

Welcoming People Affected by Disabilities into Church Introduction

It is important that disabled people be integrated into the life of our congregations, to enrich our churches by what they have to offer, and by the dimension they can add to the tapestry of worship. Disabled people need to be welcomed into the church community, recognizing all they have to share and recognizing their special needs.

Meeting someone with a disability need not be an awkward situation; however, many people are unsure of how to act, which can create some embarrassing moments. This guide has been developed to help prepare church members for encounters they may have with disabled persons.

General Information

It's always appropriate to offer a friendly greeting. We can simply say "hello." It's always better to make a mistake while trying to be friendly and welcoming than to avoid a person out of fear of offending.

- Identify yourself by name and state your purpose. Ask if the person needs assistance.
- Handicapped parking spaces should be available and clearly marked near the church for disabled drivers and passengers.
- Provide directional signs to designated parking areas.
- Supervise the designated handicap parking areas. Provide "valet service" if all the designated parking spaces are full.
- Make sure the path from the car parking lot is kept clear of any obstacles.
- Have someone at, or near, the entrance/accessible door to open it.
- Offer assistance with coats, bags or other belongings.
- A shiny, slippery or wet surface can be a hazard to a person with a mobility aid such as a walker or crutches. Have seating and ample leg space near the door for those who find it difficult to walk.
- Don't ignore disabled people. Acknowledge their presence normally as you would anyone else's, and attempt to include them in whatever activity you are doing. A warm smile and a friendly conversation are very welcoming.
- Always speak directly to the person who has a disability. (Don't consider a companion to be a conversational go-between).
- "Ask First." Don't hesitate to ask the person who has a disability if you can help them in any way. Don't hesitate to use words like "see", "walk", "listen", etc., with disabled people.
- Whenever possible, seat disabled people with their families or friends. Remove the end chair if necessary or seat them in an aisle if possible (and legal).
- Appropriate touch is often a very effective communicator of love, concern and understanding.
- Use positive language when referring to disabilities, rather than using negative terms such as "crippled", "stricken", "afflicted", or "victims".
- Ask a disabled person to serve in the church.
- If a person has a service dog, ask how much room is needed. Do not pet, feed, speak or distract a "working dog", unless given permission by the user. It is important for these two to work as a team without distractions.
- If you have a community transportation assistance firm used for people affected by disability who attend your church, inform the usher/greetings of any special drop off/pick-up locations.

Visual Impairments

- When greeting a person who has a visual impairment, be sure to identify yourself and ask them what kind of assistance you can provide.
- Explain to a person with a visual problem where things are located.
- Offer a large print song sheet and/or Bible whether you think they can read or not.
- If a blind person has a guide dog, ask how much room is needed. Do not pet, feed, speak or distract a “working dog”, unless given permission by the user. It is important for these two to work as a team without distractions.
- Always offer people your arm by asking which arm they prefer. Use directional words when guiding a blind person to their seat. Describe their surroundings, seating choices, order of service and give clear simple instructions, i.e., “Go up the aisle for prayer.”
- If you are seated by a blind person, offer assistance during the altar call, communion or in exiting the sanctuary. Offer your arm to guide; never grab or push.

Hearing Impairments

- Speak clearly and slowly, but don’t exaggerate or shout. (Sometimes it may be necessary to communicate in writing.)
- Try to stand in front of the light source in order to provide a clear view of your face. (Never speak directly into the person’s ear).
- Look directly at the person and speak expressively; remember your facial expressions, gestures and body movements help in understanding. Just remember you don’t need to be an expert in sign language to do this.
- Remember to address the person with the disability and not someone who may be serving as an interpreter for that person. Speak as you would normally.
- Try to seat a hearing impaired person in an appropriate position in front of the pastor/speaker (especially if no signer is present).

Speech Impairments

- Try to give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has difficulty speaking. If you do not understand them, do not hesitate to ask them to repeat what they said.
- Remember the person with a speech impairment may have their own means of communication other than by speech, e.g., writing, pointing, keyboard, voice box, etc.

Mobility Impairments

- Wheelchair use provides freedom. Don’t assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy. It is a means of freedom, which allows the user to move about independently.
- A person who uses a wheelchair may be able to walk, but that person still needs the wheelchair. Try not to move the wheelchair or crutches out of reach of the person who uses them.
- Be respectful. A person’s wheelchair is part of their body space and should be treated with respect. Don’t hold onto or lean on it unless you have the person’s permission.
- Always ask the wheelchair user if they would like assistance before you help. It may be necessary for the person to give you some instructions. An unexpected push could throw the wheelchair off balance.

- If you need to lift a wheelchair, be sure to follow the person's instructions implicitly. They have been up and down steps before. If there are any questions of your ability, look for stronger, more able ushers or helpers.
- Offer one of three locations (front, middle or back of the auditorium). If more space is needed, remove two end chairs.
- When passing seated persons in a row, do not climb over a person in a wheelchair.

Developmental Disabilities

- If a mentally disabled person has behaviors which seem to be making people uncomfortable, have in mind some capable people in the congregation who would be willing to share their friendship, explain the service, and invite them to coffee hour. That is not insulting, it is friendly.
- Offer a bulletin to a person you know is developmentally disabled whether you think the person can read or not.

Hidden Disabilities

- Try to be aware of a congregation member's newly diagnosed or acquired illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, stroke, Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease, which may require some assistance.
- If someone in the congregation is having a seizure, don't attempt to restrain or put anything in their mouth. Move any objects or furniture away from the person, if possible, to prevent injury. Make the person feel at ease after the seizure, perhaps by helping them move to a comfortable resting place and by offering reassurance.