

## Disability Empowerment



*We offer these tips for engaging with someone with a visible disability in order to facilitate agency and belonging. Practice hospitality and inclusion by using common sense and extending equal courtesy to everyone you meet!*

### COMMUNICATE

- Your name and who you are when you meet or greet any person.
- Welcome to anyone who is new to the space or ministry.
- In your typical pace of speaking and respectful tone of voice.
- Via a handshake or mode of connecting the other person prefers.
- About topics you would share with anyone, e.g., hobbies, the weather, or sports, but never about “what happened” or personal medical information.
- That you are leaving a conversation with someone who cannot see you.
- Via writing if someone cannot hear you and no interpreter is available.
- At eye level when possible, e.g., pull up a chair next to a wheelchair user.

### ASK

- The individual you are speaking to, not the person accompanying them.
- Before touching a person or their medical or mobility equipment or service animal. There are few reasons to touch anything that is part of someone’s personal space including their means of mobility and independence!
- Before offering assistance. If the offer is accepted ask again about the type and method of assistance desired, such as
  - guiding someone who is blind by offering your elbow and walking slightly in front of them, providing verbal cues if needed.
  - opening a door widely by standing behind it, not in the path.
  - accompanying the person to the area of the church they are seeking.
- About language preferences. There is usually no need to mention that a person has a disability, but if so ask if they prefer “identity first” (such as “autistic person” or “Deaf person”) or “person first” language (such as “wheelchair user” or “person with a visual impairment.”)
- Before praying with someone, and about what they would like prayer for.

## **LISTEN**

- To what the person's response is and not what you assume it will be.
- To the individual's lead and directives.
- Without expecting eye contact.
- To conversation in any mode, be it via a communication device, through an American Sign Language interpreter, or articulated slowly. There is no rush!
- By asking a person to repeat themselves or to try another phrase if you do not understand, or by using yes/no questions if you still do not understand someone's speech pattern. Do not pretend that you do understand!
- For insights about the person's understanding of disability culture.

## **DESCRIBE**

- The environment and any hazards that someone who is blind may not see. Then go back and eliminate those hazards before the next visitor comes!
- Items of visual interest and visible activity, e.g., youth doing interpretive dance during worship, to someone who cannot see the objects or action.
- Specific directions, not vague references to "over there" or "that side."
- Conversation or pertinent background sounds to someone who isn't hearing these and may be missing out.

## **EXPECT**

- To build mutual relationships.
- That any new person will contribute to your congregation by sharing ideas, hopes, and dreams and in potential service or leadership roles.
- That the person can manage without a bystander's intervention unless they clearly lost or struggling – and then offer information or assistance as you would to anyone lost or struggling.
- That a disabled person is comfortable with their disability and not looking for prayers for healing or cure.
- Continual validation that all of us have value and worth and that disability is an aspect of God's diverse creativity!