



The Impact of Disability Awareness Training on the Knowledge and Attitudes of Church Ministry Personnel

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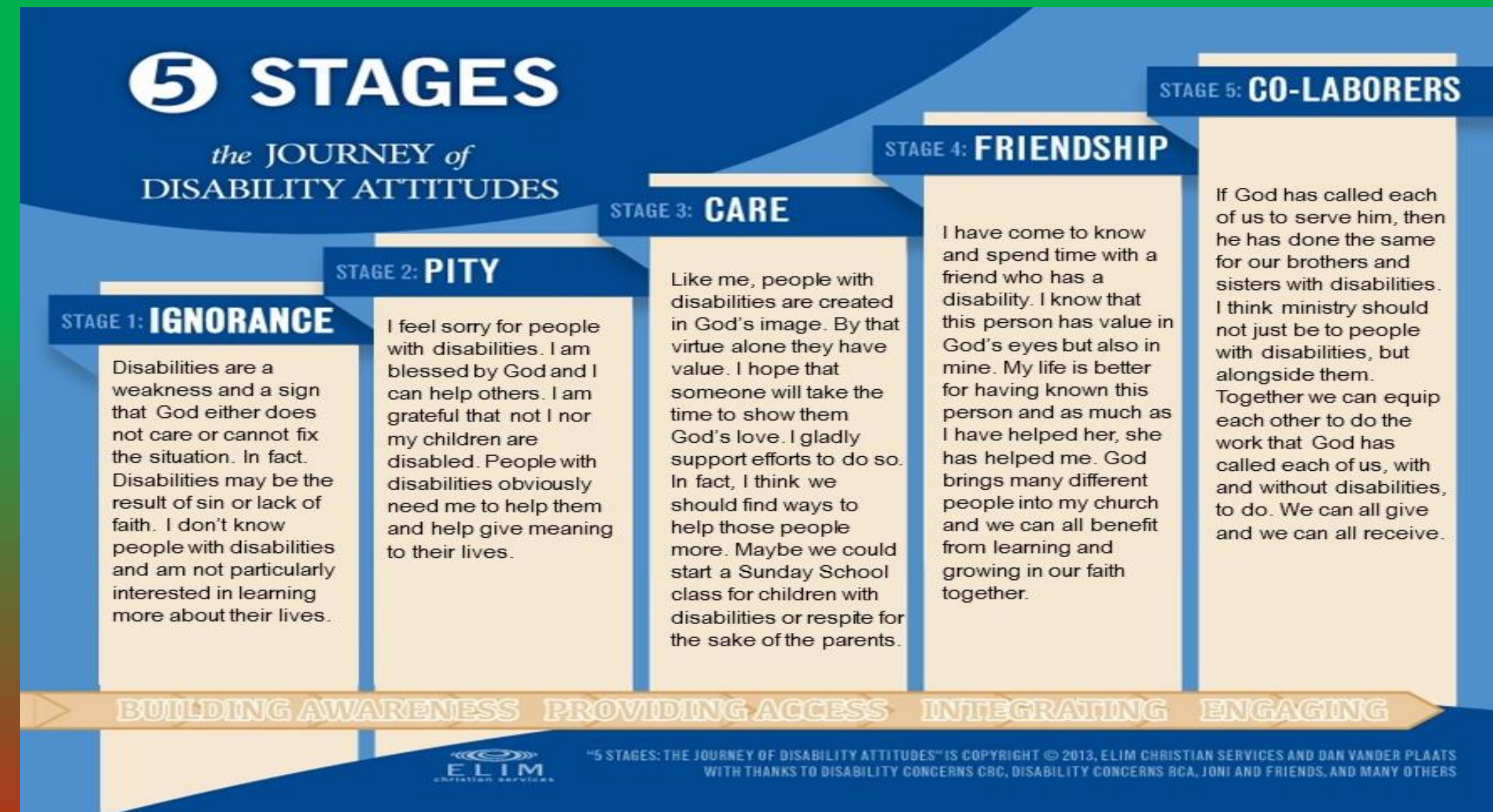
Background & Problem

In 2010, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and the Arc adopted the following joint statement related to faith and people with disabilities. "People with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities have the right to choose their own expressions of spirituality, to practice those beliefs and expressions and to participate in the faith community of their choice or other spiritual activities."



Despite this compelling statement from leading disability organizations, faith-based activities are rarely acknowledged as an important part of life or included in planning for individuals with disabilities. Research indicates that many individuals with disabilities are **not** included in faith communities and families with children who have disabilities report many barriers to active participation in their churches (Briggs, 2014; Griffin, Kane, Taylor, Francis, and Hodapp, 2012).

Participation in disability-focused awareness training is an effective strategy for enhancing church inclusion and participation for children with disabilities and their families. Lopez (2010), provided direct training to 24 participants via a series of face-to-face workshops. Results indicated these trainings had a positive impact on the participants' knowledge, skills, and confidence to successfully include individuals with disabilities and their families in their church congregations.



Purpose & Method

The goal of this exploratory study was to investigate the impact of a disability awareness training on the knowledge and self-efficacy of church ministry personnel in one rural city. A half-day training was offered to church ministry staff (e.g. clergy, youth workers, outreach, etc.) using the framework identified by Lopez (2010):

1. Basic disability awareness
2. Spiritual foundations for church inclusion
3. Barriers to church inclusion
4. Maximizing spiritual gifts of ALL members
5. Practical strategies and resources for church inclusion

A mixed-method approach to data-collection was used. An original pre- and post-training quantitative survey designed to measure disability inclusion knowledge and attitudes of the participants was administered. A group exit interview was also conducted to gather qualitative data on participant perceptions of the training.



Results & Conclusions

- Participants included 6 females and 2 males with primarily protestant religious affiliations. Participants ranged in age from 15 years to 64 years. Three of the participants indicated they had prior experience with individuals with disabilities while 5 indicated they did not.
- A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to determine if there was a significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey ratings for the group as a whole: W-value =2. The critical value of W at $p \leq .05$ is 3; therefore, there was a significant pre-post change in participants' knowledge and attitudes relative to ministry involving individuals with disabilities.
- Further analysis indicated that, in general, participants with no prior experience with individuals with disabilities experienced the greatest change pre-post training.
- For all participants, survey items related to knowledge showed increase from pre to post, while items related to attitude did not. The survey item showing the largest consistent increase was knowledge of first steps to take when welcoming individuals with disabilities to church. Examination of survey ratings revealed all participants began the training with highly positive attitudes related to ministry involving individuals with disabilities.
- Group comments were highly positive and indicated a strong desire to continue with further, more in depth trainings.
- Results of this study support the assertion that, while many church ministry personnel want to welcome individuals with disabilities, they may not know how.
- Faith communities need assistance and support to build their capacity to support and welcome ALL people in their congregations. Self-advocates, families, advocacy organizations, service providers, and members of faith communities must work together to develop trainings and other resources for including and supporting people with disabilities and their families in church.

Participant Quote:

"You know, if we truly believe that God has given each one of us a gift, I wonder how many awesome gifts we've missed out on by not allowing everyone a chance to share theirs?"