



# Diocese of Hallam

## Welcoming Disabled People. A Parish Guide

### Introduction

In the words of Pope Francis, "...inclusion should be the first "rock" on which to build our house." <sup>1</sup>

"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." <sup>2</sup>

"We, the Church, affirm the gifts of every person and desire that disabled persons enjoy their right and opportunity to use these gifts in praise and service to God." <sup>3</sup>

### Rationale

"Parish communities should be concerned to encourage among the faithful a welcoming attitude towards disabled people. Creating a fully accessible parish requires not only the removal of architectural barriers, but above all, helping parishioners to develop attitudes and acts of solidarity and service towards disabled people and their families. Our aim should be to speak no longer about "them" but rather about "us."

"Before all else, I strongly reaffirm the right of disabled people to *receive the sacraments*, like all other members of the Church. All liturgical celebrations in the parish should be accessible to them, so that, together with their brothers and sisters, each of them can deepen, celebrate, and live their faith. Special attention should be paid to disabled people who have not yet received the sacraments of Christian initiation: they should be welcomed and included in programmes of catechesis in preparation for these sacraments. No one should be excluded from the grace of these sacraments.

"In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). Disabled people, both in society and in the Church, also wish to become *active subjects* of our pastoral ministry, and not simply its recipients. Many disabled people feel that they exist without belonging and without participating. Much still prevents them from being fully enfranchised. Our concern should be not only to care for them, but also to ensure their 'active participation' in the civil and ecclesial community. <sup>1</sup>

"...there can be no *us* and *them*, but a single *us*, with Jesus Christ at the centre, where each person brings his or her own gifts and limitations. This awareness, founded on the fact that we are all part of the same vulnerable humanity assumed and sanctified by Christ, eliminates arbitrary distinctions, and opens the door to the participation of each baptized member in the life of the Church...I trust that every Christian community will be open to the presence of our disabled brothers and sisters, and ensure that they are always welcomed and fully included." <sup>4</sup>

This Guide aims to support parishes to achieve this, for the richness of all. This document uses the social model of disability and identity- first language. However, we will always respect and accept the language any individual chooses to use when referring to themselves, and this preference should take precedence over the terms given below.

### General tips for welcome and inclusion

#### What you can do:

- smile and relax

- focus on the person, not the disability
- speak directly to the person
- treat disabled adults as adults
- use your normal voice and volume, unless asked to do otherwise
- ask for instructions before giving assistance
- recognize that the person may have other invisible conditions

#### **What a parish can do:**

- conduct an audit to look at accessibility and inclusion, with input from disabled people, and work on priorities
- have reserved parking spaces and appropriate, accessible signage in all parish facilities
- include a message in the Bulletin that “All are welcome,” and announce regularly in church
- enable disabled parishioners to be active in liturgies, ministries, recognising that disabled people have talents and skills to offer to parish communities
- identify and label a withdrawal space
- remember that disabled people are the expert in what support they need- always ask them first
- train volunteers (adults and youth) to assist disabled parishioners
- provide opportunities for socialisation, involvement in wider parish activities, with support as required. Plan for the involvement of disabled people from the outset.
- include the needs of house-bound parishioners
- look for practical ways of supporting carers where appropriate, as well as the disabled person
- Have a section on the parish notice board and website for related resources and signposting

#### **Person who is blind or partially sighted**

##### **What you can do:**

- lightly tap person on the arm and introduce yourself
- ask if the person needs assistance
- speak in your normal voice directly to the person
- use names often to identify who is speaking or is nearby
- if asked to guide, ask how the person prefers to be led
- offer a tour of parish facilities with permanent fixtures to use as locators
- do not interact with guide dogs

##### **What a parish can do:**

- ask how the person accesses text, and respond as appropriate:
- supply written materials in audio format prior to the event
- provide large print in minimum 18pt in Calibri, Helvetica, Arial, Verdana, using black ink on white paper
- provide materials in Braille, such as hymn books, if parishioner is a Braille user
- announce any changes during liturgy, such as reception of Communion
- ensure good lighting
- be careful with open flames
- ensure website meets accessibility standards. Ensure text size allows content to be displayed properly on a full range of devices, including mobile, tablets, and screen readers.

#### **Person who is Deaf or hard of hearing**

##### **What you can do:**

- speak at your normal volume, without exaggerated lip movements. Do not cover your mouth
- offer to write the message
- do not assume lip-reading ability or that a person with a hearing aid hears the same as you

- face the person and speak at eye level
- avoid glare behind the speaker
- if an interpreter is present, speak to the deaf person, not the interpreter
- be aware that background noise may interfere with communication

**What a parish can do:**

- provide seating with an unobstructed view of the speaker, interpreter
- provide a sign language interpreter, if possible, if the parishioner uses sign language
- provide appropriate lighting on the speaker, interpreter
- ensure loop system is in place and switched on
- provide a printed summary of homily and announcements, and have available online
- advertise Masses interpreted in sign language and where loop systems are available
- identify preferred external communication method-email, text, phone

**Person with a learning disability**

**What you can do:**

- slow your speech and focus on using key words
- use gestures or pictures to help understanding
- give time for a response, and give encouragement
- repeat questions or directions, in a different form as necessary

**What a parish can do:**

- provide access to a programme of faith formation and sacramental preparation
- provide opportunities for the person to be involved in liturgies, ministries, for example, as a welcomer, altar server, offertory

**Person with mental ill health (including in a crisis)**

**What you can do:**

- approach, speak directly using a soft, calm voice and ask what help they need
- be sensitive to the fact that some parts of the Mass, such as music, or misinterpreted words, may create stress
- respect person's personal space, avoiding touching
- offer quiet space to rest
- remain nearby person in supportive, non- directive manner
- ask if person has received professional help before, and whether they need to access it now
- encourage person to use self-care strategies and seek the support of friends, family

**What a parish can do:**

- provide some seating near the door for people who need it
- gather and offer information regarding local resources for support, including on website
- create a buddy system within the parish
- set up a mental health prayer group or ministry

**Person using a wheelchair or other mobility aid**

**What you can do:**

- maintain eye level contact and talk directly with the parishioner
- always ask first if the person needs assistance. Do not assume that assistance it is needed
- do not touch or move equipment without permission

**What a parish can do:**

- provide accessible parking spaces and route into church
- establish a list of volunteer drivers and publicise availability
- create wide entrances with automatic or easily-opened doors, near accessible parking spaces
- ensure enough room in church for people who use wheelchairs: take out a pew if necessary. Designate some seats with/ without arms for use by people who need them
- enable all to be involved in liturgies, ministries
- ensure an accessible sanctuary and spaces for worship with access to the sacraments
- use adjustable height and tilt ambo, podium, altars, and tables
- place hymnals and printed materials within easy reach
- have accessible toilets
- be careful with open flames
- install a lift where necessary

**Neurodivergent person, including autistic person, person with ADHD****What you can do:**

- the person may not give eye contact- accept that
- speak in short sentences with a calm, quiet voice, respecting personal space
- be clear and accurate in what you say, including doing what you say you will do
- if the person is in a crisis, give personal space, aiming to keep the person and others safe

**What a parish can do:**

- preparation for the person: provide information on website about particular aspects of the parish mass, for example, having welcomers, order for coming to communion, plus photos of the church and hall areas
- provide access to programme of faith formation and sacramental preparation
- have “fidget bags” available for those who experience sensory processing issues, plus a visual schedule of the Mass so the person knows what to expect next. Consider noise-cancelling headphones<sup>5</sup>, sun glasses<sup>6</sup>
- listen and be sensitive to stimulants within the mass setting that may challenge individuals – volume, incense, lighting, holy water sprinkling. What can be modified?
- encourage participation – how does the person want to take part, for example, altar server, offertory
- identify and label a withdrawal space

**Person with dementia****What you can do:**

- smile, introduce yourself and make eye contact. Face the person in good light. Respect personal space
- slow your speech. Try not to ask for facts. Give time to respond
- observe and respond to body language and non-verbal messages
- if the person talks of something that upsets them, acknowledge the sadness, name it and comfort them <sup>7</sup>

**What the parish can do:**

- Include pictures or symbols alongside words on important notices, for example, toilet, exit
- Include older hymns in liturgies
- Identify and label a quiet withdrawal space <sup>8</sup>

**Person with epilepsy****What you can do:**

- if you are with a person having a seizure, only move them if they're in danger, and cushion their head if they are on the ground
- loosen any tight clothing around their neck, to aid breathing

- do not put anything in their mouth. No food or drink until they have fully recovered
- turn them on to their side after their convulsions stop
- stay with them and talk to them calmly until they recover, noting the time the seizure starts and finishes
- if the person is in a wheelchair, put the brakes on and leave any seatbelt or harness on. Support them gently and cushion their head, but do not try to move them.
- call an ambulance if it is the first time someone has had a seizure, or it lasts more than 5 minutes <sup>9</sup>

#### **What the parish can do:**

- identify a safe quiet withdrawal space
- share the information above as to how to respond appropriately if someone has a seizure
- Promote awareness of epilepsy
- Have a 'defibrillator' available, on charge, with clear instructions for use

#### **Person who is housebound**

##### **What the parish can do:**

- maintain a database of parishioners, to keep in contact and identify changing needs
- manage visits by Eucharistic ministers
- stream regular services
- coordinate social visiting and practical support by parish groups, for example, SVP
- Introduce The Pope's Prayer Intentions, part of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network, to link all together in prayer <sup>10</sup>

#### **References**

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 3.12.2020

<sup>2</sup> 'Welcoming People with Disabilities So All May Encounter Christ – A Guide for Parishes', Diocese of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania USA (2012)

<sup>3</sup> Living Fully 2016: Disability, Culture and Faith – A Celebration

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 3.12.2022

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Herald Reaching out to Catholics with Autism: What can Parishes Do? C Jurkiewicz 13.9.2021

<sup>6</sup> [SensoryFriendly-Mass-Considerations-OPD-1.2023.pdf \(opdarchphilly.org\)](https://www.opdarchphilly.org/2023/01/01/sensory-friendly-mass-considerations-opd-1-2023.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Growing Dementia- Friendly Churches, Revd G Hammond

<sup>8</sup> One Step at a Time, Faith in Older People, 2019

<sup>9</sup> [What to do if someone has a seizure \(fit\) - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/health-a-z/what-to-do-if-someone-has-a-seizure-fit/)

<sup>10</sup> [The Pope's Prayer Intentions](https://www.papalprayer.com/)

#### **Acknowledgements**

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