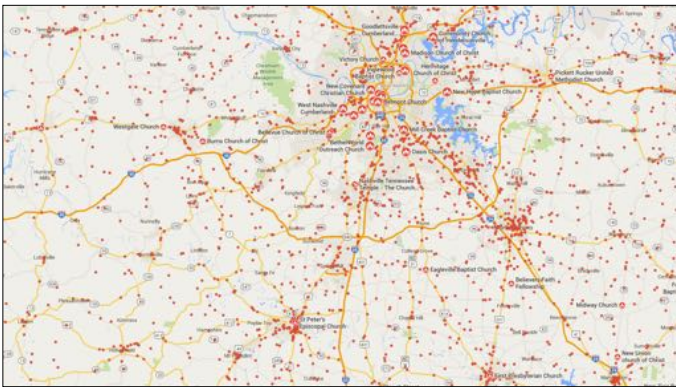


THE ACHE OF YOUR ABSENCE  
CREATING COMMUNITIES OF  
INCLUSION AND BELONGING FOR  
YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

ERIK CARTER  
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

325,000

CHURCHES IN THE UNITED STATES



19%

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES



Exclusion



Segregation



Integration

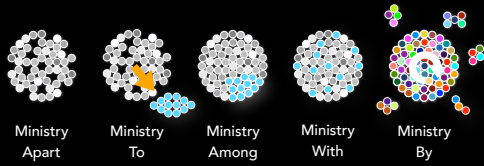


Inclusion



Belonging

Which portrait describes the communities and ministries you are part of?



Exclusion    Segregation    Integration    Inclusion    Belonging

I know I belong when...

*You belong here*

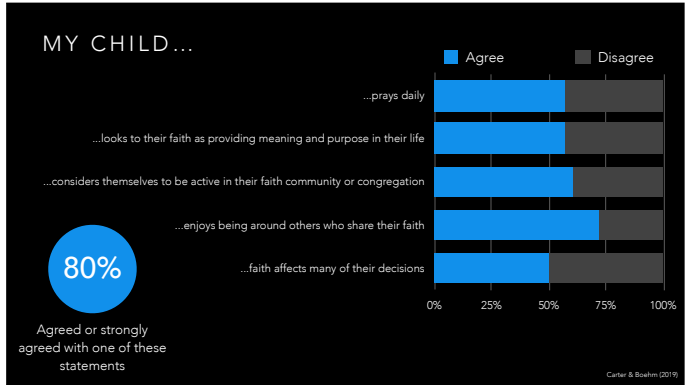
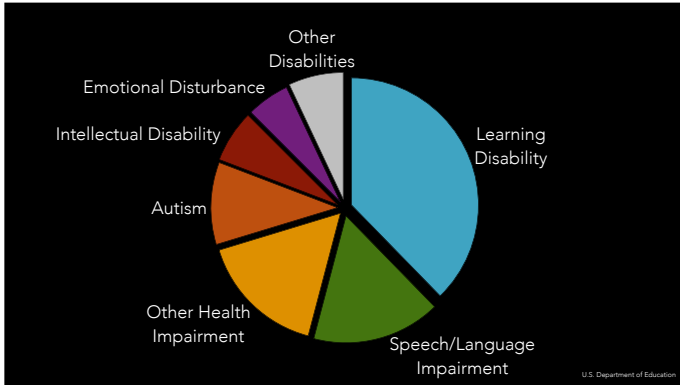


1. TO BE  
**PRESENT**

1 in 7  
youth in  
your community

**2,764,000**

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES (13-18)



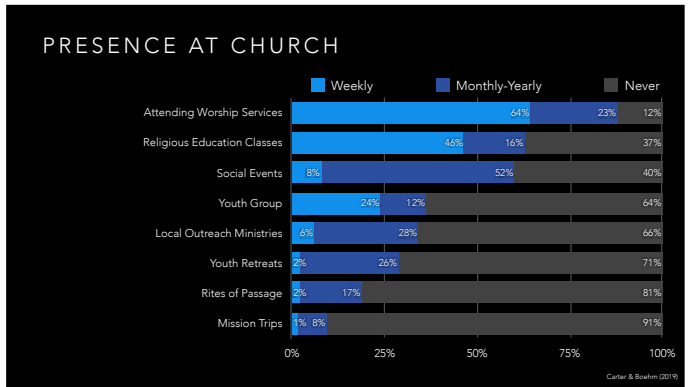
"I am a Christian myself. I go to church every Sunday. So, that's what I do .... I believe that first and foremost, God is the most important thing in my life.."

-JAMES, 15-YEAR-OLD WITH AUTISM

"It is a good church. People good to me. My youth group's good ... they love me and they cheer me up."

-MAURICE, 15-YEAR-OLD WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

(Faith and Flourishing Project; Liu et al., 2014; Accessible Worship Project; Carter et al., in press)



2. TO BE INVITED

And the master said to the servant,  
 "Go out to the highways and hedges  
 and compel people to come in,  
 that my house may be filled."

LUKE 14:23

**NOT INVITED TO  
SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IN  
THE PAST 12 MONTHS**

Autism	51%
Intellectual Disability	25%
Physical Disabilities	30%
Visual Impairment	22%
Emotional Disturbance	17%
Other Health Impairment	12%
Learning Disability	11%

Source: [www.nits2.org](http://www.nits2.org)

"It's not that we  
deliberately excluded them.  
In fact, we weren't deliberate at all.  
*That was the problem.*"

-A CHURCH LEADER

EVERYBODY  
WELCOME?

3. TO BE  
**WELCOMED**

"We felt like we were wanted."

-A PARENT

1 in 3  
families left  
their church

4. TO BE  
**KNOWN**

Intellectual disability is  
"characterized by  
**SIGNIFICANT  
LIMITATIONS**  
both in intellectual  
functioning and in  
adaptive behavior,  
which covers many  
everyday social and  
practical skills."

American Association on  
Intellectual and Developmental  
Disabilities

Autism is characterized by...

- **DEFICITS** in social-emotional reciprocity; ranging from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back and forth conversation through reduced sharing of interests, emotions, and affect and response to total lack of initiation of social interaction.
  - **DEFICITS** in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction; ranging from poorly integrated- verbal and nonverbal communication, through abnormalities in eye contact and body-language, or deficits in understanding and use of nonverbal communication, to total lack of facial expression or gestures.
  - **DEFICITS** in developing and maintaining relationships, appropriate to developmental level (beyond those with caregivers); ranging from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit different social contexts through difficulties in sharing imaginative play and in making friends to an apparent absence of interest in people
- American Psychological Association

For you formed my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my  
mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and  
wonderfully made.

PSALM 139:13-14

5. TO BE  
**ACCEPTED**

- "We just are not equipped to serve your son."
- "We don't really do inclusion here."
- "Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable somewhere with a 'special program' for her."
- "We aren't really sure he will get much out of being part of our group."
- "Her behaviors are a bit of a distraction."
- "I'm not sure he can really grasp the gospel."

6. TO BE  
**SUPPORTED**

Photo Courtesy of Young Life Capetown

## 7. TO BE CARED FOR

## 8. TO BE BEFRIENDED

"... alone we are poor,  
together we are rich."

-SUE MOSTELLER



TEENS WITH...	NEVER OR RARELY RECEIVE PHONE CALLS OFTEN FROM FRIENDS (%)	NEVER GOT TOGETHER WITH FRIENDS IN PAST 12 MONTHS (%)
Autism	74%	44%
Intellectual Disability	33%	16%
Physical Disabilities	34%	20%
Visual Impairment	24%	15%
Emotional Disabilities	18%	11%
Learning Disability	11%	7%
Other Health Impairment	13%	6%

### CAN WE NAME PEOPLE HE CAN...

- Eat with?
- Walk with?
- Celebrate with?
- Cry with?
- Play with?
- Pray with?
- Shop with?
- Catch a movie with?
- Just hang out with?

## THE "FRIENDSHIP FORMULA"

- Shared activities
- Common interests
- Regular opportunities over time
  
- [Sufficient support]
- [Valued roles]

## 9. TO BE NEEDED

"The youth group will ask when Aria's not here. 'Where's Aria today?'  
You know, we are doing so and so, we need Aria, you know.  
'We want Aria here!'"

—GRACE, PARENT OF DAUGHTER WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

"When we see people like Cathy—who you just know is different but  
you don't know why—you see that they are an important part of our  
story as a congregation, a part of our story. They're not just  
somebody who shows up here. They're part of us."

—CATHY, PARENT OF A DAUGHTER WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

(Faith and Flourishing Project, Carter et al., 2016, Systematic Reviews, Carter, 2021, in press)

As each has received a gift,  
use it to serve one another,  
as good stewards of God's varied grace.

1 PETER 4:10

The way God designed our bodies is a model for  
understanding our lives together as a church:

every part dependent on every other part,  
the parts we mention and the parts we don't,  
the parts we see and the parts we don't.

If one part hurts,  
every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing.

If one part flourishes,  
every other part enters into exuberance.

1 CORINTHIANS 12: 12, 25-26 (THE MESSAGE)

## 10. TO BE LOVED

This is my commandment:  
that you love one another as I have loved you.  
Greater love has no one than this,  
that someone lay down his life for his friends.

JOHN 15:12-13



"FOUR SIMPLE QUESTIONS"

- What are we doing **well** right now?
- What could we be doing **better** or **more of**?
- What should we be doing **entirely differently**?
- What can we begin doing **next** to move us toward this vision of community?



Which portrait describes the communities and ministries you are part of?  
What role might you play in changing the landscape?

