



The General Conference  
Sabbath School &  
Personal Ministries



TO

# SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

## COMMUNICATION DISORDER



SEVENTH-DAY  
ADVENTIST<sup>®</sup> CHURCH

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Author: Fran Chaffee Grossenbacher  
Editor: Gary B. Swanson  
Design: AdventSource

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AdventSource  
5120 Prescott Avenue  
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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 communication disabilities. Specific suggestions and strategies will be given so that the church can make the gospel accessible to all people, including those with a communication disorder.

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, parishioners 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

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.

## *Communication Disorders*

Communication disorders generally fall into two general categories, with some children and adults experiencing a combination of the two. Speech or articulation disorders affect the person’s ability to make the sounds of speech clearly and/or connect the sounds of speech together into understandable speech. Language disorders impact a person’s ability to understand or express ideas and thoughts meaningfully. Language disorders can be expressive or receptive; abilities related to communicating language are referred to as expressive language abilities, while abilities related to understanding and comprehending language are referred to as receptive language abilities. A person can experience a disorder in expressive language, receptive language, speech ability, or a combination thereof.

Those who have a receptive language disorder will typically have difficulty comprehending and processing what is seen or heard. They may struggle with comprehending oral and written language. They may require repeated opportunities to master new information, and they often

benefit from having new information presented in a variety of formats; using auditory, visual, physical, or multisensory methods can be helpful. Key spiritual concepts must be presented in a manner simple enough to be understood and accepted, yet deep enough to impart a personal, meaningful understanding of the gospel.

People dealing with an expressive language disorder typically experience significant challenge in effectively communicating their thoughts, ideas, needs, and wants to others. This difficulty can result in frustration on the part of both the communicator and the listener. Individuals with an expressive language disorder often understand much more than they are able to express. Strategies can be implemented to decrease the potential frustration surrounding communication.

Speech or articulation disorders can hamper a person's ability to communicate with others. As a result, individuals may feel somewhat isolated. They may be uncomfortable entering into conversations or discussions, as they are concerned that they will not be understood or may be mocked due to their speech challenges.

Communication disorders can be diagnosed early in life or in later life, depending upon the cause of the disorder. This type of disability can be caused by brain trauma, physical facial disability, neurological issues, psychological disorders, stroke, frequent or severe ear infections, hearing loss, and developmental delays. In some cases the cause for speech and language delays are never identified.

Some types of speech disorders are:

*Apraxia of speech.* This disorder occurs when the person attempts to talk but is unable to coordinate muscle movements to create the desired sounds.

*Dysfluency (also called stuttering).* This occurs when the smooth flow of speech is disrupted.

*Dysarthria of speech.* This disorder is caused by weakened or paralyzed speech muscles; it can occur following trauma such as a stroke.

Some types of language disorders are:

*Aphasia.* The loss of the ability to speak and comprehend or process language.

*Dysnomia.* The inability to successfully retrieve words.

In a church setting, the determination of a special need is typically based upon self-reporting or the report of family members or caregivers. Most importantly, church members must avoid pre-determining the scope or range of disability in a person with speech and language disorders. In some cultures, identifying and acknowledging an intellectual impairment or disability is not acceptable. So, instead of inquiring about details regarding the special need and its cause, it is often more helpful to approach these individuals by asking, “How may we help?” 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 Individuals With Communication Disabilities*

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 communication disorders 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 or physical barriers must be addressed and eliminated. For individuals with communication disorders and no additional challenges, this objective should be easily addressed, and in fact may not be an issue. It is important to be aware, however, that a person with a communication disorder may have difficulty either asking for help or understanding when help is given. Thus, signage directing them to various locations (Sabbath School room, fellowship hall, bathrooms) that incorporates both the written name of the division and a picture symbol to identify the division and room number or location will be necessary.

Next, attitudinal barriers that may prevent a person with a special need from feeling welcome must be eliminated. 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 another is a powerful tool that demonstrates a willingness to worship together inclusively. 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 be accessible. To enhance the understanding of the gospel in adult Sabbath School divisions, the church's Special Needs Ministries team can:

- Break down the lesson into smaller, manageable amounts of information, with a review of key concepts during the lesson study period.

- Begin with simple, concrete concepts before moving to more complex, abstract concepts and ideas.
- Provide a multi-sensory learning experience, incorporating written, visual, and auditory methods. This approach will assist worshipers who have limited abilities for processing and retaining verbal information. Utilize a handout or screen presentation with key words and pictures to enhance the understanding of spiritual concepts.
- 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 benefit those who have a developmental disability.
- Provide visual cues and prompts during the Sabbath School program to assist all worshipers as they follow along. Some worshipers require more lead time to prepare for prayer or other parts of the service, which are missed if they only appear in written form in the bulletin and the worshiper cannot read. Projecting on the screen a visual of a person praying, for example, can show the worshiper to prepare for prayer.
- Arrange alternative ways<sup>4</sup> for members to share their ideas and comments during lesson study. Provide ways for them to write down their comments so they can be shared by another person to avoid discomfort. If a member with a language disability does attempt to share a thought or idea, care

must be taken not to rush them or try to finish their thought for them. Patience and compassion will encourage the sharing of ideas and thoughts, regardless of communication challenges.

- Encourage active participation by watching for ways to build on individual strengths instead of focusing on a person's challenges. For members with communication disabilities, the church has many tasks and roles that do not require fluid speech or language processing abilities.
- Some members with a communication disorder may have an augmentative and alternative communication device which they use to facilitate communication with others. Such a device may be low-tech, such as a visual or picture communication board, or it may be a more elaborate electronic device. These devices may assist an individual in both receptive and expressive communication. If a member in your church has such a device, it would be helpful for your Special Needs Ministry team members and others (such as the individual's Sabbath School teacher) to become trained in how to communicate using the device. The effective use of the device will often significantly improve the individual's ability to communicate with others, both receptively and expressively.

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

- Use actual objects when teaching a concept.
- Begin with simple or concrete concepts and build to more complex or abstract concepts.
- Break things down into smaller pieces of information, with a review of key concepts during the

lesson study period. For someone with a receptive language disorder, directions given one at a time are easier to understand and process than a long multi-step series of directions.

- Invite children to repeat instructions, which will aid their comprehension.
- Provide visual supports or tools to assist children with an expressive language disorder. Without support, they will likely struggle with describing or retelling Bible stories. Visual supports such as picture sequence cards can act as cues to facilitate oral expression.
- Use a variety of aids to ensure the understanding and gradual memorization of important spiritual 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 visual reminders as a verse or Bible story is learned over time. These visual and auditory cues can be of great assistance to children with developmental disabilities.<sup>5</sup>
- Use a combination of visual, auditory,<sup>6</sup> and multi-sensory approaches to teach concepts. For participants who cannot read, the lesson can be audio recorded so that they can listen to it repeatedly to build understanding. Consider providing the recorded lesson prior to its presentation in Sabbath School. Kindergarten and primary Sabbath School lessons are provided in audio-video format along with extension activities.<sup>7</sup> 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. The use of felt-board and sand-table manipulative figures can also aid in the understanding and sharing of Bible stories.

- Explain vocabulary in the lesson study in an understandable way for the benefit of all participants. When possible, pair definitions with visuals to enhance comprehension. Many children with a receptive language disorder will often need to hear the simpler, alternative definitions more than once to grasp the concept being presented.
- Be patient. Children and youth with language disorders will often 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 student present can be enhanced, facilitating a true understanding of the gospel message.
- Model patience and compassion when children with communication disabilities attempt to participate in discussions. Avoid finishing their statements for them or rushing them to finish. It is often helpful to set group norms and expectations regarding the value of each child's contribution to the group.

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

- Produce church bulletins that include not only a written guide to the service, but visual cues to explain the different parts of the service. Bulletins created with visual supports would benefit many

members, including those with receptive language disorders and nonreaders (both children and adults).

- Provide visual cues via projected images or 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 of morning prayer or an image of a congregation holding hymnals just prior to a hymn).
- See if your church provides written sermon notes or guides; if so, ensure the provision of 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.

Consider special events in church services and how to include all members. It is critical that explanations be provided that assist individuals with communication disorders to attain full comprehension. For example:

- Do new members need the opportunity to review church beliefs in a simplified, more understandable manner? Do they understand what will happen during their baptism? Are they in need of anything specific during their baptism? Consider the use of visuals to explain important concepts and events.
- How can you explain the communion service ahead of time to those with developmental disabilities? Can you provide a guide with the key parts of the service clearly explained and supported with visuals?
- Can you create visuals to ensure that all members understand the meaning of the footwashing service and know how to participate? Will some participants

benefit from a worship assistant to help them through the process? Can you provide a guide with the key parts of the service clearly explained and supported with visuals?

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, and Pathfinders. In this way, you can ensure the inclusion of all members in all activities 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, but not all members have the resources to access and use technology easily. Printed handouts may be necessary to help all participants feel welcome. Contact prior to church events can also assist in ensuring full participation.

As mentioned earlier, individuals with an augmentative or alternate communication device will benefit from church members learning how to use the device to enhance communication.

**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.

When individuals with communication disorders are fully included, and members demonstrate patience, encouragement, and a sincere interest in listening to what they have to share, they will feel encouraged, welcomed, and valued.

**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.

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 communication disabilities 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 communication 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*

Although a child or adult may have a communication disorder and no other learning or physical challenges, it is important to understand that some types of disabilities include one component of communication difficulty.

Individuals diagnosed with autism or cerebral palsy, or those who have had a stroke, for example, may have multiple disabilities, including communication disorders. It will be important to learn about and address multiple disabilities when they are present concurrently. 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
- hidden disability
- mobility and physical disability
- emotional and psychiatric disability
- intellectual disability
- 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.

<b>Use this . . .</b>	<b>Instead of this . . .</b>
Person with a disability or person with a special need	Handicapped
Has a disability or special need	Afflicted, unfortunate, less fortunate
Person who cannot speak	Stupid, imbecile, mute
Person who had a stroke	Stroke victim

## *How to Prepare for Training Others*

In the introductory leaflet of this series, *Special Needs Ministries: Creating Inclusive Opportunities in Ministry*<sup>8</sup>, you will find information on training church members to provide a ministry inclusive of all people, including those who have communication disorders. 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 communication disorder can be extremely challenging. The ability to communicate effectively is something most people take for granted. However, when you are unable to communicate your needs, wants, and ideas or cannot understand and process information from other people, life can be extremely frustrating. It can be difficult to engage socially with others when the possibility of misunderstanding is high. 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. It is critical that church members address these issues and support members with communication challenges in order to fully share the gospel message.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> *Steps to Christ*, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 511, emphasis supplied.

<sup>4</sup> APPS: (iOS) <http://bit.ly/SabbathSchooliOSapp>; (Android) <http://bit.ly/SabbathSchoolAndroidApp>

<sup>5</sup> [www.youtube.com/sabbathschool](http://www.youtube.com/sabbathschool); [www.vimeo.com/sabbathschool](http://www.vimeo.com/sabbathschool); [www.gracelink.net](http://www.gracelink.net)

<sup>6</sup> [www.sabbathschoolu.org](http://www.sabbathschoolu.org)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gracelink.net/article/3/kindergarten#.VEW0gMnk0p8>; <http://www.gracelink.net/article/4/primary#.VEW0yMnk0p8>; [www.sabbathschoolu.org](http://www.sabbathschoolu.org); [www.cqbiblestudy.org/podcastlist.php](http://www.cqbiblestudy.org/podcastlist.php); [www.youtube.com/sabbathschool](http://www.youtube.com/sabbathschool); [www.vimeo.com/sabbathschool](http://www.vimeo.com/sabbathschool); [www.gracelink.net](http://www.gracelink.net).

<sup>8</sup> [www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/specialneedsleaflet](http://www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/specialneedsleaflet)





