

Seven Ways to Open the Doors

National Catholic Partnership on Disability
Washington, D.C.

(Excerpted from *Welcoming Parishioners with Disabilities*
available for a free [download](#) from the USCCB)

Those with varying degrees of disabilities have responsibilities and gifts to open the parish “doors” to worshippers of all abilities. But as the U.S. Catholic bishops have stated, “the creation of a fully accessible parish reaches beyond mere physical physical accomodation to encompass the attitudes of all parishioners toward persons with disabilities.”³ Live out the Christ-centered focus of our Christian Baptism. Call forth the gifts of all in your community. Each person can follow these suggestions in some way, according to his or her gifts and capacities.

1. Initiate both a personal and parish examination of conscience.

- How are you living the Beatitudes? How might you continue to grow?
- What has your parish done to live the Beatitudes by becoming more accessible to those with physical, sensory, cognitive, or psychological disabilities? How can you further this process? If you or a family member have a disability, you have a special opportunity to generously offer your experience in helping that process. Be an advocate.

2. Survey other parishioners to identify which of the following would help them participate more fully in all aspects of parish life:

- Transportation
- Large-print worship aids and/or bulletins; or audio-taped bulletins
- Assistive listening devices or ASL signing
- Easily grasped door handles; appropriate door pressure
- Handrails at steps
- Wheelchair seating; elevator
- Pastoral services for those unable to attend regular service
- Accessible restrooms

3. Encourage committees and groups in your parish-such as the parish council or committees for liturgy, evangelization, social justice, religious education, and pro-life issues-to evaluate the accessibility of all parish programs in order to welcome people of all abilities. Keep in mind that accessibility goes beyond physical access- it includes those who have sensory or cognitive disabilities.

4. Make your liturgies accessible. This might include ensuring physical access to your altar, ambo, and reconciliation rooms or confessionals; offering Braille and /or large-print missalettes and hymnals; and offering ASL interpretation at Mass and other sacramental celebrations. Lack of access for the sacrament of Reconciliation is particularly painful for those who use mobility aids or who require ASL or assistive-

listening devices. And the Precious Blood should be made available at all times for those with a severe sensitivity to gluten (Celiac-Sprue disease).

5. Search your local community for people who live in assisted-living settings or nursing homes, and offer companions and transportation for Mass and other parish gatherings. If you have a disability, make your parish aware that you need to attend liturgies and seasonal services.

6. Encourage your parish to offer accessible training sessions for anyone interested in becoming Eucharistic ministers, lectors, hospitality ministers, cantors, or altar servers. By offering training sessions that create access for people with disabilities to participate in the liturgy, your parish can reflect the rich diversity of God's gift of life.

7. Welcome Catholics with disabilities who have stayed away because they have felt marginalized. The steps outlined above can extend a hand of welcome—as can helping fellow parishioners to educate themselves so that they can reach out to their brothers and sisters with disabilities and their families. Or if you or a family member have a disability and have felt disenfranchised, consider responding to initiatives that seek to bring disabled Catholics and their families home to the Church. When parishioners reach out, they may be uncertain about how to welcome someone who has needs that they have never experienced themselves. Be generous and help them to learn. Give them time to grow. To risk it, ever one more time, is well worth the effort.

Notes

1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework of Access and Inclusion* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999), no.1.

2 USCCB, *Pastoral Statement by U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1978), no.4.

3 USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1995), no.6.