

Disability Ministry at  
Providence Road Church

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**Proposal**

**August 2007**

## Why a Disability Ministry?

*“For my house shall be a house of prayer for all people.” Isaiah 56:5*

Depending on the definition used, it is estimated that there are between forty-three and forty-nine million Americans with one or more physical and/or mental disabilities.<sup>1</sup> This makes people with disabilities the largest minority group in America. There are literally hundreds of types of disabilities. Some people are born with disabilities; the rest become disabled at some time during their life usually as a result of accident or illness. Some disabilities are permanent; others are temporary. Many people have multiple disabilities. Some disabilities are hidden, like epilepsy. Some are static such as the loss of a limb. Some are episodic, such as seizure disorders. Some disabilities are progressive, such as muscular dystrophy. Unlike gender, race or national origin, one can join the ranks of “the disabled” at a moment’s notice.<sup>2</sup>

While there is no single definition of who is disabled, there is one commonality among people with disabilities: it is not easy being disabled in a world designed for nondisabled people. People with disabilities cope with particular problems that are not experienced by nondisabled people, and we do them an injustice by not recognizing and attempting to understand their uncommon situations.<sup>3</sup> Dennis Schurter makes the point that “Finally, we dare not exclude ourselves from the family of those who have disabilities, for then we are at risk of excluding ourselves from the family of the kingdom of God, as did the Pharisees of old.”<sup>4</sup>

While a single member of a family may have a disability, the impact extends to every member and into every area of the family’s life. Siblings see that the care of a brother or sister takes up huge amounts of time, time not spent with them. Medical and therapy expenses can overwhelm family budgets. Vacations can become impossible, opportunities to advance in a career unlikely because of time spent in a hospital, and family connections can disintegrate. It is not unusual for disability to become the sole family issue on which everyone focuses attention, both inside and outside the family.

For couples who have a child with a disability, the rate of divorce is higher than for couples whose children are not disabled. There also appears to be a correlation between the severity of the child’s disability and the likelihood for divorce. Parents of children with disabilities may face grief, not unlike the grief experienced when a loved one dies. The five stages of grief identified by Elizabeth Kubler Ross in her landmark book *On Death and Dying* (MacMillan, New York, 1969) can be loosely employed as a rubric for understanding the grief experienced by parents of children with disabilities. They are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Parents of children with disabilities can face a chronic grief. Acceptance is not a static state, but a process that continues throughout the life-cycle of the child. Guilt, shame, denial, depression and anger may resurface and need to be worked through as the child grows.<sup>6</sup> A positive support system helps these families deal with these issues and gives them opportunities to maintain positive marital relationships. These support systems include genuine faith in God, access to information on the disability, connections to others also experiencing disability, appropriate medical care, child care, housing, respite care and authentic friendships with other adults. The church body can be a vital, practical presence in such a family, helping to maintain an entire family structure and demonstrating the love of God.

Are people with disabilities welcome in worship services? Obviously many are. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities do not experience a comfortable, welcoming environment at some churches. The National Organization on Disability: Religion and Disability Program collaborated with Harris Poll in 2000 to try and measure participation rates of people with disabilities in congregations. The NOD/Harris Surveys of Americans with Disabilities discovered that about 47% of people with disabilities attended a service at least monthly, as compared to 65% of people without disabilities who attended a church service at least monthly.<sup>7</sup> An interesting notation in the survey was that the participation gap in church attendance between those who are disabled and those who are not is growing, increasing 63% since 1986. People with disabilities are disappearing from church.

Anecdotally, my sister has struggled for years to find a congregation where she and her children would be welcome. She outlined this struggle in a post to her personal blog:

*I've been trying for 10 years to find a church that would welcome my family. I know it sounds odd that I haven't had any luck in those 10 years, but it's true. It sounds really odd to me also.*

*I was raised in the Catholic Church. Friday night brought fish for dinner, and Sunday mornings meant church. As my teenage years approached, the Catholic Church approved conducting mass on Saturday nights, and my parents switched to that so we could sleep in on Sundays. While I probably grumbled about having to attend mass, I know I found a comfort in it – a realization that there were forces greater than myself, forces I could turn to in times of distress. That comfort has accompanied me through the many tribulations of my life, and is a peace that I continually still turn towards. Sadness overwhelms me, however, that I have not brought my children to that same peace and comfort.*

*I've visited Catholic churches, Baptist churches, Presbyterian churches, non-denominational churches, and several others without labels. The visits have played out the same regardless of the doctrine of the church. We arrive as a family – two children in wheelchairs, two walking. Jessica is friendly and outgoing but doesn't understand that exuberance does not always have a place in a house of worship. Corey drums his ADHD-inspired head beat on the backs of pews or benches, bringing looks from the other church-goers of "Can't you control that child?" Ashley is just Ashley – loudly vocal, fidgeting on the scale of Paul Bunyan, and with an overwhelming curiosity that leads her to touch, taste, and otherwise examine every surface around her. I can usually count on about 5 minutes before one of the "proper" church-goers turns to me and suggests I take the children to the nursery. But, there's a problem with that also.*

*Nurseries are for babies and very young children. My children are teenagers. While Jessica would be very happy to interact with 4 year olds, my attempts to instruct her in ways appropriate to her age would be undermined. Put Ashley in a room with toddlers, and in no time one of the young children would be hurt because Ashley is the size of an adult and is blind. She can't see the small children standing in front of her as she mows them down. And like Jessica, Ashley needs to be with her peers.*

*The next suggestion I usually hear is Sunday school. Oh, how I would love for all my children to attend Sunday school. But until I find a church where someone can both communicate in sign language with Ashley and assist her with orientation and mobility, not to mention helping both her and Jessica with activities of daily living (eating, toileting, etc), Sunday school is not really an option.*

*So there's the rub – my children are not wanted in the church during service – they are not wanted or cannot be accommodated outside the service – and I can't leave some of them home and take the others. I refuse to believe however that a church that can accommodate us as a family doesn't exist. I am, though, very tired of looking. My children have experienced enough rejection in their lives and should not have to experience it in a church of so-called*

*Christian people. While I would really like to hear from other parents like me who have solved this problem, for the time being we will be worshipping in solitude. And, I hope I can provide enough of an example for all my children that they, too, will find the comfort that I have found in God.<sup>8</sup>*

Why can't families with disabled children be accepted in a Christian congregation? Why do people with disabilities not feel welcome at church? There have been many misconceptions about people with disabilities drawn from interpretations of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

1. The person is thought to be possessed by demons.
2. The person is seen as lacking adequate faith, suggesting that if their faith were stronger, they would be cured.
3. The person is seen as wholly innocent, saved by their disability.
4. In spite of the fact that Jesus makes it clear that disability is not caused by sin,<sup>9</sup> there are many people that view having a disability or giving birth to a child with a disability as a punishment for sin.
5. The person is viewed as a prophet, one sent with a special message communicated by or through their disability.

Perhaps the most harmful religious perception that plagues people with disabilities is the idea that they are automatically "the least of my people" because of their disability.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary perceptions of people with disabilities see new stereotypes emerging.

1. If successful and accomplished, the person is seen as a "*Supercrip*". This creates false expectations for all people with disabilities.
2. The person is seen as *special*, a reversal of the subhuman perception.
3. The person is *devalued*, seen as without abilities and capabilities.
4. The person is viewed as *broken* and in need of fixing.
5. The person is treated as if they are *invisible*, as if they are not present, as if they do not exist.
6. The experience of being disabled is *romanticized*, a reflection of political correctness now associated with the disability movement.

How should people with disabilities be perceived? First, people with disabilities, like all of us, should be perceived as unique individuals, created in the image and likeness of God, with great gifts and talents to share, and as people who are inherently valuable and of inestimable worth.<sup>11</sup>

Pope John Paul II said,

"Every human person is the subject of fundamental rights which are inalienable, inviolable and indivisible. Every human being is always worthy of maximum respect and has the right to express his or her dignity as a person fully."<sup>12</sup>

Josie Byzek, a disability rights advocate wrote,

“People are not given disabilities so that nondisabled Christians can sing about how happy they are that they’re not disabled - blind, lame or otherwise.

People do not have disabilities so that Christians can test their faith by trying to heal them - or so nondisabled people can chalk up points with God by being charitable to them.

People have disabilities because people are human, and disability is a natural part of the human state.”<sup>13</sup>

People with disabilities often suffer from chronic exclusion: exclusion as a way of life. It is both pastorally and theologically imperative that the Sunday assembly be – or become – a place where all the baptized faithful can find a home, can be welcomed as full members of the church.<sup>14</sup>

## Disability and the Bible

*“...But God has so composed the body,  
giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,  
that there may be no division in the body,  
but that the members may have the same care for one another.  
If one member suffers, all suffer together;  
if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” 1 Cor. 12:24b-26*

In the Gospels, there are a total of twenty-two narratives where Jesus removes a disability from a person. In many cases, these narratives are a retelling of the same event. While there are a few passages that refer to groups of people being cured, the number of people that Jesus cures is only somewhere between thirteen and fourteen. Jesus was drawn to people who were marginalized by society; hence, it would make sense that he would be attracted to people with disabilities who were extremely marginalized in the ancient world.<sup>15</sup>

Why did Jesus cure people or take away their disabilities? He did these things so people would believe he was God. The story of the four men who carried their friend who was paralyzed to see Jesus illustrates this point well. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”<sup>16</sup> This man was forgiven in his paralyzed state. He took away the man’s disability to prove to the people that he was God. He did not need to take his disability away to forgive his sins. The forgiving of the man’s sins was far more important than the removal of his disability. The reality that our sins are forgiven, just as we are, should be comforting to all of us.

There is a problem with the connection between disability and sin. John 9:1-7 gives the story of the man born blind:

*1 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. 2 "Teacher," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?" 3 "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "He was born blind so the power of God could be seen in him. 4 All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent me, because there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end. 5 But while I am still here in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smoothed the mud over the blind man's eyes. 7 He told him, "Go and wash in the pool of Siloam" (Siloam means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came back seeing!*

The insinuation that a moral transgression is the cause of a disability must be challenged, for it suggests that people with disabilities are inferior and results in exclusion on many levels. Even though Jesus clearly refutes this idea, the connection is still made. People with disabilities are constantly being referred to as "afflicted", "broken", "poor" or by other pejorative or derogatory terms. These terms expose and perpetrate biases that are dangerous and continue to cause suffering, alienation, isolation and shame in the lives of people with disabilities and their families.<sup>17</sup>

Who is this blind man? Like most people with disabilities in the Bible, he has no name, which renders him without status in the ancient world. He does not ask for healing. He is a beggar, a common occupation for a disabled person in the first century, and sadly, also in the twenty-first. He is, however, an intelligent and articulate man for he stands up to a series of intense and pointed questions about his healing and about Jesus. He is a thoughtful, brave, amusing, but above all, ordinary person. When asked, Jesus clearly refutes the idea that this man's blindness is caused by his sin or the sins of his parents. Jesus names the purpose of the man's blindness as an opportunity to make God's work visible in him. The man in this Gospel story breaks many of the stereotypes about people with disabilities. He is smart, clever, tenacious, and boldly speaks out, identifying and defending Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, we will look at the story of blind Bartimaeus.

*<sup>46</sup>And so they reached Jericho. Later, as Jesus and his disciples left town, a great crowd was following. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) was sitting beside the road as Jesus was going by. <sup>47</sup>When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus from Nazareth was nearby, he began to shout out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>48</sup>"Be quiet!" some of the people yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>49</sup>When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, "Tell him to come here." So they called the blind man. "Cheer up," they said. "Come on, he's calling you!" <sup>50</sup>Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. "Teacher," the blind man said, "I want to see!" <sup>52</sup>And Jesus said to him, "Go your way. Your faith has healed you." And instantly the blind man could see! Then he followed Jesus down the road.*

Bartimaeus was the only person with a disability named in the Bible. The passage begins with Bartimaeus sitting on the side of the road calling out to Jesus. The crowd treats Bartimaeus in a disrespectful and demeaning way, ordering him to be quiet. Bartimaeus is persistent, crying out more loudly. As he passed, Jesus responds to the cries. He stops to hear the call of someone in need. The mood and behavior of the crowd changes dramatically when Jesus pay attention to Bartimaeus. Jesus' authority steers the crowd away from exclusion.<sup>19</sup> Bartimaeus threw off his cloak and ran to Jesus. The cloak was often the only protection the poor had against cold of the nights. During the day, it would

have been spread out in front of him to collect alms. It may very well have been his only possession. It is touching that Bartimaeus would have left behind his protection and his livelihood to seek Jesus. Bartimaeus and Jesus talk directly to each other. Jesus asks “What do you want me to do for you”. Bartimaeus uses the more personal and respectful term “Teacher” or Rabboni. Jesus ends Bartimaeus’ blindness with words of salvation. In this case, Jesus attributes this miracle to faith alone. This not only restores his sight but gives him access to a less marginalized life. This is the only miracle where someone follows Jesus. Bartimaeus does this willingly and without prompting. Fear consumed almost everyone else in Mark’s Gospel but Bartimaeus, although poor and marginalized, was transformed by faith.<sup>20</sup>

All throughout the Scriptures, Jesus’ ministry is marked by an unwavering commitment to access and inclusion. He singles out people with disabilities and recognizes their great faith. He chooses people with disabilities to assist in revealing his identity. Jesus was not afraid of physical intimacy with people with disabilities, although this surely would have been frowned on in his culture. He is keenly aware of the marginalization of people with disabilities and seeks to change their situations.

## Discussion

*As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Gal. 3:27-28*

Throughout my study of this topic, one theme has been repeated, that of the church as a community. Leslie Newbigin describes this community as “the hermeneutic of the gospel”, that place where the gospel is lived out and interpreted to the world through the actions and characters of its participants.<sup>21</sup> The church is the place where the story of God is enacted, told and heard. It is here that truth about the crucified Jesus is revealed and taught not just through words but in actions and gestures that reveal the nature and truth of the coming peaceable kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

As Christians, we know we are not created to be autonomous creatures. Dependency, not autonomy is a characteristic of our lives. We were not created to be alone. Our dependency, our need for one another means that we will suffer as well as know joy. As Christians we should not feel embarrassed to discover the handicapped among us help us better understand the narrative that constitutes the very purpose of our existence.<sup>23</sup>

In 1964, Jean Vanier founded L’Arche, an international network of communities for people with disabilities. He wrote: “what struck me is how people with disabilities, as different as they may be, have a secret power to touch and open people’s hearts. Many young and less young people come to L’Arche without any experience with people who are weak; they come “to help”, but they soon discover that in fact they are being helped! Their hearts and minds are being opened. They discover how prejudiced they

were. What is true for people with disabilities is true for all those who are weak and in need. They call us to greater compassion, kindness and tenderness. They can teach us to become human".<sup>24</sup>

Being part of a church community, the family of God, means that everyone in the church has a "parental" role, whether or not they have biological children. Therefore the ways in which handicapped children are received into such a community should be strikingly different from how they are received in wider society. At the very least, the church should be the place where parents and handicapped children can be without apologizing, without being stared at, without being silently condemned.<sup>25</sup>

Jeff McNair wrote: "If the disabled do indeed have worth, this should be evident in our religious practice. Our best and brightest hope is to see people with disabilities as no different than ourselves. Once that happens, we will try to do unto them as we would have them do unto us. Disabled individuals should simply be treated as normally as possible. They should be respected, loved, or gotten angry at in the same way as any other person. We shed labels and know people. Ultimately, people with disabilities should be integrated into the community as if their disability were as irrelevant a characteristic as hair color or state of origin. Community integration is the critical issue. Christians have to want persons with disabilities in their homes and in their lives."<sup>26</sup>

McNair continues: "How wonderful if observers looked upon the church and learned that God is not a labeler, for example, who characterizes people by a supposedly logical notion of mental age. That God is not one who will pass the buck to state agent professionals, but is a servant who steps up to meet even the most difficult of challenges because he wants to be a servant. That God is one who accepts all persons, independent of personal characteristics. That God does not evaluate a person on the basis of the contribution he can make. That God proves the worth of a person once and for all through Jesus giving his life for people who could not save themselves".<sup>27</sup>

When we are "strong," our need for God seems small, and we coast. A church filled with "strong" people coasts as well. Individuals with disabilities, and their families, do not have the luxury of coasting. The ongoing issues - surgeries, therapies, doctors, social workers, even outright discrimination - create a daily, never-ending struggle. The temptation to lose hope and give up is strong. The statistics on divorce and depression show how real this is.

As Joni Eareckson Tada puts it, "When we are weak, we need God desperately." The person with a disability needs Him desperately. Parents of a disabled child have to live the disability with their child, and so they need Him. The church that lives the disability along with their members needs Him. And God loves to be desperately needed by individuals, families, and churches. He is "rich in mercy." Eph. 2:4 He works all things for good for those are called (even called to be disabled) for His purpose. Rom. 8:28 (Bob Horning and John Knight, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN)

## Recommendations

*<sup>3</sup>With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. <sup>4</sup>Say to those who are afraid, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you." <sup>5</sup>And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. <sup>6</sup>The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. Isaiah 35:3-6*

As I see it, instituting a disability ministry involves a three-fold approach. First, break down barriers that prevent people with disabilities and their families from fully participating in worship, religious education and ministries at Providence Road Church. Barriers are not only physical, but attitudinal as well. Second, encourage people with disabilities to be active participants in any and all ministries at the church, with accommodations as needed. Finally, reach out to the disability community in Hampton Roads through advertising, community involvement and volunteering. The first step, before anything, is prayer. If this church wishes to commit to this ministry, then everyone needs to prayer for its success and turn this ministry over to God. Without this commitment, we will not succeed.

## **Breaking Down Barriers**

### **1. Disability Awareness**

- a. Form a volunteer committee to implement this Disability Ministry. The committee should have in its membership, at least one person with a disability, at least family member with a child having a disability and at least one member of the Providence Road leadership.
- b. At least once each year, have a "Disability Awareness Sunday". Children's classes could focus on disability in the Bible. Adult classes could feature a discussion of disability issues in the church, facilitated by members with disabilities.
- c. Provide information about disability etiquette (see appendix 1) for members. Cultivate a welcoming attitude.
- d. Train teachers as to the best way to include children with various disabilities in their classes.
- e. Invite representatives of various disability support groups to visit Providence Road Church and present information and education about the specific disabilities.

### **2. Facility Audit**

- a. Find physical barriers that still exist for people with disabilities. Invite a representative from the Endependence Center in Norfolk, or similar organization to examine our building and make recommendations for improvements.
- b. Have available materials or accommodations for people with various disabilities. Though there are currently no members with serious vision impairments, it might be worthwhile to have a few copies of the bulletin printed in large type, as well as large type Bibles and volunteer readers on hand.

### 3. Support Groups

- a. If enough people are interested, have a support group for members with disabilities and their families. This group can meet during a regular class time or at some other mutually agreeable time.
- b. As Life Groups are reformed, they can be invaluable to families of children with disabilities, allowing more intimate bonds and relationships to form than would happen in a larger church setting. These groups should be encouraged to reach out to these families.
- c. Parents who have raised children with disabilities over many years can provide counseling and advocacy assistance to those parents newly facing this struggle. Special education can be a confusing and frustrating experience involving years of study to understand. The experienced parent can be a great help to those just starting out.
- d. Parents of children with disabilities have very little time for themselves. Appropriate child care can be very difficult to find. A time for respite care by trained volunteers would be an invaluable service for exhausted parents. This could be a period of time one evening or Saturday, possibly once or twice a month.

## Inclusion

### 1. Inclusion in Worship

- a. Anyone who wishes to join in the worship service should be accepted. This may mean that the worship service may not be as orderly and quiet as most expect. A church family that segregates even one of its members is no family at all.
- b. Some parents with children having particularly challenging behaviors may prefer to be in a room separate from the main auditorium. While this could be made available, they should be encouraged to stay with the congregation if at all possible.

### 2. Inclusion in Education

- a. Teacher should be trained to work with children with various disabilities. This training could be from outside experts, members with experience dealing with children with disabilities or from their parents.
- b. Children with disabilities should be included in classes with their same age peers as much as possible.

### 3. Inclusion in Ministries

- a. Every member with a disability should be welcome to take part in any ministry opportunity as well as any church function. We all have God given gifts and talents, and each person, with or without a disability, should be encouraged to use them.

## Outreach

1. Enroll Providence Road Church in the Accessible Congregations Campaign of the National Organization on Disability by signing and returning the commitment form attached to this

document. Providence Road Church would be the only church in Southside Hampton Roads belonging to this organization. A logo will be provided that can be used on signs and documents.

2. On our exterior signage, show the phrase: We Welcome People with Disabilities.
3. Invite groups from disability awareness and advocacy groups to visit and address our congregation.
4. Groups from our congregation can volunteer for disability events, fundraisers, etc. Each year, Chesapeake Public Schools put on a Special Games day for students with disabilities. They are always in need of volunteers. A group from Providence Road could help with our church being listed among the volunteering organizations.

## Summary

*<sup>7</sup>But this precious treasure—this light and power that now shine within us—is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own. <sup>8</sup>We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed and broken. We are perplexed, but we don't give up and quit. <sup>9</sup>We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going. <sup>10</sup>Through suffering, these bodies of ours constantly share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be obvious in our dying bodies. <sup>12</sup>So we live in the face of death, but it has resulted in eternal life for you. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12*

It is evident that disability is a pervasive and profound human experience, transcending categories of economic class, cultural background or gender. The number of persons with disabilities will only increase as health care improves and becomes more widely available. Congregations and pastors need to become sensitive to the experience of persons with disabilities.

Providence Road Church has already demonstrated an openness and welcoming attitude to people with disabilities. We now have an opportunity to expand this attitude into a ministry that reaches out to the disability community in Hampton Roads. This ministry is consistent with the church's mission statement, Claiming Hampton Roads for Christ..., One Heart at a Time.

This ministry cannot succeed by the actions of one person or even a small group. What will be required is a commitment by the entire congregation. The challenge for the church is not so much to learn how to minister to people with disabilities but to be open to being ministered to and, ultimately, healed by them.<sup>28</sup>

# Appendix 1

## Disability Etiquette

### Many have learned that.....

- A person who hears less may see more.
- One who sees less may perceive more.
- One who speaks slowly may have more to say.
- A person who moves with difficulty may have a clearer sense of direction.

### Overall Information

- Welcome a person with a disability with the same warm welcome and smile as you will share with all you meet.
- Touch is a very effective communicator of love, concern and understanding.
- "People-first Language" is best when referring to someone with a disability. The person is primary, and the disability is secondary. A "person uses a wheelchair". They are not "wheelchair bound" or "confined to a wheelchair".
- Speak directly to the person who has a disability. Do not use the attendant or companion as the "go-between".
- "Do you need assistance?" Ask the person who has a disability if they need assistance and the best way to assist them. They are the experts! Don't make assumptions that they can / cannot do things.
- "Can you please repeat that?" If the person has speech that is unclear, do not pretend to understand it. Politely ask the person to repeat or clarify. Continue to speak to the person rather than the companion.
- Seat the person with the disability with their family or friends whenever possible. Always allow for at least one person to be seated with them.
- Do not ignore people with disabilities. Acknowledge his or her presence just as you would anyone else. Always make sure they feel included in any activity to the best the situation allows.
- Do not pet or talk to service dogs. They are working, and this is a distraction to their job.
- Do not be afraid to use the words, "see", "look", "walk", "listen". They are not offensive.

### Developmental Disabilities

- Treat adults as adults, not as children. Use normal tone of voice.
- Talk to the person directly. Do not go through the companion or caretaker.
- Be patient and flexible.

## Hearing Impairments

- Before speaking, tap the person on the elbow and speak face to face. Do not speak to the interpreter.
- Speak clearly and at a moderate pace. Do not exaggerate or shout.
- Look and speak directly at the person. Speak with natural expression to help in their understanding.
- Do not cover your mouth when speaking.

## Mental Illness

- Try to respond with support of the person when unusual behavior occurs. Try to remain nonjudgmental or uncritical.
- Listen and stay positive with the person.
- Allow a person to change location if he or she becomes agitated.

## Mobility Impairments

- Wheelchairs provide mobility and freedom. Embrace the gift.
- Be at eye level when speaking with a person in a wheelchair.
- Be respectful. A wheelchair is a part of his or her space. Do not lean on it or move it without permission.
- If a person is able to get out of their wheelchair and sit or stand for a period of time, do not remove the wheelchair out of their reach.
- Always ask if the person if they would like or are in need of assistance before you help. If directions are given, follow them implicitly.

## Speech Impairments

- Give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has difficulty speaking.
- Do not pretend to understand if you don't. Ask for clarification, and be patient.
- Utilize other means of communication, only if helpful, such as writing or an assistive device.

## Visual Impairments

- Identify yourself when greeting someone with a visual impairment. Use their name to get their attention. When having a conversation in a group, identify people by name when speaking.
- Explain where things are located to a person with limited vision.
- Provide enough room if a person with visual impairments uses a guide dog.
- Give verbal descriptions and clues as to what is ahead if guiding someone. Alert the person to doors, curbs, steps and other objects.
- When you are leaving, let the person know.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act, *Statutes at Large*, S. 993 (1990)
- <sup>2</sup> Block, J.W., *Copious Hosting* (The Continuum International Publishing Group, NY 2002) 28
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. 34
- <sup>4</sup> Schurter, D., "Jesus' Ministry with People with Disabilities: Scriptural Foundations for Churches' Inclusive Ministry," *Journal of Religion in Disability and Rehabilitation* 1, no.4(1994):47
- <sup>5</sup> Bolduc, K.D., *A Place Called Acceptance* (Bridge Resources, Louisville, KY 2001) 10
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. 12
- <sup>7</sup> 2000 National Organization on Disability/Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities. See [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org) for a summary of this report.
- <sup>8</sup> Nickerson, D., [www.pipecleanerdreams.blogspot.com](http://www.pipecleanerdreams.blogspot.com), June 20, 2007
- <sup>9</sup> John 9:1-6
- <sup>10</sup> Block, J.W., *Copious Hosting* (The Continuum International Publishing Group, NY 2002) 51
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