



# DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

It is important that disabled people be integrated into the life of our congregations to enrich our churches by what they can offer and by the dimension they can add to the tapestry of our worship. People with disabilities 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 ushers, leaders and members for encounters they may have with people living with disability.

## General Information

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- Always speak directly to the person who has a disability. Do not consider a companion or attendant to be a conversational go-between.
- Don't hesitate to ask the person who has a disability if you can help him or her in any way.
- Whenever possible, seat the person with the disability with their families or friends.
- Don't ignore those with disabilities. 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 friendly conversation is very welcoming.
- Don't hesitate to use words like "see", "walk", "listen", etc., with them.
- Touch is often a very effective communicator of love, concern and understanding. Ask first if you can give a hug. Those on the autism spectrum or with sensory issues may not welcome touch.
- Use positive language when referring to disabilities, rather than using negative terms such as "crippled", "stricken", "afflicted", or "victims".

## Visual Impairments

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- When greeting a person who has a visual impairment, be sure to identify yourself.
- Explain to a person who has a visual problem where things are located.
- If the blind person has a guide dog, ask how much room is needed.
- Offer a program to a person with a visual impairment (whether you think they can read it or not).
- Offer a braille or large-print Bible or hymnal, if available.
- Direct a blind person to his or her seat by asking them where they would like to sit and allowing them to take your upper arm above the elbow in order to lead them if need be; never grab or push.
- Explain the order of service and give clear, simple instructions, i.e., "go up the center aisle and down the outside aisle".
- Offer assistance during communion. Extend your elbow to guide.

## Hearing Impairments

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- 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).
- Try to seat a hearing impaired person in an appropriate position in front of the preacher/celebrant (especially when there is no signer present).

- 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.

## **Mobility Impairments**

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- 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. Language: WC user, not WC bound.
- 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 his or her 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 he or she 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 user out of balance.
- If lifting a wheelchair, be sure to follow the person's instructions implicitly. They have been up and down the steps before. If there are any questions of your ability, look for stronger, more able helpers.
- If you have a "wheelchair section", do not discourage the people from going to the front of the sanctuary steps or other stations to take communion or receive prayer with everyone else. The act of going forward may be an essential component of their spiritual being.

## **Developmental Disabilities**

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- 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 a hymnal, explain the service, invite him/her to coffee hour. This is not insulting, it is friendly.
- Offer a program to a person you know is developmentally or intellectually disabled, whether you think they can read it or not.

## **Hidden Disabilities**

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- Try to be aware of congregation members' hidden disabilities or newly diagnosed or acquired illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, stroke, Parkinson's disease, environmental illness, which may require assistance or attention.
- If someone in the congregation has a seizure, don't attempt to restrain or put anything in his or her 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.