



Mental Health Inclusion Ministry Planning Tool

Version 1.0

This planning tool is provided as a resource to accompany *Mental Health and the Church*. It is intended to help ministry leaders implement the ideas presented in the book.

A key idea presented in the book is that individuals and families impacted by a broad range of mental health conditions encounter **seven common barriers to church involvement** – stigma, anxiety, executive functioning, sensory processing, social communication and social isolation. ***These barriers are listed on the horizontal axis of the grid.***

The book also presents **seven broad ministry strategies for overcoming the barriers to church involvement** – assembling an inclusion team, creating welcoming ministry environments, prioritizing manpower and resources on including people in activities your church identifies as most critical for spiritual growth, developing a mental health communication strategy, helping individuals and families impacted by mental illness both inside and outside of church, providing mental health education and support, and giving responsibility for the ministry to the people of your church. ***These strategies are listed on the vertical axis of the grid.***

The grid is intended to be used by church leaders charged with implementing a mental health inclusion strategy. In a large church, your inclusion team might ask leaders responsible for defined ministry departments (children, student, family, adult, small group, worship team) or support functions (facilities management, communication) to identify barriers to church involvement within their areas of responsibility and propose a plan for using the seven inclusion strategies to overcome those barriers within their department. In a smaller church where leaders have multiple areas of responsibility, the grid might be used to identify barriers and inclusion strategies for the church as a whole.

We suggest your team use the grid to organize your thoughts and observations regarding challenges individuals or families impacted by mental illness might experience in your church or area of ministry, and then the strategies your team might employ to address each barrier. We've included sample questions for inclusion team members to consider in your planning process, organized by common departments and functions. We encourage you to periodically check our website or our Facebook page for new training resources and opportunities! Don't get discouraged if your church is unable to develop a perfect inclusion plan. No church will be able to welcome every individual or family affected by mental illness, but **every church can welcome more children, adults and families touched by mental illness!**

Barriers to church involvement→	Stigma	Anxiety/Fear	Executive Functioning	Sensory Processing	Social Communication	Social Isolation	Past Experiences of Church
Strategies ↓							
Assembling your inclusion team							
Create welcoming ministry environments							
Inclusion in activities with high impact for spiritual growth							
Communication strategy							
Helping families inside and outside church							
Education and Support							
Responsibility: Empowering your people for ministry							

Working through the Grid...Preschool, Children's, Family Ministry

Who needs to be on our inclusion team?

- Who might help us identify families with children in our community with mental illness who don't have a church home?
- Who might help us better understand the challenges in serving children who experience anxiety, difficulties with self-regulation, social communication challenges, or children of parents with mental illness?

How do we create welcoming ministry environments for kids with mental illness and their families?

- What can we do to help anxious kids (and anxious parents) to have a positive first experience of our ministry?
- How can we minimize the possibility of kids with subtle differences being bullied by another kid in our ministry?
- How can our entrances, registration areas, small and large group ministry environments become more "sensory-friendly?"
- How do our ministry environments enhance the ability of kids to manage their emotions and behavior?
- Is there information requested on registration forms that families impacted by mental illness might be reluctant to provide?
- How do we create learning environments for kids to help them internalize the most important truths of our faith?
- How might we protect kids we serve with learning differences from experiencing shame or embarrassment in ministry activities?

How do we help kids with mental health conditions to participate in our most impactful ministry activities?

- How do we invite (and transport) kids from families impacted by mental illness to ministry activities (Sunday School, AWANA, VBS, MOPS, worship services) most likely to promote spiritual growth?
- How can special events (VBS, AWANA) be more sensory-friendly?
- Would a child with anxiety or challenges with social communication experience difficulties if they wish to be baptized or confirmed? What if they want to be part of the Christmas pageant or other special events?

What do we want to communicate to families impacted by mental illness we currently serve or hope to serve?

- How do we use photography or video on our websites and social media platforms to relieve the anxiety a visitor might experience, or the anxiety a child who regularly attends might experience during a special or unfamiliar ministry event or activity?
- How do we promote relationship between our people and families outside our church impacted by mental illness?
- How do we introduce our ministry to families with negative past experiences of church?
- Is our signage easy to follow for newcomers?
- How can we help kids with organizational difficulties to get information or ministry resources home to their parents?
- Can parents who experience discomfort while using the telephone or in face-to-face interactions easily contact key members of your ministry team?
- How do you invite parents to share helpful ideas for promoting positive experiences or good behavior your ministry team?
- Do we share helpful information with families impacted by mental illness through our social media platforms and printed materials?
- How do we encourage our people to use their social media platforms to resource, encourage and support families impacted by mental illness?

How might we meet practical needs of kids and families impacted by mental illness inside and outside the church?

- How can we best meet practical and immediate needs of parents of kids with mental illness in our community? Respite care? Transportation? Providing activities for “typical” siblings? Offering speakers or other special events?
- Should we offer or host support groups or educational groups for parents? (NAMI Basics)
- Do families of kids with mental illness receive the same supports from the church as a family of a child with a medical illness? Casseroles, cards, prayer, encouragement?
- How can we help families searching for mental health care for their kids?
- How can we help families of kids in need of special education services or accommodations at school?
- Could we offer support services to adoptive or foster families?

How might we prepare our staff, volunteers and members to better support kids with mental illness and their families?

- How should our greeters respond if a child is visibly upset upon arrival at church?
- How will our team respond if a child (or parent) appears to be experiencing an emotional crisis within a public space at church?
- How will our team respond if a child tries to run away from church, or engages in other dangerous behavior, such as climbing, jumping from high places, playing with lit candles or other dangerous objects?
- How do you want your team to respond if a child demonstrates aggression toward a peer or adult?
- Does our church have a system in place to follow up with attendees who regularly participated in worship services, small groups, Christian education or mission activities who are suddenly absent from those activities for weeks or months?
- When is our church no longer the “least restrictive ministry environment” for a child with severe difficulties managing emotions or behavior? How will we minister with families when our church no longer represents the “least restrictive environment” for ministry?

How do we empower the kids and families we impact to share the love of Christ with people in their spheres of influence?

- How do we support parents with mental illness in promoting spiritual growth in their kids?
- Can we resource and encourage our families to provide practical support to families impacted by mental illness in their neighborhoods or social networks? (Relational respite, transportation assistance, sibling support)
- Can we encourage families from our church to pursue adoption or foster care as a ministry?

Working Through the Grid...Student, Youth and College Ministry

Who needs to be on our inclusion team?

- Who might help us identify students in our community with mental illness who don't have a church home?
- Who might help educate us about the challenges we're likely to encounter in ministering with students with common mental health conditions?
- Who might help us understand the system in place within our community that serves teens and young adults experiencing psychiatric emergencies - suicidal plans, severe self-injury, psychosis?

How do we create welcoming ministry environments for students with mental illness and their families?

- What can we do to help students prone to introversion or anxiety or students with less well-developed social skills to have a positive first experience of our church/ministry?
- How can we help support students during the less structured times before and after scheduled worship services and activities?
- How do our ministry environments promote attention to the teaching/activity taking place within the physical space? Are there changes we can make to our ministry environments to minimize distraction?
- How can our ministry environments become more "sensory-friendly?"

How do we help kids with mental health conditions to participate in our most impactful ministry activities?

- What changes might we make in our small group registration/assimilation process or in the training we offer to small group leaders to make our groups more welcoming to students with common mental health conditions?
- Are there any demands or challenges a guest might encounter at one of our worship activities that might cause significant discomfort for a student with a common mental health condition?
- How can we proactively reduce the apprehension or discomfort a student might experience in anticipation of an important special event, including weekend retreats, mission trips, baptisms and service activities?

What do we want to communicate with students impacted by mental illness we currently serve or hope to serve?

- How might we introduce our ministry to students outside of our church impacted by mental illness?
- How do we introduce our ministry to students with negative past experiences of church? Students who previously experienced embarrassment or shame at church or students who struggled to meet the social expectations of their previous church?
- Is our church or ministry activity easy to find for someone coming on their own?
- How can we better remind forgetful students of upcoming ministry events and activities?
- How should we invite parents and family members to share helpful ideas that promote positive experiences between their student and your ministry team?
- Do we share helpful and age-appropriate information regarding mental illness through our social media platforms and printed materials?
- How do we use photography or video on our websites and social media platforms to relieve the anxiety a visitor might experience, or the anxiety a student who regularly attends might experience during a special or unfamiliar ministry event or activity? Mission trips, weekend retreats, community outreach events?

How might we meet practical needs of students impacted by mental illness and their families, both inside and outside the church?

- How can we best meet practical and immediate needs of students with mental illness in our community and their families? Offering speakers or other special events? A referral service for mental health services?
- How might we provide students with mental illness and their families the same supports from the church offered to those experiencing other medical conditions or treatments? Casseroles, cards, prayer, encouragement? Do we provide pastoral care to students in psychiatric hospitals or residential treatment facilities?
- Does our church have a system in place to follow up with students who regularly attended worship services, small groups, Christian education or mission activities who are suddenly absent from those activities for weeks or months?
- How can we help families searching for mental health care for their students? Or students away at college searching for mental health care in an unfamiliar community?
- How might we help advocate for students in need of special education services or accommodations at school?
- How might we help support students in our community with mental health concerns who are “aging” out of the foster care system?

How might we prepare our staff, volunteers and members to better support students with mental illness and their families?

- How should a staff member or volunteer be trained to respond if a student discloses a suicide plan or a past suicide attempt? Some other psychiatric emergency?
- What types of educational or support groups does our church provide to students with mental illness and their families? (Grace Alliance, Fresh Hope, NAMI)
- How will our team track and follow up with students who are absent from worship and ministry activities following a period of regular participation?
- What processes do we have in place to protect the confidentiality of information shared by students with ministry staff and volunteers related to their mental health condition?

How do we empower the members of our church to share the love of Christ with students in their spheres of influence and their families?

- How might we support parents of students with mental illness in promoting spiritual growth in their kids?
- How might we resource and support our students along with other attendees of our church to invite students with common mental health conditions who aren't actively involved with a church to our ministry activities?
- How might we encourage our attendees to provide personalized support to friends and neighbors of students with significant mental health conditions?
- How do we encourage our students and other church attendees to use their social media platforms to resource, encourage and support their friends and family members impacted by mental illness?

Working Through the Grid...Adult and Small Group Ministries

Who needs to be on our inclusion team?

- Who might help us identify adults in our community with mental illness who don't have a church home?
- Who might help educate us about the challenges we're likely to encounter while ministering with adults with common mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, ADHD and personality disorders, as well as adults with severe mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder?
- Who might help us understand the system in place within our community that serve adults with chronic mental illness?

How do we create welcoming ministry environments for adults with mental illness and their families?

- How might we modify our assimilation process to be more welcoming to first-time visitors who experience anxiety or discomfort in social situations?
- How can someone predisposed to severe anxiety attacks in crowded or confined spaces inconspicuously find a comfortable place to sit during a worship service?
- Would a first-time visitor to our campus struggle to find where they (or their children) need to go from our signage?
- How do our ministry environments promote attention to the teaching/activity taking place within the physical space? Are there changes we can make to our ministry environments to minimize distraction?
- How can our ministry environments for adults become more "sensory-friendly?"

How do we help adults with mental health conditions to participate in our most impactful ministry activities?

- What changes might we make in our small group registration/assimilation process or in the training we offer to small group leaders to make our groups more welcoming to adults with common mental health conditions?
- What alternative discipleship strategies can our church offer to persons uncomfortable with the self-disclosure required for participation in a small group?
- How can we proactively reduce the apprehension or discomfort adults might experience in anticipation of an important special event, including weekend retreats, mission trips, baptisms and service activities?

- How might we welcome individuals and families impacted by mental illness into the relational structure of our church?
- How do we use photography or video on our websites and social media platforms to relieve the anxiety a first-time visitor to our church might experience, or the anxiety someone might experience in anticipation of joining a small group, a Bible study, a singles ministry or an outreach event?

What do we want to communicate with adults impacted by mental illness who we hope to minister with?

- How might an adult indicate their need for support to someone on our ministry team if they're uncomfortable approaching an unfamiliar person or making a phone call?
- How might we introduce our church to adults outside of our church impacted by mental illness?
- How do we encourage and support members and attendees to share the challenges they experience resulting from mental illness, both spiritual and functional?
- How can we signal to our surrounding community that children and adults with mental illness are welcome at our church?
- How often are mental health-related topics addressed in our preaching, public prayer and announcements during our worship services?
- How can we better remind adults prone to forgetfulness of upcoming ministry events and activities?

How might we meet practical needs of adults impacted by mental illness and their families, both inside and outside the church?

- Does our church provide pastoral care and support to adults receiving treatment in psychiatric facilities or adults in assisted living placements?
- Does our church have a system in place to follow up with attendees who regularly attended worship services, small groups or Christian education activities who are suddenly absent from those activities for weeks or months?
- How might we provide families the same supports from the church offered to those experiencing other medical conditions or treatments? Casseroles, cards, prayer, encouragement?
- Is our church intentional in reaching out to and building relationships with individuals with mental illness and their families who don't currently attend church?

- How can our church partner with agencies and advocacy groups to improve the quality of available mental health services and supports in our community?
- How can our church help provide mental health care and support to adults in our community in need of such care, or help direct adults and their families to where they might find high quality, affordable care?
- If our church is involved with prison or jail ministry, what can those ministries do to provide care and support to prisoners with mental health issues?

How might we prepare our staff, volunteers and members to better educate and support individuals with mental illness and their families?

- What type of staff training is needed to more effectively minister with individuals and families affected by mental illness?
- What types of mental health education or support groups does our church provide to individuals and families impacted by mental illness, both inside and outside of our church? Grace Groups, Fresh Hope, Celebrate Recovery, NAMI?

How do we empower the members of our church to share the love of Christ with adults they come in contact with affected by mental illness?

- How might we encourage and support our attendees in inviting and accompanying friends and neighbors to church with common mental health conditions?
- How might we enlist our people in addressing common misperceptions that persons with mental illness aren't welcome at church?
- How might we encourage our people to provide personalized support to friends and neighbors with significant mental health conditions?

Working Through the Grid...Worship Team

Who needs to be on our inclusion team?

- Is there someone on our ministry team empowered to monitor our communication for insensitive or inappropriate comments or statements?

How do we create welcoming ministry environments for adults with mental illness and their families?

- How will we incorporate mental illness-related concerns into the preaching, prayer and public announcements that take place during our worship services?
- How might a child or adult with sensory processing differences experience one of our worship services?
- Do we offer any “sensory-friendly” worship services for attendees and persons in the surrounding community who might benefit?
- How might we make worship experiences designed for children and teens more sensory-friendly?

How do we help individuals with mental health conditions to participate in our most impactful ministry activities?

- Are we intentional in seeking out singers, musicians, actors or dancers affected by mental illness to be part of our worship team?
- How might we use our worship team to build connections with individuals and families affected by mental illness?

What do we want to communicate with persons impacted by mental illness we hope to minister with?

- Do we have a schedule or calendar in place for addressing mental health-related topics during worship services?

How might we meet practical needs of children and adults impacted by mental illness and their families, both inside and outside the church?

- How might we take our worship services and activities out to persons with mental illness in housing or treatment facilities where they might not have the ability to attend church as a result of their condition or a lack of access to transportation?

How might we prepare our staff, volunteers and members to better educate and support individuals with mental illness and their families?

- Do we call attention to counseling services, educational and support groups available through our church or partner churches during our worship services, or in bulletins or other information distributed in our worship services?

How do we empower the members of our church to share the love of Christ with adults they come in contact with affected by mental illness?

- How can members of our worship team use their gifts and talents to minister with families affected by mental illness?

Working Through the Grid...Communication/Technology Team

Who needs to be on our inclusion team?

- Is there someone on our ministry team empowered to monitor our communication for insensitive or inappropriate comments or statements?
- Do we need someone on our team to call attention to articles, teaching and research originating both within and outside the Christian subculture on mental health-related topics of benefit to our attendees, as well as their friends and neighbors?

How do we create welcoming ministry environments for adults with mental illness and their families?

- How will we incorporate mental illness-related concerns into the preaching, prayer and public announcements that take place during our worship services?
- If we have an online platform for presenting worship services or other church activities, how are we using that platform to reach families in our community unable to attend church as a result of mental illness?

How do we help individuals with mental health conditions to participate in our most impactful ministry activities?

- Do we make it possible for individuals interested in a ministry activity or event to sign up electronically if they're uncomfortable making phone calls or registering in person?
- Do we have someone serving as a mental health liaison to facilitate communication between attendees requiring some accommodation or support and our staff/volunteers responsible for key areas of ministry?
- How can we use technology to overcome foreseeable challenges for persons with mental illness in our most critical ministry practices and activities?
- How do we use technology to assist children and adults prone to forgetfulness of important ministry resources and events?

What do we want to communicate with persons impacted by mental illness we hope to minister with?

- How do we use photography or video on our websites and social media platforms to relieve the anxiety a first-time visitor to our church might experience, or the anxiety someone might experience in anticipation of joining a small group, a Bible study, a singles ministry or an outreach event?
- Do we need to have a schedule or calendar in place for addressing mental health-related topics during worship services or sharing mental health-related resources through our church's social media platforms?

How might we meet practical needs of adults impacted by mental illness and their families, both inside and outside the church?

- How might our communication team increase awareness of the supports and resources your church offers to members and attendees?
- How might our communication team make our attendees aware of helpful supports and resources outside of the church they might share with their friends and neighbors impacted by mental illness?

How might we prepare our staff, volunteers and members to better educate and support individuals with mental illness and their families?

- Do we regularly share articles or resources of interest with our staff or key volunteers to help them better understand or minister more effectively with individuals and families impacted by mental illness?

How do we empower the members of our church to share the love of Christ with adults they come in contact with affected by mental illness?

- How can our team draw attention to the stories of members and attendees engaged in mental health ministry?
- Who do we invite members and attendees to partner with us to expand the reach and impact of our mental health inclusion strategy as part of our social media team?

Working Through the Grid...Facilities Management Team

Who needs to be on our inclusion team?

- Is there someone on our ministry team with the knowledge and experience to help us make the physical spaces in which ministry takes place more welcoming to everyone, including individuals and families with mental illness?

How do we create welcoming ministry environments for adults with mental illness and their families?

- Are there inexpensive ways of making our lighting less harsh inside our ministry environments?
- Are there inexpensive ways of using lighting, paint or floor coverings to make our ministry environments more conducive to supporting self-control, especially in spaces where children's and student ministry take place?
- Are there inexpensive ways of removing potential sources of distraction, or using lighting, paint or window coverings to help promote attention and learning in the ministry spaces most often used for teaching and preaching?
- How might we provide more comfortable seating for children and adults during ministry activities?
- Can we identify a quiet space (or spaces) within our facility where an adult or child might go to experience privacy while regaining emotional self-control?
- Can we designate a sensory-friendly entrance for members, attendees and visitors who experience discomfort in crowds or in situations where multiple conversations are taking place at one time?
- Can we establish a "fragrance-free" zone in our worship services for individuals and families who are sensitive to strong smells or odors?

How do we help individuals with mental health conditions to participate in our most impactful ministry activities?

- Do we have any designated seating during worship services for persons prone to anxiety in crowded or confined spaces?
- Do we have spaces for hosting small groups or other discipleship activities for a student or adult who might feel uncomfortable attending such an activity in a private home or office?

What do we want to communicate with persons impacted by mental illness we hope to minister with?

- Is our signage throughout our facilities sufficiently clear for someone to find where they need to go if they struggle to remember multistep directions or feel uncomfortable approaching someone for help?

How might we meet practical needs of children and adults impacted by mental illness and their families, both inside and outside the church?

- How might our facilities management serve individuals and families affected by mental illness or community agencies that serve them?
- Could we help maintain and care for housing in our community set aside for persons with mental illness?
- Help paint, repair or landscape the offices of clinics that offer free or reduced cost care to individuals or families with mental health concerns?

How might we prepare our staff, volunteers and members to better educate and support individuals with mental illness and their families?

- Would we consider partnering with community agencies to offer job training and employment opportunities to individuals in mental health recovery programs?

How do we empower the members of our church to share the love of Christ with individuals and families they come in contact with affected by mental illness?

- How can we train and encourage our staff and volunteers to meet practical needs of families impacted by mental illness and the caregivers who support them?