

Why growing Shine **matters**

Families that include a person with a disability are all around us in Tallahassee — and they are among the least likely families to be sitting in any church on Sunday. Not because they don't want to be, but because attending is genuinely hard without support. Shine is how Deer Lake becomes the church in the community and for the community for these families.

What the research tells us

1 in 4

More than 1 in 4 U.S. adults — over 70 million people — live with a disability.¹

1 in 31

1 in 31 American 8-year-olds is identified with autism spectrum disorder — up from 1 in 36 just two years earlier.²

~1 in 6

About 17% of children ages 3–17 have one or more developmental disabilities (autism, ADHD, intellectual disability, and more).³

2x

Children with autism are almost twice as likely to **never** attend religious services as other children; kids with ADHD, anxiety, and depression are also significantly more likely to be absent from church.⁴

Unmet

Most parents of children with disabilities say faith is important to their family — yet most are **not satisfied** with the support their congregations provide, and their children participate in fewer church activities than their peers.⁵

3 asks

What those parents say they need most: trained volunteers, quieter spaces, and a clearly communicated welcome — exactly what Shine provides.⁵

What this means for Deer Lake: thousands of Tallahassee families are functionally unchurched because of a disability in the family — a mission field most churches never see. Research shows the barriers are attitudinal, programmatic, and communicational,⁴ which means they are all fixable by an ordinary church with willing hearts. When a family finds a church that truly includes their loved one, they stay — and they tell every other special-needs family they know.

What growing Shine looks like

- **Say it publicly.** Add Shine to the website, bulletin, and announcement slides so families can find us before they ever visit.
- **Shine Buddies.** Recruit & train one-on-one volunteers (free training from Key Ministry, Ability Ministry, Joni and Friends).
- **Sensory-friendly welcome.** Quiet room, sensory bags with fidgets & headphones at check-in, visual schedules.
- **Respite nights.** A monthly "Shine Night" parents' night out — the single most effective outreach a disability ministry can offer.
- **Community partners.** Connect with Little Boy Blue Foundation, Future Pathways, FSU CARD, and Leon County ESE families.
- **Include adults.** Meaningful serving roles — greeting, welcome team, worship — because belonging means contributing.

SOURCES

1. CDC, "Disability Impacts All of Us" / MMWR — over 70 million U.S. adults (more than 1 in 4) reported a disability, 2022 BRFSS data ([cdc.gov/disability-and-health/](https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/)). 2. CDC Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDMM) Network, April 2025 release, 2022 surveillance year ([cdc.gov/autism/data-research/](https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/)). 3. Zablotsky et al., "Prevalence and Trends of Developmental Disabilities among Children in the United States: 2009–2017," *Pediatrics* (2019); CDC child development data. 4. Whitehead, A. L., "Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57(2), 2018; summarized by Lifeway Research, "Few Churches Are Autism Friendly" (2018). 5. Ault, Collins & Carter, "Congregational Participation and Supports for Children and Adults with Disabilities: Parent Perceptions," *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 51(1), 2013.