



# SAINT CATHERINE CENTER FOR *Special Needs*

## Parish Support

### Etiquette and Hospitality with Persons with Disabilities

The suggestions below refer to opportunities for engaging with individuals with disabilities that may occur during Mass or other moments in parish life when welcoming someone who is new to the parish, or that you are just meeting. Some basic premises to follow are to assume: the ability to participate in some way; a preference for some level of autonomy, rather than be waited on; and that each person's support needs are different, even among people with the same disability. If you know the person has a disability, based on suggestions below, you can ask how you might help. Sometimes, though, the disability isn't obvious, as in the case of some intellectual/developmental disabilities or mental illnesses.

If you observe behavior that you don't understand, it is good to remain aware for possible need of assistance and be nonjudgmental. What may appear to be willful, disruptive behavior may be due to stress in the family (divorce, unemployment, etc.) or a "hidden" disability, such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder or a mental illness.

#### General Tips

- Gestures often convey acceptance. Sit next to a person with a disability, but respect boundaries.
- If a person has a seizure, you cannot do anything to stop it. Be sure head is protected.
- As an usher or greeter, please respect person's needs and requests whenever possible.
- Assume ability rather than disability. Respectfully ask if assistance is needed if you have doubts.
- A person who may appear drunk or sick may have a disability or medical emergency.
- Ask a person with a disability to take up the offertory gifts or serve in other roles of ministry.
- Ask a person with a disability to be an usher.

### **Intellectual / Developmental Disabilities**

- Greet person normally, with age-appropriate language.
- Repeat information about yourself if necessary.
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person doesn't understand.
- Treat people equally.
- Even if person doesn't read, offer reading materials.

### **Speech Disabilities**

- Let the person know you do not understand him/her rather than pretending you do.
- Ask the person to repeat himself/herself if you can't understand.
- Wait for the person to finish; do not finish his/her sentences.
- Wait for the person to finish, and then restate to be sure you understand.
- Suggest another way of facilitating communication if needed.

### **Behavioral Needs**

- Create a space available that parishioners can go to de-escalate challenging behaviors.
- If the individual is with a parent or other adult, wait before offering assistance and if you do, first ASK if it is desired. Supportive strategies for challenging behavior can take time before effecting change. However well intended your offer, it may be intrusive and counterproductive.
- Ask how you can help, find out if there is a support person who can be sent for.
- Ask what will make him/her most comfortable and respect these needs to the maximum extent possible.

- If attempts at conversation fail, wait for rational moments. Do not force conversation or argue.

### **Mental Health**

- Be sure to greet the person.
- Give your name and ask theirs but respect boundaries.
- Offer to sit with or near, but respect wishes to be alone.

### **Physical/Mobility**

- Ask about preferred location for seating.
- Ask permission to push or touch a person's wheelchair first.
- Individuals with canes or crutches may or may not prefer to use a ramp rather than stairs. Ask.
- Individuals with canes and crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so do not grab their arms.
- Speak to the person in the wheelchair and not to the person that may be accompanying them.
- Be eye level, if possible, with persons in wheel chairs when talking to them.
- Always ask before offering help. Don't be offended if the person says no.
- Never pat anyone on the head.
- A person with a respiratory or heart condition may have difficulty walking long distances. Offer a place to rest before ushering to a seat.

### **Blindness/Partially Sighted**

- Prearrange tour of church with audio description.
- Identify yourself and your role (I am the greeter/usher).

- Ask person “Would you like assistance?” Offer your arm.
- Describe the scene if the person is moving through an unfamiliar space alone. Keep your voice at a volume the individual can hear, rather than for people in the general area.
- Walk on the opposite side of a guide dog.
- Don’t touch a person’s cane or guide dog. Give verbal cues that are specific such as, “there is a trash can in front of you,” instead of something vague like, “watch out.”
- Guide an individual’s hand to a banister or the back of a chair to help direct to a stairway or seat AFTER asking permission to do so.
- Inform a person who is blind and attends church regularly of any physical changes.
- Offer bulletins in large print or Braille and large-print prayer books and hymnals.
- Establish before Mass IF a person would like accommodations for Communion (e.g. Eucharistic Minister to come to him/her, need a sighted guide, etc). But do not assume.

### **Deaf / Hard of Hearing (HOH)**

- Using someone who knows sign-language is not an adequate replacement for an interpreter.
- Determine whether the individual prefers to use sign language, writing, gesturing, speaking or a combination of all to communicate.
- To get the attention of someone who is deaf/HOH you can tap him/her on the shoulder, wave your hand or flicker the lights.
- When speaking to a person who is wearing a hearing aid, use normal volume, speaking clearly. If you shout, your words will be more distorted. Move closer to the individual if s/he has trouble hearing you.
- Face the person directly when speaking, and do not obscure your mouth when communicating.

- When speaking through a sign-language interpreter, look directly at the person who is Deaf, and maintain eye contact, talking directly to him/her.
- Background noises are a problem for people who are HOH. You may need to turn off radios and air conditioners.
- Use these suggestions to initiate interaction when possible. There is nothing worse than being left out and ignored.
- Offer assisted listening devices if available; have a note pad and pen available.