



Access

# Welcoming

## Those with Special Needs

A Brochure for Church Staff,  
Ushers and Volunteers

“Show hospitality to  
strangers, for by doing so, you  
may be entertaining angels  
unaware.” - Hebrews 13:2





## Introduction

One in every five Americans has a disability, but you would be surprised at how many places of worship are not equipped to welcome everyone. Barriers to a full life of faith can be architectural, communicative or attitudinal. Barriers can also be a lack of genuine spiritual access.

It is important people with disabilities be included in the life of our congregation to enrich our church by what they can offer and by the dimension they can add to the tapestry of our worship. From the moment someone new enters our church community, they need to be welcomed as a person of God with gifts and talents to share. Their unique needs also must be acknowledged, so they, too, can enjoy full accessibility to the love of Christ.

The goal of McLean Bible Church is to “touch lives with the love of God.” An integral part of this is to promote inclusion for all persons and enable them to find their places in worship, education, fellowship and ministry at the church. We want to encourage congregational ministry with persons with special needs, not just to or for them. We want to work to ensure all people are incorporated into all aspects of the Christian life.

# General Information

In meeting someone with special needs, remember they are first of all a person, like everyone else - except they happen to have a disability. Let your words emphasize the person's worth and abilities, not their limiting condition. Here are some suggestions, both general and specific, to use when interacting with a person of any age who has a disability:

- Do not ignore them. Acknowledge their presence as you would anyone else's, and attempt to include them. A warm smile and friendly conversation is appreciated by anyone!
- Always speak directly to the person with special needs, not just their companion, attendant, or interpreter. Companions are not conversational go-betweens.



## Use Affirmative Phrases...

- Child with special needs
- Person with Cerebral Palsy
- Person who has...
- Without speech, nonverbal
- Developmental delay
- Emotional disorder or mental illness
- Deaf or hard of hearing, communicates with sign
- Uses a wheelchair
- Person with a developmental delay (and even this is changing...)
- Person with seizure disorder
- Child with Down syndrome
- Has a learning disability or learning difference
- Has a physical disability
- Congenital disability
- Condition or syndrome
- Seizures
- Cleft lip
- Facial difference or body difference
- Mobility impaired
- Medically involved or has a chronic illness
- Paralyzed
- Has hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of the body)
- Has paraplegia or quadriplegia (paralysis of lower body, or both lower and upper body)
- Of short stature
- Successful, productive, hard working
- Person without special needs, typical

## Instead of Negative Phrases...

- Disabled or handicapped child
- Palsied, CP or spastic
- Afflicted by, suffers from, victim of
- Mute or dumb
- Slow
- Crazy or insane
- Deaf and dumb, suffers a hearing loss, hearing impaired
- Restricted to a wheelchair
- Retarded, feeble-minded, mentally defective or impaired
- Epileptic
- Downs child, Mongoloid
- Learning disabled
- Crippled, feeble, lame, deformed
- Birth defect
- Disease (unless truly a disease)
- Fits
- Hair lip
- Deformed, disfigured
- Lame
- Sickly, unhealthy
- Invalid or paralytic
- Hemiplegic
- Paraplegic or quadriplegic
- Dwarf or midget
- Courageous (hero or martyr)
- Normal, healthy (implies people with a disability are not normal, not healthy)



## **For Persons Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired**

- When greeting a person who has a visual impairment, be sure to identify yourself.
- Explain where things are located in the building, e.g., the sanctuary is to the left, the restrooms are in the far right corner.
- If someone has a guide dog, ask how much room is needed for seating purposes. When guide dogs are in a harness, they are at work; please do not pet them!
- Offer a program to a person with a visual impairment, whether or not you think he/she can read.
- Make as many written materials as possible, such as pamphlets and fliers, in large print (18 point). Try to have hymnals and the Bible on cassette available upon request.
- Ask if the person needs an escort to his/her seat. Offer your elbow so he/she may grasp and be guided.

## **For Persons with Physical Disabilities/Mobility Needs**

- A person who uses a wheelchair may be able to walk but may still use a wheelchair.
- Keep wheelchairs, walkers and crutches within reach of the person who uses them.
- When talking with a person who uses a wheelchair, try to sit as well, or kneel, so you are at eye level. This takes the strain off his/her neck, as well as off yours!
- As much as possible, allow the person to choose where he/she would like to be seated in the sanctuary and/or classroom.
- If lifting a wheelchair, be sure to follow the user's instructions implicitly.

## For Persons with Verbal Differences

- Try to give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has speech difficulties. Allow the person to talk at his/her own pace.
- Ask questions that require short answers or a nod of the head. If you aren't sure you understood the response, repeat or paraphrase what was said. Rephrase your question, if necessary.
- Remember the person with a speech difference may have his/her own means of communicating other than speech, such as writing, picture cards or boards, and assistive technology devices.

## For Persons Who Are Deaf/Hard of Hearing

- If you need to gain someone's attention who is deaf or hard of hearing, lightly tap his/her elbow or shoulder.
- Try to stand in front of the light source in order to provide a clear view of your face; do not speak directly into the person's ear.
- Look directly at the person and speak expressively, but don't over-exaggerate. Remember, your facial expressions, gestures, and body movements help the individual to better understand what you are saying; you don't need to be an expert in sign language to do this.
- Again, remember to address the person with the disability, not someone who may be serving as his/her interpreter.
- Try to seat the person in an appropriate position in front of the pastor during the service, as well as with good visual access to the sign language interpreter. In classrooms, also have the person sit with an appropriate view of any speakers.
- For their reference, tell visitors where they may find the church phone with TTY capability.





## **For Persons with Developmental Disabilities, Autism or Other Mental Disabilities**

- Offer a program, book, etc., to everyone, whether they may read or not. Allow each person in class to have a chance to participate in discussions.
- If a person with a mental disability has behaviors that seem to make people uncomfortable, have in mind some capable people in the class or congregation who would like to invite him/her to sit with them to share a hymnal or Bible, explain the service, etc. This is not insulting; it is friendly!
- Many times, a person with a developmental delay or other mental disability will react to social situations in a non-typical way. Respect his/her request to be left alone, to not be touched, or his/her desire to go without speaking. Try to converse in a normal tone and a warm manner; keep it simple.
- Treat adults with developmental disabilities as adults, not children. Use first names only when using the same familiarity for all persons.

## **For Persons with Non-Apparent Disabilities**

- Remember, there are those in the congregation with non-apparent or newly-diagnosed illnesses, such as psychiatric disability, multiple sclerosis, seizure disorder, and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's Diseases, which may require some assistance.



## **It's the “Person First” ...Then the disAbility**

People with special needs, like all of us, want to be accepted by their communities as equal members who actively participate in and contribute to all aspects of community life. They want to be recognized as full members of society, respected as whole persons who have much to give.

Consider how you would introduce friends to someone. You might share their names, where they live, what they do, or name some of their interests, such as swimming, eating Mexican food, or watching movies. Why say it differently for persons with special needs? Every person is made up of many characteristics - mental, physical, and personal - that make us who we are. All of us want to be known as whole persons and not just by one or two facts.

In speaking or writing, remember children and adults with special needs are like everyone else - except they happen to have an impairment. Let your words emphasize the person's worth and abilities, not the limiting condition. Simple etiquette puts the emphasis on the individual first, so here are a few tips for improving your language regarding persons with special needs:

- Speak about the person, *then* the disability - think “people first!”
- Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
- Don’t label people as part of a disability group.
- Don’t give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability; it can be patronizing.
- Choice and independence are important to us all. Let people do and speak for themselves as much as possible.
- If addressing an adult, use the same respect as with any other adult, e.g., Mr. Smith instead of his (or her) first name.
- Look and speak to the person with special needs, not someone else who may be accompanying him/her.
- It’s very easy to change one’s tone of voice, choice of words, and non-verbal language with someone who has a special need; oftentimes, this can come across as demeaning to that person. Just interact as you would with anyone else you may meet at church.
- Don’t hesitate to use words such as “see”, “walk”, “listen”, etc. More than likely, the person with whom you are speaking will use these words, too!





## More Tips

- Please ask the person with special needs if they need any assistance first, before intervening. Most people will let you know if they do or do not need any help.
- Most of the time, touch is very appropriate and the offer to shake a hand is accepted. If someone is unable to shake hands in the usual manner, offer to shake his/her left hand or gently clasp the person's hand if he/she is unable to lift up his/her own. If someone is touch averse, be accepting of this, and still greet him/her warmly with words.
- Use positive, "people first" language. Negative terms, such as "wheelchair bound", "crippled", "disfigured", "afflicted by", "deaf/mute", "retard", etc., are not appropriate. As Mark Twain stated, "The difference between the 'right word' and the 'almost right word' is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

## Tips (cont'd)

- Whenever possible, seat persons with special needs in a variety of areas within the sanctuary. Wheelchair areas should be integrated throughout the fixed seating plan. Accessible seating contained in only one area of the sanctuary or a classroom is a way of excluding, instead of including, persons with special needs.
- Persons who use wheelchairs may also need to sit closer to the front to see and/or hear better. They may need to have access to the sign language interpreter or the audio loop system during the service. They may need to sit with an attendant. Please do your best to accommodate seating needs and requests. Please be aware of your words and attitude during seating - they are people, not “fire hazards”.
- When planning special events, whether churchwide or for a Sunday school class, remember to plan ahead for special needs and modified accommodations. Check with regular members who may attend to see how they may need assistance. Advertise that accommodations are available, and ask participants to request them in advance. Let the community know when sign interpretation will be available during an event.



# For Persons Who Want to Serve

Just as the fabric of our congregation is enriched by those who attend our church, so will we be enriched by including any who have a desire to serve. Think about those you might ask to help with any task, volunteer opportunity or job. Include persons with special needs in all aspects of service, from parking lot attendant to greeter, usher to choir member, nursery volunteer to Sunday school teacher. There is always a need to be filled - make everyone feel welcome to share their gifts and talents.

**For more information or other assistance  
with accessibility concerns, please contact  
Jackie Mills-Fernald, Director of Access Ministry,  
at (703) 770-2942 or  
[jackie.millsferald@mcleanbible.org](mailto:jackie.millsferald@mcleanbible.org).**

As a reminder, we have an emergency medical team available at each service. If a medical emergency arises, please notify the usher captain, who will designate a second usher to put "911" on the LED lights in the sanctuary. This will alert medical personnel that there is an emergency, and they will respond according to established procedures.

