

# Welcoming Strategies and Tips for Systemic Change

## How Parishes Can Better Serve People with Disabilities

### 1. Welcome (Before Families Step in the Door)

- *Cultivate a Culture of Care*
  - Intentionality and Alignment of Vision
    - Move people with disabilities from the periphery to the forefront of parish thought.
      - “Keep the end in mind.” People with disabilities should be included in future planning whether currently present or not.
      - “If you build it, they will come.” This includes accessible facilities, hearts, and programs.
- *Plant seeds for change*
  - Active Engagement
    - Identify parishioners who are authentic and welcoming
      - Use person first language
      - Practice disability etiquette
      - Step out of old scripts. Consider engaging younger parishioners.
    - Identify a Parish Advocate (volunteer, staff person, committee)

*Note:* It is important for priests and parish leaders to be approachable so that parishioners feel comfortable contacting the parish for assistance.

### 2. Presence (Crossing the threshold)

- *Bloom where you are planted*
  - Readiness
    - Identify parishioners needs so accommodations can be made
      - Parish Member Registration Forms should include an area for disabilities and accommodations
      - Faith Formation, VBS, and Parish Event Registration Forms also need to include an area to note disabilities and needs
  - Communication
    - Parishes need to identify disability advocates and make their contact information accessible in the bulletin, on the parish website, and in parish publications.
      - For example, include a weekly presence in the bulletin or on the website that states,
        - “Our parish desires the active participation of all members of our faith community. If you or your family member could benefit from an accommodation, please contact [Insert name of parish contact/staff]. We are eager to assist you or your family member as we are able [email, phone number]” (NCPD, 2021)

- “Please contact us if you could benefit from an accommodation such as screen reader access, wheelchair access, sign language, interpretation, sensory adaptations, etc.”
- “In order to provide for any needs, such as wheelchair seating, assistive listening equipment, sign language interpreter, or large print/Braille materials, please contact \_\_\_\_\_ at least 10 days before the event.” (NCPD, 2022)
- Example accessible symbols to utilize include:



- For individuals needing little assistance, make sure accommodations are available and communicated.
  - i.e., signage in the parking lot, Gathering Space, and church
  - Information on where or how parishioners can obtain hearing devices, large print missals, visual learner Mass guides, or braille missals, sensory friendly tools/spaces. etc.
  - Hospitality members and staff also may need to verbally communicate this information.

### 3. Serve (Action-oriented and serving like God)

- *Nourish*
  - Invite persons with disabilities to share their gifts in serving at your parish in liturgical roles and volunteer opportunities.
  - Training
    - Offer ongoing trainings to hospitality ministers and volunteers
    - Sensory Masses
    - Bulletin blurbs or reflections on disabilities
- *Grow*
  - Quality Improvement
    - Parish council or special needs advisory board meetings
    - Parish surveys and/or listening sessions to identify new or unidentified needs
  - Advancement
    - Diocesan outreach and connections
    - Parish outreach and local community connections
    - Promote via media, network and share best practices within our diocese and disability resource community

#### Resources

“Parish Access Contact Guide.” *NCPD*, 23 Feb. 2021, [ncpd.org/resources\\_and\\_toolkits/parish-access-contact-guide](https://ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/parish-access-contact-guide).  
 “A Good Host Is a Good Planner.” *NCPD*, 16 Jan. 2022, [ncpd.org/resources\\_and\\_toolkits/good-host-good-planner](https://ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/good-host-good-planner).