



Guiding with Intentionality

Policies, Forms, and Planning

The writing of policies, the creation (and collection!) of forms, and the development of detailed plans are experienced by many church leaders as necessary evils and the stuff of too many overlong committee meetings. A commitment to disability inclusion, however, means being intentional in determining the guidelines that we will follow, in crafting the ways that we collect information, and in preparing carefully for our life together.

Policies

Every ministry context, faith community, and ministry within the church has policies and procedures that help them to guide the things that they do. Some policies can help promote a positive view of disability in your context.

- Vulnerable People Protection - Consider revising your child protection policy to be more expansive or creating a second policy for vulnerable adults. Many of the same practices about good boundaries and extra supervision hold when working with vulnerable adults. Be sure that leaders in your church know how to report abuse of adults and be sure that everyone is aware that vulnerable adults are often the victims of crimes and abuse. Consult the PCUSA's [Child and Vulnerable Adult Policy](#) as a resource.
- Shared Leadership - One way to promote leaders with disabilities in your church is to allow for and to encourage shared leadership. Talk to members of your nominating committee about utilizing shared leadership as a tool for inclusion. (You can check your by-laws to make sure that co-chairs of committees, co-deacons and co-elders are permitted.) Each leader can draw on their strengths that way and support the other.
- Language - Revising church policies with an eye for outdated language is an important step toward being an inclusive church, as is including disability in any lists of minority groups. Finally creating a policy around the use of person first or identity language in all communication signals to the community that your church is welcoming to people with disabilities and their families. (For more information on the use of language, see the [Speaking Words that Welcome](#) Quicksheet.)
- Education - In 2006 the PCUSA adopted a report on disability inclusion with recommendations for leadership, worship, and life in community together. Consider using the [study guide](#) in your ministry context as a tool to promote disability inclusion.

Your ministry context may also consider other policies to promote access and inclusion, such as allergen policies (such as maintaining a nut-free campus), vaccination policies, and other health policies (such as masking, conducting temperature checks, etc.)

Forms

Church leaders often name the same situation, which repeatedly happens in different areas of church life—people with disabilities are in our ministry contexts and we have no information about how to support them. (This is most

difficult when it comes to children or youth who are being dropped off for Sunday school, youth group, VBS or some other program.) Ministry leaders often feel unprepared and wonder what they can do to help individuals and families with disabilities to feel comfortable disclosing support needs *before* a program happens so that they can plan and provide accommodations for successful participation for all.

People with disabilities are often dismissed and excluded from ministry settings when they disclose their disability status. Therefore, it's important to be intentional about our commitment to inclusion and to be intentional about how we gather and use information in our settings. A common tool for information gathering is through forms—permission slips, registration forms, welcome cards, etc.

Beyond Liability

Many ministry settings require liability and permission forms to be filled out before people participate in activities and programs. While these are helpful and necessary, we can also use our forms in a variety of ways to support people with disabilities in our ministry.

- Registration forms or welcome cards can be a great prompt for a conversation. Whenever a participant or their care team discloses a support need, leaders need to be sure to follow up with a conversation. This can be as simple as clarifying a food allergy or identifying a participant's comfort item or person, or it can be as complex as discussing how to support an intense behavior.
- Forms can be used to allow people to disclose their support needs in a safe and private way.
- Forms can be context-specific. Learn about the use of forms in different ministry areas at [Designing Registration to Support Inclusion of People with Disabilities](#). Here are some [example registration forms](#) for different programs.

Design your Forms to Look for Strengths and Needs

Rather than asking for specific health information or disability diagnosis, people may feel more comfortable disclosing support needs if those needs feel relevant to the setting. A faith community might ask:

- How can we help you/your child feel calmer if they become upset?
- Are there any common triggers we should avoid (sounds, textures, etc.)?
- When you are tired, what are things that support you and help you feel better?
- Are there supports or accommodations that you receive in other settings that might be helpful here?

Ministry leaders can also ask about strengths on their registration forms. This helps in making program decisions and in nurturing diverse leaders. You might ask:

- What activities/teams are you involved in at school?
- What are your volunteer activities? Do you participate in any fundraisers or events?
- What are you passionate about?
- What would you consider yourself an expert in? Would you be willing to lead younger kids/novices in learning more about this?
- What do you consider your strengths?

In addition to these questions, consider including a checklist of descriptive words for parents or participants to complete which helps you learn more about them. See this easy-to-use [Strengths and Interest Inventory](#) combining questions and a checklist.

Planning

Being intentional about disability inclusion requires planning. Although we must be ready to exercise flexibility in implementing any plans, stepping away from exclusive, outdated models of doing ministry and opening up new

options and opportunities requires careful preparation. While much of these preparations are covered in the other Quicksheets in this toolkit, highlighted below are program-specific ideas for planning.

Planning for Christian Formation

- Take time to provide spoken and [visual schedules](#) so that people know what to expect. (Learn more about visual schedules under "Welcoming Communication" on the Speaking Words that Welcome Quicksheet.)
- Plan each space, as well as what is needed for the class or activity, with the particular group and their needs in mind.

Planning for Fellowship and Service

- Forms and policies help support your programs, but you also need to have orientation and time for conversation. Be sure to follow up in-person with participants asking for supports or accommodations. Don't assume that you understand what is needed without clarifying.
- For overnight service or fellowship, be sure to provide training and orientation to allow for detailed communication, questions, and follow-up. Be honest with participants about the set-up and schedule that they will experience. Consider issues like lack of privacy or down time, physical activity, food, bathrooms, and expectations of living in community, etc. Provide ways for people to find more information.

Planning for Worship

- Think about how to enrich the visual aspects of worship with windows, screens, banners, art, and other media.
- Consider using movement—not only standing up and sitting down—but bringing people forward and encouraging them to reach out. Offer simple objects to include in movement. Incorporate American Sign Language, dance, and gesture in your worship experiences.
- Be intentional about the use of liturgical and community traditions in order to build communities and create services that are more engaging and inclusive of people of all abilities.

Policies, forms, and planning, are, for some church leaders, housekeeping chores that take time away from doing *real* ministry. To guide a faith community in embracing disability inclusion with intentionality, however, means recognizing that these marks of doing everything "decently and in order" are, in fact, important tools in welcoming and allowing for the full participation of persons of all abilities.

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