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www.accessservices.org

Access Services serves people without regard to race, sex, color, national or ethnic origin, or religious beliefs.



**ACCESS
SERVICES**

Creating better ways to serve
people with special needs

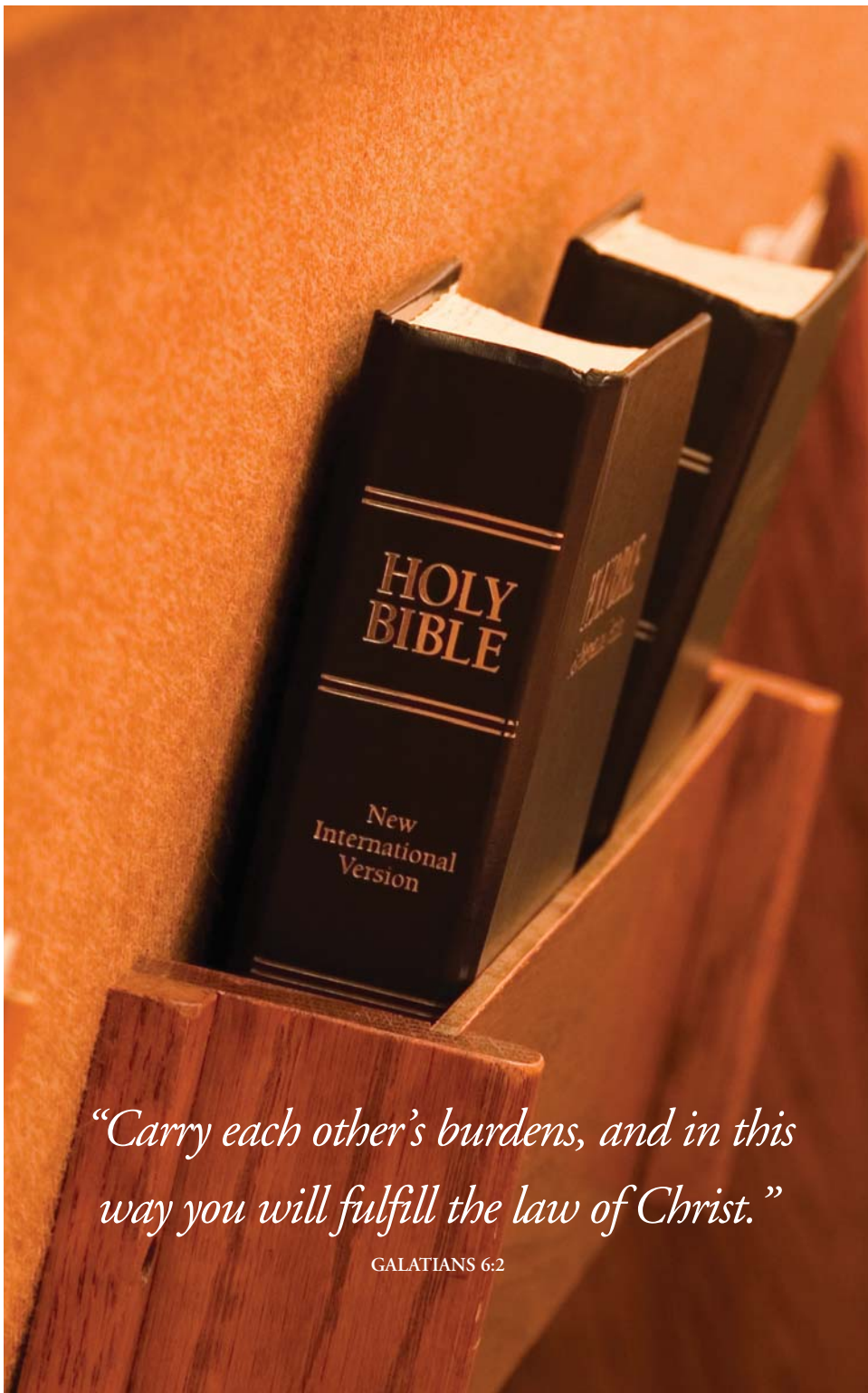
Spiritual Care Program

Handbook for Churches



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“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

GALATIANS 6:2

Introduction

Access Services is a faith-based social services organization that seeks to serve those with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Since our inception as an organization begun by a group of Christian social workers, we have always understood the importance of not just serving people’s physical, social and emotional needs, but their spiritual needs as well. We understand that all people, regardless of disability, have been created in God’s image and therefore have inherent value. As a result of taking this perspective towards those we serve, we have always had great respect for the local church and its mission in our world. It is out of this love for the church and desire to see its mission carried out to all people that we have put together this small handbook you are now holding.

Access Services consists of many people who have one foot serving in the social services profession and one foot serving within the local church. This experience has given us the opportunity to see both the opportunities and challenges facing the local church in the area of ministering to those with developmental disabilities and mental illness. We have witnessed ministry “highs” when those with disabilities have found community within the life of a local church that they have never found elsewhere. We have also seen ministry “lows” when those with disabilities have left the local church wounded by the fact that they were ignored and left to feel different and on the “outside” of a seemingly insular community. It is not our goal to offer quick and easy answers to situations that are often very complex. Rather, it is our hope that the insights and questions within this handbook will assist you and your team in some small way to think through how to best serve those with disabilities within your church.

Using this Handbook

There are six sections of topics that relate to issues dealing with the church's ministry to those with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Each section consists of a paragraph exploring the significance of that topic for ministry. Along with these insights are a set of questions meant to stimulate thought and dialogue among ministry leaders working with a specific person with a disability.

This handbook could be used by a single individual who's looking to come alongside someone with a disability or by a ministry leadership team that's attempting to think through how they can move forward within a particularly difficult situation. Certain sections and questions will be more or less applicable given the unique situation in which a church finds itself.

Your Relationship with the Person

More important than any knowledge you may have about a person's diagnosis is your relationship with the person. It has often been said that "the relationship is the vehicle for help". Giving support or advice will often not be effective unless there is a relationship that exists as a foundation for such interaction. What's great about this truth is that you don't have to be a mental health professional to develop a relationship with a person. Anyone can do it.

1. What are some ways you can get to know this person?

2. What are some of the activities that the person likes which you can do together?

3. How does the person currently view their relationship with you?

4. What worries you about beginning to build a relationship with the person?

Person's Relationship with God

When thinking about how to best help a person with a mental illness or developmental disability it can be easy to find oneself moving towards one of two extremes. On the one hand we may focus so much on the spiritual needs of a person that we forget the opportunity we have to serve the other aspects of a person; their physical, social and emotional needs. On the other hand, because a person's special needs may seem so daunting we may begin avoiding spiritual issues, believing that it's too difficult to help certain people understand some seemingly abstract spiritual issues. The church has a great opportunity, though, to both support the whole person while also understanding their unique calling to help people develop a relationship with God.

- 1. What is the person's view of God?**
- 2. What is the person's perspective on their relationship with God?**
- 3. How can you help this person understand their relationship with God?**
- 4. If the person doesn't have a relationship with God, how do they understand their relationship with your church?**

The Person's Relationship with Others in the Church

For the person to feel at home in your church they will likely need to develop relationships that go beyond your relationship with them. There are at least two important ways you can facilitate such relationships being built. First, you can model what it looks like to have a positive relationship with the person. As people see how comfortable you are in your interaction, it will often help them see that they can develop relationships with people who have disabilities in many of the same ways they develop relationships with other people who don't have disabilities. Second, it is important that you be aware of which people within your church have either the spiritual gift of mercy or experience with those who have disabilities. Such people may find coming alongside those with disabilities much more natural than those who don't have such gifting or experience. Once you've identified such people you will be able to begin making relational connections.

- 1. How do you think people in your church view the person?**
- 2. Does the person talk to other people in the church or usually stand alone?**
- 3. What do you need to teach people in your church so that they feel comfortable reaching out to this person?**
- 4. What people in your church have a spiritual gift of mercy?**
- 5. What people in your church have experience with family or friends who have a disability?**
- 6. How can you make relational connections between this person and others?**

Navigating the Church

It can be easy to assume that people who are exploring your church understand what we might call “church culture”. Many people with disabilities, though, have never been given the opportunity to be part of a local church. Therefore, they may need help with understanding some basic aspects of living among others in a church community. This could mean guarding awkward situations from occurring (the person not knowing that he can’t begin having a conversation with the pastor during a sermon) as well as providing positive opportunities for a person to serve in a church. For instance, many people with disabilities have been spoken with about their weaknesses and challenges without being told about their strengths. Perhaps this person is a believer with spiritual gifts that he has never explored or had the opportunity to use. The church has a fantastic opportunity to allow people to experience the joy of giving to others.

- 1. Does this person know how your church works?**
- 2. How can you help this person better understand how your church works?**
- 3. What are some areas in the life of the church where the person can be involved?**
- 4. What are some of this person’s strengths or spiritual gifts?**

Disability

One of the first questions you may have asked yourself upon meeting this person was, “what is their diagnosis?”. While it’s a fine thing to know more about the nature of a person’s disability, there are a few things to keep in mind as you increase your knowledge of their disability. First, remember that people are much more than their disability. While a diagnosis may tell you some things about a person, it won’t tell you everything. There are many aspects of their life experiences, personality, and worldview that shape who they are just as much as their disability does. Second, knowing a person’s disability is never an end but just a beginning. As a helper, knowing a person’s diagnosis is really only valuable if it helps you understand how you can better help and support the person than you did before. Last, be careful as to how you learn about a person’s disability. People are often very sensitive about labels they’ve been given and may lose trust in you if they think you’re just another person trying to categorize or label them with a title.

- 1. What would be helpful to know about the person’s disability?**
- 2. What is the person’s disability?**
- 3. How does their disability impact their view of God?**
- 4. Does knowing their disability tell you anything about how you can better help them?**
- 5. What are some things you’ve learned about this person that have nothing to do with their disability?**

Concerns

There are multiple reasons why many churches shy away from helping people with mental illness or developmental disabilities. One of them is that some people with such needs may come across as somewhat unpredictable. Within churches we often seek to have order and are concerned with people or things that can disrupt such order. Another reason churches sometimes shy away from this type of ministry is because of their own feelings of inadequacy. Many pastors didn't learn about serving those with disabilities in seminary and many people within the church haven't had relationships with people who have special needs. Rather than hiding these concerns it is better to voice them and explore ways to move beyond them so that you are able to minister to all those whom God may bring your way.

- 1. What are your expectations for how well this person will assimilate into the life of your church?**
- 2. Is there something that worries you or that you are afraid of regarding this person being connected to your church?**
- 3. If there's a behavior that comes up, who can you talk to about it? Who can you go to for help?**
- 4. Who are the people outside of the church who know the person best? How can they be helpful?**

