

# THROUGH THE DOOR - INTO THE HEART

ASSISTING CONGREGATIONS IN WELCOMING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

## INTRODUCTION

This packet of materials has been assembled by the Disability Awareness Task Force of the Northwest District of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.



The District, at its 2000 and 2003 conventions, authorized this task force to facilitate ministry to and with people with disabilities in the congregations of the District.

In 1990 the federal government passed the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). This law requires public facilities to make accommodation for people with disabilities.

Except for new construction and remodeling, churches were not included in this act; certainly the church should be at the forefront of efforts to be inclusive and to open our doors to all people.

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**The pages that follow contain many ideas and suggestions to help YOU answer some of these questions:**

1. How is our congregation inclusive?
2. How does our mission statement reflect inclusivity?
3. How are our church buildings accessible?
4. How is our church family truly open and welcoming to people with disabilities?
5. How are we making use of the gifts offered by people who have disabilities?
6. How and where do we start?



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## A THEOLOGY OF INCLUSION

"Your kingdom come." We pray this as the first petition of the great prayer Jesus taught His followers. Jesus placed this petition first and foremost in His prayer, because the kingdom of God was at the center of His ministry and of His vision of a new humanity. In word and deed, through preaching, teaching, and healing, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God. To all who would see and hear, His entire life, death, and resurrection was a sign of what God's reign would look like in a world torn by division and exclusion.

In Jesus' vision, all those who were excluded by human society—the poor, those who were outcast, gentiles, women, foreigners, those blemished by disease and disability—were in fact the honored guests at God's great messianic banquet. In the less than perfect world that precedes the final coming of God's kingdom, His followers were also to be signs of God's welcome to those who are disenfranchised.

St. Paul broke through the wall separating Jew and Gentile with this gospel implication. As the early church grew outward from Jerusalem, it elevated hospitality and inclusion to the forefront of its mission practice. That conviction of God's unconditional welcome to all in the crucified and risen Christ carried the Church's mission to the ends of the world.

The greatest challenge of the Church today remains this outward-reaching thrust to all kinds and conditions of people. The shadow side of this challenge is the temptation to fall back, either through apathy or willfulness, into exclusivity. People with mental and physical disabilities present the Church not only with a challenge, but primarily with the Lord Jesus himself. In the sister/brother with disabilities, Christ is in our midst.

We embrace the very kingdom of God that we pray for when we invoke the Spirit of Christ to transform our thinking and attitudes toward people with disabilities; when we structure our physical facilities in such a way that all are included in the entire mission and ministry of the parish; and when we welcome and use their gifts to the glory of God in whose image they are made.



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## GETTING STARTED

**Fifteen to twenty percent of our population have a physical or mental disability.** With the graying of America this number will increase. The ADA defines disability in these words: "a person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of major life activities."

**MARY JANE OWEN** in The Priest (July 2003-p.11) says,  
*"Folks are asking why grocery stores and movie theaters seem more welcoming than their parish; why museums have large print guidebooks for those with visual impairments and libraries have instructional materials easily understood by those with cognitive disabilities, but these resources are missing as they seek to worship in their parishes."*



Ms. Owen's words are powerful and give us food for thought.

**Look around your church and your community.** You notice many who use wheelchairs, large print, or hearing aids, or who experience some less obvious mental or physical disability. You know of countless other individuals who have experienced temporary disabilities such as broken bones, severe back problems, eye cataracts or other challenges - all conditions benefiting from the use of crutches, canes or other assistive devices. Add to this list the many physical and mental challenges of aging, and you begin to understand why church accessibility is a key factor in responding to God's call for us to welcome ALL into the community of faith. **THE NEED IS THERE!** The following pages offer suggestions to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities in the mission and ministry of your congregation.

*For assistance call the Disability Awareness Task Force at:  
Northwest District - LCMS Office - 503-288-8383.*

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## TEN EASY WAYS TO WELCOME PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE AREA OF AFFIRMATION

1. Include children, youth and adults with disabilities in worship as cantors, ushers, musicians, altar servers, gift bearers, lectors, etc.
2. Make a well-rounded committee on inclusion part of your congregation's governing council to increase meaningful participation for persons with disabilities.
3. Educate the entire congregation about disability issues by periodically running pieces in your bulletin about hospitality and welcome. See "How You Can Make a Difference" (Page 6 in this folder).
4. Train ushers and lay leaders as role models to include and welcome persons with disabilities and their families.
5. Make prayers and petitions more inclusive of persons with disabilities.
6. Place an "inclusion box" in the worship space with paper and pencils for suggestions for better inclusion.
7. Observe an annual Inclusion Awareness Day to celebrate how your congregation welcomes persons with disabilities.
8. Publicize accessibility goals as part of fundraising campaigns.
9. Consult people who use a wheelchair, walker or crutches when planning renovations or additions.
10. List accessible features and supports available in a permanent "For your comfort and convenience..." section of the bulletin or worship aide.

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## COMMUNICATION

**Some good ideas used by congregations to welcome persons with disabilities and their families in the area of communication:**

- Worship services are presented verbally and visually, dramatically and musically **for different learning styles**.
- Sermons or entire worship services are recorded on **audio tape** or are **available in large print**.
- Amplifying **sound system** is in good order. **Assistive listening devices** are available for those with hearing difficulties.
- **Church lighting** is surveyed to ensure that the wattage is high enough and that the placement of fixtures ensures maximum visibility.
- A **TDD** is in the church office so that a person without hearing can communicate by telephone.
- A comfortable way to offer **suggestions for inclusion** is created for people with disabilities and their families so they are not made to feel like "complainers".
- **Sign language interpreter** is available for worship services/events as needed.
- The words "**Stand or sit as you are able**" and "**Kneel or sit as you are able**" are used in worship aides to direct the congregation.
- **Accessibility logos** are used in local newspaper advertisements, print materials and outside signage.
- The faith community **consistently publicizes** that persons with disabilities are **intentionally included** in worship, ministry, fellowship and study.
- **Transportation** is personally **offered** to people in need and provided on a consistent basis. This availability is also communicated in bulletins and event announcements.

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## HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

There are many things that you, as an individual, can do to help people with disabilities feel welcome in your house of faith.

1. I will treat **ALL** people as **PEOPLE FIRST** - as I would like to be treated.
2. I will **SPEAK DIRECTLY** to the person with a disability, not only to the nearby family member, companion, interpreter, or the canine companion.
3. I will offer to **SHAKE HANDS** when introduced to a person with a disability. (Persons with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb may shake hands. Shaking the left hand is okay, too.)
4. I will place myself at **EYE LEVEL**, in front, for easy conversation with a person in a wheelchair, with crutches, or with a walking frame.
5. I will **OFFER ASSISTANCE AND WAIT** until the offer is accepted. I will wait and then ask for instructions.
6. I will be **PATIENT AND WAIT** for the person with difficulty speaking, rather than speaking for the person. I may help by asking short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head.
7. I will see the **WHOLENESS OF SPIRIT** beneath the surface of someone with a disability and overcome the tendency to turn away or ignore the person.
8. I will **TREAT ADULTS** with developmental disabilities **AS ADULTS**, not as children. I will use first names only when using the same familiarity for all persons.
9. I will get the attention of someone who is hearing-impaired by **LIGHTLY TAPPING** their elbow or shoulder, or by **WAVING MY HAND**. I will look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read my lips.
10. I will guide a person with visual impairments by **GIVING VERBAL CLUES** to steps, curbs, escalators or doors.

*Please duplicate and share with others.*

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## TEN EASY WAYS TO WELCOME PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE AREA OF ACCESSIBILITY

1. Use universal design concepts to plan buildings, programs, ministries and events so that all can participate.
2. Move Sunday school classes, fellowship activities and meetings to accessible areas.
3. Encourage church members to designate memorial gifts for accessibility projects.
4. Install long-handled door hardware. It is easier for everyone to use, not only those with impaired hand function.
5. Place pews 32 inches apart to allow space for people who use walkers, crutches and canes.
6. Provide padded seating or have chair pads available. Provide chairs with arms for those who have difficulty rising.
7. Open the ends of several existing pews so that people using wheelchairs may be seated with their families and friends rather than in specially designated, segregated sections.
8. Think about converting two side-by-side bathrooms into one accessible, unisex bathroom so caregivers can assist.
9. Consult people with disabilities in every phase of planning new construction, building modifications or additions to buildings.
10. Explore ways of including members of your congregation who have disabilities in the education, fellowship, ministry, and worship of the faith community. Often simple accommodations can make participation possible.

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## PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

Words, whether spoken or signed, are the basic means by which people communicate. Words are powerful tools that can affirm and empower. At the same time, the misuse of words can belittle and demean. Language used to describe people with disabilities often focuses on lack of ability rather than on competency. Age-old terms such as "deaf and dumb", "invalid", or "idiot" continue to be used despite their disrespectful tone and the inaccurate message they portray.

When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, words should be chosen with care in order to promote dignity and a positive image. The following suggestions, adapted from guidelines developed by *Paraquad, Inc.*, and *The Research and Training Center on Independent Living*, may assist in this process:

- ◆ Make reference to the person first, then the disability. Say "a person with a disability" rather than "a disabled person".
- ◆ If the disability isn't germane to the story or conversation, don't mention it.
- ◆ A person is not a condition; therefore, avoid describing a person in such a manner.
- ◆ Don't present someone as an "epileptic". Rather say "a person with epilepsy".
- ◆ Do not portray successful people with disabilities as superhuman, as this raises expectations that all people with disabilities should reach this level.
- ◆ Do not sensationalize a disability by use of such terms as "afflicted with", "victim of", "suffers from".
- ◆ Do not use generic labels for disability groups such as "the retarded".

The following terms should be avoided because they have negative connotations and evoke pity:

abnormal	imbecile	pitiful	tragedy	burden
maimed	suffer	deformed	moron	spastic
stricken with	palsied	pathetic	unfortunate	incapacitated

The chart on the back of this page demonstrates the power of words to dignify or demean those they describe.

<u>Words with Dignity</u>	<u>Words to Avoid</u>
Person with a disability, disabled	Crippled, handicapped, invalid (literally, invalid means "not valid")
Person who has, person who experienced, person with	Victim, afflicted with or by
Non-disabled	Normal (referring to non-disabled people as "normal" insinuates that people with disabilities are abnormal)
Uses a wheelchair	Restricted or confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound (the chair enables mobility), wheelchair person
Deaf, non-verbal	Deaf mute, deaf and dumb, dummy
Disabled since birth, born with	
Emotional disorder, mental illness	Crazy, insane, mental case, psycho
Has a physical disability or spinal curvature	Deformed, misshapen, hunchbacked
Has multiple or severe disabilities	Vegetable, creature, freak
Person with mental retardation	Retard, idiot

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## GUIDELINES FOR CLERGY, USHERS AND LAY LEADERS

### General Information

1. What do you say when you meet a person with a disability? How about "Hello"?
2. Because each person has gifts and abilities, ask a person with a disability to usher, to serve communion, to read, etc.
3. Speak directly to the person with a disability or difference, not only to the family member, companion, interpreter, or canine companion.
4. Ask the person with the disability if you can help. Respect any refusal.
5. Be sensitive to where a person wishes to receive communion - at his/her seat or at the altar.
6. A warm smile and friendly conversation are very welcoming.
7. Feel comfortable using words like see, walk, and listen with persons with disabilities.
8. Use person-first language such as "persons with disabilities" NOT "the disabled".
9. Offer large-print bulletins or assistive listening devices.
10. Use the accessibility logo. Include the words "All Are Welcome".



ALL ARE WELCOME

### WELCOMING PERSONS WITH BLINDNESS OR VISION LOSS

1. Identify yourself when you greet the person. Tell the person when you are about to leave.
2. Talk normally, using your customary voice and typical expressions like "See you later".
3. Offer your arm when assisting, the same way an usher does at a wedding.
4. Give verbal cues such as "We are going through a doorway". Explain the traffic pattern with clear, calm instructions such as "Go up the center aisle".
5. Canine companions should be approached only with the owners' approval.

## WELCOMING PERSONS WITH MOBILITY DIFFERENCES

1. Speak directly to the person.
2. Offer assistance, but accept a "No, thank you".
3. Sit down so that you are at eye-level if the conversation will last more than a few minutes.
4. Shake hands or lightly touch a shoulder in the same way you would with others.
5. Keep a person's wheelchair or walker near the person. A person who uses a chair may be able to walk but still needs the chair.

## WELCOMING PERSONS WITH DEAFNESS OR HEARING LOSS

1. Face the person. He/she will appreciate seeing your facial expression and may read your lips. Your face, gestures, and body movements help in understanding.
2. Move closer rather than shout.
3. Speak clearly and slowly. Writing may be necessary.

## WELCOMING PERSONS WITH SPEECH DIFFERENCES

1. Be patient. Let a person talk at his/her own pace.
2. Remember that a person may have communication means other than speech, such as writing.
3. Ask questions that require short answers or a shake of the head. If you cannot understand, rephrase the question.
4. Repeat or paraphrase what was said in order to confirm that you understand.

## WELCOMING PERSONS WITH COGNITIVE DIFFERENCES

1. Greet the person and interact normally.
2. Keep things simple and uncomplicated.
3. Treat people equally regardless of participation level; give prayer books or hymnals to all; allow everyone a chance to speak.

*Please duplicate and share with others.*

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## SOME GOOD IDEAS

Some good ideas used by congregations to welcome persons with disabilities and their families in the area of affirmation:

- ✓ The faith community recognizes **talents and/or gifts** of individuals. Rarely are persons described by their disabilities, and usually they are described by their strengths. For example, a woman who is blind proclaims the Scripture using Braille, and a man who is a guitar player and who uses a wheelchair performs with the music ministry.
- ✓ An **access survey** is used to determine the individual needs of the congregation and to help prioritize improvements such as accessible parking, large-print materials, improved sound system and lighting, wheelchair access, inclusive religious education classes, etc. (See ADA checklist and Communication & Architectural Access Survey of Worship Facilities).
- ✓ Adults and children with disabilities are given **opportunities to serve others** within the worship service and in the outreach programs of the faith community.
- ✓ Persons with invisible disabilities are **active members**. (Invisible disabilities include learning disabilities, psychiatric disorders, seizure disorders, the many forms of cancer, arthritis, lupus, heart disease, stroke, scent sensitivity, allergies, etc.)
- ✓ Children of all abilities are **included in religious education classes** with appropriate supports.
- ✓ A religious or lay leader who has acquired a serious disability **continues to serve in worship services** and church leadership if he/she desires.
- ✓ A "**Care Committee**" has been created to connect the congregation to families with disabilities by means of weekly social visits, shopping assistance, caregiver break time, or babysitting. Committee members are **trained to communicate appropriately** and **to extend open-arms** to the new baby with difficulties or to the person with a new injury/condition so that all families can feel the warmth of God's love.

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