

*How* WORDS *Can*  
MAKE A DIFFERENCE  
*in your* CHURCH

② WAYS CHANGING YOUR WORDS

CHANGES YOUR CHURCH CULTURE

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Did you know that according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in every six persons in the United States has a disability? One in six! Other research asserts that number is even higher- up to one in three. Regardless which number is most accurate, one thing is certain: that's a lot of us! (At least 55 million, to be exact).

However, if we were to take a look within our church congregations, most of us would not see the disability population proportionately in attendance. It begs the question, "Why?"

Today, there are many barriers that make it difficult for our congregations to be inclusive of the entire Body of Christ. Some of those barriers are expected. Physical limitations, such as older buildings with poor accessibility, or space modifications can be problematic. Some of those barriers relate to communication, such as a lack of adaptive materials like Braille or large print for the visually impaired, or sign language interpretation or closed captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing community. These barriers exist and can take time to resolve. However...

Some of the biggest barriers we consistently find that keep congregations from seeking and welcoming those with disabilities are actually not physical or communication hurdles, but rather, *barriers of attitude*. Very often, communities have limited or incorrect information about the reality of disability in their church. Perhaps people are unsure or even fearful about how to engage with people different than them. Maybe there is anxiety about doing the proverbial 'wrong thing'. No matter the reason, we are all accountable to God to respond to His call to provide for each other, bear one another's burdens and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people. And removing our attitude barriers may not be as difficult as we think.

Here are two easy and immediate ways we at Faithtree suggest that you and I can help remove barriers in your church. Although they cost nothing, they alter attitudes and can have a profound impact.

# 1

## Ask the right questions

Part of our attitude towards our brothers and sisters living with disability, or their families and caregivers is defined and crafted by the questions we ask ourselves (and others) regarding disability.

“We have an elevator and handrails, is that good enough?” “What if I’m scared, uncomfortable, or unsure of what to do around a person with a disability?” “I’m not a doctor, therapist, or a teacher, so is it even my responsibility?”

We don’t need to be professionals when it comes to being inclusive. What we need is a heart that is open and compassionate, and a willingness to serve all of God’s children. Of course, we need to remove the physical barriers that may prevent someone from entering the church building, but more importantly, we need to remove the barriers in our thoughts that may prevent someone from entering our hearts.

Useful questions to ask ourselves include:

**“What are the real barriers at my church for people with disabilities?”**

**“What can I do to help?”**

**“What has God entrusted to me, that only I can do to make a difference for my brothers and sisters touched by disability?”**

**“Why does this make me uncomfortable? Am I afraid of something? If so, what?”**

**“What can I do to bear the burden of this particular person in front of me?”**

**“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”**

**-(MATTHEW 16:24)**

# 2

## Emphasize the Person, Not the Disability

In Disability Culture, there is a movement to use “person-first language.” Person-first language emphasizes the person *first*. This means that instead of referring to someone as a “wheelchair-bound woman,” we should call her a *woman*, who uses a wheelchair. Or instead of “the autistic kid,” we say “the *child* who has autism.”

This is not an attempt to be more “politically correct”; it is meant to focus our attention on the individual’s personhood instead of their disability. Notice that when we say “that bipolar man,” or “the disabled girl,” we emphasize their disability. By seeing their diagnoses, or crosses, as their defining characteristics, we devalue their humanity. It’s a subtle difference, but when you think about it - when you recognize someone’s humanity before his or her disability, it has a profound impact. The first step in removing barriers is to see the humanity in others, and to recognize that we all have our burdens, some just more visible than others.

Christ knew this—He spent time with tax collectors and lepers, the most obviously stigmatized populations of that time. He looked past their sins and their illnesses, understood the burden that it was on them, and ministered to them. In doing so, He made it easier for them to lift up their cross, overcome those burdens, and follow His example. That is our purpose. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). We are called to not only lift up our own cross but to assist others with theirs, and to do so with love (Galatians 6:2, 1 Corinthians 13:3).

Christ Himself in His humanity required help bearing His cross. After Christ was flogged, mocked, and spit upon by the Romans, Mark 15:21 says “then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His Cross.” Even Christ being that He is fully human in nature, shared our physical weaknesses. He was too weak to carry the cross on His own, and required help from a complete stranger who was simply “passing by.” Simon was just in the right place at the right time, and was available. The Orthodox Study Bible interprets this verse for us, saying that

“Simon has the unique privilege of helping the Son of God, weakened by flogging, to carry His Cross to Golgotha.” While Simon may have been the one to help Jesus Himself, we all have the privilege of helping Christ. He tells us that the way to help Him is to help other people in need (Matthew 25:40).

Families in our communities are struggling spiritually, financially, physically, and emotionally as a result of disability. “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). As Christians, we are called to see each other’s crosses with compassion and empathy and to help ease the burden of those crosses so that together, we might all rejoice in the Kingdom of Heaven.

An easy way to start is with the questions we ask and the way we speak.

