



Stepping Stones Ministry

A Template for Developing a Parish Ministry
for Individuals with Disabilities and their Families

Mission

To reach out to, minister to, and support individuals with disabilities and their families through *worship (latreia)*, *service (diakonia)*, *education (catechesis)*, and *fellowship (koinonia)*. To work toward the full integration of individuals with disabilities and their families into the life of the Church.

Preface

People with disabilities face many challenges in their daily life. Disabilities, both physical and intellectual, may pose challenges to an individual and their family's participation in the life of the Church. The Church and its faithful are called to do their best to minister to all people. Philippians 4:8-9 reads; "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice." Through their experience in the Stepping Stones Ministry, we hope that individuals with disabilities will grow in the ability to participate more fully in the life of the Church and develop meaningful relationships that facilitate their inclusion and connection.

Stepping Stones will provide the local congregation the opportunity to engage with individuals with disabilities while deepening their awareness of the unique challenges that they face. This ministry should do its best to "be all things to all people," while understanding that no parish will ever be able to fully accommodate the diverse needs of each unique individual within our parishes.

The four main components of the Stepping Stones ministry include *worship (latreia)*, *service (diakonia)*, *education (catechesis)*, and *fellowship (koinonia)*. Below are some suggested accommodations and resources to develop, implement, and support this ministry. With discernment, the priest and parish volunteers should determine which accommodations will be used for each of these components.

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How It Works

Organize a gathering around a worship service. Plan an activity in the church hall following worship. Activities may include a service project, education, fellowship, or some combination of more than one of these elements.

The goal is to work towards inclusion in the life of the local parish. When possible, consider embedding gatherings into already existing activities. For example, if the group would like to gather on a Saturday in February, and the Feast of the Entrance of the Lord falls on a Saturday, gather for the Liturgy and host an Education/Fellowship gathering following worship for all who attend. Another example might be organizing participation in other scheduled activities in the parish, such as prosphora making, a youth and family outing, etc. Encourage attendance and participation from everyone in the parish!

Consider hosting gatherings 3-4 times per year.

Four Main Components

Potential General Accommodations for Worship [and Activities] (*latreia*)

Based on the needs and preferences of those attending:

1. Encourage the Use of Accommodating Equipment
 - a. Accommodating equipment can promote attendance for all abilities.
 - i. Why this may be beneficial: Encouraging the use of noise reducing headphones, for example, can accommodate those with sound sensitivities. Other forms of equipment are included in the Accommodating Equipment section below.
2. Sound System
 - a. Vary volume of microphones based on individual needs.
 - i. Why this may be beneficial: For those with low tolerance of auditory input, the reduced volume may prevent overstimulation. On the contrary, those with low hearing may benefit from assistive listening devices (included in the Accommodating Equipment section below) that can reduce background noises and accommodate for poor acoustics. The clergy and chanters could use a hearing aid lapel microphone.
3. Lighting
 - a. Dim lights.
 - i. Why this may be beneficial: Dimming the lights can reduce the risk of overstimulation and provide a calming or regulating environment.
4. Seating/Accessibility
 - a. Give people the freedom to sit, stand, walk, or roll where they are most comfortable (ie. on the floor in the front, in the back, etc.)

- i. Why this may be beneficial: Allowing people to sit or stand where they are most comfortable will help them to better engage in worship and fellowship.
- 5. Incense
 - a. Use and location of incense.
 - i. Why this may be beneficial: Incense can be regulating or dysregulating for an individual, based on specific sensory needs. Using incense in certain areas or reducing the amount of incense may allow for better participation.

Service (*diakonia*)

Service ideas for individuals with disabilities, along with others in the parish.

1. Serving in the altar, chant stand, or choir
2. Greeting or passing out bulletins
3. Reading (Epistle, Psalms, etc.)
4. Fellowship assistant
5. Helping with other activities such as...
 - a. Soup Kitchen
 - b. Baking Prosfora
 - c. Memorial Wheat (Kollyva/Kutya) making
 - d. Etc.

Education (*catechesis*)

Education ideas for individuals with disabilities and their families along with others in the parish.

1. Theological discussions on personhood
2. Presentations on resources and community support
3. Presentations for church community on inclusion
4. Presentations for church community on ministering to and engaging with individuals with disabilities and their families
5. Supporting and encouraging an individual's participation in Sunday School and other parish educational activities (Bible Study, book club, etc.)

Fellowship Structure (*koinonoia*)

- Option 1: Fellowship Only (music time, parents/caregivers/family members spending time together, sensory space, etc.)
- Option 2: Structured gathering. Potential schedule: Vespers, meal, presentation and support group time for parents/caregivers/family members, and concurrent structured time for individuals with disabilities. Structured gatherings could include...
 - a. Theological presentation and discussion
 - b. Support group
 - c. Presentations on local resources and services (federal, state, and county programs)

- d. Volunteer-led structured time for participants with disabilities so that parents and caregivers can participate in a, b, c, etc.

Fellowship Accommodations (*koinonoia*)

Based on the needs and preferences of those attending, consider...

1. The space or room.
 - a. Bigger room vs. contained
 - b. Location (accessibility, noise, etc.)
2. Setting up sensory/activity space
 - a. Having a sensory space with calming activities can provide individuals the opportunity to regulate for greater participation in group activities.
 1. Coloring books
 2. Fidgets/manipulatives
 3. Calming music
 4. Dim lights
 5. Comfortable chairs
 6. Sensory bin
 7. (for more ideas see the Accommodating Equipment Section below...)
3. Food considerations
 - a. Ask about allergies, food preferences, or if there are any foods with smells and tastes that may be overstimulating.

Leadership

Consider creating a committee for the ministry. Fill roles that you see fit in your community.

These individuals can help to advise and manage the program. Below are suggested roles for the ministry.

1. Priest
 - a. Responsible for the life of the local parish and its ministries. It is particularly important in this ministry that he is responsible for overseeing potential accommodations.
2. Committee leader
 - a. Responsible for delegating various tasks to committee members and communicating the expectations and goals of the ministry. They are also responsible for gaining information about the individuals and families attending, to support their participation.
 - b. Responsible for training volunteers
3. Committee

- a. Responsible for various tasks such as planning fellowship, marketing, scheduling, facilitating accommodations, creating a family directory, and all the other tasks that are essential in executing this program.
- b. Suggested Committee Task Checklist
 - ☐ Get to know individuals with disabilities and their families and have them fill out the example questionnaire below.
 - ☐ Marketing (flyers, emails, etc.)
 - ☐ Fellowship (food, activities, etc.)
 - ☐ Buddy System (see below)

Information for Leadership Committee to Gather

It is important that the committee gather information about the needs and preferences of the individuals attending gatherings. Not all of the accommodations below need to be implemented if they are not necessary. See the example questionnaire below.

Due to multiple individuals attending these gatherings, the program may not be able to accommodate every need. The committee should use this information to accommodate the best that they can.

Advertising

Ideas for how to advertise the ministry to the parish.

1. Word of mouth (direct introduction or invitation by priest or leadership team)
2. Bulletin
3. Newsletter
4. Email
5. Text Messaging
6. Social Media

Follow-Up

Follow up with individuals and families to learn how we can include them more fully in the life of the local parish.

Additional Considerations

Patron Saint

Parishes are encouraged to select a patron saint for their local ministry.

Buddy System: Discover the interests, skills, and/or talents of parishioners with disabilities and pair them with a volunteer who can help them incorporate these into serving the Church. This could look like someone helping an individual to attend Sunday

School, a buddy to guide and direct them in serving in the altar, at the chant stand or in the choir, or a greeter “team” so that they can participate in passing out bulletins, passing the tray, etc. The buddy system also provides an opportunity for friendship, connection, and a consistent routine.

Pan-Orthodox Invitation

Consider inviting other Orthodox Parishes in the area. If rotating parishes for gatherings, consider only utilizing a couple locations in order to maintain consistency for participants.

Family Directory

Consider creating a family directory, so that individuals and families are able to connect, share resources, and develop relationships with one another.

Examples of Accommodating Equipment

1. Headphones
 - a. Noise reducing headphones help to decrease auditory stimulation from background noise or other input.
 - b. Headphones
2. Assistive Listening Devices
 - a. “Assistive Listening Systems (ALSS) are sometimes called Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs). Essentially they are amplifiers that bring sound directly into the ear. They separate the sounds, particularly speech, that a person wants to hear from background noise. They improve what is known as the ‘speech to noise ratio.’”¹
 - b. Assistive listening device
3. Seating
 - a. Alternative seating can promote attention and participation while providing comfort, calming sensory input, and movement.
 - b. Recommended types:
 - i. Wiggle seat
 - ii. Wobble stool
 - iii. Ball chair
4. PECS/AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)
 - a. PECS: Picture Exchange Communication System. Can be used to help non-speaking parishioners communicate. This could be on an iPad or with physical pictures. One example of this would be stating their name for Holy Communion.
 - b. Pictures

¹ <https://www.nad.org/resources/technology/assistive-listening/assistive-listening-systems-and-devices/>

5. Social Stories

- a. Purpose: A social story helps prepare individuals for a particular routine, event, or sequence of events. Social stories provide predictability and allow individuals to prepare and become familiar with social situations, schedules, and expectations.
- b. How to create one: Use visuals and easy to understand language depending on individual needs. Here's an example.
 - i. Social Story example

Example Questionnaire

Name of individual: _____

For each accommodation, check the “need” or “preference” box if the accommodation applies. Please provide additional comments that would be helpful as we prepare for an upcoming gathering. Please fill out one questionnaire for each family member with special needs.

	Need	Preference
Lighting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional comments:		
<hr/>		

Sound System	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional comments:		
<hr/>		

Seating/Accessibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional comments:		
<hr/>		

Incense	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional comments:		
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Fellowship Accommodations: Food considerations (due to allergies or overstimulation) and sensory space:

Please list any additional accommodations that are needed or preferred:

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