



The Pandemic's Impact on Disability Ministry

Early Snapshots from the
National Disability and Ministry Study

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Project Overview

Like anyone else, people with disabilities and their families want to know and be known by God, to love and be loved by their neighbors, to serve and be served by others, and to discover and live out their calling. Like anyone else, they want to explore, share, and deepen their faith in the midst of a caring and committed community. Like anyone else, they bring gifts, talents, and passions that are needed by others. Like anyone else.

The call on churches to be places of inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities and their families is both clear and compelling. The Scriptures are replete with commands to welcome the stranger, to invite the overlooked, to break down barriers to Jesus, to affirm the image of God in every person, to move the margins to the middle, to see every person as utterly indispensable, and to love one another deeply.

A growing number of churches across the country are striving to invite and embrace people with disabilities and their families. Indeed, there is burgeoning interest in widening the welcome in this way. But what does this look like to move from exclusion to embrace? Every local church is unique with regard to its culture, traditions, priorities, resources, size, and membership. It is not surprising, therefore, that the movements they make and the impact they experience can vary widely. Yet there is much to be gained from learning about how other churches are moving forward and the lessons they are learning.

In this first-of-its-kind study, our team interviewed 200 people across 48 states who were actively involved in leading intentional disability ministries at their church. We wanted to learn what churches were currently doing in this area and why, about the complexities of this work, about the difference it is making, and about the resource needs of ministry leaders. We designed this project so that our findings will help encourage and advance the work of churches, parachurch organizations, and denominations in this essential area of ministry.

We are honored that you each shared your time and stories with us. Your investment in this area of ministry makes us smile. We are also grateful to Leila McCoy and David Jespersen for funding this study. We pray these findings will both encourage and challenge you. May we all be faithful in the work of creating flourishing communities for everyone.

Regards,



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P.S. Please remember that these are early findings that may change somewhat as we dive deeper into our analyses. Updated reports will be posted online at www.disabilityministry.org.

Examining the Pandemic's Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on religious practices and participation across the United States. In the midst of new risks and uncertainties, churches across the country adjusted whether and how they gathered in a myriad of ways. As part of this project, we examined the pandemic's particular impact on congregational ministry *to* and *with* people with disabilities and their families. Drawing upon interviews with and surveys of 200 church ministry leaders in 48 states, we captured the diverse ways in which nine aspects of these ministries were affected:

- Number of disability ministry leaders
- Number of disability ministry volunteers
- Consistency of disability ministry volunteers
- Number of people with disabilities served
- Consistency of people with disabilities attending activities
- Virtual access to church events for people with disabilities
- Financial resources available to the ministry
- The church's commitment to the ministry
- The overall effectiveness of the ministry

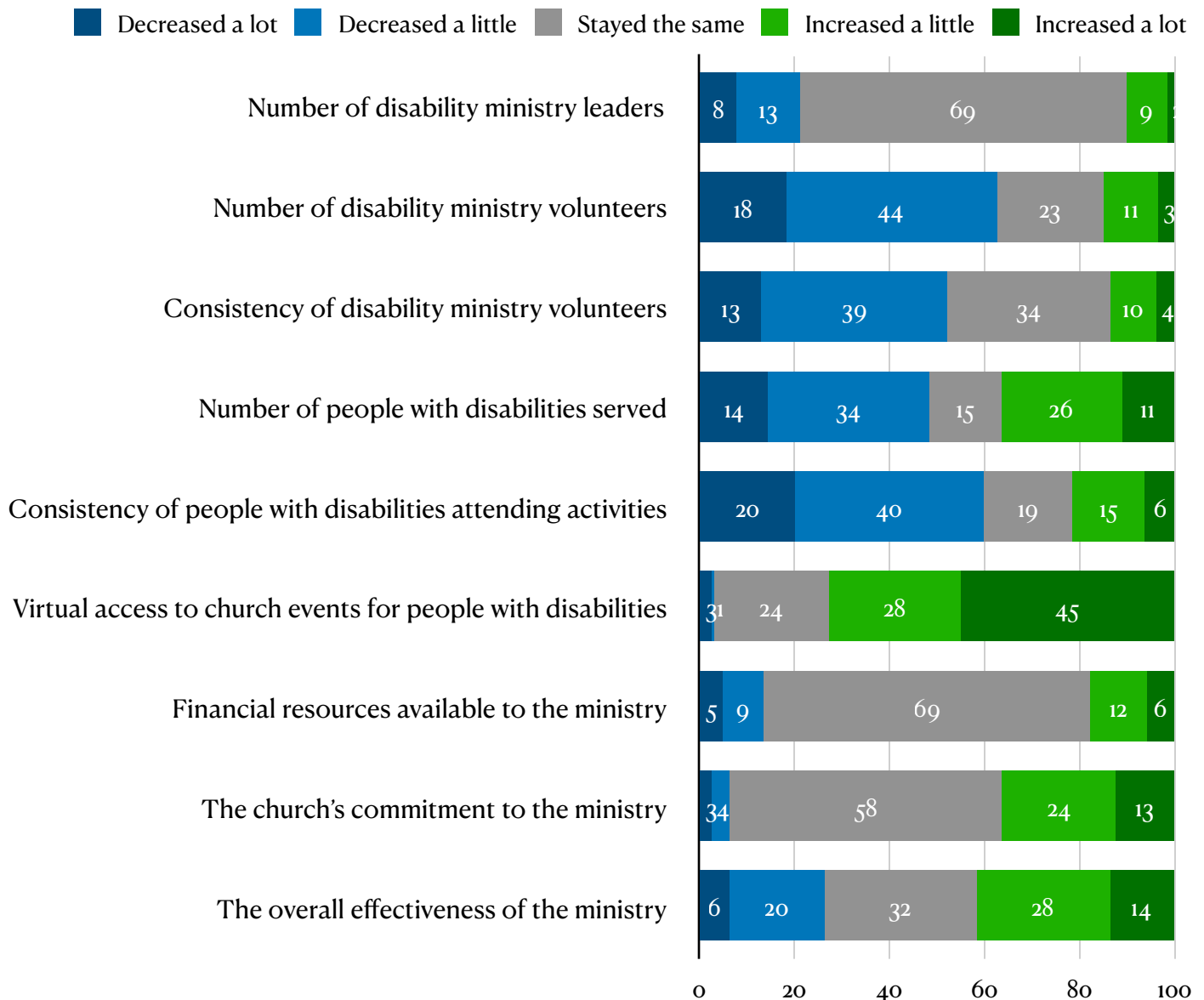
We interviewed each ministry leader over the course of nine months—from November 2021 to August 2022. Our questions addressed (a) the origins, design, and reach of their ministry; (b) their roles and responsibilities as leaders; (c) the complexities and tensions of this ministry; (d) its impact on people with disabilities, families, and the church; (e) their advice for other churches; (f) their own resource needs; and (g) “one wish” for their church in this area.

We addressed the topic of the pandemic's impact directly in the section addressing complexities and tensions. Two questions included: *What (if anything) makes this area of ministry hard or challenging? What has been the impact of COVID?* However, leaders naturally spoke to this topic throughout the interviews. We also distributed a follow-up survey asking leaders to rate how much they felt each of the above nine aspects of this ministry was affected. Response options included: *decreased a lot, decreased a little, stayed the same, increased a little, and increased a lot.*

Learn more about the churches that participated in this project in our first issue brief. We are grateful for the contributions of Haley Bower, Allison Koehler, Caroline Parker, Hannah Rowley, and Emilee Spann to this project. To learn more about this project and its findings, please reach out to Erik Carter at erik_carter@baylor.edu.

How Were Ministries Impacted by the Pandemic?

The impact of the pandemic varied widely across churches and nine key aspects of their ministries. In most interviews, the pandemic was described as a sort of dividing line when describing their ministry work: “Realistically, there’s the pre-COVID and then the post-COVID.” This demarcation was reflected in variations on phrases like “and then COVID happened,” “because of COVID,” “we used to,” “back before COVID,” “COVID blew everything up,” and “everything is different now” peppered the conversations. Indeed, only 10% of the leaders indicated that things stayed the same or increased for all nine areas reported in the Figure below. However, the impact of the pandemic was rarely uniform across all ministry areas.



1. Number of Disability Ministry Leaders

In most churches (68%), the number of leaders remained the same; decreases were reported in 21% of churches and increases in 10%. Among the one quarter of churches with multiple paid staff involved in disability ministry, most described some reductions in staffing.

Devon, a ministry leader within a large church explained, “Right before COVID, we hired a second 15-hour person. Then, after we all realized that COVID was going to last for a while, she had to back away from her position.” Other churches reduced overall staff hours when ministries went virtual. Speaking about the ministry leader who preceded her, Sharon said, “Unfortunately during COVID when we weren’t meeting in person, they had to cut her hours and it just didn’t work for her. So she had to step away.” The small number of churches that added leaders usually did so later in the pandemic.

Even when the number of ministry leaders did not decrease, the barrage of needs and constancy of change took a toll on many people we interviewed. Many felt exhausted in their efforts to maintain their ministries, while also navigating their own family’s needs. Melinda, a part-time religious education director, explained:

I’ve pushed for more hours.... But it finally kind of came to a point where I was just overworking to supply the needs. And especially during the pandemic, I wasn’t, I wasn’t going to say no when people were struggling. And we had two deaths [in our ministry] right in the beginning.

Heartley sighed deeply as she reflected on the ministry she led at her multi-campus church, “It is still hard. It’s really hard....I just can’t tell you how many times I heard the statements like, “This has been my hardest year of ministry so far. I’ve been in ministry for 15 years and my kids are hurting.” As leaders served others, some lacked others to also serve them back. Brenda, a pastor who also led her church’s inclusive ministry efforts, explained, “I wish there was more pastoral care for pastors to do this role...I wish there was a *me* for me. I wish there was somebody who would drop off things at my door for *my* kids.”



2. Number of Disability Ministry Volunteers

The total number of committed volunteers decreased in almost two thirds of churches (62%). Increases were reported in 15% of churches and no changes in 23% of churches. Discussion of diminished numbers and its impact on ministry dominated many of our conversations (e.g., “volunteers are short,” “we experience more burnout with COVID,” “COVID completely wiped out our previous volunteer team”). Brenda, who volunteered herself as a ministry leader, said it succinctly, “We’re—just like every other church—struggling with volunteers after COVID.” The enduring obstacle of finding volunteers was immediately and substantially amplified. Rachel, who led a ministry focused primarily on youth and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities explained, “So there’s all this layer of challenge, the regular challenge. But you throw COVID into the mix and it’s a whole different ball of wax.” She continued, “We lost 10—approximately 10—after the COVID closure because I had a lot of older people that were serving. So now, it’s primarily just me. I’m the *only* teacher.”

Even among churches that remained open throughout the pandemic, concerns about COVID persisted (e.g., “a few of them were afraid of COVID,” “COVID did us all in,” “I’m not getting signups like I used to”). In churches where volunteers tended to be older, like Cathy’s, the problems were further exacerbated. “Those volunteers...maybe one stayed. A lot of them were older and they didn’t feel like they could come back safely.” Miki experienced this issue within her small church’s respite ministry, “Of the elderly group, COVID has been a really inhibiting factor. They’re trying to protect themselves and so they don’t want to volunteer, even though they desire to help.” In other cases, former volunteers were said to have gotten used to not serving. Mary, a part-time ministry director, suggested, “I think people got really comfortable when church was shut down and it’s been very difficult to reengage people into volunteer roles.” Others opted to remain online after the pandemic, to forgo volunteering, or to change churches altogether. When describing the cadre of volunteers who had served in her church’s large ministry, Cynthia lamented, “They’ve either changed churches or they’re not serving.” Kimberly captured a common response to these departures, “We’ve had to kind of recruit and restart over.”

A few leaders noted that some former volunteers felt neglected during the time when ministries were paused. This led to more tenuous ties to the ministry. As Jackie illustrated:

And so then the volunteers were like: “I haven’t heard from you in a year. You haven’t checked on me. My mom died from COVID. My kid has lost his mind. My marriage is fallen apart. I’m on the verge of divorce and I have not heard from you in a year. And now you want to call me and ask me to come back and serve? No thank you!”

In contrast, Britney described how her small church plant avoided this problem by actively working to keep volunteers engaged in other roles, “So even though we weren’t able to utilize our volunteers a whole lot, we really tried to engage our volunteers.”

Volunteer challenges directly impacted the frequency or scope of ministry activities. Speaking about her church’s respite ministry, Janice explained, “It’s once a month [now]; I had pulled it back. It used to be twice a month when I first came on and we were struggling with finding enough volunteers. Because we are a very volunteer-dependent ministry for sure.” Like others, she described narrowing their respite ministry to only serve church members, “We’ve had volunteers who haven’t come back and we’ve had to say, you know, right now, we’re taking care of the people that have been coming here faithfully for years.” This scaling back of offerings extended to Sunday school classes, buddy ministries, and fellowship events as well.

3. Consistency of Disability Ministry Volunteers

Slightly more than half (52.3%) of leaders said volunteers became less predictable; the remainder said volunteer consistency stayed the same (34.0%) or actually increased (13.7%). Amidst overall reductions in the number of volunteers, some churches also struggled with the inconsistency of those volunteers who remained. At Kate’s church, which had been preparing to expand their inclusive ministry, “COVID really tore it up commitment-wise for people.” Early in the pandemic, ministry leaders like Judy expected this challenge: “I noticed that there was a little bit of a reluctance to get volunteers to come in and do things.” But the uncertainty of whether enough people would be available to carry out ministry



programming each week was especially hard when serving people with greater support needs. This irregularity made planning precarious, as Lori explained:

Right now, it just feels like—from week to week—things are up in the air. Who's going to be in quarantine? Who's going to have COVID? Who's not going to feel safe coming? Who's not going to want to wear a mask? So, recruiting volunteers right now is more challenging than it has ever been.

In several churches, the choke point came after the climax of the pandemic when families were eager to return to church, but volunteers remained reluctant. Kayla described the sudden demand in her large ministry serving children with disabilities, “Parents are ready to get out! They've been stuck inside for so long. So we're getting more families. But always finding the extra help—that's probably the biggest battle right now.”

Whereas some leaders anticipated these children would be the last to return because of health risks, they were sometimes the first back in order to escape the isolation that had abounded for so long. Cathy also anticipated an influx of families, “I'm going to need to be ready for a January spike because I might have a lot of people in second semester who are ready to start sending their kids back. And right now I don't have volunteers for that.” Speaking about the predictability of critical volunteers, Gayle summarized what so many other established ministry leaders said, “That's been all over the map a little bit.”



4. Number of People with Disabilities Served

The impact of the pandemic on the total number of people with disabilities served through each church's ministries varied widely. It decreased in nearly half of churches (48.5%), increased in more than one third of churches (36.7%), and stayed the same in the rest (14.9%). In many churches, there was a sudden or gradual dropping of involvement among people with disabilities and families (e.g., "We've got about 40% of what used to be normal for us attending." "When we came back, we're only still at about 65%." "Some of our families we just haven't yet seen come back."). This was heartbreaking for many ministry leaders, like Abby, who were so deeply invested in this work:

I'm a serial optimist, so it's hard for me to focus on the grief part. But that's been really hard! A lot of families are gone and just not coming back maybe. We don't know. I don't hear from them or lots of people have gone through some really hard things in isolation.

Jan shared this same sadness when reflecting on those who had drifted from her small church, "I thought, by now, we'd have a lot more people coming and that isn't the case. I just get a little discouraged at times." Many leaders, like Lisa, wrestled aloud with how to respond: "How do we draw them in? How do we get them to want to come back? And what are we going to do?" Others, like Devon, described their difficulty reconnecting with families impacted by disability, "We have about five or six families that we've just kind of lost touch with. I don't know where they are because I can't find them. They're not responding to my phone calls, emails, whatnot." Heartbroken, Kate noted, "Those are the families that need the most community."



A different portrait was evident in other churches, where the number of participants maintained or even increased. Alexa expressed gratitude that their disability ministry rebounded, “I would say all but one family has returned to programming.” Stephanie even observed new growth, “Yeah, I would say we’ve had about a handful that have not come back. But we’ve also gotten many new people.” For example, many churches that offered virtual options found that individuals from other cities, counties, and even states started attending. In some ministries, the strong in-person return of long-time or new participants was attributed to multiple factors, including the isolation so many felt amidst church closures. As Karina explained, “People were just so lonely. So we’ve come back really strong. People have come back!”

5. Number of People with Disabilities Served

Most leaders (60%) indicated the regularity with which people with disabilities participated in church activities decreased; it increased in 21% of churches and remained the same in 19%. A primary factor impacting consistency related to the elevated health concerns of many participating children and adults. In other words, the variability in attendance evident among all church members was amplified among people whose health conditions made them more vulnerable. Ministry leaders variously recognized that “a lot of our kids have that immune system that’s compromised” (Andie), that “those autoimmune disorders are absolutely terrifying whenever it comes to the mortality rates in kids” (David), and “a lot of people with disabilities are immunocompromised and are not taking risks” (Jill). As COVID rates rose and dipped, the attendance of people with disabilities moved in opposite directions. Likewise, the engagement of older adults became more uneven and uncertain. Mandy, who had been leading her church’s ministry for nearly 20 years explained, “It’s killed our families, the isolation. The elderly and the disabled are being affected the most.” Monique, a parish nurse, lamented, “I wasn’t able to go into the hospitals, into nursing homes. I wasn’t able to do those kind of visits. And that was very difficult.”

A second factor was evident in churches that partnered with area residential providers in serving adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Prior to the pandemic, many ministries either visited group homes or welcomed their residents to Bible studies and church events. However, COVID restrictions issued by these providers became especially tight. Kelly, who directed her large church’s disability ministry, said, “Our group homes were not allowed to come to public events...they’re restricted and confined to an area. And I think it took such a toll on our people.” Matt, who led a well-established ministry, elaborated on this reluctance to come:

We have a lot of people that come from group homes on Sunday mornings, but the group homes still have a lot of COVID restrictions in place. If they were to come to church on Sunday mornings, then the residents when they got back to the group home, they would have to like quarantine for 14 days or something. So a lot of group homes have been hesitant to come back because of that.

Even as the pandemic diminished, many group homes struggled to hire staff to support community participation. Gary observed, “Our group homes aren't coming back as much... part of that I've heard is for staffing. They're just not back to being staffed yet.”

A third factor related to variations in safety protocols. Callie shared how their policies impacted participation, “We did have some families leave because of our response to COVID and lack of protocols. Their kids with special needs are more likely to be immunocompromised, so they went somewhere else where the protocols were a little bit better for their kids.” Samantha also noted that “the lack of mitigation efforts and safety a lot of times in churches,” including her own, led some people to remain home for longer, “especially my family who's immunocompromised.” A few leaders elaborated on how the polarization that surrounded masking in their churches made members with disabilities feel more vulnerable or excluded.

6. Financial Resources Available to the Ministry

In two thirds of churches (68.9%), available financial resources remained the same; decreases were reported in just 13.5% of churches and increases in 17.6% (see Table 1). In the limited cases where financial resources were reduced, two primary reasons were cited. In a few churches, membership—and corresponding giving—had already been declining prior to the pandemic and continued to do so. Cathy described her own church's fiscal situation as many other leaders did, “I think our budget has been tightening for a couple years.” In the rest of the churches, the pandemic produced an unexpected financial shock that impacted all or most ministries, including those focused on disability ministry (e.g., “During COVID, every church is tight.” “There's a lot of economic challenges for churches everywhere.”). James, a priest who strived to include disabled members in his small church, described the impact, “Then COVID hit and just, I mean, just the Jenga tower came down! That created a huge financial hardship at the parish.” In some of these churches, staff reductions resulted. In most churches, however, the impact of any declines in overall giving was offset by the scaling back of ministry activities resulting from people staying home. Miki illustrated, “There is a separate budget line [for our respite ministry]. It was very generous before the pandemic. But with closures of programming, I didn't feel the need to ask for as much money.”

7. Virtual Access to Church Events for People with Disabilities

Nearly three quarters (73%) of churches were described as increasing their access to virtual events during the pandemic; 24% stayed the same and 3% decreased.

The scramble of so many churches was captured by Susan, who ministered in a church deeply committed to mental health ministry: “So we had to develop a whole new online alternative that we never had before.” Our interviews abounded with examples of how churches explored live-streaming, virtual gatherings, video conferencing, online meetings, video blogs, recorded lessons, and other virtual offerings that enabled members to gather when the usual ways of gathering were unsafe. This rapid adoption often came with growing pains (e.g., “It was pathetic when I first started [using Zoom].”; “[The students] laugh at me so much because, technically, I’m a mess.”).

Even when churches opened back up, many continued to offer hybrid options after realizing the accessibility it offered to so many members of their community who had health, sensory, and transportation issues that kept them homebound (“So we’ll never go back to not doing it also live on Facebook.”). William, the pastor of a large church, later realized, “I hadn’t thought of it before that way, but being online now—now that was a pandemic thing—but it certainly provides a service to people with disabilities too.” Another pastor of a smaller church, Khloe, echoed this point, “We have decided to keep that [livestream] going, particularly for folks who are immunocompromised...something we probably should have always been doing to increase our access. But because we were all affected by it, we [finally] saw it.” Others, however, described a growing fatigue with gathering only online (e.g., “Most people are Zoomed out.”; “I can’t do a Zoom call. It’s sucking on my soul.”).

Some leaders simultaneously worried aloud about what might be lost if virtual access remained the only access. Many leaders, like Kathy, felt a certain tension in this space, “So, I mean, a lot of our families actually really enjoyed online church, but you are missing that human connection.” Cheri, who founded her church’s ministry five years earlier, shared:

I think that COVID allowed [families of children with disabilities] to be churched because they could tap into streaming... However, that didn’t give them fellowship or community or anything like that. And that’s what they’re lacking, and so desperately needing. Every time I talk to a family, they feel alone. They feel lost and just isolated, more isolated than anybody else I’ve ever met.



In contrast, other leaders like Nina spoke of how being together online was the only point of togetherness experienced amidst the isolation, “So I think it gives them a sense of belonging. I think that’s the impact on the folks that are there and the feedback I’ve gotten from our YouTube video has just been that it has been an encouragement and that people can connect.”

8. The Church’s Commitment to the Ministry

The church’s overall commitment to the ministry rarely declined during pandemic (6%); instead, it was described as staying the same (58%) or increasing (36%). Among the few churches in which commitment to the ministry waned, it did not disappear altogether. Sharon observed, “I think a lot of things following COVID are just kind of back to square one.” Likewise, Sarah described the impact on her ministry to youth and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, “COVID about killed us. When we had to shut down for COVID, to be honest with you, it’s never come back the same.” But each remained convinced their church would renew its investment when the pandemic passed. In contrast, other leaders expressed delight (and even surprise) that their church’s commitment endured or deepened. Kasem—who led a disability ministry in a large, multicultural church—shared:

I would’ve thought that if you told me that we couldn’t meet for two and a half years, my ministry would just fall apart just with the needs that we have. But actually, it was not a bad time for us. A lot of our students blossomed during that time.

Tanner celebrated the enduring commitment to his church’s respite ministry, “I would say if anything’s going really well right now, what I’m most enthusiastic about is that the flame has not gone out over the last two years for our team. Our team is more excited than ever.”



9. The Overall Effectiveness of the Ministry

About one quarter (26%) of leaders said the overall effectiveness of their ministry decreased; the rest felt it stayed the same (32%) or increased (42%). Among those churches that struggled most, the impact was described as devastating. In the midst of the Omicron surge, Cathy grieved, "In some ways right now, it's almost like we're in survival mode." Speaking about the formal activities for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the bilingual church in which she pastored, Kylie noted, "Then COVID hit and we haven't done anything since." When asked about how their ministry was impacted, Dylan repeated himself for emphasis, "Profoundly. Profoundly!" More than 1.5 years into the pandemic, many churches were still taking things one moment at a time, uncertain about what laid beyond the horizon. As Melinda reflected, "I really have been afraid to vision much during the pandemic."

Many leaders described how important ministry activities ceased for a time or altogether during the pandemic, including fellowship events, respite nights, parent support groups, summer camps, choirs, disability awareness events, sign language interpretation, accessible worship services, mission trips, fall festivals, sibling support groups, children's ministries, classes for adults with intellectual disability, opportunities to serve, church accessibility teams, and entire ministries. In some cases, the pause was for a few months; in others, it lasted more than two years. In other churches, programs continued, but their scope had to be reduced. Multiple leaders voiced variations on this statement about so many programs and supports, "Pre-pandemic we were definitely doing more of that." Many leaders also spoke of the profound impact each of these changes had on the lives of the individuals and families whom they served. For example, Gayle relayed the story of a teenager with intellectual disability who longed to return to church:

When COVID was here, his parents had to put on the calendar: "Church is closed." And he had many days, he just cried. His was closed. And we weren't closed, but that was how they had to tell, "You can't go." And so he kind of hit a place of really spiraling down emotionally from not being around his community.

Parker, who was designated as a special needs pastor, also noticed the isolation this introduced at his church, "People are isolated. They aren't connected. They aren't sharing their lives and stories with other people which, when something bad happens, they don't have any resources to go to."

In contrast, many leaders also spoke of the pandemic as a time of reflection, renewal, and innovation for their ministry. As leaders had to flex and pivot, some discovered a certain creativity and imagination. Penny, who led a multi-campus disability ministry, explained:

COVID has heightened things. Yes it has! But also—I will say forever—I'm so grateful for COVID because it taught us as a staff what to do creatively to still continue to feel, find, and inspire that sense of belonging in this crazy time where we couldn't meet in person.

Jenn approached the pandemic as a time to transition her church's ministry toward more inclusive offerings, "Because of COVID, we have this whole ability to reimagine everything." The halting of longstanding ways of doing things pushed leaders to explore new practices and possibilities. Madison also recognized a need to re-envision the ministry she led, "Especially coming out of COVID, I realized a lot of things just really need to be rebuilt because of how the world has changed. A lot of things have changed." This resulted in the launching of many new forms of ministry (e.g., establishing new care networks, incorporating intergenerational activities, community outreach ministries), new uses of technology (e.g., Zoom parent groups, Facebook Live Bible studies, virtual fellowship events, online life groups), and more flexible ways of worshiping (e.g., streaming services, leadership by people with disabilities). Mike, who led his church's children's ministry, explained, "I would say that I'm probably on the opposite end of the spectrum of most people, where COVID was beneficial to me in this area because it gave us the time and the resources to build this [ministry] space."



Although isolation proliferated during the pandemic, some leaders described how their ministries discovered new ways of fostering belonging. In churches like Cate's, the shift online brought families together in new ways: "Every Monday night, parents would meet online on Zoom for a while to talk about how they were managing all of this. It's a close community now of people. I think that they've formed relationships." For many of these families, attending online allowed them to avoid the challenge of getting their children with disabilities ready to leave the house or find someone to babysit. For youth and adults with developmental disabilities, new online gatherings connected them between Sundays. Ava explained how her specialized classes were transformed:

[Our online meeting] means a lot of screen sharing and discussion...they're always looking for a social connection, and so that's a great connection. Even if they've been to church that morning, heard the exact same lesson in Sunday school, they don't care. They just want to come and be a part and be online with us.

Referring to the opportunities because of technology, Madison shared, "We're together now more than we ever have because of Zoom."

What Are Our Key Findings?

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruption to the practices and plans of most churches. This impact was also substantial for the growing number of churches invested in ministry to and with people with disabilities. The current study provides new insights into the experiences of congregational ministries focused on serving individuals and families impacted by disability, as well as the ways in which key aspects of those ministries were affected.

First, the effects of pandemic were usually swift and substantial. Although the rapid onset of COVID-19 forced abrupt changes through the entirety of these 200 churches, nearly all of their disability-focused ministries were still experiencing considerable challenges 18-24 months later when the current study was conducted. This enduring impact was most evident in the numbers and consistency of people served by and serving through the ministry. For example, the regular presence of children and adults with disabilities was affected both by the availability of offerings and supports through their church, as well as by personal health risks and fluctuating COVID levels. At the same time, ongoing uncertainty made it hard to both retain and recruit a reliable number of ministry volunteers needed to maintain these ministries.

The pausing of ministry activities—whether short-term or sustained—was described as devastating for many individuals and families, particularly those experiencing chronic health conditions or developmental disabilities. When combined with school closures, business shutdowns, and group home restrictions, the absence of fellowship opportunities and spiritual connections through church was doubly difficult for individuals who already experienced considerable isolation and loneliness in their community. Ministry leaders who often sensed a special calling to serve this population felt deeply burdened by the constraints of their ministry during this season. They strived to find ways of maintaining personal connections and fostering belonging in the midst of shaky circumstances. Like many clergy at the time, most felt disheartened and exhausted at points throughout the pandemic.

Second, the effects of the pandemic were not experienced evenly among all churches. We heard 200 unique stories about the pandemic's local reverberations. Although the pandemic was a shared season, it was not a uniform experience. Intriguing patterns were evident in the ways churches described the pandemic's impact. For example, a modest proportion of churches—about one in ten—indicated their overall ministry remained unchanged or was strengthened. For the majority of churches, however, concerns about one or more aspects of their ministry were fairly prominent. In other words, some ministries seemed to fare better than others. As many ministries lamented decreases in the involvement of people with disabilities and volunteers, others celebrated new growth. Whereas some lost leaders and financial resources, others noticed gains in these areas.

Overall, a sense of optimism still tended to lie underneath this uneven landscape. Most ministry leaders anticipated that circumstances would eventually return to normal, though they were more restrained in predicting when or how. In the midst of this uncertainty, each leader was left to make daily decisions about how their ministry would move forward. All sought guidance from clergy and other leaders at their church (e.g., children, youth, and adult ministries). Some also sought advice from fellow disability ministry leaders at other churches through online gatherings, social media forums, and trainings hosted by parachurch organizations or denominational offices. These latter connections were especially important for discussing the particularities of serving individuals with unique vulnerabilities and support needs.

Third, support for disability ministry endured at most churches. At a time when the future of many congregational ministries seemed uncertain, commitment to serving and supporting people with disabilities through the church mostly maintained or strengthened. The very difficult questions surrounding how to implement these ministries during the pandemic did not lead churches to revisit whether to implement these ministries. Indeed, the pandemic punctuated just how critical their ministry was to an overlooked and vulnerable segment of their community. Some leaders and church members recognized for the first time the impact

of not being able attend church because of inaccessibility or health issues because they too were cut off from this critical community during the pandemic. Elsewhere in their interviews, participants had already spoken about the origins of their ministries and the strong factors leading to their adoption. The scriptural, theological, and personal foundations of this work were not shaken by the pandemic. Rather, each was appealed to all the more in the midst of it. This is not to imply that church-wide support was always high for disability ministry. Indeed, many leaders we interviewed still longed for a deeper investment from church leaders and members in this work. However, the pandemic was not typically a time of diminishing commitment.

Fourth, virtual offerings were instrumental for engaging people with disabilities and their families. Almost every church found ways of creating virtual access to events that had been shuttered by COVID-19. Consistent with national trends, worship services became live streamed through phones, video conferencing apps, and video sharing sites. Likewise, ministry leaders also found creative ways of gathering virtually for small groups, Bible studies, sacraments, rites of passage, social activities, service projects, personal check-ins, and much more. Each was considered a lifeline for many people whose health conditions prevented them from joining public gatherings.

These virtual offerings also became a primary place for promoting belonging in the midst of physical distance. In some churches, ministry leaders pinpointed this as the source of increased attendance among people with disabilities and their families. Although advocacy for technology access among people with disabilities pre-dated the pandemic, it was often dismissed as too cost-prohibitive for serving such a small segment of the population. Rapid adoption early in the pandemic, therefore, was both welcomed by and wounding for some members of the disability community. Many ministry leaders in our study emphasized the importance of maintaining hybrid options as a way of ensuring continued access for people with certain disabilities. They were concerned that any “return to normal” could result in renewed exclusion for the individuals they served.

Fifth, creativity abounded throughout and because of the pandemic. Leaders explored new ways of maintaining connections (e.g., video messages and chats, drive-through and drive-by visits, tailgate gatherings), serving families (e.g., care packages, meal deliveries, porch visits, online support groups), partnering with disability organizations (e.g., virtual visits, parking lot parades, socially distanced events), and re-envisioning worship (e.g., smaller or outdoor services, greater leadership by people with developmental disabilities). This reflected a degree of adaptability and resilience that many leaders felt would serve their ministry well in the future. It remains to be seen which of these innovations might become permanent parts of these ministries in the future.