference.

Recommendations and Applications

Strategies for Addressing Barriers (recommended by program leaders)

- Provide transportation to and from JC events and programming.
- Create a database of group homes to connect with and recruit participants.

- Model JC to the church to increase understanding of disability ministry.
- Use poll software to determine the best time for participants to gather.
- Consider meeting participants in their group homes to hold JC programming.
- Provide access to training and resources to help equip JC leaders to address teaching challenges.
- Include more low-technology communication methods including mailing paper copies of resources

Strategies for Embracing Impacts

Parents and Caregivers

- Provide programming for parents and caregivers to worship
- Develop quarterly opportunities for a longer time of respite
- Provide parent and caregiver social events

The Church

- Increase opportunities for people with and without disabilities to fellowship together
- Find ways to increase the visibility of JC within the church

Ministry Participants

- Incorporate tools to support the faith formation of people with disabilities such as religious education plans or behavior support strategies.
- Provide opportunities for people with disabilities to serve in the church and at JC events
- Plan events for people with disabilities to connect outside of JC

Volunteers

- Continue providing training and resources for volunteers
- Clearly outline volunteer roles and responsibilities to increase comfortability and confidence

Strategies to Continue Exploring Inclusion

- Explore impacts of this ministry from different perspectives (participants, caregivers, etc.)
- Continue conversations with program congregations and participants regarding what an ideal ministry would look like in terms of whole-congregation and specialized activities

Conclusion

This study resulted in several recommendations that may be valuable for faith-based organizations implementing ministries for people with disabilities. Putting into practice recommendations regarding addressing barriers to program implementation and participation, enhancing positive effects, and addressing philosophies of inclusion have the potential to increase program impacts.

This practice recommendation is provided by the Meros Center, which supports Christian health ministries around the world. Additional information and resources can be found at www.meroscenter.org. This summary is intended to share emerging evidence relevant to

community health practices, but individual clinical decisions should be made by qualified clinicians using the appropriate standard of practice for their setting.