

Ten Ways

TO GROW IN FAITH WITH PEOPLE OF ALL ABILITIES



God has made each of us with different gifts, strengths, and weaknesses. Often people with disabilities find that other people decide for them how they can and cannot participate in the life of their church community. The church is one body. People with disabilities are underrepresented in the church, despite having as much (or more) interest in faith as the average population. If we fail to intentionally include and accommodate people, the church suffers just as much as the person excluded. Here are a few tips to help you think about working together in God's growing kingdom!

1. BE CAREFUL WITH FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When you first meet someone, you don't know what that person can understand or do. Some people who struggle to express themselves are nevertheless great at receiving your communication, while others may be good communicators themselves but do not always understand what you say in return. People who use wheelchairs may have above-average intelligence. People who are blind are not necessarily hard of hearing. Try not to make assumptions, and get to know each person individually.

2. BRUSH UP ON THE BASICS

From person-first language to understanding the boundaries of personal space with someone in a wheelchair, basic etiquette around disabilities is often simple but not necessarily intuitive. Take five minutes to learn the basics (bit.ly/DisabilityHospitality)—you'll feel more confident and avoid some common blunders!

3. BUILD A SOCIAL RAMP, NOT JUST A WHEELCHAIR RAMP

Often the hardest friend to make in a community is the first one. Try identifying and training specific individuals who will reach out and be that first friend when someone with a disability comes through your door. Encourage them to introduce others from the congregation and model appropriate interaction and communication for the rest of the community. Remember that someone who has a difficult time with social interactions may long for friendships but will likely need someone to be a social ramp into other relationships.

4. HELP EVERYONE ACCESS WORSHIP MATERIALS

Large-print bulletins, hymnals and Bibles make it easier for some people to participate. Sending worship materials in the church's weekly email and posting the bulletin, song words and liturgy online with a QR code in the bulletin also increases access. This allows people to use technology on their phone or tablet to magnify the words, allows people who are blind to use a screen reader and reduces stress for some people with autism and anxiety.

Hearing loops (hearingloop.org) linked to the church audio system can dramatically improve the worship experience for people who are hard of hearing. Consider incorporating live captioning and sign-language interpretation into your services as well.

5. TRAIN UP CHILDREN IN THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO

Children with disabilities, and their families, often leave the church right around the time a Sunday school teacher throws up his or her hands in frustration and says, “I’m sorry—I just can’t do this anymore!” Give your teachers and youth leaders the resources they need to keep their classroom a safe, exciting place for all students (bit.ly/DCvideotraining). Adding a second teacher to classrooms that are struggling can also make a world of difference for everyone involved.

6. REMEMBER FAMILY MEMBERS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Parents or other family members living with a person with a disability often have countless extra stressors in their lives. Offering respite care for date nights, weekend getaways, or even simple spring cleaning days and grocery runs shows sensitivity and love to the whole family.

7. ASK AND LISTEN

When in doubt, just ask. Sometimes we forget that the best teaching resource we have is the person right in front of us. Not every tip for interacting with a person who has autism will apply to each person with autism. Every individual has preferences, ideas, and goals. Don’t be afraid to ask questions like “What would you like to try doing that you haven’t been able to explore yet?” Just be prepared to follow through after you start the conversation!

8. EXPLORE HOW TO REACH PEOPLE OF ALL ABILITIES

Incorporate universal design concepts, creating things as accessible as possible for as many people as possible. Offer different types of seating options and offer your worship services online as well as in-person. Not everyone learns best by listening to a spoken message. Incorporating visuals and experiential learning can help a person with an intellectual disability participate more fully in your worship and will often benefit many other worshipers, such as persons learning English as a second language. Learn more at bit.ly/CICWuniversal.

9. EVERYBODY BELONGS

Some people make noises or movements that others may find distracting in a worship setting. Very often this is something the person cannot control, and it is an intrinsic part of how God created him or her. As Christians, we are called to ensure that others are made welcome and comfortable in Christ’s body. Church leaders should be proactive in modeling a welcoming, flexible, gracious attitude.

Many people with disabilities are socially isolated, surrounded only by paid caretakers and perhaps family members, and they rarely have opportunities to form lasting friendships. Consider expanding the scope of your small group program to include people with disabilities using the Together Small Groups studies (withministries.org/together).

10. EVERYBODY SERVES

Don’t forget that all people in God’s kingdom have gifts and that every one of us has work to do in growing that kingdom! Think about ways all people can contribute actively. You may be surprised at how many opportunities you discover. Be intentional about asking what people with disabilities would like to offer, and be careful not to decide for someone what he or she cannot do.

This resource has been developed by Thrive. If you have questions or would like support in ministry, please email thrive@crcna.org.

