

Hospitality Team Training



It does not take long for most people, including families affected by disability, to decide whether to return to a church. The hospitality team is the first contact many people will have with your church and the last people they will likely see as they leave. Training your ushers, greeters, parking lot team, welcome center volunteers, and anyone else in a hospitality role is a fantastic way to make families affected by disability feel more welcome. Below you will find a simple training outline to equip your hospitality team to welcome individuals and families impacted by disability.

Special Needs Ministry Overview

- Parents' Panel discussion or pre-recorded interview with a family [*like this one*](#).
 - Questions for parents' panel discussion might include:
 - Tell us about your family.
 - What would you like the church to know about your child with special needs?
 - How does your church currently welcome you? Does this make you feel welcomed?
- Special Needs Ministry Leaders — Have them share the vision and scope of the special needs ministry
 - What ages are included
 - The meeting times, locations, and point people
 - Describe the ministry set-up (full inclusion, buddy ministry, self-contained, or hybrid)
- Describe the options during worship services. This could include:
 - A sensory area
 - Worship buddies
 - An intake process for first time families whose child has special needs
 - Share any options for long-term inclusion like choirs, drama, and opportunities to serve

General Information

- Don't ignore people with disabilities. A warm smile and a friendly conversation are very welcoming.
- Always speak directly to the person with a disability. As much as possible, don't look to their family or caregivers to communicate for them.
- "Ask first." Sometimes jumping in to help someone without asking first can do more harm than help. Don't hesitate to ask the person with a disability if you can help them in any way. It is OK to use words like "see," "walk," or "listen."
- Appropriate touch is often a very effective communicator of love, concern and understanding.
- Use people-first, inclusive language.

For the next section of the training, invite individuals from your church or community with disabilities to share what makes them feel more and less welcomed.

Welcoming Persons Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- When greeting someone 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 impairment where things are located.
- Always offer people your arm by asking which arm they prefer. Use directional words when guiding a person who is blind to their seat. Describe their surroundings, seat choices, and order of service. Give clear simple instructions like, "Go up the aisle for prayer."
- If you are seated by a person who is blind, offer your help if the congregation is asked to physically move. This could be during Communion, times of prayer, or exiting the sanctuary. Offer your arm to guide; never grab their arm or push them forward.
- If time allows, divide up into pairs and practice. Have one person temporarily experience visual impairment by using a blindfold while the other person assists. Practice walking into a room, finding a place to sit, exiting the sanctuary, and doing other tasks that someone might experience during a morning at church. Take time to debrief, talking about how it felt to assist and to be assisted.

Welcoming Persons Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Speak clearly and without rushing, but don't exaggerate or shout. Sometimes it may be necessary to communicate in writing.
- Try to stand in front of a light source to provide a clear view of your face.
- Look directly at the person and speak expressively using your facial expressions, gestures, and body movements help communicate. You do not need to be an expert in sign language to do this.

Welcoming Persons Who Have Speech Impairment

- 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 means of communicating other than by speech, e.g., writing, pointing, keyboard, voice box, etc.

Welcoming Persons Have Developmental Delay

- Offer a bulletin to a person you know is developmentally disabled whether you think the person can read or not.
- If a person with developmental delay exhibits behavior that seems to be making people around them uncomfortable, have in mind someone in your congregation who would be willing to share their friendship, explain the service, and spend time with them before or after the service.

Welcoming Persons Who Have Hidden Disabilities

- Individuals on the Autism Spectrum may miss social cues or respond differently to social contexts such as worship services. The hospitality team can model acceptance. Many churches provide a sensory area close to their worship space.
- Try to be aware of congregation members' abilities, diagnoses, or illnesses that may limit them such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, stroke, Parkinson's, or Alzheimer's disease.

Welcoming Persons Who Have Mobility Impairment

It can be a good idea to invite a person who uses a wheelchair or a physical therapist to present this section.

- Wheelchair use provides freedom, allowing the user to move about independently.
- A person who uses a wheelchair may be able to walk, but still needs the wheelchair. If the individual using a wheelchair transfers to a chair, try not move their wheelchair or crutches out of their reach.
- 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 the wheelchair unless you have the person's permission.
- Establish eye contact with the person in the wheelchair. Stand in front of him or her during your conversation, it may even be better to sit or kneel to speak with them at their eye level.
- 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 them or their 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 and are the expert. If you have any question on your ability, look for stronger, more able helpers.