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Perspectives and Practical Strategies for Disability-Related Behavior Challenges in Ministries to Children and Youth

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Abstract

Challenging behaviors happen, even within Sunday schools and ministries to children and youth. This essay explores spiritual and theoretical perspectives about disability and addressing behaviors. Teachers, leaders and volunteers may benefit from example practical strategies for planning for and responding to such challenging behaviors, especially the social, emotional and behavioral challenges related to disability.

Keywords: *behavior, disability ministry, New Testament Biblical perspective on disability, children's ministry, youth ministry*

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As Johnny's autism intensified, volunteers in church ministries faced unexpected challenges of elopement, tantrums, hitting and biting. At times, parents rotated church attendance so he could simply stay home. Responses within the church body varied dramatically. One pastor recommended building a "cage" to contain him during Sunday school. Others ministered to Johnny and his family through varied and unique skill sets. One seamstress designed a special quilt for Johnny with a heart evident in the middle of the swirling "storm at sea", sharing her hopes and prayers through each stitch. Sharon and Dave opened their home as one place for safe family fellowship. Tim, the tough and gentle horse trainer, volunteered as a weekly special buddy. None of those individuals were trained special educators or even teachers. Each of those members of the body of Christ demonstrated tangible expressions of love using the personhood of their own creation and design, and in so doing, welcomed Johnny as a valued part of the church body, enabling his family to fellowship and worship in church community.

Introduction

How can the church ministries work well for children and youth with disabilities, especially for disability-related behavioral challenges? A biblical perspective of disability requires grasping relationship with God the creator and master of all we are and will be as individuals and in relationship within the church body and in outreach from that body. Teachers and leaders of ministries communicate much about a particular church body and about God as they plan for and respond to behaviors of children and youth, especially to those with disability-related challenging behaviors.

Recognition of Brokenness

Societal perspectives of disability outside the church vary widely but tend to influence perspectives of disability within the church. In a culture generally emphasizing independence and self-sufficiency, relating to individuals with disabilities may feel awkward or discomforting for some, or quite natural for

others. Focusing inward on our own brokenness is a helpful foundation for perspectives of disability. Beates (2012) challenges that "… absence of people with disabilities in the church indicates that the church has not yet grasped deeply enough the essence of the gospel; and conversely, God's people have drunk too deeply from the well of cultural ideology with regard to wholeness and brokenness" (p. 79). He asserts that our perspectives of disability are rooted in comprehending "…the transforming power of the gospel…" acknowledging "…our inability, our weakness, and our brokenness…" to deep awareness that "…our God is supremely able" (Beates, 2012, p. 80). Founded in understanding that all are broken, Beates further challenges us to be a countercultural church that fulfills biblical mandates to bring in those with disabilities and anyone else who feels broken or marginalized (p. 82), to then submit and serve together in our mutual weaknesses to God's strength (p. 131). By "…living transparently… with weakness, and allowing these weaknesses—recognized, owned, admitted, and surrendered… the church must be inclusive, biblical, accessible, practical, evangelizing, assimilating, promoting and multiplying" (140).

Communicating Value of Individuals with Disabilities

Disability etiquette clearly establishes that when referencing individuals with disabilities one should use "people first" language. That way of discussing disabilities references the person first, not the diagnosis, showing respect that one is human first, not defined by a category or diagnosis or label (Peoplefirst.org, 2020; SelfAdvocate.net, 2020). In other words, instead of saying "that blind kid", you might ask about "Jamie with his blindness".

Christ values ALL he created. Humans were designed in God's own image, declared to be a work that was "very good" (Gen. 1:27, 31). He designed each of us with intimate knowledge. "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb" (Ps. 139:13). That creation was with beautiful intentional design. "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well" (Ps. 139:14). Even more amazing, our Creator continues to know us and to value us tremendously. "But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matt. 10:30-31). Consistent with such Scriptures, speaking with "people first" language communicates respect and the immense value of everyone no matter our appearance or performance or behaviors.

Christ Challenges to Love the Least of These. Christians are charged, "...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly..." (Mic. 6:8). Jesus tells us "...Blessed are the merciful" (Matt. 5:7), and that in ways we serve "the least of these" we are serving Him (Matt. 25:40). "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). So many marginalized individuals could fit the category of "the least of these", but certainly children and youth with disabilities can fit that category, and as teachers and leaders in church ministries, Jesus motivates us to be kind, merciful and loving as we serve them.

Christ Modeled Inclusion. During his own earthly ministry, Christ himself interacted with ALL, even touching a man whose medical disability of leprosy technically classified him as "unclean" (Luke 5:12-13). In a parable, Jesus challenged believers to actively pursue fellowship with society's rejected, including those with disabilities (Luke 14:21). Not only does God's word model inclusion of people with disabilities in care and hospitality, examples throughout Scripture show God's use of people in leadership who may have seemed somehow disqualified or incapable. For example, Moses initially protests God's calling because he is "slow of speech" (Ex. 4:10) though God goes on to use Moses as a mighty leader. Clearly this biblical model teaches the church to not only speak about people with disabilities as valued and respected, but to also honor the person's value through actions.

Leaders Value Voice. To most successfully honor the value of an individual with a disability teachers and leaders need not just communicate *to*, but also communicate *with* those individuals. Well-intentioned planning that excludes the individual in their own planning, or that discounts the expertise and wisdom of parents, may unintentionally distance the very ones a teacher or leader seeks to serve. When a child is very young or unable to express needs, leaders should ask parents what works and what is needed, including questions about specific components of the ministry program. Even children without words can usually communicate preferences or needs. Most children will feel empowered when involved in planning for their own successful inclusion. Valuing the person first includes valuing the voice of parents and the child in planning for inclusion and belonging in Sunday school and church ministry programs.

Issues of Equity versus Equality

Inevitably, teachers can anticipate issues of equity versus equality. Equality generally means everyone gets exactly the same thing, while equity means

people get what they need for access, participation, and belonging. When accommodating or adapting for the needs of one individual, if at all possible, let such actions occur with invisibility. For example, a fifth grader in the group has stopped participating and after conversation, the teacher learns that children laugh at her when she answers questions wrong due to her auditory processing disorder. Lexie explains that she can hear and reason, but she just needs more time to process what she hears. Without more time, she might answer a question that was asked minutes ago rather than the current question, so saying "I don't know" has become Lexie's default to avoid the laughter of peers. In this example, an apparent behavior of non-participation is in fact a social strategy of self-protection rooted in a disability that impacts learning. Together, Lexie and the teacher agree upon a signal system. Each time the teacher plans to call on her to read a Scripture or answer a question, the teacher will hand her an index card with the question in writing or the verse reference, giving a delay for processing before calling on her. Handing Lexie a card with the reference "I John 1:9-10" the teacher says, "Lexie, in a moment I'll ask you to read I John 1:9 and 10. Guys, first let's get some context for what I John is all about...." After brief context, the teacher turns to Lexie for the Scripture reading. To keep that signal system even less visible, the teacher could use index card cues for everyone. Such efforts to keep accommodations and adaptations invisible communicate respect for the individual.

When invisibility is not possible, anticipate challenges to fairness. Children notice who got "more" or who "got the pink marker last time". Even young children can comprehend that fairness is not always everyone getting the "same". A teacher who wears glasses may point out that to read the Bible, they need to wear glasses, but that having everyone use the same glasses would not actually be fair since not everyone needs those same glasses. Pop Pop uses a cane to navigate from car to the worship seating, but Nannie doesn't need a cane. For example, in order to handle the noise level during free play, Max wears noise-cancelling headphones. Only Max needs headphones, and while simple, such an accommodation is visibly different from what everyone else is doing during free play. When questioned about that difference, without calling focused attention upon Max, the teacher can simply reply, "not everyone needs the same but we all get what we need." Through individualizing accommodations or adaptations, teachers and leaders of children and youth can demonstrate value for the individual by providing each child with what is needed, even when not the "same".

Behavior Challenges within Church Ministry

Within church ministry, welcoming and even embracing individuals with challenging behaviors can sometimes stretch the imagination of the church body. Simply managing typical behaviors can be challenging in ministries such as Sunday schools or youth groups. Though varying in cultural norms, most such ministries lack the structures of schools to support behavior, and especially to deal with behavioral challenges. Teachers and ministry leaders volunteer with varied training and experiences to support behavior of children and youth.

Stretching churches even further, as churches implement ministries after initial pandemic shutdowns, interruptions in ministry understandably magnify behavioral challenges for all children. Children may have experienced limited social interactions for months. Children's experiences in home may have ranged from increased stress to decreased demands. Returning to social interactions and routines of ministries may require re-learning the social norms and expectations for all children. Children will adjust to church and ministry engagement with varied responses and in varied timing.

Disability-Related Behavioral Challenges in Church Ministry

Some children with specific disabilities may face even greater challenges as they readjust to social engagement and re-learn expectations in their Sunday school or youth ministries after time away. Imagine a few examples. A young child with an attention deficit may be out of practice using strategies for impulse control or turn taking. A fourth grader with a reading learning disability may have lost some skills and experience increased frustration if asked to read aloud. A teen with autism may experience tremendous stress when expected to flex back to old schedules and routines. A child with an intellectual disability may experience confusion when asked to limit the hugging of friends not seen in months. Any child who struggles with social skills may be challenged to again catch on to the unwritten rules of such social settings. While all children may face challenges in returning to church and ministry participation, many children with disabilities may face frustrations beyond the norm in such recalibrations as they return to the social engagements required through ministry programs.

Therefore, ministry leaders face increasing demands for structures, behavior planning, and anticipated responses when challenging behaviors occur. Beyond simply practicing patience, the purpose of this essay is to offer

theoretical and practical supports to ministry teachers and leaders. Through examining highlights of theoretical perspectives and example practical strategies, ministry teachers and leaders can support inclusion and belonging of all children, especially children with disabilities involving social skills and behaviors.

Awareness of Culture and Norms within Ministries

One helpful step in planning for behavior support within the context of a church or ministry is to identify prevailing culture and social norms. Though all Christian churches and Christians are part of ONE body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-8), each church community or ministry is distinct in its own structures, culture and the social norms expected by children who participate in its programs.

Physical Accessibility

Though having a physical disability does not mean that individual will struggle with behaviors, ensuring physical accessibility certainly reduces frustrations and is an appropriate entry point for later addressing more challenging concerns such as supporting behavior. *How can children move and access materials around the church and classroom?* Can every child reach sinks to wash hands? Is each space physically accessible for navigation in a wheelchair? Can every child reach and use learning materials? Components of physical accessibility communicate the message that all individuals are welcome in this space.

Participation

Beyond physical accessibility, some cultural norms are observable. *How are children participating in worship and learning?* To what degree are children participating in corporate worship with adults? Are classrooms mostly noisy or quiet? In Sunday school classes, for what duration are children expected to sit in chairs? How are children actively engaging? Specific to behavior, what range of behaviors "fit" the norm?

Belonging

Other cultural and social norms require more reflective consideration. Merriam-Webster defines belonging as, "close or intimate relationship" (2015). *How might children see themselves in this fellowship or group?* Do coloring sheets or

classroom illustrations include people who look like them? *How do individuals fit into the group?* Are there cliques in Sunday schools or the youth group that may inhibit belonging for all children? Who is friendly with the child who doesn't look like, speak like, or move like the rest of the group? *What group behaviors support or inhibit belonging?* Does spiritual discussion require Scripture memory? Does the "system" elevate children who exhibit high intelligence the most as most worthy of leadership? What do children laugh at? Would a child who struggles communicating feel safe contributing to the conversation? Specific to behavior, what behaviors challenge belonging in groups?

Proactive Behavior Planning Supporting Faith Values

Each church or ministry prioritizes specific ministry values. When behavior planning starts with awareness of the current norms, then Sunday school teachers and ministry leaders can reason through behavior planning that supports children engaging in ministries and programs toward those Christian values.

While proactive planning and structures prevent many challenging behaviors, challenging behaviors will occur. While it is not the role of Sunday school teachers or youth leaders to teach social skills and behaviors as in schools, still such leaders face real time decisions about which behaviors to address in ministry contexts. Importantly, behaviors that risk safety of the child or others must be addressed, such as running with scissors or kicking others. For other behavioral challenges, teachers and leaders can reason if the behavior is just annoying and can be ignored, or if the behavior actually impedes the learning of the child or others, or if it inhibits the child from building connections in that faith community.

Applying Perspectives and Strategies

Certainly, volunteering in ministry requires the heart to serve. While ministry volunteers do not need teaching degrees, some information and training about education helps, especially when planning to support behavior.

Lived Perspectives of Disability

In general, what does each ministry demonstrate as the lived perspectives of disability? In *Luke 14:13*, Jesus instructs us to fellowship with the marginalized, including individuals with disabilities. How is a particular class or

ministry demonstrating hospitality to individuals with disabilities? "...The sovereignty of God is in, over and through all circumstances..." including disability (Tada, et al., 2014, p. 35). "Disability is a high price of living in a sin-cursed world. As Paul reminds us, all creation, including people with disabilities, 'groan' in suffering as we wait for perfect redemption (Rom. 8:19-25). Regardless of how blessed we appear, we are all still in pain this side of heaven. But we also know that 'God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purposes' (Rom. 8:28). That calling includes disability" (Deuel, 2013, p. 83). Furthermore, Deuel asserts, "When Jesus came to earth, in addition to dying on the cross for sin, his mission was to repair the effects of the curse... As his commissioned agents, we continue the work he began.... Part of God's plan for people with disabilities was to not only glorify Jesus, but to also minister to others—not just in their disabilities, but because of them" (2013, p. 86). How is each ministry not only ministering *to* individuals with disabilities, but preparing them *for* commissioned ministry?

Disrupting Separating Responses to Challenging Behaviors

When considering behaviors, we know that "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:23-24). Children demonstrate natural tendencies toward selfishness, and sometimes even within ministries, children will intentionally sin against one another. Still, perspectives of sin do not explain every challenging behavior for individuals with some disabilities. For example, a child with autism who tantrums when experiencing disruption to a routine, may be communicating frustration.

Historically, those who "misbehaved" experienced degrees of exclusion from community. While inclusion in church has progressed through time (Beates, 2012; Tada, et al., 2014), still, because Sunday school teachers or ministry leaders typically have limited authority, the default response to truly challenging behaviors may be degrees of exclusion, removing a child to the side, or entirely from a class or group.

What happens when a challenging behavior occurs? Is the typical response some degree of separation? How do responses communicate and promote belongingness in the group, in the church, and as fellows commissioned for shared ministry? To truly assimilate individuals with disability-related behavior challenges, we must disrupt tendencies to separate those with challenging behaviors, and push to instead embrace and include.

Planning Developmentally

Certified educators learn various theories of human development, each with implications for behavior. From constructivist theories of development from such theorists as Piaget or Erickson or Vygotsky, we expect children to change and grow across various stages of human development, and we expect some children to require more support than others (Flick, 2011). Regardless of teacher training, Sunday schools generally operationalize such educational theories in the expectations for the varied amount of movement and sitting required a class of toddlers versus a class for teens. When leaders train new ministry volunteers, a bit of human development training might support volunteers in understanding what behavioral expectations are appropriate for their age group. Toward success with behavior, a new teacher of five-year-olds should reasonably expect to allow time to support sharing and turn-taking and to expect limited time sitting still, while a new youth leader might instead benefit from models to promote more sophisticated social and emotional skills. For example, if empathy is a target value in a youth group, time must be structured for challenging discussions and perhaps practice of community service.

In simplest application of a constructivist approach, church and ministry volunteers can plan to promote ministry values through repetitious exposure to those values, building opportunities for children to make meaning as they engage. When behavioral challenges occur, this approach encourages teachers and leaders to come alongside in support of behavioral success. In more challenging cases for children who have experienced trauma, this approach challenges teachers to support the child in slowly building trust that the teachers or leaders are safe, an approach that requires much time and consistency.

Intentionality in Designing an Environment

Regardless of whether a class meets in a basement or the finest facilities, leaders and teachers communicate much through environment. A teacher can intentionally design a learning environment to communicate messages and to support learning and behaviors (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2015; Flick, 2011). Such typical environmental supports range from arrangement of chairs to promote discussion to a poster of the focus scripture. Specifically for children with behavioral challenges, environmental supports may include such as an auditory signal a few minutes before transitions

between activities, or placement of a supportive adult nearby for a child experiencing anxiety.

Many children experience anxiety or concerns when situations are highly unstructured or unpredictable. Therefore, beyond physical environment, routines also support behaviors. If a team of volunteers rotate as teachers, do they share the same expectations for gaining the teacher's attention or for what prayer time looks like? Is there a rhythm or routine for how time is spent? For example, class may consistently start with a time of praise and worship, followed by a listening lesson, followed by some creative activity, etc. When such routines are consistent, a posted visual schedule of that routine may support a child who is anxious about what comes next or when they can expect a restroom break. Creative adaptations to environment extend hospitality to communicate safety and belonging in a space and community.

Reinforcing Positive Behavior

What should ministry teachers and leaders do when truly challenging behaviors occur? While current teaching theory reject extremes of behavioral theories, from rote learning to punishments, when the most challenging behaviors occur, strategies such as reinforcement offer options to effect change (Burchard and Deardorff, 2020; Chandler & Dahlquist, 2015). Though not the responsibility of a church and ministry volunteers to teach behavioral goals for a child with a disability, it is sometimes appropriate for ministry teachers and leaders to support consistency in what works for a child in home and/or school.

Short of bribing or manipulating a child, reinforcement of desired behaviors is a particularly strong option to promote a new or developing behavior. One example is to verbally praise the children who are following the activity directions as one way to encourage those children who are off task or not yet on task. Specific for a child with hyperactivity, a teacher may offer frequent praise for the child remaining in the circle for the Bible story time (Burchard & Deardorff, 2020). For ministry programs through which children earn levels for Scripture memory or similar achievements, to reduce behavioral expressions of frustration by children who struggle with memory or cognition, leaders may consider individualized reinforcement of incremental achievements, beyond those prescribed by the established program.

For a child who is resistant to participating in un-preferred activities, teachers may employ a simple "contingency contract", essentially engaging the child in a contract for expected behaviors. The simplest type of

contingency contract is a twist on a visual schedule, using a first/then board to show the child just two activities, with a visual representation of the first un-preferred activity on the left side labeled "first", and a visual representation of a more preferred activity on the right side labeled "then" (Burchard & Deardorff, 2020). Such an approach avoids rewards such as treats or stickers by using preferred activities as the reinforcement to participate in un-preferred activities.

Reconciling Community

Consistent with concepts of restorative justice, ministries can reverse that default response to separate those with disruptive or misfit behaviors through intentionality in building community, building shared values, and intentionally pursuing "offenders" to return them to community (Milner, et al., 2019). Implementation of restorative justice practices requires time for group members to define and occasionally redefine community, and to discuss and articulate expectations and feelings. Such practices may involve structures for sitting in circles and passing an item to signal turn-taking for responding to a challenging question. Because restorative practices focus upon reconciliation, teachers must also demonstrate flexibility to stray from intended schedules and content when circumstances require time to welcome a child back to community after an offending behavior (Milner, et al., 2019).

Creative Solutions

Wondering how such concepts work together in reality? The following provide selected examples of creative solutions applied to disability-related behaviors that occur commonly in church and ministry scenarios. Though not exhaustive, such examples are intended as practical extensions toward brainstorming solutions for common anticipated behavioral challenges.

Example Solution for Turn Taking

Teachers consistently correct Alex for his behaviors during turn taking activities. When corrected, Alex demonstrates momentary disappointment in himself, but within minutes he messes up again with turn taking. The teacher starts first with friendly brainstorming with his mother seeking ideas to

support turn taking more proactively to avoid so many corrections. The parent explains how visual schedules work at home and school. Using that idea, Alex's teacher designs a visual schedule with photographs of classmates attached with Velcro to a horizontal board. She then explains the turn taking visual schedule to the class. She gives Alex the job of identifying which child gets the next turn, moving their photo to the end of the Velcro line after each turn. This gives Alex a positive way to stay actively involved in more appropriate turn taking.

Example Solution for Attention Duration

With Sarah's autism, she struggles with attending for the full duration of Sunday school. She typically whimpers after about fifteen minutes of sitting or listening and if movement does not soon follow, the whimpering quickly turns to crying and sometimes a full-blown tantrum. After brainstorming with Sarah's father and the children's ministry leader, a special buddy begins attending Sunday school with Sarah. The special buddy positively reinforces Sarah for sitting and listening for ten to twelve minutes at a time, with breaks between to walk or move for about three minutes. Sarah then returns to the class with support from her buddy to join into the next learning activity. This approach respects Sarah's abilities to attend and needs to move, and proactively supports greater success participating in more of the learning during Sunday school.

Example Solution for Disruptions

Drew seems to try to stay on topic but is frequently thinking of things other than the lesson or intended activity. At random moments, he inserts off-topic comments about video games or sports. With a whimsical sense of humor, Drew laughs at his own stories and other children typically laugh along or then want to add their own similar stories, de-railing the intended agenda for the entire class. First attempts at plans for more structure were implemented inconsistently across the teaching rotation, with some teachers complaining that the plan seemed overly rigid or that Drew could have more of a role. Because Drew is a pre-teen and well aware of his strengths and struggles, one favorite teacher takes Drew out for pizza to learn more about what works in school and other settings and to involve Drew in a personal plan to avoid lesson disruptions. Drew leads the planning and establishes a contract with that favorite teacher. Drew helps define what

on-task listening and participating will entail, and times when his stories are welcome, self-reporting his success to this teacher. The teacher then plans to take Drew out once each month for at least a walk when Drew struggles with more disruptions, and up to a pizza outing when Drew demonstrates more on-task listening and participating. The teacher plans each outing's conversation to briefly address on-task behaviors, but to focus most conversation on sports, video games, and expressions of joy in Drew.

Example Solution for Tantrums

Part of Mia's disability includes frequent tantrums, not occurring during every Sunday school meeting but possibly occurring up to twice each month. Teachers have noticed that Mia's tantrums usually occur when the class activity requires prolonged group interactions, and that Mia typically hugs herself and rocks back and forth prior to each tantrum. After consultation with parents, the teachers rearranged the room with a calm corner set apart partially using the back of one bookshelf, and including a large soft pillow and a few sensory items. Mia's parents brought Mia to the classroom to explore the new space and to help teachers practice using a photo of the corner as a way for Mia to ask to go there and calm down, hopefully at her first sign of self-hugging and rocking. When first implemented this plan gave a way for Mia to depart the group to calm down. Over time, parents continued to collaborate with teachers to refine a plan so that Mia could not only depart the group but also return to the group when feeling calm.

Example Solution for Control

While group leaders are aware of Josh's recent trauma, they need a better plan to manage class when Josh opposes the planned schedule of activities. Josh tells you he hates to be told what to do. Still hoping for Josh to participate in all learning activities, teachers organize each activity time with two activities, offering Josh a choice of what to do first. For example, after the Bible story, Josh can choose to cut color and glue pictures of the story in order from beginning to end, or he can choose to complete the word search. His group leaders verbally praise Josh for making a choice and then praise again for finishing one activity. If he participates in both activities, leaders pair verbal praise with high fives. Giving Josh choice for the order of activities gives him some sense of control during group activities.

Conclusions

Managing behaviors in the context of children and youth ministries can be challenging for volunteers. The church is the community of all believers, including those with disabilities, even those with challenging behaviors. Therefore, volunteers may benefit from options to support positive behaviors and address challenging behaviors in such ministries.

Despite Johnny's extreme behaviors, individuals within the church body stepped up to demonstrate love, sewing a quilt, serving as a special buddy, and more. Such tangible expressions of love demonstrated value and belonging within the body, and enabled his family to engage in worship and fellowship.

Finding the solution for each child with challenging behaviors requires individualization. Usually, no one theoretical approach offers the only approach for such behavioral challenges. Instead, volunteers can combine strategies that fit the unique situation, the individual child, as well as their personal teaching and leadership approaches. Integrating various behavior strategies ultimately maximizes opportunities to welcome children with complex behaviors into the community and programs of the church, and beyond that to build their capacity to fully participate in the outward ministry of the church as well.

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