

Interacting with Disabled Individuals



Disability Inclusion Resource Guide





Dear Leaders,

Thank you for your continued commitment to building a church that reflects the inclusive love of Christ. As we grow in our understanding of disability and accessibility, it's vital that we recognize the unique gifts and perspectives of every individual in our community.

1 Corinthians 12:22 reminds us: *“On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”* This truth calls us to honor and embrace all members of the body of Christ, especially those who have often been overlooked.

We're sharing resources and insights to help our ministries become more welcoming and accessible—from physical spaces to communication styles, and from worship experiences to leadership opportunities. Together, we can cultivate a culture of belonging where everyone is seen, valued, and empowered to serve.

With gratitude and unity,

Your Disabilities Ministry Team



Each individual with a disability is a unique person!

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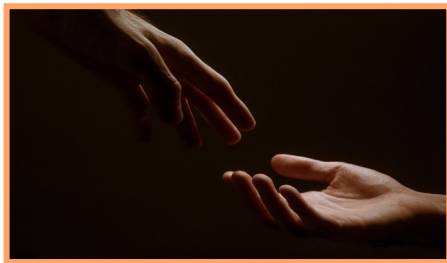
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Interacting With A Person Who Has A Mobility Impairment

Wheelchair and mobility aid use provides freedom. Don't assume that using a wheelchair or other mobility aids is a tragedy. The all-too-common phrase, "wheelchair bound", represents an unfortunate misunderstanding of the true situation. It is a means of freedom, which allows the person to move about independently.



Structural barriers in the church buildings create inconveniences for those who use wheelchairs and other mobility aids, and present significant barriers to participation in the full life of the faith community.

Here are a few tips to help remedy this situation:

- A person's wheelchair or other mobility aid is part of his body space and should be treated with respect. Don't hang or lean on it unless you have the person's permission. Don't attempt to move the person in the wheelchair without asking. Don't be tempted to pat a person in a wheelchair on the head, as it is a degrading gesture.
- Speak directly to the person, and if the conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit or kneel to place yourself on the same level as the person in the wheelchair.
- You should always ask the individual using a mobility aid what help is needed before trying to provide assistance.
- Don't worry about using expressions such as "running along" or "walked away" when speaking to a person in a wheelchair. These sayings are used in everyday conversation and are not offensive.
- Always ask a respectful question when you are unsure of what to say or do.



- When giving wheelchair users directions, be aware of architectural barriers such as narrow doorways, stairs, curbs, etc.
- When a person transfers out of the wheelchair to a chair, toilet, car or other object, do not move the wheelchair out of reaching distance. Some people who use a wheelchair for mobility can walk with aids, such as braces, walkers, or crutches. They use wheelchairs some of the time to conserve energy and move about more quickly.
- Don't classify persons who use wheelchairs as "sick". Although wheelchairs are often associated with hospitals, they are used more frequently to assist people with mobility disabilities to navigate around their home, work and community.
- Relationships are important. Have eye and physical contact with wheelchair users in the same respectful manner you would for a person that isn't in a wheelchair.
- A person in a wheelchair should never be seated in the church aisle. When an individual uses a walker or other mobility device, this device should never be left in the aisle. Throughout the sanctuary several spaces should be left open for seating the person in a wheelchair, or for placing the walker. These should be scattered throughout the sanctuary. In our sanctuary, this simply means removing some chairs from the end of rows in varied locations.
- Some individuals need arms on the chair to assist them in standing from their seated position. This simply means placing some chairs with arms in varied locations in the sanctuary.
- Changes in elevation should always have appropriate ramp alternatives. Remember that everyone can use a ramp, but not everyone can use stairs.
- An entry door at the top of a ramp needs to be operable by a person using a wheelchair or other mobility aid. This may mean installing an electric push button opener. If the door cannot be opened, then the ramp is inaccessible.



Interacting With A Person Who Is Blind Or Visually Impaired

This summary is intended as guidelines for interactions with persons who are blind or are visually impaired. Every person with a disability is an individual, and blindness and visual impairment is a spectrum of vision loss. You should always consider the situation for each individual and ask appropriate questions to determine the current needs. This summary is about disabilities, but you are not working with disabilities; you are working with individual who have disabilities.



Speaking with a person who is blind or visually impaired

- Remember to initiate an interaction by identifying yourself using your name. It is inconsiderate to tease by saying such things as, “Do you know who this is?”
- Use verbal clues to let the individual know your intentions. For example, rather than putting your hand out and getting no response, say something like: “Let me shake your hand.”
- You should speak directly to the individual, not through a companion. A person who is blind can often tell if you are looking at them when you are speaking, so look at the person directly.
- Use the name of the blind person to get their attention since you cannot use eye contact to let the blind individual know you are speaking to them.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice and do not raise your voice. It is not uncommon for people to raise their voice when speaking to a person who is blind; but most likely, the person who is blind does not have a problem hearing. If he has trouble hearing, he will let you know.
- Using phrases such as “good to see you” is perfectly acceptable.



- Be sure to verbally let the blind person know who is in a group and tell the blind person when you or someone leaves.
- Support facial expressions or visual cues with verbal cues. For example, say “yes” when you are nodding your head.
- Remember that a person who is blind cannot find you unless you verbally tell them where you are. They are not being aloof; they simply don’t know that you are there.

Offering Assistance

- Ask if the individual needs assistance and how you can best help. Do not assume incapability. Don’t feel awkward if your offer is not accepted.
- If location directions are needed, give specific directions like, “The desk is five feet to your right,” as opposed to pointing and saying, “The desk is over there.”
- Verbal clues are essential to a person who is blind. Give a word picture when describing things to an individual with vision loss, including such details as color, texture, shape and landmarks.
- When you guide a person who is blind, they will grasp your arm just above your elbow and lag half a step behind you. Move your guiding arm behind your back when approaching a narrow space so the person you are guiding can step behind you and follow in a single file.
- Hesitate briefly at a curb or at the beginning of a flight of stairs; tell the person you are guiding whether the steps go up or down.
- You should allow the person you are guiding to find the handrail and locate the edge of the first steps before proceeding.
- You should not grab the person you are guiding by the hand, arm, or shoulder and try to steer them.
- You should not grab the person’s cane or the handle of the guide dog’s harness.
- If they need assistance in taking a seat, show them to their chair by putting their hand on the back of the chair. They will be able to seat themselves easily.

(Continued on the next page)



Interacting with blind/visually impaired individuals using white canes:

- Use of a white cane when walking is a common aid for people who are blind. Speaking will help orient the individual to your location.
- The white cane can create a barrier between you and the person using it. Make an effort to avoid this by speaking to the person rather than trying to stay out of the way.
- Remember that the white cane alerts the individual to changes in elevation of the walking path, and to find things such as the edges of pavement, walls and corners. The person using a white cane may need your help in identifying the location of things in a new or changing environment. You can then serve as a “sighted guide” as described previously.

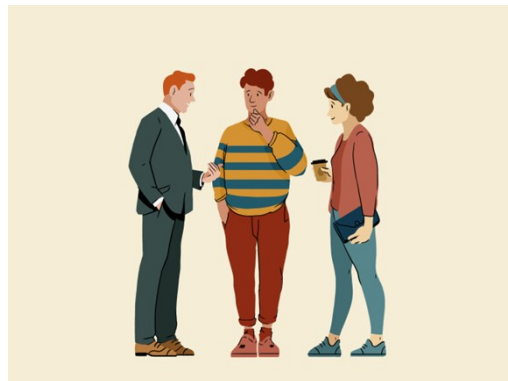
Interacting with a person using a guide dog:

- Speak directly to the person using the guide dog with no initial reference to the dog. After establishing a conversation, you may ask questions about the guide dog.
- When guiding a person using a guide dog, the person may have the guide dog follow you, or the person may drop the dog harness, and you can serve as a “sighted guide” as described previously.
- You should give any needed instructions to the person, not the guide dog.
- It is essential that the guide dog maintains focus in order to provide safe guidance. This means you should not do anything that would distract the dog’s attention, such as calling the dog, touch the dog’s harness, petting or feeding the dog. The decision of what interaction you should have with the dog is up to the guide dog user. If you have questions, please ask.



Interacting With A Person Who Has Difficulty Speaking

There are many situations which can make it difficult for an individual to speak clearly. Regardless of the reason for the speech impairment, it is important to begin with respect for the person with whom you are communicating. This person has something to say, and it is worth making the effort to understand.



Here are a few tips to help make the communication process more comfortable and effective:

- Give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has difficulty speaking.
 - Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
 - You should not assume that the person with a speech difficulty also has a mental impairment.
 - Rather than speak for the person, allow extra time for the conversation and be patient. Do not finish a person's sentence.
 - If you have difficulty understanding, don't pretend that you do not understand. Repeat as much as you do understand. The person's reaction will guide you and clue you in.
 - Use paper and pen as a last resort.
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Interacting With A Person Who Is Deaf or Hard Of Hearing

People who are deaf or hard of hearing are a diverse group. Each person must be understood individually. There are variations in how a person becomes deaf: level of hearing, age of onset, education background, communication methods, and cultural identity. How people identify themselves is personal and may reflect identification with the deaf communities, the degree to which they can hear, or the relative age of onset. It is important, then, to remember that each individual who is deaf or hard of hearing is unique. The term, “deaf”, may not mean a total loss of hearing, and “hard of hearing” may be profound. You will need to know from each individual what their specific needs may be.



People who are deaf or hard of hearing use many methods to communicate. Many people use speech and lip-reading, some use sign language, while others write or use a combination of these.

Here are some guidelines to promote effective communication with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- Ask the individual what method of communication works best for them.
- Communicate, when possible, in a quiet environment with few distractions and little or no background noise.
- Make sure the area where you are speaking is well lit. Avoid standing with the window or a light source behind you. Look directly into the individual's face.
- Always get the person's attention before you speak by raising your hand or touching the person lightly on the shoulder.
- Try to pronounce your words clearly. Avoid exaggerated lip movements or “yelling”.



- Make sure your mouth and face are visible. Do not eat, chew gum, or cover your mouth in any way.
- Use facial expressions and gestures to help clarify your message.
- Rephrase your message if the person does not understand you.
- Verify that the individual has understood what you have communicated. The best lip readers will understand 40% of what is said.
- Do not assume a person can hear and understand your voice if he/she is wearing a hearing aid.
- When in a group situation, only one person should speak at a time.
- Ask the person with a hearing loss what you can do to help improve the communication process. Be patient and allow the time needed to effectively communicate.

When a sign language interpreter is used:

- You should look at and speak directly to the individual who is deaf, not the interpreter.
- Speak at a normal rate and volume.
- The interpreter will translate all that is said when interpreting; do not say anything you do not want translated.

In the worship service:

- Videos should be captioned when possible.
- An interpreter skilled in American Sign Language (ASL) should be used when necessary.

Hearing Assistive Technology (HAT): Typical hearing aids amplify almost all sounds and cannot separate the sound you want to hear from the background noise. HAT overcomes challenging acoustics by transmitting sound signals to a person's hearing aid, headphones, or other devices. Hearing loop systems are the most common solutions among churches. [The Hearing Loss Association of American](#) has some excellent resources on available HAT options.



Interacting with A Person Who Is Experiencing an Emotional Crisis

Before you go on duty each Sabbath, PRAY. Ask God to be with you, to give you patience and compassion, to guide you and to give you wisdom. This should be the case no matter who you might encounter.

From time to time, you may encounter someone exhibiting odd behavior or who has an unusual appearance (i.e., appears to be talking to themselves; their clothing is unkempt and/or dirty; they have an unpleasant odor; or they seem agitated—pacing, raising their voice, or crying). Do NOT assume the person is going to be violent UNLESS you see a weapon.



- **Stop.** Say another quick prayer for God to be with you. Take a deep breath. If possible, ask another person to greet this individual with you, preferably a member of the opposite gender from you. This is helpful because you never know if the individual will react better to a man or a woman.
- **Walk over quietly.** Stand about an arm's length from the individual. You can extend your hand in greeting. If the individual does not respond, don't let this bother you. Calmly and pleasantly say, "Good morning. I'm _____ and this is _____. We're glad you're here. How may we help you?" You may experience several responses:

1. "Thank you. I'm ok."

If you get this response, don't immediately walk away. Say something like, "I didn't catch your name." or "We are glad you are here today. What is your name?" The person may or may not respond. This is ok. Whether they do or don't, reply with this, "I'm _____ and this is _____. If we can do anything to be of help, please don't hesitate to ask."

2. No response.

In this case, ask gently, "What is your name?" If the person responds, you might say, "You seem upset. Would you like to talk?" The person will probably not say "Yes." But if they do, refer to #3.



3. “I’m upset” or “I need help with X.”

Take them aside (with another person) and sit in a quiet, but public location. Give the individual personal space (arm’s length) and do not touch them. Calmly ask, “How may we be of help?” You do NOT have to solve whatever problem the person may be having. **LISTEN**. Nod your head as they speak. Express concern and offer to pray with them. Whatever the problem, tell them that you care and while you aren’t sure exactly what do in the moment, you will be happy to explore options. If the person expresses significant needs such as housing, money, or food, contact a pastor; if not available, contact the head elder or head deacon. Do the same if the individual talks about grieving over a loss or expresses despair. If you feel unsafe at any time, contact **Tom McCullough, the church’s safety officer**, and ask him to join you. If the individual talks about odd or difficult things (i.e., the devil is after me; people are out to get me; it’s the end of time and the world isn’t ready; or anything else that makes you uncomfortable), respond with “I understand. This does seem like a lot. We care and we’re happy to pray with you.” Then involve the pastor, head elder or head deacon in the conversation.

4. Person is agitated and raises their voice.

When this occurs, drop your voice to a soft tone and say, “You seem upset. Help me understand what is going on.” If the person gets louder and more agitated, contact **Tom McCullough, the church’s safety officer**. If the individual becomes aggressive, you may need to **call 9-1-1**. However, it is VERY unlikely this will be needed.

- **Do not make sudden or aggressive moves** and do not move closer to the person. Do not allow yourself to become angry or upset. Do not raise your voice.
- Above all, **remain calm**. People who are upset will often mirror the reactions of the person/people who approach them. If you are calm and quiet, chances are they will begin to calm down and relax. Say a silent prayer and ask for God to send His Spirit to be with you in the moment.

Remember, nearly every problem has a solution.

It may not be the perfect solution, but there are always options.



Resources



Americans with Disabilities Act

www.ada.gov

**American Foundation
for the Blind**

www.afb.org

**American Speech-Language-Hearing
Association**

www.asha.org

**Hearing Loss Association
of America**

www.hearingloss.org

National Institute for Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov

800-950-6264

TN Crisis Hotline

855-CRISIS-1 (855-274-7471)

or text “TN” to 741-741

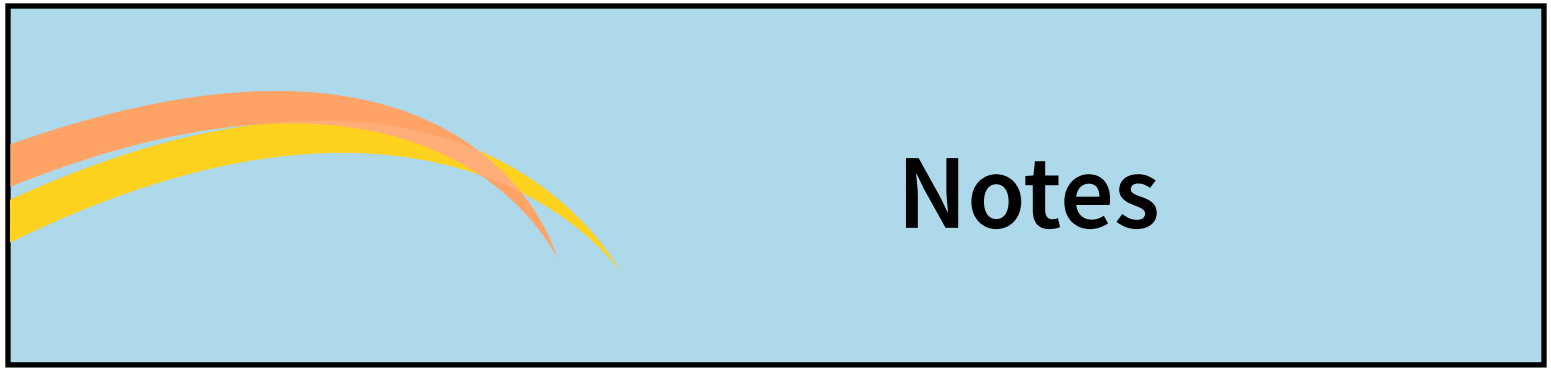
**Partnerships for Families, Adults &
Children 24hr hotline**

423-697-7130

**Seventh-day Adventist Church/NAD
Disabilities Ministries**

**[www.nadadventist.org/
departments/disabilities-
ministries](http://www.nadadventist.org/departments/disabilities-ministries)**





Notes



For more information, resources and a digital copy of this guide, please scan the QR code below:



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