

WELCOMING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

“Disabled people must have access to the sacraments, to Catholic parish life.”

Pope Francis, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 3 December 2020.

Members of the Sidmouth St Vincent de Paul (SVP) conference came together to discuss how to ensure people with disabilities are welcome in their parish and in particular how they can be a Sight Loss Friendly Church. This note is a short summary of their discussions and ideas that we hope will help people in other parishes. The group reflected on some materials sent through by The Torch Trust, (<https://torchtrust.org/>) a Christian charity which enables the blind and partially sighted to participate and thrive within their communities.

The following are some quotes from people affected by sight loss:

“I just want to be treated as normally as possible, not singled out as different.”

“I can’t make eye contact, so I need them to initiate conversation - I might not know they are there.”

“I can see to do most things if the light is right for me. People are often surprised if I have to ask for help when the light is less good - sometimes I get the impression that they think I’m messing about!”

“It’s really embarrassing to be offered a cup of tea but not know that it has arrived. After one meeting, I asked someone if I could have a drink, only to discover that it had been sitting on the table in front of me for 5 minutes, but no one had told me!”

“The priest at my church sends me an e-mail before the weekend Masses containing any printed material that will be given out in the service, the newsletter and hymns we will be singing. This means I can read them on my computer at home and make braille notes.”

“I’m not registered blind or partially sighted, but as I have got older, I need more light to read clearly and I find it difficult to read the projector screen, especially if there is light shining on it.”

“It is very embarrassing, having to keep asking for the same thing over and over again. It would be really helpful if someone who understands my needs would take that responsibility.”

On 6 December 2021, the Vatican launched a campaign for persons with disabilities—#Iamchurch, highlighting the contribution made by people with disabilities to the life of the Church. You can find our more here <https://youtu.be/U4PWSir1Ovk>



The group reflected that to ensure access to church life for people with disabilities, the following checklist could be helpful:

- ◆ **Prayer and celebration**— there are lots of ways to make worship accessible <https://www.sightlossfriendlychurch.org.uk/downloads/slsunday/interactive-prayers.pdf>
- ◆ **Don't presume:** parishioners with disabilities are best placed to advise on how a parish can be welcoming for all and have an important role to play.
- ◆ **Parish newsletter.** Are large print copies provided, are they emailed out or posted?
- ◆ **Braille and/or large print hymnbooks.** Is there anyone in your parish who uses Braille?
- ◆ **Screens.** The siting and lighting of screens is crucial for anyone with any degree of sight loss and any discussions on their introduction needs to take this into consideration.
- ◆ **Role of welcomers.** Welcomers can make people feel safer and can support people who need an escort in and out of church and also up to Holy Communion if need be. They can also advise the Celebrant of anyone needing Holy Communion brought to them.
- ◆ **Escorting in and out of Mass and to coffee afterwards.** This could be done by Welcomers and other parishioners (but don't forget safeguarding guidance).
- ◆ **Ensure people are not isolated at coffee or social events.** At social events is special care taken to seating people near friends or, if alone, at the helpers' table.
- ◆ **Toilets.** Are there facilities for people with disabilities in both the church and hall?
- ◆ **Trips and hazards.** Are the church and its hall accessible and checked for hazards?
- ◆ **Use of type fonts and printing.** Consideration should be given to using Arial 12 and keeping to left justified. Use blank lines (spacing) after paragraphs and square bullet points and solid lines rather than dots.
- ◆ **Notices.** Are notices emailed/sent to all registered visual impaired people who request it?
- ◆ **Conversations:** Always ask if people need help before doing anything: introduce yourself by name and use their name. Always ask before you touch someone.

If you would like more information please contact caritas@prcdtr.org.uk. There is also a super guide for parishes produced by the Catholic Disability Fellowship which includes a checklist for parish provision www.csan.org.uk/guidance/parish-guide-to-disability/

TOP TIPS FROM SIDMOUTH SVP

The role of welcomers is crucial in ensuring people's needs are met.

Make sure people with disabilities have a voice.

Changing printing font sizes on parish documentation can make a big difference.

If you are installing screens, ensure that people with disabilities are not disadvantaged.

Make sure the parish office can respond to requests for mailing out notices, etc., so that people can make use of their adaptive technology.

