

CHURCH
RESOURCE
GUIDE FOR
**INCLUSION &
BELONGING**
Families Living with Autism

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Families Living with Autism
**CHURCH RESOURCE GUIDE FOR
INCLUSION & BELONGING**



Do you have 20 minutes?

It should take about 20 minutes to go through this resource guide, yet it has the potential for lasting impact. As you read through the resources and reflect on the experiences of autism parents, consider the lasting impact it would have on families and individuals that can be forgotten in our churches and community.

In 1 Corinthians 12:21-26 the Bible says there is ONE BODY but MANY PARTS, and every person plays a very important part in building and growing God's family. One part can't say that it is any more important than another. But unfortunately, in our communities and in our churches, there are some forgotten parts, individuals who are easy to overlook for their contribution, they are disregarded for their ability to lend wisdom and serve God and the community.

This resource guide is a starting point for churches, as they consider growing inclusive communities for families living with autism. The strategies shared are suggestions. ***The best resource is to connect with the ASD families in your own church to see how their unique needs can be met and how their contributions can be honored.***

For questions or additional information contact Elizabeth Pule: epule@AdventistOntario.org or call 613 867 3350.

Why this matters...

BECAUSE WE ARE ALL WONDERFULLY MADE

Regardless of ability, our value comes from God and being created in his image.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. Psalm 139:14

And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Colossians 3:10

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

BECAUSE THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO NEED TO BE RESTORED & REMEMBERED

There are many families and individuals who can be overlooked or forgotten, they need a church community where they are welcomed, included and belong.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34-35

Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table. 2 Samuel 9:7

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Luke 19:10

BECAUSE WE ALL HAVE SOMETHING TO CONTRIBUTE

The body of Christ has no small or unimportant members, we all have a vital role to play in God's plan for redeeming and restoring the world.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 1 Corinthians 12:21-27

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7

OUR EXPERIENCE

Quotes from the hearts of ASD Families

**These quotes are from ASD parents & caregivers about their experience in Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Ontario, Canada*



What do you need from your church?

Food drop-off, sometimes just eating has been a struggle.

We need emotional support, it would be nice if someone called and checked on us.

A quiet designated space, with sensory items, reading materials, fidget toys and educated ASD volunteers.

It would be nice to have education on autism - the church at large doesn't always understand. Families need to be spotlighted and supported so they don't leave.

Find ways to utilize their gifts.

The church should be an encouraging place, they need ASD education & awareness so that people are less judgmental, we need more respect and more acceptance.

My child needs noise reduction in the sanctuary or a quiet, sensory friendly service with low lights that allows him to use fidget tools, musical instruments and walk around! He would need the ability to move around, lay down or lay on the pew without judgment.



Our worship experience...

My daughter loves the bible, she wants to get baptized.

My son often made mistakes during bible class so he was excluded from the group of kids, he was considered 'strange'.

I want him to be baptized and be exposed to spiritual things, I don't see these opportunities for him right now.

He's done mission story! People were surprised at his abilities - it's a struggle though.

It's a big challenge to get to church, as soon as we got in, we got a loud "SHHH!". So we left immediately. I felt angry, I wanted to cry, it was the start of 'forget this'.

My son loves to run and jump, he wants to sing exuberantly, this bothers people.

For our family to be fully included, there would need to be a special needs class, with teachers & helpers that understand my child, because our current teachers don't really understand, it's hard. There have been some amazing teachers in the past in the educational system, and in the church. So it is possible!



what you do want the church to know about your family?



I want the church to know "this is our church too"; having a special needs kid changes the entire trajectory of your life. People with neurotypical kids cannot conceptualize how different life is in so many ways. It's a rare blessing to find anyone who's willing to journey alongside you, very few people who will get close enough to stay along for the ride. I don't need my kids to interact with 100 people, but if 1 or 2 people can journey with him.

We have become socially isolated, because it's hard to come to church.

Special needs kids are lonely, many do not have friends. There are no friends to support me either. He will not get invited to ANY birthday party, he has no friends - we are not thought of.

Beyond ASD awareness and education, WE NEED COMMUNITY.

Stop ignoring kids with autism and acting like they don't exist.

There's no quiet corner, my daughter would just leave and sit in the corner alone - she needed quiet space. There's no acknowledgement of her needs; no one to ask either.

We want people to know it's not easy, have compassion & empathy, we don't want to be forgotten, we don't want him to be labelled, we want him to be embraced.



There is a disconnect at church, people know us and they know that we have him - but no one asks about him. They don't know how to approach him, **so they just ignore him.**

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION & BELONGING

Safe Church Communities for Families Living with Autism



AWARENESS & EDUCATION

Educate the congregation on ASD and how families experience life: ASD families and individuals can often go unnoticed and fall away. Provide takeaway learning cards (examples attached).



ASD TRAINING & DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

Include ASD communication and compassion skills as part of standard trainings for volunteers and leaders. Consider having a bible class or teacher that meets the developmental needs & intellectual levels of the ASD individual.



BUDDY SYSTEM

Assign a trained 'buddy' to each ASD individual that requires support or could use a friend.



RECOGNITION

Acknowledge & honor ASD individuals and their families from the pulpit.



CARE TEAM

Identify a team that will care and provide wrap around support for families living with autism. What are their strengths, needs, or other useful information, incentives & preferences for ASD individuals and caregivers that will make their church experience safe & enjoyable.



RESOURCES

Utilize resources: books, in-take forms, ASD experts, funding and other online tools that can assist in growing the church to be a safe place for families living with autism (book list & websites attached).

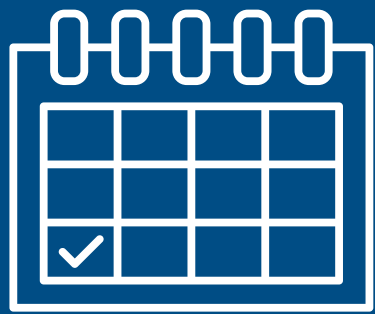


FOSTER BELONGING

Connect with ASD families / caregivers regularly to foster belonging: do they have any unmet needs the church can meet? How can they be supported in meaningful ways? How can the entire congregation grow the relationship with the family? In what ways would they like to be involved and contribute?

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION & BELONGING

Autism & Sensory-Friendly Worship Service



AUTISM & SENSORY-FRIENDLY SERVICES

Consider scheduling quarterly or monthly autism & sensory-friendly services if these accommodations cannot be offered regularly.



CREATE A MAP

Create a map of the building that indicates which areas are busy, noisy, bright. Show which areas are quiet, calm and less crowded - specify exits, bathrooms & meeting rooms.



SENSORY & SOCIAL STORIES

Sensory & social stories that explains the sensory and social experience at worship services or other meetings - what can they expect?



VISUAL SCHEDULE

Visual schedule of the different elements of worship service, this can replace a standard 'bulletin'.



VOLUME & LIGHTS

Lower volume & adjust lights that are overly bright or moving.



QUIET VIEWING & CALMING ROOM

Stream the worship service into a designated Quiet Viewing Room if the volume & lights cannot be reduced in the whole sanctuary or meeting area. If needed, have a Calming Room that gives ASD individuals a safe space to decompress, vocalize or move around.



SERVICE INCLUSION

Provide tools for ASD individuals to identify and utilize their spiritual gifts in church and the community.



SENSORY ITEMS

Provide items to ease sensory processing challenges: sensory cancelling headsets/glasses, stretch or weighted blankets, fidget toys, a designated safe room to find peace and quiet.

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION & BELONGING

Resource Listing: Books

Autism And Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder by Barbara J. Newman

This resource provides biblical foundation and practical tools to equip leaders and members on how to better understand, communicate and include ASD families in the ministry and life of the church. It is a comprehensive guide on how to implement a ministry with and to ASD families, there are also reproducible forms and social stories that can be helpful.

How to Make Your Church Autism-Friendly by Stephen J. Bedard

Using his own experience as a church pastor and ASD parent, Bedard shares a range of strategies on how to minister to and with ASD individuals, even if the church does not have a specific disabilities ministry or a budget for ministry with ASD families. This small, yet powerful book allows churches and leaders to begin implementing small changes that yield powerful results.

Accessible Gospel: Inclusive Worship by Barbara J. Newman

Readers will be challenged to think about inclusive community and how to make the gospel accessible to all individuals. Newman places importance on getting to know individuals living with disabilities, how they learn, communicate and express their worship and praise to God. Newman also focuses on the abilities of individuals and how they contribute to church community, rather on the disabilities that require assistance. The appendix also provides worksheets, social stories and prayers that assist churches in creating and a safe environment for persons with disabilities to experience the gospel.

Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities by Erik W. Carter

Advocating for full participation for individuals living with disability, Carter identifies barriers to inclusion and the development of meaningful inclusion in faith communities. Carter takes inclusion of people living with disabilities beyond church and encourages readers to consider social relationships, leisure activities, employment and accessibility as areas of need. Working collaboratively with service providers, leaders and families, Carter champions a wholistic approach to inclusion of people with disabilities in faith communities. The appendix is full of resources, accessibility guides and supports for families, congregations and examples of faith group statements that address inclusion and disability.

Disability and the Church by Lamar Hardwick

Written by an autistic church pastor, this book provides first hand experience, biblical foundation and practical strategies on how to grow a church community where individuals and families living with disability feel welcomed, included and seen.

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION & BELONGING

*Resource Listing: *Downloadable Resources*

***Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families: A Practical Guide for Congregations by Courtney E. Taylor, Erik W. Carter, Naomi H. Annandale, Thomas L. Boehm, and Aimee K. Logeman**

This guide serves to equip churches with the tools necessary to create an inclusive ministry for families with developmental disabilities. The suggested steps and practical strategies provide options to make church accessible and for families living with developmental disabilities to feel invited and safe. This guide is full of suggested reading and websites for further education.

<https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/resources/CongregationPracticeGuide.pdf>

***Autism and Faith: A Journey Into Community Published by The Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities**

A collaborative booklet that shares first-hand experiences of ASD families in various faith communities. Through their stories, it shines a light on this often forgotten part of our community. Contributors convey possible strategies for both leaders and parents on how to blend autism and faith in a meaningful and safe community.

https://www.djfiddlefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Autism__Faith_final-1.pdf

***Inclusion Handbook: Everybody Belongs, Everybody Serves edited by Terry A. DeYoung and Mark Stephenson**

This reference is for disability advocates looking for in-depth information and guidance on how to start a disability ministry. The contributors address the responsibility of believers to advocate for those who are often ignored and passed over with sections on behaviour and learning styles, communication tips and caring for caregivers. The material on disability theology encourages discussion on the calling to include all the parts of the body of Christ.

<https://www.faithward.org/everybody-belongs-serving-together/#toc>

Learning Cards & Worksheets

These can be printed and left in the pews during Autism Awareness Month (April) or kept in the the churches info center. They can be used as part of small group discussions, planning sessions and prayer meetings year round. The learning cards allow for micro-learning to avoid information overload. Worksheets can be used to assess how the church is currently ministering to and with ASD families and what the goals are for the future.

- **Ten Facts About Autism:** <https://www.autismontario.com/media/1602>
- **What is Stimming?:** <https://files.elfsightcdn.com/43cd4e5b-d7d4-4fe6-8e3c-9968aa47e130/d0d74c45-547e-486e-a82f-70dde86a23e6/What-is-Stimming.pdf>
- **Indicators of Belonging Checklist for Churches: (Click on 'Churches' > 'Indicators of Belonging Checklist' > 'Download Resource')** <https://christianhorizons.org/resources/>
- **Reflecting on Belonging: (Click on: 'Churches' > 'Erik Carter Belonging Handouts' > 'Download Resource')** <https://christianhorizons.org/resources/>
- **10 Tips for Belonging:** <https://pathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/10-Tips-for-Belonging.pdf>

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION & BELONGING

Resource Listing: Online Workshops

Autism & Your Church with Victoria White (with ASL Interpretation)

Victoria White, the Director of Church Services at All Belong Center for Inclusive Education shares information on autism and simple adjustments that can be made to include children on the autism spectrum during worship services, Sabbath school and other ministry initiatives. Victoria shares the beautiful illustration of how every person is a gift to their church and community, tying this truth into the body of Christ and how everyone has something valuable to contribute.

https://youtu.be/LLU_T8CBQrg

Adventist Possibility Ministries: The Forgotten Gift with Dr. Larry Evans (with ASL Interpretation)

Dr Larry Evans, former Director for Adventist Possibility Ministries. This workshop will give a broad overview of Adventist Possibility Ministries, and the twelve principles of possibility thinking and acting that will bring hope and a new sense of mission to those whose identity is not built on what they cannot do, but rather on what can be possible.

<https://youtu.be/8EpTTm8cYTM>

Incomplete Without You: The Church and People with Disabilities with Erik W. Carter

Erik W. Carter is a Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University. In this presentation he focuses on inclusion and belonging for people living with developmental disabilities in schools, workplaces and places of worship. There is also attention paid to how communities are strengthened when they are able to receive the contributions and gifts of all people. This presentation lays a tremendous biblical foundation for the importance and power of belonging.

<https://youtu.be/sRZHwj6CarM>

Adventist Possibilities Ministries - A People Centered Approach

This is a free online course through Adventist Learning Community. It shares the belief that how we interpret and accept the gospel changes everything including the way we see ourselves, others and God. The workshop reminds us that value is inherent in each person and not determined by what a person can or cannot do. Adventist Possibilities Ministries celebrates and looks for ways to create inclusion and belonging, focusing on how every person is gifted, needed and treasured.

ENGLISH: <https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/adventist-possibility-ministries>

*Course also available in ASL Interpretation, French, Spanish, Portugese

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION & BELONGING

Resource Listing: Organizations

ALL BELONG CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: All Belong Center provides churches and schools looking for plan development, assessments and resources for inclusion.

Website: <https://allbelong.org/church-services>

Contact: Victoria White, Director of Church Services

Email: vwhite@allbelong.org

FRIENDSHIP MINISTRIES: Friendship Ministries is a subsidiary of All Belong, and works to promote the ideals of Equality, Interdependence, Compassion, and Hospitality within the Body of Christ. They have an online curriculum that provides a framework for inclusion, training & resource videos, offer consultation services and provide churches with the tools necessary to start a ministry that includes all individuals with and without disabilities.

Website: <https://friendship.org>

Together Curriculum: <https://friendship.org/together/>

Friendship Ministries Canada Website: <https://friendshipministries.ca>

CHRISTIAN HORIZONS: Christian Horizons is a non-profit developmental services organization dedicated to individuals experiencing disabilities accomplish their goals and thrive in communities where their God-given gifts are valued and respected. Does your congregation want to become a more accessible, welcoming place for people with disabilities and their families? Browse our list of curated resources here, or connect with us to chat about your particular situation.

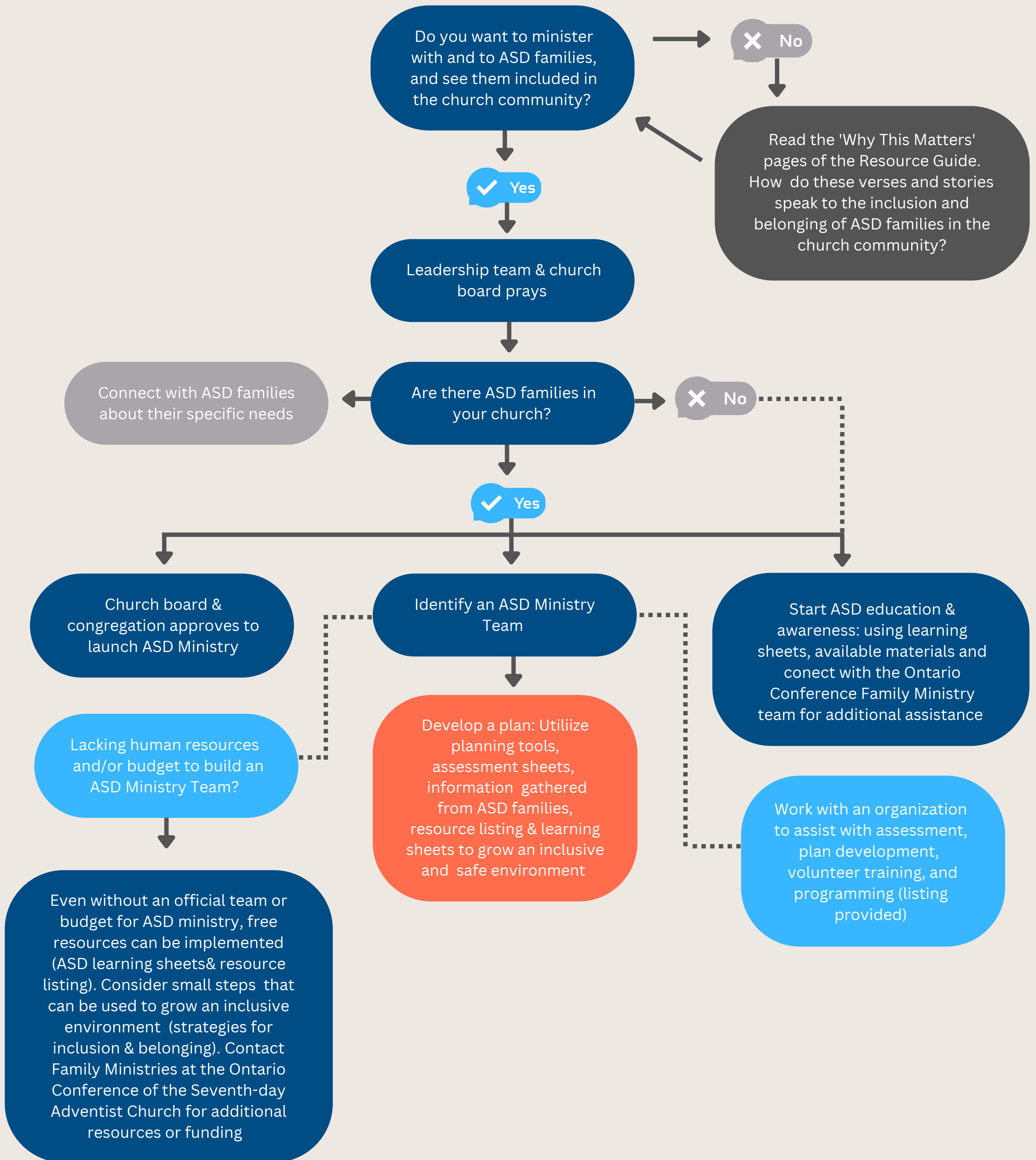
Website: <https://christianhorizons.org/churches/>

JONI AND FRIENDS: Joni and Friends is committed to providing resources to churches on how they can welcome and embrace people living with disabilities. The website is full of resources, podcasts, and instructional videos. There is also a comprehensive training series - The Irresistible Church Training Series which explores 12 aspects of serving families affected by disability that includes a book, supplemental resources, and training tools, all downloadable for free.

Website: <https://www.joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/>

Irresistible Church Training Series: <https://www.joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/irresistible-church-training-series/>

How to Get Started



thank
you

To all the ASD parents and caregivers who bravely shared their own experiences & stories. Your families made this resource possible!

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.
Philippians 1:3-5*

