

Practice Update: Integrating Faith into Community-Based Rehabilitation

Background/Context

- Kingdom Workers' Malawi Disability Program supports congregations in reaching and serving persons with disabilities (PWDs). The program provides community-based rehabilitation and a specialized worship service called "Worship at the Cross" tailored to engaging PWDs.
- Programming throughout Malawi is carried out in collaboration with congregation-based volunteers, pastors and elders, Kingdom Workers staff (including a trained physiotherapist), and caregivers.
- A program evaluation was conducted to explore physical, social, and spiritual impacts. The program has a vision to promote inclusion of PWDs in community and church life.
- For this practice update, we will focus on learnings surrounding spiritual and social impacts.

Reference:

Matope K, Mitumbu D, Lucio T, Kambalame H, Porinsky R, Hatzfeld J. Church-based ministry to people with disabilities in Malawi: a case study and program evaluation. *Christ J Glob Health*. 2025 Mar; 12(1).

<https://doi.org/10.15566/cjgh.v12i1.331>

Methodology

- Program volunteers, adult participants, and caregivers of children attending Worship at the Cross completed a program impact survey.
- Church leaders participated in an interview regarding program activities and impact.
- Data were collected in 14 congregations throughout Malawi with approximately 10% of PWDs and caregivers, 15% of volunteers, and 100% of church leaders participating.

Key Findings

77% of program participants/caregivers reported a **stronger relationship with God** after Worship at the Cross participation.

Most participants (96%) in Worship at the Cross reported **feeling accepted** in the community. Church leaders and volunteers affirmed this in their observations.

86% of participants/caregivers reported that other community members **treated them age-appropriately** since the church began Worship at the Cross ministry.

Recommendations and Applications

- Pastors and other church leaders can play valuable roles in faith-based disability programming through activities like home visits alongside volunteers, teaching evangelism, settling disputes, and encouraging regular group activity.
- Informal support groups among program participants and family members can be encouraged for additional opportunities for connection and collaboration.
- Providing a uniquely designed weekly worship experience for PWDs has both personal spiritual impacts as well as community-level social inclusion impacts.
- A multi-faceted approach to including spiritual activities like prayer and reading God's Word is encouraged through personal home-based care visits and group worship.
- It may be valuable to study mental health impacts of spiritual care in greater detail since past research indicates spiritual care as important for coping for PWDs and caregivers.
- There are opportunities for further training for volunteers, caregivers, and other advocates on how to effectively provide spiritual and mental health support for PWDs.

Additional Tips from the Field

- Look for already existing activities in the community that PWDs are attending. There may be opportunities to integrate spiritual components into those activities.
- Approach cultural practices with curiosity and humility to better understand PWDs' and their caregivers' context and tailor spiritual programming to address questions and challenges.
- Consider designing your own evangelism resources and ways of sharing them that match well with the people you serve and their caregivers. Similarly, consider ease of understanding and use by program volunteers. Those sharing and receiving the messages should be able to clearly understand the specific spiritual point.
- Develop disability ministry procedures and frameworks that guide your wider operations, being flexible to refine them over time as the team learns from their holistic work.
- Collaborate with local institutions to position your program within the wider system for resource-sharing, sustainability, and greater opportunity to focus on your mission (eg, local hospital staff could provide volunteers with technical skills training while you provide evangelism training).

Conclusion

Congregation-based programming uniquely designed for PWDs and their caregivers led to meaningful social and spiritual impacts including feelings of acceptance by the broader community and a stronger relationship with God.

Additional Resources

[Accessible Worship: A Community Conversation on Disability and the Church](#)

[Belonging: A Community Conversation on Disability and the Church](#)

[Flourishing Together: A Community Conversation on Disability and the Church](#)

[Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and their Families: A Practical Guide for Congregations](#)

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.