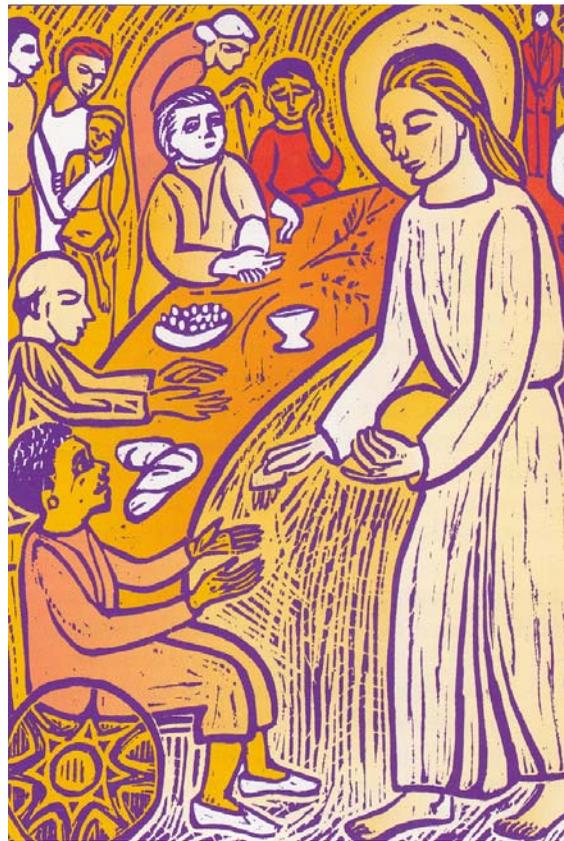


National Catholic
Partnership on Disability

Welcoming Parishioners with Disabilities



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His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.” Jn. 9:1-3

We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.

Welcome & Justice for Persons with Disabilities (1999)

The truth is that all of us are disabled. Only God is able. Only God can create, give life, and make our efforts fruitful.

Deep within, we know that the body is frail. But it is sometimes difficult to recognize that we are God’s people- bent, feeble, blind, with many diseases and disabilities. Those among us who cannot disguise their fragility remind us of realities that sometimes seem to bitter to accept. Accepting these realities can help us recognize the spiritual gifts that accompany our shared vulnerability.

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) defines “disability” as “the normal and expected outcome of the risks and stresses of the living process.”

Chances are good, then, that you or someone you know has one or more disabilities. For twenty years, the U. S. Census and national surveys have consistently reported that approximately one person in five has some disability that limits one or more life functions.

Perhaps you wear a hearing aid or communicate using American Sign Language; maybe your neighbor uses a wheelchair. Your child might receive supplemental services for a learning disability. The person who sits at the end of your pew this Sunday might live with chronic depression.

We all struggle with life. We must carry on this struggle in a spirit of mutual love, inspired by Christ’s teaching that in serving others we serve the Lord (see Mt. 25:40). And as the U. S. Catholic bishops have reminded us, “concern for persons with disabilities was one of the prominent notes of Jesus’ earthly ministry.”

Everyone has been given gifts to serve the Body of Christ- people present in the Church and the world. Have the heart of a missionary- whether you have a disability or not- and use your gifts to move outside your comfortable circle to be a person of service and share you faith. This brochure suggests ways for each of us, as parishioners, to open doors to other parishioners who might have disabilities- helping to build a community of interdependent people, and discovering the Kingdom of god in our midst.

Seven Ways to Open the Doors

Those with varying degrees of disabilities have responsibilities and gifts to open the parish “doors” to worshipers of all abilities. But as the U. S. Catholic bishops have stated, “the creation of a fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical accommodation to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners toward persons with disabilities.” Live out the Christ-centered focus of our Christian Baptism. Call forth the gifts of all in your community. Each person can follow these suggestions in some way, according to his or her gifts and capacities.

1. Initiate both a personal and parish examination of conscience.
 - How are you living the Beatitudes? How might you continue to grow?
 - What has your parish done to live the Beatitudes by becoming more accessible to those with physical, sensory, cognitive, or psychological disabilities? How can you further this process? If you or a family member have a disability, you have a special opportunity to generously offer your

Experience in helping that process. Be an advocate.

2. Survey other parishioners to identify which of the following would help them to participate more fully in all aspects of parish life:

- Transportation
- Large- print worship aids and/ or bulletins; or audio- taped bulletins
- Assistive listening devices or ASL signing
- Easily grasped door handles; appropriate door pressure
- Handrails at steps
- Wheelchair seating; elevator
- Pastoral services for those unable to attend regular service
- Accessible restrooms

3. Encourage committees and groups in your parish- such as the parish council or committees for liturgy, evangelization, social justice, religious education, and pro- life issues- to evaluate the accessibility of all parish programs in order to welcome people of all abilities. Keep in mind that accessibility goes beyond physical access- it

includes those who have sensory or cognitive disabilities.

4. Make your liturgies accessible. This might include ensuring physical access to your altar, ambo, and reconciliation rooms or confessionals; offering Braille and/ or large- print missalettes and hymnals; and offering ASL interpretation at Mass and other sacramental celebrations. Lack of access for the sacrament of Reconciliation is particularly painful for those who use mobility aids or who require ASL or assistive- listening devices. And the Precious Blood should be made available at all times for those with a severe sensitivity to gluten (Celiac- Sprue disease).

5. Search your local community for people who live in assisted- living settings or nursing homes, and offer companions and transportation for Mass and other parish aware that you need to attend liturgies and seasonal services.

6. Encourage your parish to offer accessible training sessions for anyone interested in becoming Eucharistic ministers, lectors, hospitality ministers, cantors, or altar servers. By offering training sessions that create access for people with disabilities to participate in the liturgy, your parish can reflect the rich diversity of God’s gift of life.

7. Welcome Catholics with disabilities who have stayed away because they have felt marginalized. The steps outlined above can extend the hand of welcome- as can helping fellow parishioners to educate themselves so that they can reach out to their brothers and sisters with disabilities and their families. Or if you or a family member have a disability and have felt disenfranchised, consider responding to initiatives that seek to bring disabled Catholics and their families home to the Church. When parishioners reach out, they may be uncertain about how to welcome someone who has needs that they have never experienced themselves. Be generous and help them to learn. Give them time to grow. To risk it, even one more time, is well worth the effort.