Welcoming Others in Faith
Building relationships & communicating with people with disabilities

Bethesda
Like most people, those with intellectual and developmental disabilities want to feel they belong. The basic human desires for community, fellowship, social interaction and acceptance resides in all of us. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities struggle throughout their lives to find that basic sense of belonging.

People often tell us church is where they first felt completely included—somewhere they truly belonged. So how can you, a church member, foster a welcoming environment for people of all abilities? How can you help create an environment where everyone is an equal member and participant in the Body of Christ?

In the following pages, you will begin to learn how to communicate and build relationships with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

To equip you, we will briefly explore the following:
- Psalm 139 and how we are all “wonderfully made” by our Creator
- The Body of Christ, and how it is only complete when all people are part of the body
- The gifts that people with disabilities bring to the church
- The ability to use people first language
- The value of building genuine friendships with people with disabilities

Our prayerful hope is that this guide will inspire you to move past any barriers that might hinder you as you approach people with intellectual or developmental disabilities and lead you to further instruction about this topic at [www.lhm.org/learn](http://www.lhm.org/learn).

---

**We Are Fearfully and Wonderfully Made**

For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. - Psalm 139:13-14 NIV

God created human beings in His own image. He gave us souls and the ability to have a relationship with Him. No matter the differences of culture, ethnicity or appearance, we all have something in common: we are all God’s creations and He loves us all the same.

So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. ...And God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. - Genesis 1:27, 31a NIV

God has blessed each of us with a different set of talents, aptitudes and abilities. These are gifts from God, not indicators of our worth. Our value comes from our God-given identity. We are His children, loved and forgiven in Christ.

God’s love for us doesn’t depend on our abilities. All people are equally valuable and important to the Lord because He created each one of us and offers forgiveness in Christ equally to all. We are fearfully and wonderfully made!

---

**Meet Don**

Don first came to Bethesda in 1974, and since then, Bethesda has supported him as he spends much of his time serving in his church. Don is a faithful, strong and independent man who happens to have a developmental disability and is legally blind. However, Don has never let his disabilities stand in the way of sharing his faith with others.
We are One Body—The Body of Christ

We all sin and are in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. We all:

• should have the opportunity to learn about salvation in a welcoming congregation
• need to know we are saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
• need opportunities to witness to others
• need to feel part of the same body: The Body of Christ

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.
- 1 Corinthians 12:13 NIV

When the Lord looks at you, He sees His child, made perfect in Christ. Each member of the body has been justified through faith in Jesus and washed clean by His forgiveness. Together we are the Body of Christ on earth.

Additional verses to consider:

1 Corinthians 12:18, NIV ➔ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be.

John 10:10b, NIV ➔ I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

1 Samuel 16:7b, NIV ➔ The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

Genesis 1:27, NIV ➔ So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

Ephesians 2:10, NIV ➔ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

1 Peter 4:10, NIV ➔ Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.
A true friend knows your weaknesses but shows your strengths; feels your fears but fortifies your faith; sees your anxieties but frees your spirit; recognizes your disabilities but emphasizes your possibilities.

- William Arthur Ward, author

Communicating for Success

Throughout His ministry, Jesus demonstrated time and again, whether He was healing the sick, forgiving the irredeemable, or carrying the cross on the road to Calvary, that the Gospel is meant to be shared with everyone no matter who they are. As Christians, we are called to do the same, and that starts with communication.

Let’s get practical. You may desire to love and serve people with disabilities, but the simplest thing—how to talk to people—may seem like a barrier to building these relationships. That’s why we’ve put together examples to think about when communicating with people with disabilities. Please note: We do not have all the answers, we are just trying to begin conversations about communicating respectfully.
People First Language

Human beings should not be defined by their abilities. Each of us has a different set of strengths and challenges; that doesn’t change the fact that we are people. Our terminology should reflect this. Someone may have a disability, but that doesn’t mean they are their disability. They are people first.

Use the table below to see the difference between affirmative and negative language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>USE AFFIRMATIVE LANGUAGE</th>
<th>AVOID NEGATIVE LANGUAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person who has...</td>
<td>Suffers from, victim of...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person with a disability...</td>
<td>Handicapped, crippled, unfortunate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person with intellectual or developmental disability</td>
<td>Retarded, dumb, mentally handicapped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a learning disability</td>
<td>Learning disabled, slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a physical disability</td>
<td>Crippled, lame, deformed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When you are with a person who has a disability:

- Be respectful
- Choose topics you think will interest the person
- Speak naturally
- Be clear and concise
- Talk directly to the person, not through others
- Don’t talk down to the person
- Offer to help, but do not assume help is needed or wanted
- Define words, especially in a classroom setting
- Do not ignore or disregard someone with disabilities who is in a group setting
- Talk with the person even if they cannot respond verbally

Regardless of abilities, all people are wonderfully made in the image of God and equally valuable to Him. His Church is diverse. Each child of God brings gifts to the community and is an indispensable member of the Body of Christ. As we use people first language, we honor God’s creation. By developing positive communication skills that show respect to people of all abilities, we show love to our neighbors.
Building Meaningful Relationships

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. - Romans 1:11–12

We have seen some biblical reasons to support awareness and acceptance and viewed the tables regarding respectful communication. But let’s consider what happens once true relationships are formed: friendships develop!

Friends Who Become Family

Authentic friendships are not one-sided. Authentic friendships are mutually encouraging. True friends recognize each others’ gifts and talents and value each other as equal members of the friendship.

By taking the time to communicate with respect, friends show a genuine desire to affirm one another’s dignity. When we communicate with and understand one another, we begin to recognize that we are all called to be productive, forgiven servants of Christ, connected by the Body of Christ.

Get the Full Curriculum

This paper is based on the four-session free online course developed by Bethesda and Lutheran Hour Ministries: Face2Face: Building Relationships with People with Disabilities.

The full course includes:
- A journal as you walk through the course
- Supplementary Bible verses to study
- Quizzes on what you’ve learned
- Discussion guides for use in group settings

If you would like to take the course, visit the Learning Library at Lutheran Hour Ministries at lhm.org/learn

Bethesda also offers free disability awareness materials for your congregation, school or organizations. The materials include sermon notes, Bible studies, school materials and more.

For more resources on disability awareness, including sermon notes, Bible studies for all ages, devotions, and school materials, look for Face2Face at BethesdaLC.org/FaithResources

© Copyright, 2020, Bethesda Lutheran Communities. All rights reserved. This content is intended for educational use only. Copies may be made to support your classroom or place of learning.
ABOUT BETHESDA

Our Mission

To enhance the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities through services that share the good news of Jesus Christ.

What We Do

Bethesda is a national leader in providing community supports, promoting awareness and advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Operating at program locations across 13 States, we are a Christian nonprofit organization that succeeds through the passion of our employees, donors and volunteers who make a difference every day in the lives of those we support. Bethesda’s spectrum of services continues to evolve as we strive to reflect the needs of the people and families we support, which in recent years has focused on independence and community living.

Our organization is proud to be a change agent in implementing forward-thinking solutions that improve the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Bethesda’s Employment Support Services are an example of our offerings that exemplify the level of self-direction and choice that people we support, parents and guardians seek.

Bethesda’s services include: *

- Residential Support Programs
- Community Connections (Community Activities and Day Programs)
- Careers Connections (Integrated Employment)
- Faith Supports
- Bethesda College of Applied Learning
- Behavior Support

* Bethesda services vary by state. Visit BethesdaLC.org/Locations for specific offerings in your area.