

On Greeting Persons With Disabilities: A Suggestion Manual for Ushers and Greeters

by Naomi Mitchum

As Climate Setters, Ushers and Greeters Are Important!

We all contribute to the climate of our church, but ushers and greeters can be trend-setters and models for the congregational environment. They put the welcoming arms of the church around the shoulders of all who come to worship. Ushers and greeters promote a climate of friendship, acceptance, and surrounding love, and they enable the warmth of respect and the certain knowledge that we are all children of God.

An understanding of the varied needs of persons with disabilities will help ushers and greeters become more comfortable in their jobs. Questions they most often ask are, "What is appropriate?" and "What do I do in case of an emergency?" The following suggestions will help answer both questions.

General Information

- Acknowledge the presence of persons with special needs as normally as you would anyone else. Identify yourself as you greet them. Ask their name, welcome them, and call them by name.
- Always speak directly to the person with a disability. Allow plenty of time for response. Do not consider a parent or companion as a necessary go-between. That tends to make the person with a disability feel dehumanized.
- When in doubt, ask persons with special needs about ways in which you can assist them to make them feel more welcome and able to participate more fully.
- Become informed about the location of special needs amenities available to worshipers, such as large-print Bibles, hymnals, and bulletins, as well as Braille hymnals or bulletins (if available), auditory amplifiers (assistive listening devices), and so forth. Learn the seating location for viewing sign language interpreters.
- Become informed of the foyer locations for the following items: first aid kit (including a mouth protector for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, smelling salts, and sugar tablets), wheelchair, the nearest telephone for calling 911, a blanket, and possibly oxygen with a sterile cannula. Know the procedure for a medical emergency. The head usher is usually in charge at that time.
- When referring to a person's special need or disabling condition, use positive, person-first language. Avoid such terms as *crippled*, *stricken*, *victim*, *afflicted*, even *handicapped*. The preferred approach is, "A person with ..." The term *handicapped* is still used in reference to parking. (The term is outdated, so why do we use it? The government doesn't want to change the signs, and it is a universal sign.)
- Invite a person or persons with special needs to usher or to assist you as a greeter. If a person with developmental delay is invited to greet, assign a working usher to stay with him or her or assist him or her.

Assisting Persons Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

- When greeting a person with visual impairment, be sure to identify yourself by name and say that you are an usher or that you are a greeter. This welcome also provides notice of your location.
- Offer the person a large-print or Braille worship program or bulletin and hymnal. Since Braille hymnals are very large and heavy, remove the day's selected hymns to a separate notebook. At the end of the service, return the hymns to the larger book.
- Guide the person to his or her seat. Extend your arm as a guide. Don't take hold of the person; let him or her take hold of your arm and follow. Remember: persons who are blind can't see that you have offered your arm, so you need to suggest that they take hold of your arm.
- Offer to return after the service to escort the person to the door or automobile. Let them know that you are willing to escort them to the altar or assist with communion if that is necessary during the service.

Assisting Persons Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Greet the person with a warm and friendly smile. Have an attitude of acceptance and love. That communicates a great deal even before you begin to try to speak with the person.
- Look at and talk directly at the person to whom you are speaking. Even if he or she has an interpreter, LOOK AT THE PERSON AND NOT THE INTERPRETER (IF THERE IS ONE). Stand directly in front of the person with whom you are trying to communicate. Speak expressively; remember facial expressions, gestures, and body movements help to communicate. You do not need to be an expert in sign language to do this.
- Speak clearly and slowly. Don't exaggerate or shout. If the person cannot understand, it may be necessary to communicate in writing. Keep pad and pencil handy for this purpose.
- Face a light source to provide a clear view of your face. The person may be able to speech read your lips. This is also a good rule for communicating with a person wearing a hearing device, as they often use lip cues to completely understand.
- If there is a Sign Language Interpreter, direct the person who is deaf to a seat where he/she can see the interpreter and the minister clearly. It is very important for a person who is deaf or hard of hearing to be in full view of the interpreter, minister, and altar activities as they are relying upon all visual factors in order to receive the spoken message.
- If the person is hard of hearing, offer an assistive listening (or hearing) device (ALD). Make yourself aware of the different configurations of ALD's available (i.e., various types of ear buttons, receivers, neck loops, etc.). If no such devices are available, but there is an audio loop, Infrared System, or other system, indicate to the person that there is a system in use. That will indicate the ideal place to sit and provide an alert to the need of turning the T-switch on a hearing aid on.
- For individuals maintaining ALD units: All ALD's should be tested (batteries, ear pieces cleaned, etc.) before giving to someone to use. Some ushers perform this service before putting the devices away when the unit is returned after the service. Special considerations should be given regarding the care and storage of these units as they represent a high budget item and can be rendered inoperable through misuse.
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- A special telephone called a Telephone Device for the Deaf (commonly known as a TDD or TTY) is available at minimum cost. This equipment allows a person who is deaf to type and send messages to someone with similar equipment. The Texas relay system (1-800-735-2988 voice or 1-800-735-2989 TDD) can send messages if the TDD is not available. Most states have a relay system available. This information is especially important when someone needs transportation or in case of emergency.

Assisting Persons Who Have Speech Impairment

- Greet the person with a friendly smile and a warm, personal word of welcome. If he or she feels truly welcome, he or she will feel more at ease trying to communicate through their speech impairment.
- Give your UNDIVIDED attention to the person who has difficulty speaking. Listen carefully and attentively. Don't try to rush the person.
- Remain aware that persons with speech impairments use many forms of communication. They may need to use pencil and paper or picture boards to express their wishes by pointing at a picture. They may use a typing device that lets you read what they are saying or reads to you what they are saying. Persons using this sort of device consider the spoken word to be theirs and prefer that you not read the screen but wait for the voice.

Assisting Persons Who Have Mobility Impairment

- Remember that a person who uses a cane, crutches, walker, or wheelchair is obviously mobility impaired, but is not necessarily hard of hearing. Do not raise your voice or shout.
- Do not attempt to "talk down" to a person who uses a wheelchair. You may need to look down to make eye contact, but you do not need to talk down to him or her. Never ask a companion what the person can do. Rather, ask the person in the wheelchair.
- In order to establish eye contact with the person in the wheelchair, always stand in front of him or her during a conversation, otherwise the person gets a strained neck.
- Ask the person where he or she would prefer to sit and with whom. Help facilitate that by providing an escort to a pew cut of their choice, making certain that there is a space for the companion. If no space is available next to the pew cut, ask the person to move over to make space. Companions of a wheelchair user are often hesitant to ask someone to move, but an usher can do it with ease and no embarrassment.
- Ask if you may provide further help in any way.
- Some wheelchair users prefer to step out of the chair and into the pew. In this case, place the wheelchair in an accessible location for the user and return at the close of the service to provide assistance. The same is true for persons using walkers that need to be put out of the way. Remember that persons are helpless without their mobility aids, and they get nervous if they cannot see their apparatus or have reassurance that you will be on hand to help them retrieve it later. Moving a power chair can be dangerous for persons without experience.
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- If someone requests that you lift him or her out of the chair into the pew, never do it alone. In fact, perhaps say that you cannot assist in this way. It is a judgment call. There are safety issues for everyone. Should you decide to lift a person, always follow his or her directions, even if the directions don't seem to make sense. They know what is best. The ushers' group needs to consider the possibility of injuring someone or of liability and decide on the policy on this before the request comes.
- Check with the person who is mobility impaired to make arrangements for communion or other worship events (such as foot washing, depositing something at the altar, and so forth) where the general congregation moves about.
- When possible, seat persons using canes, walkers, or crutches at the end of a pew. It is virtually impossible for them to step sideways along the seat to the middle of the row.
- Remember that persons who cannot stand are not able to see a PowerPoint screen when others around them stand, so hymns and litanies not in the hymn book should be printed separately and made available.

Assisting Persons Who Have Developmental Delay

- Offer a bulletin or program to a person who is developmentally delayed or otherwise mentally challenged whether you think that person can read or not.
- Extend a warm welcome. A good opener is, "Hi. My name is _____. What is yours?" Then call the person by name. This is affirming. Since they may not be able to conclude from your friendly welcome that they are welcome, be sure to say it to them.
- Speak directly to the person. Do not talk over or around him or her by directing your comments to a companion or family member.
- If they have not been accustomed to being in church for worship, they may not know they are expected to speak in a "hushed" voice and may speak to you or others around them in a louder tone than is appropriate. It is appropriate for you to indicate that to them and speak quietly to them as an example. Persons with developmental delay may not be able to speak in a "hushed" voice, so it is appropriate to ask them not to speak during the prayer, etc.
- If a person with developmental delay exhibits behavior that seems to be making people around them uncomfortable, have in mind someone in your congregation who would be willing to go sit with that person. They may be able to help explain to them what is taking place and what behavior is appropriate.

Assisting Persons who have Hidden Disabilities

- Try to be aware of people's hidden disabilities or newly diagnosed or acquired illness such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, stroke, cancer, or heart problem.
- As an usher, part of your responsibility is to know the congregation, which means being sensitive to the fact that there are persons who may need special assistance from time to time. You will need to know, for example, where the oxygen tank and mask are in the event the person with heart disease or asthma has an attack during a worship service, or where there is pure sugar or Coke in the event of a diabetic lapse.

- You may want to take note of the presence and location of a medical doctor in the congregation in the event a medical emergency occurs during the service of worship. The doctor can assist you to see that proper medical attention is secured and help decide if an ambulance is needed to transport the person to a hospital.
- If a participant has a "grand mal" seizure, do not attempt to restrain or put anything in his or her mouth. Move objects of furniture that might cause injury away from the person. Lay the person on the floor in as comfortable a position as possible until the seizure has passed. Make the person feel at ease after the seizure. You may want to help them move to a couch or comfortable chair. Offer them reassurance and support, but do not ask about the seizure. Most persons do not remember what happened during the seizure.
- Be aware that "petit mal" or even smaller seizures occur regularly for some people. Often they are accompanied by "head drop" — a sagging of the head. Most are silent. Do nothing during this type of seizure unless you notice they repeat themselves for ten minutes or the person falls out of the pew, which is unlikely. If the person is unaccompanied and it is possible, just put a hand on the shoulder lightly. This seems reassuring. If there appears to be any confusion after the seizure, stay with the person until he or she seems aware of surroundings.
- Be aware of patients undergoing chemotherapy who must avoid contamination by other people's germs. They may need to sit apart from people and may ask for assistance.
- Ushers who also serve as communion stewards will need to know if their church provides gluten-free communion wafers and the location of those elements.
- In certain mental illnesses or autistic syndromes, a person may not be able to sit down or must sit apart. A person with social phobia usually has great fear of being diminished as a person. The church may be their prime haven. If possible, tell them your name and ask for theirs. Reassure someone who must hug a wall or stand against a post. Offer a hymnal and Bible or suggest a location where the person can see the PowerPoint screen. Ask if the person would like a chair IN THAT LOCATION. Never insist on use of the chair or that the person move. Do not try to keep them company. They may be more comfortable alone.

Assisting Persons Who Have Sudden Needs Defibrillator

A defibrillator is a valuable piece of medical equipment for every church to own. All ushers and church staff should know its location and be trained in its use.

First Aid Kit

Although in most congregations a designated usher is in charge of the first aid kit in order to keep it fully stocked, every usher should know the location and content of one or more first aid kits and should have Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) training.

Disaster Planning

Ushers and church staff should develop a plan for evacuation or shelter in place in case of disaster such as flood, fire, tornado, hurricane, or national emergency. Many churches are equipped as designated shelters; others should know the location of the nearest emergency shelter. Persons with special needs may become disoriented or unable to follow verbal directions and will need assistance and reassurance. They will need to be led to safety. Never leave a person with developmental delay alone to wander off after evacuation; rather, entrust them to someone you know. A person who is blind will need a trusted hand to hold. Persons who are deaf must be given directions by someone in sign language, and that person should stay with them after evacuation. Use printed direction if no signer is present. Whether sheltering-in-place or evacuating the sanctuary, first aid supplies and all medical equipment should be out of a closet and ready for use.

Links for further investigation:

Religion and Spirituality Division, AAMR

www.aamrreligion.org

(American Association of Mental Retardation)

Works to create lifelong supports for people with developmental disabilities.

National Organization on Disabilities

www.nod.org

Click on *Religion and Disability Program* for community involvement, emergency preparedness initiative (EPI), and test of the Conference on Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities.

Faithability

www.faithability.org

Faithability is an online community focusing on disability and spirituality issues.

Parts of this information were adapted from "Information for Ushers and Greeters" SEMAR, PO Box 128, Lake Junaluska, NC 28745. Remaining information compiled by Naomi Mitchum and members of the Council on Special Needs, Chapelwood United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas.

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http://gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=14704