

People with disabilities are not “other” people but rather, our friends, our families, and our selves. All of us will probably have to cope with disability in our lifetimes – our own or that of someone we love. Creating an accessible church is about creating a welcoming church.

Tips and Reminders for Providing a Welcoming Environment for People with Disabilities

1. Be ready to offer assistance. You can ask, “Is there anything you need?” or “How can I best help you?” When you ask, don’t assume they need help – listen for their response.
2. Speak directly to a person in a natural conversational tone, not to an intermediary such as a caregiver or a parent. If a person’s speech is difficult to understand, it is appropriate to ask them to repeat what they said.
3. When meeting people with disabilities, use common courtesies including eye contact, verbal greetings and offering your hand to shake.
4. Allow the person time to process information and time to respond.
5. Every disability has a broad range and spectrum of severity. Be aware that disabilities can be visible or invisible.
6. If a person has a service dog, do not interact with the dog unless the handler first gives permission.
7. When greeting a person with a visual impairment, use your name and tell them your role, if appropriate.
8. Do not touch canes, crutches, walkers, or wheelchairs without permission. It is part of the person, so touching mobility equipment may be an invasion of their privacy. Only move devices with permission of the user, and return them as soon as possible.
9. Model and encourage respectful interactions in our congregation and community. Instead of identifying someone as a disabled person, indicate that he or she is a person who has a disability. For example, she is not an autistic child, but a child who has autism or he is not a blind person, but a person who has a visual impairment. These are examples of “People First” language.