



The General Conference
Sabbath School &
Personal Ministries



TO

SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

HIDDEN DISABILITY



SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST[®] CHURCH

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SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

Creating Inclusive Opportunities in Ministry

Ministry is a privilege given by God for the modern-day Christian based on biblical principles, the life of Christ, and the love God shows to, for, and with all people. Ministering to, for, and with people with special needs is the extension of the love that Christ demonstrated while on earth. It allows Christians to replicate the Heavenly Father's supreme sacrifice of service by giving His only begotten Son to an undeserving world.

This publication provides information that will assist congregations in developing Special Needs Ministries, specifically a ministry that focuses on children and adults who have a hidden impairment. Specific suggestions and strategies will be given so that the church can make the gospel accessible to all people, including those with a hidden disability.

Certain conditions may hamper efforts to embrace all men, women, and children into inclusive worship. People with special needs may not wish to self-identify as having a special need, or their family members may share the same reluctance to openly identify a special need. This resistance may be the result of personal issues, preference, and/or the cultural stigma related to disabilities. In addition, parishoners may not feel adequately prepared to participate in inclusion ministries, or may not be comfortable with children and adults with unique needs. Concern over the adequacy of church resources to meet identified needs may also be an issue. However, if the church can work around and eventually overcome these potential obstacles, it can create powerful ministries that address the needs of the one billion people in the world with a disability.

The Mission

The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel in the context of the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14:6-12.

Special Needs Ministries, which coordinates its outreach under the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, exists to teach and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to people with special needs. As the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department communicates the good news of Jesus Christ to men, women, and youth throughout the world, the Special Needs Ministries focuses on those with disabilities. Training and promotion materials are provided through *AdventSource* and the Adventist Book Center to support the mission of including people with special needs in all areas of church life.

A major goal of the ministry is to encourage church leaders worldwide to intentionally meet the needs of individuals with special needs and include them in all aspects of church life. Leaders are advised to develop programs for witnessing to people with special needs and to make facilities—and the gospel—accessible to all.

The mission of Special Needs Ministries is to encourage the inclusion of all members in the church. Unfortunately, this goal has not been fully met for many individuals with disabilities. To educate the church about the ways that people with special needs can contribute to the mission of the church, a worldwide Special Needs Ministries Awareness Sabbath can be a useful event. This program can take place at camp meetings, leadership training events, or any gathering in which these four goals can be emphasized: accessibility, education, encouragement, and accommodation.

In planning events and activities for the Special Needs Awareness Sabbath, set a goal for the day. One day is not enough to cover all the issues related to special needs, but positive contributions of individuals with special needs can be highlighted for the church or community.

As much as possible, be sure to invite individuals with special needs to plan and participate in the Special Needs Ministries Awareness Sabbath activities. If individuals with disabilities are to become fully included in the church, the congregation must see those with disabilities involved in all areas of church life. Special Needs Ministries Awareness Sabbath gives the opportunity for people with disabilities to use their gifts for God and at the same time increase the congregation's awareness of individuals with special needs, their talents, and their needs.

Romans 12:3 states, "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." As Ellen G. White explained, "The only way to grow in grace is to be disinterestedly doing the very work which Christ has enjoined upon us—to engage, to the extent of our ability, in helping and blessing those who need the help we can give them."¹ This statement should guide both those serving in Special Needs Ministries and those being served. The Special Needs Ministries team encourages adults and children with disabilities to participate fully in the church and to grow in Christ; and, in turn, people with disabilities are able to help and be a blessing to others.

The mission of Special Needs Ministries is to bring all members into the work of Christ. To promote full inclusion of members with disabilities, it is important to focus on each person's abilities, talents, and relationship with God. What can the church family do to encourage and support a member with a disability?

For an adult or child with a disability to be truly included in the church family, she or he needs access to the gospel message through the Bible, sermons, the worship service, Sabbath School programs and materials, Bible study guides, music, Pathfinders, education, and fellowship. Community-based activities such as Vacation Bible School, evangelistic meetings, and vegetarian cooking schools are a few other ways to provide meaningful support to those with special needs. Individuals with disabilities may not be aware of alternative resources that are available; therefore, a goal of Special Needs Ministries is to help people with disabilities access those resources and the support they require to feel fully included in the church.

The Ministry

Special Needs Ministries promotes the importance of specialized ministries to foster the spiritual wellbeing of persons with special needs.

The ministry:

- educates leaders, directing them to appropriate resources for ministering to persons who have a special need;
- fosters the inclusion of qualified persons with special needs in church committees, forums, volunteer service opportunities, and other ministries.
- ensures the development of resources for reaching and accommodating individuals with special needs; and
- encourages the training and employment of individuals with special needs throughout the church.

Therefore, Special Needs Ministries blends the services of those with a disability with those who do not have a disability. They unite in a bond of ministry, each returning to God the talents and gifts He has bestowed.

As a community of believers who share the gospel with all, Christ is our example. Of Jesus' 35 recorded miracles, 27 touched people with special needs. He healed the boy who was "unable to speak" (Mark 9:17, NRSV), a man who was paralyzed (Luke 5:18-26), and a deaf man (Mark 7:32-35). Jesus gives clear evidence that the worldwide church is to be involved in Special Needs Ministries.

In *Steps to Christ*, Ellen White wrote, "This was [Jesus'] work. He went about doing good and healing all. . . . There were whole villages where there was not a moan of sickness in any house, for He had passed through them and healed all their sick. His work gave evidence of His divine anointing."²

One particularly powerful statement comes from White's *Testimonies for the Church*: "I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested benevolence. *This is God's test of our character.* If we have the true religion of the Bible we shall feel that a debt of love, kindness, and interest is due to Christ in behalf of His brethren; and we can do no less than to show our gratitude for His immeasurable love to us while we were sinners unworthy of His grace, by having a deep interest and unselfish love for those who are our brethren and who are less fortunate than ourselves."³

Describing His earthly mission, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim

liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

Often Jesus would ask the person He had healed not to tell anyone. Confidentiality is extremely important in this ministry; no information about a person with a special need should be shared with anyone else without written permission.

It is important that each congregation develop an awareness of the range of disability needs their ministry must address. As successful strategies for inclusion are identified, it may be helpful to share those strategies as members move into other roles or divisions in the church. However, it is important that any information about individuals and their needs be considered highly confidential, and that personal information should not be shared without specific permission from the individuals and/or their families.

Hidden Impairments

At times, the fact that a person has some type of special need is evident. However, many people have special needs that are hidden from view, at least initially. Sometimes the special need impacts physical health and stamina, thus affecting the person’s ability to participate fully in activities of church life. In other cases the special need impacts the individual’s ability to learn, process information, and/or function fully with others. These types of needs may impact the individual’s ability to access and comprehend the beautiful message of the gospel.

Some examples of hidden impairments are described below.

Diabetes is a metabolic disease affecting the body’s ability to produce any or enough insulin, resulting in elevated levels of glucose in the blood. Diabetes can be diagnosed in very young children or the elderly and every age in between. People with diabetes who maintain good control of the disease may experience little impact on their church life.

In some cases, however, diabetes can be very difficult to manage; in addition, co-existing physical complications may be significant.

Seizure disorders are characterized by episodes of uncontrolled electrical activity in the brain (*seizures*). This disorder can impact people of all ages. At times the cause can be determined, but in other cases, the cause is never determined, and the focus is on treating the resulting seizures and minimizing their negative impact on further development and functioning.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can affect a child, teen, or adult in many ways. They may be unable to focus on one activity or task, be overactive (if hyperactivity is present), and/or demonstrate impulsive behaviors. In many cases individuals with ADHD have difficulty managing or organizing themselves and their resources to complete a task.

Autism spectrum disorders are complex disorders impacting the ability to communicate, interact socially, and/or regulate one's sensory systems. Repetitive, stereotypical behaviors may or may not be present. Individuals with this disorder often prefer to be alone and may have difficulty handling considerable sensory stimuli and disruptions in their routines. They may not look at others when they are spoken to, and they are often challenged by transitions from one activity to the next. At times external input may lead to great difficulty with emotional regulation, and in some cases, the individual may make loud, repetitive sounds.

Asperger syndrome is often considered a high-functioning form of autism. It can lead to difficulty interacting socially, repetitive behaviors, and clumsiness. An individual with Asperger syndrome often demonstrates average to above-average intellectual abilities.

Learning disabilities are difficulties in acquiring knowledge and skills to the level expected of same-age peers. Areas affected may include listening comprehension, oral expression, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency, reading comprehension, math problem-solving, and math calculation. It is not necessary to be affected in all areas to be considered learning disabled. Individuals are typically of average or higher intellectual ability and have difficulties in specific learning areas.

This is only a partial list of the types of special needs that may not be easily observed when first meeting an individual. There are many additional types of hidden needs that individuals may be living with when they enter our churches for worship.

Hidden needs can impact people of all ages and may occur at any point in the lifespan. Several factors will determine how each person will uniquely respond to their need, and may include:

- the impact of their condition on their ability to function day-to-day
- the support network available to them
- the severity of their condition
- the unique personality of the individual

The impact of these hidden needs can range from slight to intense and even life-altering. Great sensitivity from church members is needed as relationships are formed with the individual with a special need and their family. Once a relationship is formed and assistance is offered in a genuine and caring fashion, trust can be established.

Asking “How may we help?” instead of inquiring about details regarding the special need and its cause is appropriate. In some cultures identifying and acknowledging an impairment is not acceptable. Asking how to help is productive, considerate, and acceptable—and it avoids

labeling the individual. In addition, offering assistance can foster a positive relationship based on Christian care and concern.

Four Goals of Special Needs Ministries and Populations With Hidden Impairment(s)

The first booklet in this series, *Special Needs Ministries: Creating Inclusive Opportunities in Ministry*, produced by the General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, identified four goals of Special Needs Ministries. Now, in this booklet, specific strategies related to these goals will be explored, with worshipers who have hidden impairments as the focus.

1. Accessibility. Special Needs Ministries assists church leaders in learning how to make all structures, buildings, and programs available to all. The point of this goal is to provide an environment in which everyone feels welcome and has access to all areas of church life, regardless of her or his physical or mental condition.

First, architectural and physical barriers must be addressed and eliminated. For worshipers with hidden physical disabilities, the Special Needs Ministries team will need to be alert to observe areas of limited physical access and conditions that pose safety risks for worshipers. In addition, preferential seating may be a helpful accommodation for some worshipers with physical, medical, or developmental needs that may require them to exit the sanctuary often or with urgency during the service.

In the case of a person with characteristics of autism, the loud noise of group worship activities such as the singing of hymns can overwhelm the sensory system. In this case a quiet room where the child or adult can have quiet sensory breaks would be advantageous. Those with sensory overload can use this space to regain the ability to regulate their emotions and hopefully rejoin the activity after

a short break. As emotional regulation is regained, sensory behaviors that may be distracting to other worshipers will often decrease or cease. During Sabbath School the room designated for childcare could meet this need.

Additionally, some people with autism or learning disabilities have difficulty with unexpected changes in routine, so it will be helpful for the physical location of their meeting space to remain as consistent as possible. Signage directing them to their Sabbath School room that incorporates both the written name of the division and a picture symbol to identify the division and room number or location will be helpful.

It is also important to consider physical safety with regard to food and snacks. For children with diabetes or a severe food allergy, even an innocent snack can be dangerous and life-threatening. Check with caregivers prior to providing a snack at any church event or activity.

One additional area of physical access is the availability of a quiet, private room for any worshiper with sensitive medical needs, whether they need to check blood sugar levels or take a brief rest. If one's medical condition is somewhat fragile, a private, quiet space may be a very helpful accommodation.

Next, attitudinal barriers that may prevent a person with a special need from feeling welcome must be eliminated. For example, parents of a child affected by severe autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may be reluctant to bring their child to church, knowing that she or he may demonstrate behaviors and/or noises that can lead to uncomfortable attention from other worshipers. Education, training, and modeling appropriate attitudes toward those who are disabled will help increase sensitivity throughout the congregation.

Every member of the church can welcome each worshiper with genuine kindness and a spirit of inclusive worship. The warmth and caring that each church member bestows on one another will demonstrate a willingness to worship together inclusively. With such support, church may become the one place parents can go to find true acceptance for their child who has significant and often misunderstood needs. Such a genuine expression of good will certainly follows Christ's example of interacting with others as well. Care must be taken to focus on an inclusive approach, not an approach in which those with special needs are welcomed to church and then directed to segregated programs.

Finally, the gospel must also be accessible. To enhance the understanding of the gospel in adult Sabbath School divisions, the Special Needs Ministries team of the church can:

- Break down the lesson into smaller, manageable amounts of information, with a review of key concepts during the lesson study period. Doing so will assist worshipers with learning issues to participate more fully in discussions.
- Provide a multi-sensory experience, incorporating written, visual, and auditory methods. This approach will assist worshipers who have limited ability to process and retain verbal information. Utilize a handout or screen presentation with key words and pictures to enhance the understanding of spiritual concepts. Individuals with autism typically learn best when information is presented in a visual, concrete way.
- Order or print copies of the Easy Reading version of the quarterly (<http://www.absg.adventist.org/Archives.htm>) in addition to the standard Sabbath School Bible study guide. This version teaches the same concepts found in the lesson but with more easily

read and understood text. The Easy Reading lessons may also guide the Sabbath School teacher to use different vocabulary in written handouts or screen presentations so as to better benefit those who have a learning disability in the area of reading and/or comprehension.

- Encourage active participation by watching for ways to build on individual strengths instead of focusing on a person's challenges. For example, a member with a significant learning disability in the area of mathematics may still fulfill the responsibilities of a deacon, with the exception of counting the weekly offerings.

To enhance the understanding of the gospel in children and youth Sabbath School divisions, the church's Special Needs Ministries team can:

- Break concepts and lessons down into smaller chunks of information, with a review of key concepts during the lesson study period. Directions given one at a time are easier to understand and process than a long multi-step series of directions.
- Slow down the pace and offer participants time to answer questions. Children with learning disabilities often take longer to process answers to questions, so if the pace moves too fast, they are ready to answer a question several minutes after it may have been asked. The leader may tell the student the questions before the lesson to allow for ample thinking time.
- Use a variety of aids to ensure the understanding and gradual memorization of important spiritual concepts. Children and youth with learning disabilities will benefit from the repetition and practice of concepts. Have the group act out the

lesson or Bible story, more than once when possible. Teach songs that incorporate biblical concepts, as concepts are often learned more readily in musical format than when spoken. If available, provide memory verse take-home cards to provide a visual reminder as a verse or Bible story is learned over time. These visual and auditory cues and reminders can be of great assistance for children with intellectual impairments.⁴

- Get the attention of participants before giving directions so that all participants can follow along and understand what is happening next. Use a combination of visual, auditory, and multi-sensory approaches to teach concepts.
- Make the routine as predictable as possible. For learners who cannot process auditory information, make the lesson and program as visual and hands-on as possible. A visual schedule (showing a picture for each part of the program, such as song service, prayer, offering, and so forth) posted at the front of the class can be extremely effective, especially for children with autism spectrum disorders.
- Model expectations of positive social interaction, and have the entire Sabbath School group demonstrate a knowledge of the expectations. Children and youth on the autism spectrum may have difficulties with social expectations unless they are clearly stated and practiced.
- Be patient. Children and youth with special needs such as learning disabilities or autism may require considerable repetition of complex Bible truths to master an understanding of the concepts. As the Sabbath School teacher incorporates review in the

form of games and group activities, the learning of every child present can be enhanced.

- Watch for ways to build on the children's strengths instead of focusing on their challenges. Most will benefit from being asked to contribute and having an assigned task in Sabbath School. For example, consider choosing a very active child with ADHD to pass out items during Sabbath School, which will provide an appropriate, physically active outlet.

To ensure inclusive worship during the church service, the Special Needs Ministries team of the church can:

- Produce and provide church bulletins that include not only a written guide to the service, but visual cues to explain the parts of the service. Bulletins created with visual supports would benefit not only those with learning disabilities, but nonreaders (children and adults) and individuals with development issues such as autism as well.
- Provide visual cues via projected images or with large-print images to denote what is happening in the service (such as an image of a person kneeling in prayer projected at the time for morning prayer or an image of a congregation holding hymnals just prior to a hymn).
- Arrange for assistance from a deacon or deaconess to find seating that meets everyone's unique physical needs, including easy availability of entrance to and exit from the sanctuary.
- See if your church provides written sermon notes or guides; if so, be sure to provide a version that is appropriate for those requiring a more straightforward guide to the sermon. Likewise, if your church provides a sermon or service guide to children in the church, ensure that the materials benefit all children

worshipping, so that all are engaged in learning more about Jesus and the gospel.

- Offer a worship partner to help model expectations and guide the person in understanding and participating in the service.
- Consider ways to accommodate worshipers in all church activities. At potluck, for example, it may be necessary to create labels for each dish to account for dietary concerns such as diabetes, gluten intolerance, or food allergies. When planning a cooking school, advise the instructor of any participants with specific food needs, as the instructor may be able to include recipes with those individuals in mind.
- Consider ways to accommodate worshipers in all special events. For example, baptism is an extremely special and meaningful event. However, for those with sensory issues, it may be necessary to practice ahead of time so they are comfortable with the experience and do not have an unexpected reaction to immersion in the water.

If your church finds that some members benefit from specific strategies, carry those strategies over into all outreach ministries, such as prayer meetings, evangelistic meetings, cooking schools, Vacation Bible School, and Pathfinders. For example, if the Sabbath School teacher discovers that a child benefits from a picture schedule during class, consider offering a visual schedule during Pathfinder meetings. In this way, you can reach all who wish to join your congregation in all aspects of church life.

2. Education. The goal is to train people without special needs and those with special needs to work collaboratively in building God's kingdom. Resources should be continually

developed for and made available to church members. These resources will provide guidance for the inclusion of individuals with special needs throughout the church structure.

Consider using multiple methods of communication to spread awareness of resources and events within the church community. In some cultures social media has become quite prominent and may be quite helpful for some members, but for people with learning disabilities, accessing and using technology may be more challenging. Printed handouts may be necessary to help all participants feel welcome. Contact prior to church events can also assist in ensuring full participation.

3. Encouragement. The focus of this goal is to promote participation in all aspects of church life. Providing a safe, loving environment within all levels of the church for all people is the privilege of every Christian.

When all worshipers are welcomed, nurtured, and given opportunities to engage meaningfully in all activities of church life, the result is inclusive worship and fellowship that encourages participation. As you welcome everyone, including those with special needs, into your congregation, and involve them *meaningfully* and *intentionally* in all aspects of church life, they will be encouraged. It is important that the church focus on encouraging each person to be an active member of the church community as a whole, and not segregated from the larger church body into “special” classes and activities. As ministry leaders and members continue to find opportunities for meaningful participation, all members will be encouraged and will benefit from truly inclusive worship.

It is important to remember the needs of the caregiver(s) of people with autism, ADHD, or severe learning disabilities. In this area church members can have a profound and positive effect. Whether caring for a child, teen, young adult, or an older adult with such

challenges, the task can be overwhelming and tiring. Some individuals require diligent care and attention to ensure their safety and wellbeing. In some cases the response to new caregivers is so overwhelmingly negative and potentially dangerous that the caregiver(s) never have a break from their responsibilities. Such care, even when based upon a loving relationship, can be exhausting. The church could consider ways to provide the caregiver with tangible support and encouragement to support their spiritual needs. Providing respite care so a caregiving mother can attend a women's ministry meeting, relieving a caregiver father so he can attend a prayer meeting, or setting up a caregiver support group could be especially beneficial to the spiritual encouragement of a caregiver.

4. Accommodation. The goal is to help God's family be inclusive in principle and practice. Special Needs Ministries promotes the inclusion of qualified persons with special needs in church committees, forums, volunteer service opportunities, and other ministries. These activities should be planned with accommodations in mind. Because some individuals with a hidden impairment are unable to drive themselves to church activities, transportation assistance is one way to provide much-needed support.

As the church makes and puts into action a plan to include every person in meaningful participation, the needs of every worshiper will be considered and accommodated. See Goal #1 above for additional ideas on how to help people with hidden impairments fully participate in the activities of your church.

Attaining these four goals gives the church a wonderful opportunity for evangelism, discipleship, and inclusion. Special Needs Ministries should educate the church about hidden disabilities, develop resources for people with these disabilities, enhance their worship experiences, and emphasize their intentional and meaningful inclusion into the larger church body. Finally, although employment is

not included as one of the primary goals of this ministry, leaders in this ministry can develop and maintain a database that includes job skills of members with special needs. Assisting with the tangible need of employment is an invaluable service.

People With Multiple Special Needs

Some individuals with a hidden disability may have additional areas of need as well. For example, a person with autism frequently demonstrates a communication delay as part of their autism. Because of the potential for an overlap of issues, it is important for Special Needs Ministries groups to consider and address multiple areas of need. Additional guidance on the following topics is provided in other leaflets in this series:

- deafness/hearing impairment
- intellectual disability
- mobility and physical disability
- emotional and psychiatric disability
- communication disorder
- blindness/visual impairment

As in many areas of church life, sensitivity to the culture(s) of others is critical. Offensive language, even when used unintentionally, can significantly hinder the goals of this ministry. When training individuals to work in Special Needs Ministries, be sure to avoid words that are not appropriate. Although some of these words may be found in the Bible and other spiritual writings, their usage has evolved and they now carry negative connotations. The following table shows examples of words to use and words to avoid.

Use this . . .	Instead of this . . .
Person with a disability or person with a special need	Handicapped
Has a disability or special need	Afflicted, unfortunate, less fortunate
Person with an intellectual impairment	Retarded
Person with autism	Autistic
In the hospital or at home	Sick and shut in

How to Prepare for Training Others

In the introductory leaflet of this series, *Special Needs Ministries: Creating Inclusive Opportunities in Ministry*⁵, you will find information on training church members to provide a ministry inclusive of all people, including those with a hidden impairment. The essential training elements of prayer, action, study, and planning are described. Scriptural references are also provided to guide ministry leadership groups in sound, Bible-based planning and interventions.

Conclusion

Living with a hidden impairment is challenging. Multiple factors, including individual temperament, the degree of cultural acceptance of the impairment, and the degree of family and church support, impact an individual's interest in and involvement with the church. Further, these factors can impact how an individual can gain access to an understanding of the gospel. Certainly, then, the church must respond to the needs of people who have hidden disabilities. We have been called to conquer barriers, to make inclusive communities, and to welcome all people into the family of God.

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Endnotes

¹ *Steps to Christ*, p. 80.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 511, emphasis supplied.

⁴ www.youtube.com/sabbathschool; www.vimeo.com/sabbathschool; www.gracelink.net

⁵ www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/specialneedsleaflet

