

## Q & A



### ***Disability and the Church*** *A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*

February 9, 2021 | \$18, 192 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4160-8

*“Lamar Hardwick was designed by God to write this resource for the church. Lamar perfectly weaves together his personal experience, the history of the church, and today’s much-needed conversation on diversity to lay a blueprint for inclusion in the local church.”*

—Ryan Wolfe, president and executive director of Ability Ministry

## The Church Needs the Disabled Community

Lamar Hardwick was thirty-six years old when he found out he was on the autism spectrum. While this revelation helped him understand and process his own experience, it also prompted a difficult re-evaluation of who he was as a person. And as a pastor, it started him on a new path of considering the way disabled people are treated in the church.

*Disability and the Church* is a practical and theological reconsideration of the church’s responsibilities to the disabled community. Too often disabled persons are pushed away from the church or made to feel unwelcome in any number of ways. As Hardwick writes, “This should not be.” He insists that the good news of Jesus affirms God’s image in all people, and he offers practical steps and strategies to build stronger, truly inclusive communities of faith.

### **Why did you decide to write *Disability and the Church*?**

**Lamar Hardwick:** As a pastor and a person diagnosed with autism, I understand the importance of the local church. The local church is perhaps the most underutilized support system in the disability community. I wrote this book to educate and empower the local church to become more inclusive of persons with disabilities. Without the disability community, the church is at best only half as great as it could be.

### **What is the message you hope to convey through this book?**

**Lamar:** With the modern church increasingly focusing on diversity and inclusion, I propose that church is missing a tremendous opportunity. The largest minority group in the world is people with disabilities. If the church intends to be culturally inclusive, it must begin with reaching the disability community.

### **What do you hope readers understand after reading *Disability and the Church*?**

**Lamar:**

- The church has historically excluded the disability community from its gatherings.
- Ethnic and cultural diversity must include the disabled.
- The church must develop a healthy theology of disability.
- The church needs those with disabilities to help lead it into the future.
- There are practical tools for developing a disability ministry.

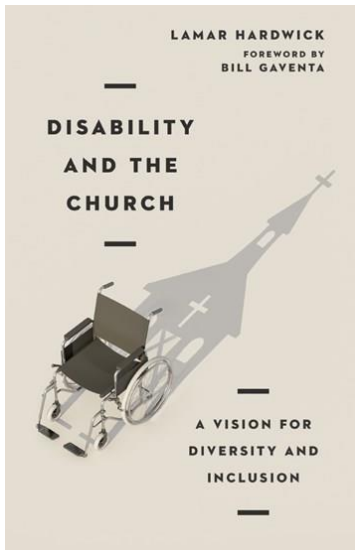


Tara Burns, print and online publicity  
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or [tburns@ivpress.com](mailto:tburns@ivpress.com)

Krista Clayton, author interviews  
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or [kclayton@ivpress.com](mailto:kclayton@ivpress.com)



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## EXCERPT



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*“Rev. Dr. Hardwick provides his readers with a powerful message about not only accepting people with disabilities but including them as church leaders. . . . Hardwick offers an insightful look into the what it means to pastor a church while on the autism spectrum, as well as practical tips for developing inclusive churches that take the wisdom of disability experience seriously.”*

—Devan Stahl, Baylor University

## The Church as Disability-Inclusive Communities

As a child, I learned to give my life to something greater than myself. As an adult, I learned that one of the secrets of fully devoting your life to something greater than yourself is having the courage to look outside yourself to get the best understanding of who you really are.

For me, that meant having the courage to listen to people comment on their experiences with me. It meant learning to unlearn how to deny, defend, and dismiss what everyone else seemed to know about me except me. It meant asking myself a tough question: what do people experience when they experience me?”

It’s a dangerous question, but it’s the question that led me to my diagnosis. It’s the question that led me to the conclusion that everyone can’t be wrong. And while I am sure that there were some people who were making comments about me only for the sake of divisiveness, there were enough incidents and enough verifiable evidence to suggest that I take their objective observations seriously.

It is time for the church—as great as she is—to find the courage to ask the questions that I had to ask myself: What do people experience when they experience church? What part of what they are saying is true?

According to a religion and disability study conducted in 2018, there is an increased chance of families declining to attend religious services based on their child’s disability. In fact, families impacted by autism are nearly 84 percent more likely to never attend religious services due to a felt lack of inclusion. Similar studies report that 46 percent of families impacted by disability have never been asked how their child and family could be included in the life of the church.

When we are faced with such a high percentage of families who report that they are unable to be involved with their local church due to disability, it communicates that the church has not paid enough attention to how those who are absent view the church. The absence of the disability community from the church is not a matter of invitation; it is a matter of inclusion.

The church is great, but she has been left to figure out her role in the diversity and disability conversation for so long that she has learned to deny, defend, and in many cases dismiss the objective observations of those around her. If the church is to forge forward into the future, we must recapture her original intent of inclusion and access into God’s kingdom. If you believe that the local church must lead the way in creating disability-inclusive communities—communities for people of all cultures and with all types of conditions—this book is for you.

—From the introduction, “A Love Letter to the Church from an Autistic Pastor”



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