

# WELCOMING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES SO ALL MAY ENCOUNTER CHRIST



**A Guide for Parishes**



## Bishop of Harrisburg

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the Diocese of Harrisburg each parish community is the place where all persons are nourished spiritually as they encounter Christ in the Sacraments, in the Word of God, in prayer and in each other. Hearts are better prepared to receive this spiritual nourishment in an atmosphere of welcome and acceptance that is a true family and true home. Each parish family is to be this home for all of God's children making present the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Persons with disabilities are valued members of our parish families. Unfortunately, some Catholics with disabilities are still waiting to be welcomed, to have access, to be accepted, to be served and to serve, and to experience being part of the one family of Christ.

In 1978, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops promulgated a Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities stating "The parish is the door to participation for persons with disabilities and it is the responsibility of the pastor and lay leaders to make sure that door is always open." We know that this must be done. Yet, how it is accomplished can prove to be a challenge.

The Diocese of Harrisburg through the Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities offers this guide to welcome and inclusion of parishioners with disabilities as a response to that challenge. It is my hope-filled prayer that this resource will assist the parish families of our Diocese in creating a thriving faith-filled environment where "All May Encounter Christ." With your help, I believe that this prayer will become a reality in our parishes as we do our part in building up Christ's Kingdom here on earth.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Joseph P. McFadden  
Bishop of Harrisburg

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## SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The first priority of any parish in meeting the needs of persons with disabilities is spirituality. While physical accommodations are necessary, the parish community must see to it that every individual meets Christ: in the celebration of the Sacraments, in proclaiming the Word, in prayer and in the compassion and love of the community.

Just as with any parishioners, people with disabilities and their families can come to the parish doors with great spiritual need. There may be feelings of pain, loss, rejection and suffering. Spiritual questions often arise. Lives may be fraught with uncertainty and questions about medical issues, schooling, employment, relationships, etc. Grace is looked for to live with challenges and look for meaning in a life that is somehow altered. There is a search for understanding this deep mystery with faith, hope and trust in God. Parishes must be ready to respond to the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities, despite differences in communication, mobility, behavior or thinking.

Priority should be given to the initiative of God in the sacraments and not only the readiness of the recipient or the recipient's response. Preparation must be attempted, but in case of doubt, decisions should be in favor of reception of the sacrament and grace of the Holy Spirit within in the person. Our faith also teaches that it is the right and need of everyone to receive religious instruction and formation appropriate to his/her age and development. This includes learning how to pray and know the God who calls us to life and sustains us.

It is the encounter with Christ, mediated through a Church community that is welcoming and accessible, that has its deepest and most important affect on every soul. This encounter must be at the core of a parish's outreach to persons with disabilities and their families. Parishes cannot impede the mission of its members with and without disabilities to serve His Church. This ultimately is the whole reason for a parish to exist: to be a true community where all persons can come to know and love Christ as He personally encounters each human heart.

"It is by the path of love, which is charity that God draws nearer to man and man to God."

St. Albert the Great





## GENERAL TIPS FOR WELCOME AND INCLUSION

It is helpful if YOU.....

- focus on the person, not the disability
- treat adults with disabilities as adults
- speak directly to the parishioner, not to the companion or interpreter
- ask for instructions before providing assistance; don't assume you know the need
- recognize that the person may have multiple disabilities and, therefore, multiple needs
- use a normal voice and volume, unless instructed to do otherwise
- offer to shake hands when introduced
- relax; we are all people with gifts and challenges



## GENERAL TIPS FOR WELCOME AND INCLUSION

It is helpful if the PARISH...

- includes parishioners with disabilities in liturgy, ministries, etc.
- recognizes that people with disabilities have talents and skills that are useful to parish communities
- has appropriate and accessible signage in all parish facilities
- provides respite opportunities for families of children with disabilities
- asks persons with disabilities to evaluate facilities, such as restrooms
- asks what accommodations the parishioner needs
- trains volunteers (adults and youth) to assist the parishioner with a disability



## ENCOUNTERING A PERSON WITH A PHYSICAL DISABILITY

**Definition:** A total or partial loss of voluntary movement or an unusual stature that limits a person's ability to move about, reach, grasp and/or breathe, and is often accompanied by fatigue and weakness, that may be seen or unseen.

### Terms You Hear:

- Amputee
- Arthritic
- Cerebral Palsy (CP)
- Muscular Dystrophy (MD)
- Paralyzed
- Paraplegic or quadriplegic
- Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

### What You Might See:

- Wheelchairs (manual or powered), scooters
- Walkers, crutches, canes, braces, casts
- Prosthesis (artificial limb)
- Portable Oxygen Tanks
- Balance problems or shaking
- Slow or uneven steps, limping
- Unusually small or large stature
- Labored breathing



### What You Can Do:

- Maintain eye level contact and talk directly with the parishioner and not through companions
- Always ask first if the person needs assistance; do not assume that assistance is always needed
- Do not touch or move assistive equipment without permission

### What a Parish Can Do:

- Provide accessible parking spaces and routes with curb cuts and ramps
- Create wide entrances with automatic or easily-opened doors, near accessible parking spaces
- Install lifts and elevators
- Have accessible restrooms in all parish facilities
- Ensure an accessible sanctuary and spaces for worship with access to the sacraments
- Use adjustable height/tilt ambo, podium, altars and tables
- Place hymnals and printed materials within easy reach
- Exercise caution with the use of open flames in parish facilities



## ENCOUNTERING A PERSON WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

**Definition:** A significant limitation in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive skills, which includes many everyday social and practical skills.

### Terms You Hear:

- Mentally Retarded/MR
- Cognitively Impaired
- Down Syndrome
- Alzheimers/Dementia

### What You Might See:


- Speech that is difficult to understand
- Little or no spoken language
- Understanding that is limited
- Responses that are slow

### What You Can Do:

- Speak slowly to the person
- Use simple language
- Use gestures or pictures to help understanding
- Wait for a response
- Repeat questions or directions

### What a Parish Can Do:

- Provide opportunities for socialization
- Provide volunteer opportunities
- Create an adapted/assisted religious education program
- Train and provide mentors



“The proof of love is in the works. Where love exists, it works great things. But when it ceases to act, it ceases to exist.”  
St. Gregory the Great

## ENCOUNTERING A PERSON WITH VISION LOSS

**Definition:** The loss of a person's sight is termed as low vision (with some useful sight) or blindness (no useful vision). Terms used also depend on how severe the loss, how long vision has been impaired and how accepting the person is of the vision loss.

### Terms You Hear:

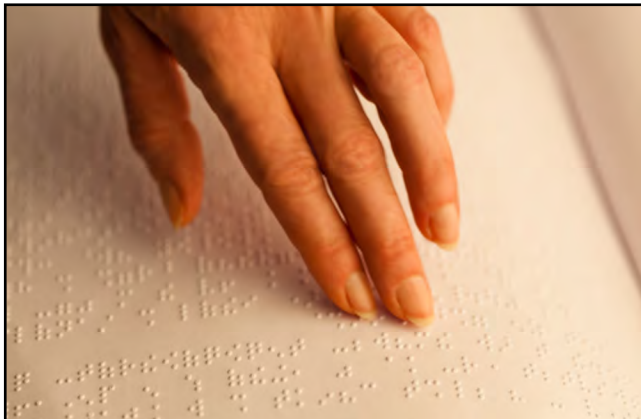
- Blind
- Legally blind
- Low Vision
- Visually Impaired
- Can't see
- Macular Degeneration
- Glaucoma
- Cataracts

### What You Might See:

- Person with white cane
- Guide dog
- Assistant
- Person using no reading materials

### What You Can Do:

- Lightly tap parishioner on the arm and introduce yourself
- Ask if the parishioner needs assistance
- Speak in a normal voice directly to the person
- Use names often to identify who is speaking/in proximity
- If asked to guide, hold our your elbow to lead rather than taking the person's arm
- Offer a tour of parish facilities with common traffic flow and any permanent fixtures to use as locators
- Don't interact with guide dogs



### What a Parish Can Do:

- Supply written materials in audio format prior to the event
- Provide large print in 18 font or larger in Times New Roman font, using black ink on white paper
- Provide materials in Braille (if parishioner is a Braille user)
- Announce any changes to "traffic patterns" during liturgy (such as changes in reception of Communion)
- Have good lighting (>30 footcandles)
- Use caution with open flames in parish facilities





## ENCOUNTERING A PERSON WITH HEARING LOSS

**Definition:** The loss of some or all of a person's hearing in one or both ears, which may limit the ability to acquire or use spoken language.

### Terms You Hear:

- Deaf
- Hard of Hearing
- Hearing Impaired

### What You Might See:

- Person with a hearing aid or cochlear implant
- Someone who speaks differently or uses sign language
- Someone who does not understand spoken language
- Someone who points to their ear/shakes head when spoken to

### What You Can Do:

- Speak at a normal volume, without exaggerated lip movements;
- Offer to write the message
- Do not assume lip-reading ability or that a person with a hearing aid hears normally
- Face the person and speak at eye level
- Do not cover your mouth when speaking
- Be aware that glare behind the speaker interferes with communication
- If an interpreter is present, speak to the deaf person, not the interpreter
- Be aware that background noise may interfere with communication

"Defense of the right to life, then, implies the defense of other rights that enable individuals with disabilities to achieve the fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable."  
US Conference of Catholic Bishops

### What a Parish Can Do:

- Allow for seating with an unobstructed view near the speaker and/or interpreter
- Provide a sign language interpreter (if the parishioner uses sign language)
- Provide appropriate lighting on the speaker and/or interpreter
- Provide assistive listening devices
- If an interpreter is used for liturgy, allow the interpreter to stand in a direct sight line between the speaker and the deaf parishioner
- Provide printed summary of homily and announcements
- Post information about Masses interpreted in sign language and where assistive listening devices can be found
- Familiarize office staff with receiving and making phone calls using relay systems





## ENCOUNTERING A PERSON WITH AUTISM

**Definition:** The result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain and impacts development in the areas of social interaction and communication.

### Terms You Hear:

- Autistic
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Asperger's Syndrome

### What You Might See:

#### Autism

- Limited eye contact
- Loud voice
- Touching things
- Difficulty following directions
- Sensitivity to sounds, lights, smells and textures
- Limited conversation
- Hand flapping, rocking or repeated movements, tantrums

#### Asperger's Syndrome

- Limited eye contact
- Highly developed language and vocabulary
- Repetitive conversation
- Goes off topic easily
- Inability to see other's point of view
- Can be curt or rude
- Awkward mannerisms



### What You Can Do:

- Encourage eye-contact, but do not insist
- Speak in short phrases with a calm, quiet voice
- Repeat directions
- Encourage participation
- Do not try to redirect a tantrum, but instead, keep the person and others safe

### What a Parish Can Do:

- Provide a "Quiet Mass" with little or no music, short sermon, low lighting
- Provide opportunities for socialization
- Provide opportunities for adapted/assisted religious education



## ENCOUNTERING A PERSON WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

**Definition:** Mental Illness is often caused by chemical imbalance in the brain. It disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning.

### Terms You Hear:

- Emotional disturbance
- Depression
- Psychiatric illness
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Eating Disorder
- Phobia/Phobic
- Dementia
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Panic disorder
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Mania or manic
- Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

### What You Might See:

- Person who looks sad, distraught, confused
- Someone who is withdrawn
- Unresponsiveness to conversation
- High energy
- Unkempt appearance
- Unusual facial and physical movements
- Talking to oneself



### What You Can Do:

- Speak directly using a soft, calm voice and ask if you can be of help
- Be sensitive to the fact that some “church” routines (music, misinterpreted words) may create stress which in turn affects function.
- Refrain from immediate physical contact (such as hand-shaking) until response to touch is known
- Offer quiet space to rest
- Stand beside person in supportive, non- instructional manner

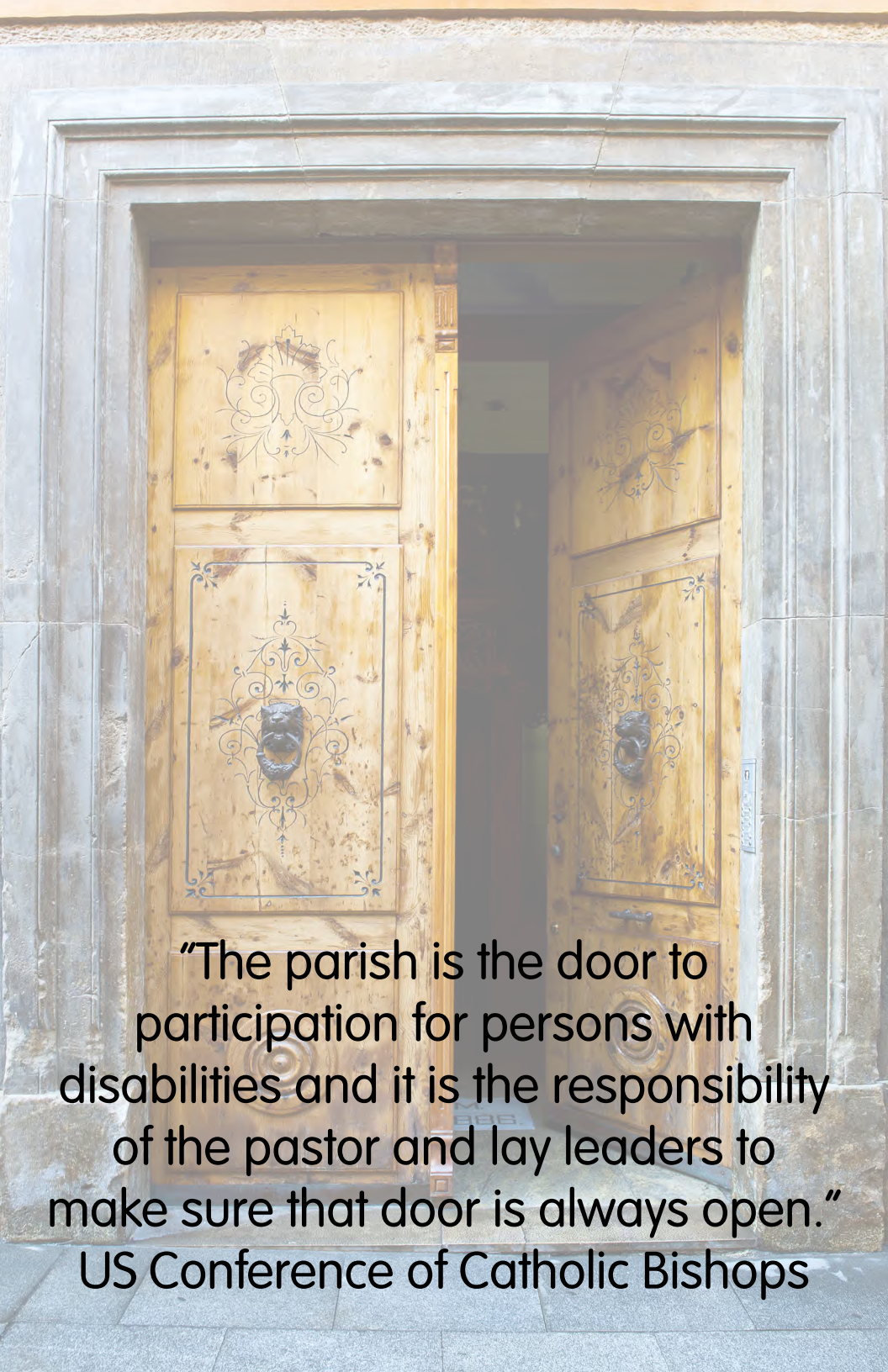
### What a Parish Can Do:

- Learn about the role of faith in recovery
- Offer information regarding local resources for support in recovery
- Create a buddy system within the parish
- Set up a mental health prayer group or ministry

“We always find that those who walked closest to Christ were those who had to bear the greatest trials.”  
St. Teresa of Avila







"The parish is the door to participation for persons with disabilities and it is the responsibility of the pastor and lay leaders to make sure that door is always open."  
US Conference of Catholic Bishops

This Parish Guide is offered to you by the Diocese of Harrisburg's **Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities**. It is hoped that parishes will use this guide to direct and continue your work on behalf of Christ to all of His flock. It is our mission as Church to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and to provide encouragement and opportunity for all members to do God's work. It is our same divine calling.

The diocesan Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities was established in 2007 to assist in Christ's mandate to create a Church that fully recognizes the dignity, rights and potential of all people. This mission involves consultation and training with parishes, providing information and assistance to persons with disabilities and their family members and creating awareness of the needs and gifts of persons with disabilities to the diocese and community at large.

To further this mission, the **Parish Advocacy Program** was established. The Parish Advocate is a parishioner chosen by the pastor and trained by the Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities to assist the pastor in working for and with parishioners with disabilities.

Information about other programs such as the John Paul II Prayer Community, the diocesan ministry to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, the annual camping program for adults with IDD, the lending library, etc. can be found on the diocesan website's "Disability Ministries" pages ([www.hbgdiocese.org](http://www.hbgdiocese.org)). Information is also provided on the website about accessibility in all parishes as well as information about disability-related ministries throughout the diocese and local and national resources.

For more information about the Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities and its programs, services and resources, contact the director at (717) 657-4804, X 322, [vduncan@hbgdiocese.org](mailto:vduncan@hbgdiocese.org).

*"Persons with disabilities are not looking for pity.  
They seek to serve the community and to enjoy their  
full baptismal rights as members of the Church. Our  
interaction should be an affirmation of our faith. There can  
be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.  
We are one flock that follows a single shepherd."  
US Conference of Catholic Bishops*



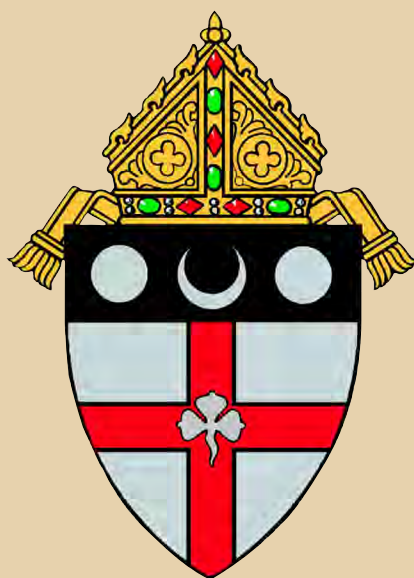
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This guide was created by the efforts of past and current members of the Advisory Board for the Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities in the Diocese of Harrisburg: Anne Marie Beshore, Traci Downey, Kathi Durborow, Angela Heinick, Dr. John Kajic, Cheryl Koury, Jennifer Najdek, Frank Nemshick, Dave Orris, Eileen Pannell, Kathy Perney, Reverend Mark Speitel and Alice Womer.

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