



The General Conference  
Sabbath School &  
Personal Ministries



TO

# SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

## MOBILITY DISABILITY



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

**Special Needs Ministries: Mobility Disability** is created by the General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department.

Author: Fran Chaffee Grossenbacher

Editor: Gary B. Swanson

Design: AdventSource

**Available from:**

AdventSource

5120 Prescott Avenue

Lincoln, NE 68506

402.486.8800

[www.adventsource.org](http://www.adventsource.org)

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-57756-161-3

# **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 physical impairments or motor disabilities. Specific suggestions and strategies will be given so that the church can make the gospel accessible to all people, including those with a mobility 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."<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.

## *Mobility and Physical Disability*

Many health issues or diagnoses have a profound impact on mobility (the ability to move from one location to another) and physical dexterity (the ability to perform physical tasks). In addition, these conditions typically impact overall physical health and stamina, thus affecting the person’s ability to participate fully in activities of church life.

Some causes of mobility impairments are described below.

*Arthritis* is a complex family of musculoskeletal disorders. Though it is commonly thought of as a disease of the elderly, two-thirds of people with arthritis are under the age of 65. Arthritis can impact a person’s ability to participate physically in church activities. At times, pain management regimens and their side effects may impact an individual’s ability to participate fully in vital activities of church life.

*Polio* is the result of a viral infection that attacks spinal cord nerve cells. Internationally, polio is one of the most common causes of childhood disability. It can result in paralysis, loss of upper body muscle tone, breathing difficulties, and other muscular issues.

*Stroke*, a cardiovascular event, is caused when blood flow to the brain is interrupted. A stroke may cause a wide range of issues, including speech difficulties, paralysis, and other complications related to the affected parts of the brain.

*Traumatic brain injury* is the result of injury or trauma to the brain. Depending on the area of brain injury, multiple problems may result, including the loss of physical skills necessary for mobility.

*Amputation* is the result of the loss of a limb or part of a limb. Limb loss is typically a result of another health issue or trauma.

*Muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis* and other neuromuscular diseases also impact mobility. Muscular dystrophy typically causes significant loss of mobility, while the impact of multiple sclerosis varies according to the individual.

*Cerebral palsy* often occurs as a result of trauma near or during birth or during the first few years of life. It is a disorder that impairs control of movement and motor function.

*Spinal cord injury* is the result of damage directly to the spine. The damage can be the result of an injury or inflammation of the spinal cord.

*Dwarfism* can impact an individual's motor access in many aspects of daily life.

This is only a partial list of the types of issues that may impact mobility. Many more circumstances can cause a person to face mobility challenges. It is important to remember that many of these conditions do not impact intellectual functioning at all. In some cases, the motor challenges may occur concurrently with other

developmental or functional challenges. A common and mistaken assumption is that intellectual impairment always accompanies motor challenges. It is critical to remember that each person is unique; the presence of a physical challenge does not necessarily mean that an intellectual challenge is present as well.

Individuals with mobility challenges will have unique reactions to their challenges. Some people may have years of experience in developing strategies to cope with his or her mobility challenges. These individuals are often very independent and proud of the challenges they have overcome. In other cases the mobility issues may be more recently acquired, and the individual may still be learning how to cope with limited physical movement.

The degree of impact of a mobility disability can vary from day to day, thus the person's needs for support or assistance can change over time, even daily. Some individuals with mobility challenges will prefer to take care of their own needs, while others may accept assistance of church members. Offering help and asking what specific type of assistance is needed (before it is offered) is appropriate. Forcing assistance on the individual will rarely result in a positive outcome. As with other challenges, building a relationship based on trust, Christian care, and respect will often lead to a positive response to offers of assistance.

## ***Four Goals of Special Needs Ministries and Populations With Mobility Disability***

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 mobility disabilities 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. Because of the nature of physical and mobility challenges, most of the suggestions here will relate to physical accessibility.

First, architectural and physical barriers must be addressed and eliminated. For worshipers with mobility limitations, the Special Needs Ministries team will need to be alert to observe areas of limited physical access and conditions that pose safety risks for all worshipers. In addition, preferential seating may be a helpful accommodation for some worshipers with limited physical mobility.

Special care must be taken with regard to every aspect of the physical environment. From the moment a person arrives at church, each aspect of access must be available.

*Arrival.* Consider accessibility from the parking lot. Individuals using a cane, crutches, a walker, or a wheelchair, or those who are unsteady on their feet when walking independently, will need a parking area that allows them safe navigation from their vehicle to the sanctuary entrance.

Parking lot surfaces with deep holes and ruts pose safety challenges for individuals using a cane, crutches, or a walker. Even for those with mobility challenges who do not use a physical device, care must be taken to provide safe walking surfaces.

Safe access from the parking lot into the sanctuary entrance should be considered. If the church building is at a different level from that of the parking lot, stairs should be marked with reflective tape and/or edged with red paint to decrease the risk of falling. Handrails should be available for use when ascending or descending stairs. Ideally, a ramp should be available for worshipers using walking devices

such as walkers or wheelchairs. If a ramp is not available or feasible, the Special Needs Ministries team must have a well-communicated plan to help people with mobility impairments gain safe access to church buildings.

In wet weather, ensure that walkways are slip-resistant and that entry areas, such as the foyer, are free of slippery flooring that could be extremely unsafe for individuals with mobility challenges.

Transportation needs to and from church should be considered. If the lack of transportation keeps someone from joining the congregation in worship, it will be important that the church family consider transportation options that they may be able to offer to extend the opportunity of worship to every person interested in joining the church family.

*Seating.* Consider how to ensure appropriate seating options for individuals with mobility challenges. Fire and safety codes, for example, may prohibit a wheelchair from blocking the church aisle. In such cases the Special Needs Ministries team must create seating options that are comfortable for the worshiper while providing a safe exit path for all in attendance at church. The use of shorter pews in some rows or removing chairs in some end-of-row locations may allow for easy access and eliminate concerns about aisle obstructions. These strategies will also encourage the feeling that all worshipers are welcome in the church. The message is clear: the congregation not only welcomes people with mobility impairments, but has prepared in advance for their participation.

*During the church service.* Consider how to provide platform access for individuals participating from the front during the church service. A strategy must be in place so that a person with a mobility challenge is not denied the opportunity for leadership in the church service because of inaccessibility to the platform. Alternatives can be explored, from physically constructing a ramp to encouraging

participation from the front pew. If participants entering the platform must access stairs, handrails and proper lighting must be in place to ensure the safety of all involved.

Footwashing is a meaningful and important service in our faith. Access to the physical space, and a plan for access to all aspects of the footwashing service, can be discussed and planned to include everyone. Some issues to consider are how a worshiper using a cane can carry the basin of water and how a person in a wheelchair can be positioned to wash the feet of another person. Pre-planning, based upon clear communication with the worshiper(s) involved, can result in a smooth and positive experience for all. Elderly worshipers who have developed motor challenges later in life often assume they will no longer be able to participate in this meaningful service; with careful and thoughtful planning, this does not need to be the case.

When dexterity issues accompany a mobility challenge, consider the communion service. It may be difficult for someone after a stroke, for example, to pick up the cup of grape juice or the piece of communion bread. Deacons and deaconesses serving these items would benefit from developing a concrete plan prior to the service if they know that someone might struggle with these aspects.

*Beyond the church service.* It is critical that hallways encourage easy access for individuals using wheelchairs or walkers. Lighting in hallways must be adequate to ensure that steps are clearly visible.

Individuals with mobility challenges will need appropriate access to bathrooms, sinks, and towels. The ability to maneuver within the bathroom is critical. Access into and out of the bathroom must be considered. In some locations, local and federal laws may dictate the types of access that must be provided.

Consider the accessibility of Sabbath School rooms and other ancillary rooms, such as the fellowship hall. Consider how easy (or difficult) it is for an individual with a walker or wheelchair, or someone who has difficulty walking, to get through hallways and into all rooms. In addition, consider how accessible bathrooms are relative to the location of the Sabbath School room and other rooms.

As stated earlier, some people with mobility challenges may also have fine motor dexterity challenges. Thus, in some cases, reaching and turning doorknobs and turning light switches on and off can be a challenge. When appropriate and easily turned doorknobs are installed and light switches are approximately 48 inches (122 cm) from the floor, these potential challenges are eliminated.

*Church life activities.* Community-building activities such as fellowship lunch or potluck after church require consideration and planning. For example, look at seating options and provide assistance in carrying a filled plate to the table at potluck. In some cases, assigning an assistant to be available for such tangible support would be beneficial.

If your church has a Pathfinder club, pre-planning must ensure inclusion of children and youth with motor challenges. For example, camping can be challenging for a Pathfinder with mobility challenges. With thoughtful planning, a child in a wheelchair can participate in camping activities with the rest of his or her club. Consider an alternative activity to marching for a Pathfinder who is unable to march. Pre-planning to meet identified needs will ensure that every child can participate in all activities.

Next, attitudinal barriers that may prevent a person with a special need from feeling welcome must be eliminated. Something as simple as bending or sitting down when talking with someone in a wheelchair can make a big difference. 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.

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 encourage active participation by watching for ways to build on individual strengths, instead of focusing on a person's challenges. For example, a willing individual can be a greeter, regardless of his or her mobility limitations. In addition, a worshiper with physical limitations may be very capable of being a Sabbath School leader or teacher. Focus on abilities and encourage the involvement of every worshiper based on his or her individual strengths.

To enhance the understanding of the gospel in children and youth Sabbath School divisions, the Special Needs Ministries team of the church can also watch for ways to build on learners' strengths instead of focusing solely on their challenges. Most children will benefit from being asked to contribute and having an assigned task in Sabbath School, and there are a wide range of tasks that do not require motor skills. It is also important to be aware that some conditions impacting mobility will also impact fine motor skills; thus, a child with cerebral palsy may have difficulty performing activities that require hand skills, such as writing or cutting. Keep this in mind when planning lesson activities.

Finally, during the church service, the Special Needs Ministries team of the church can provide assistance by having a deacon or deaconess find seating that meets the needs of those with mobility disabilities.

**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.

**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.

**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 mobility disability 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.

Attaining these four goals gives the church a wonderful opportunity for evangelism, discipleship, and inclusion. Special Needs Ministries should educate the church about mobility 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 mobility challenge may have additional areas of need. For example, a person recovering from a stroke may not only have mobility challenges, but also hand-dexterity and speech challenges as well. 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
- intellectual 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.

<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
Unable to walk, or describe the condition	Crippled, withered, maimed, defective, lame
Uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair bound
Person who had a stroke	Stroke victim
In the hospital or at home	Sick and shut in
Person with arthritis	Arthritic, afflicted with arthritis

### ***How to Prepare for Training Others***

In the introductory leaflet of this series, *Special Needs Ministries: Creating Inclusive Opportunities in Ministry*<sup>4</sup>, you will find information on training church members to provide a ministry inclusive of all people, including those who have mobility disabilities. 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 mobility disability can be very 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 and activities of church life. Individuals with mobility challenges face many difficulties with access on a daily basis. Church should be one place where a person with a physical challenge knows he or she will be welcome and intentionally included in all activities. Certainly, then, the church must respond to the needs of people who have mobility 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**

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









