



## Speaking Words that Welcome

Language, Messages, and Communications (with Visual Cues)

Our words matter. When we are teaching, preaching, and leading our words matter. Language around ability and disability should be positive and affirming, or *ability positive*. In addition to the language we choose, we need to exercise intentionality about the messages we share about differing abilities as we approach scripture, employ curriculum, and select or create music and liturgy. Finally, to welcome all, we should look to expand our methods of communication, especially enhancing our words with visual cues.

### Welcoming Language

Our positive view and language around disability helps our whole congregation have a more positive view of people of all abilities.

- Part of being ability positive is to be mindful about using [person first or identity first language](#). Here are some other resources:
  - [This video](#) from Special Olympics is accessible and memorable.
  - For the use of language in formal writing, check [this resource](#).
  - Forbes has a helpful article on [the dos and don'ts of identity language](#).
  - The National Youth Leadership Network offers [this youth-focused resource](#).
  - For writers and those who prepare written materials, check out the [Guidelines for Writing](#) sheet from the ADA National Network.
- When in doubt about when to use person first or identity first language, pay attention to how a disabled person speaks of themselves and model your language after theirs.
- Be careful to talk about mobility supports as gifts from God that help people engage fully. Stay away from “wheelchair bound,” instead talk about “using a wheelchair,” or “wheelchair users.”

### Welcoming Messages

Many of us have come to recognize the gender-biased or racially-biased messages we encounter in Bible stories, lesson plans, and hymnody, whether they be intentional or unintentional, and we have learned ways of mitigating the exclusion they create. We may not be as versed in identifying and addressing unwelcoming messages about ability diversity.

#### **Messages in Scripture**

The portrayal of disability in the Bible can be a challenge for us, with disability sometimes being used to highlight healing, weakness, or someone being unfit for religious service. As preachers, teachers, and leaders, we need to engage with these texts and do the hard work of understanding them with a more positive portrayal of disability—remembering that disability and differing abilities are a part of the amazing diversity of how God created each of us.

Helpful scriptures on diversity and inclusion include Genesis 1:27a, Matthew 28: 19, and 1 Corinthians 12.

It can also be helpful to think about Christ's healing and wholeness as going beyond our bodies. Christ's healing helps us to be more inclusive, whole, and healed communities. Christ's wholeness includes the miracle of wheelchairs, walkers, assistive technology, ramps, hearing loops, sign language, and other tools for inclusion. Doctors and nurses do amazing things in our communities—but the church has something different to offer. Allowing that story to come through in our lessons and sermons can help people see the church as a place of belonging and welcome.

Especially in preaching, we have the sacred and daunting task of interpreting and sharing the word of God. When we approach preaching and disability we have the responsibility of helping people to understand disability as part of the full diversity of God's creation (J. Swinton, [\*From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability, and Humanness\*](#)).

Some considerations for preaching or teaching are:

- Emphasize the strengths of characters who are healed in the Bible—highlight their tenacity and grit, their amazing friendships, etc. All of these characters have strong, admirable, and powerful attributes. Focus on those while you stay clear of stereotypes—especially those that equate disability with weakness or sin.
- When reading healing stories in the Bible, think about the healing that comes through assistive devices, technology, and inclusive communities.
- When dealing with a healing story, you may want to name the text as out of keeping with our current understanding of disability. Phyllis Tribble has helped us learn to read “[texts of terror](#)” by lifting up the misogyny that is revealed in certain narratives. It can be valuable and powerful to name texts that portray disability in a negative light with this same lens.
- Consider using a disability positive passage, like Matthew 25, to interpret the passage that you are preaching or teaching on.

## **Messages in Curriculum**

Curriculum should be chosen with an eye for good theology and a commitment to inclusion.

### ***Adults***

- Consider using a disability awareness lens and eye to inclusion to examine the topics that you choose and the curriculum that you use.
- Adult Christian Education is a wonderful place to address disability directly. Consider a series on disability theology, or faith and disability. Check out [the study guide for the PCUSA statement on disability](#), and see the Resource Roadmap in this toolkit for suggested specific resources.
- In addition to specific materials that connect faith and disability, be sure that disability is included in topics for discussion. If you are looking at race and equity, be sure to include disability as the largest minority group in our country. If you are addressing parenting, look for resources that discuss common disabilities and the ways that parents can support their children.
- In Bible study be sure to name the stereotypes that can emerge in the Bible and be intentional about showing how what may be a disability has strengths.
- Look for curricula that include disability in discussions of equity, parenting, Bible study, etc. Examples are [Follow Me](#)—a new curriculum designed for the whole church—from the PCUSA, [Life with God](#) from Rivers of Grace, and [The FYI on Youth Ministry Podcast](#) from the Fuller Youth Institute.
- When you are considering a curriculum, be on the lookout for stereotypes and language around disability—call it out when you see it—and look for materials that avoid this kind of language and imagery.
- When you are leading a class, be aware of outdated terms and language—when you see it, point it out, and give the correct term. See “Welcoming Language” above and the Resources Roadmap in this toolkit for guidelines.

## ***Children & Youth***

- Look for curricula that is written with good writing guides around disability, that portrays disability in a positive light, and that includes suggestions of modifications and supports which promote inclusion and belonging. Three suggestions are the PCUSA's [Big God Big Questions](#), [Follow Me](#), and [Growing in Grace and Gratitude](#).
- Modify the curriculum that you have—change the words, change the phrases, adapt the activity—so that it supports and cares for every child under your care. See "Welcoming Language" above and the Resources Roadmap in this toolkit for guidelines.
- Communicate concerns and needs to publishers. We are all a part of nurturing the faith of our children, and when you find things that need to be changed or are missing, please advocate for children all throughout the church by saying something.
- Consider sometimes using a disability awareness curriculum, but be mindful of how inclusion and disability are portrayed. Here are [Three Tips for Success](#). And here is a [sample lesson](#).
- When planning camp and summer programming, be sure to plan for kids of all abilities. See [8 Tips to make Camp more Inclusive](#).

## **Messages in Music and Liturgy**

- When looking at lyrics/texts, notice and acknowledge that many of our favorite hymns portray disability as equivalent to sin, distance from God, or weakness. Be mindful of this when choosing. Look for outdated language in hymns, and consider skipping hymns, leaving out verses, or substituting a word. Work with music leaders in your midst to identify new songs or alternative texts. See the resource [Inclusive Hymns, Exclusive Language](#).
- People who use wheelchairs to support mobility have asked worship leaders to use the phrase “You may rise in Body or Spirit” in bulletins when the congregation is to rise. Many people have expressed that using the phrase “Please stand” or “Please stand as you are able” highlights a separation from people whose bodies function differently.
- Proofread sermons, prayers, and liturgy for person first or identity first language.

## **Welcoming Communication**

In our ministry settings, we have lots of ways to connect with people and to communicate. From stained glass windows to websites, newsletters, word of mouth, signs, and pew racks, we think about the work of connecting with people as essential to sharing God’s message of love and grace. Using these same platforms and resources to communicate about disability and inclusion can be as easy as thinking about established communication routes in new ways.

- The language used in ministry can engage all the senses. For example, as we prepare for communion and baptism, we can allow people see and hear the water and juice by lifting the pitcher high to let them splash. Let people see and hear the bread break. We can also use descriptive words to support the sensory experiences.
- Design slides and websites with accessibility in mind. See these [PowerPoint best practices](#) and [guidelines for web design](#).
- Take a look at digital ministries—are they inclusive? See more [here](#).
- Use the microphone! When you upgrade your sound system, be sure that you are compatible with hearing assistance devices and consider installing a [hearing loop](#). (See more about auditory supports in the Creating Sacred Space for All Quicksheet in this toolkit.)

- Support printed words with icons and images, or *visual cues*. This is helpful for those of all ages and abilities, including nonreaders, across your ministry settings. For example, consider creating an [illustrated worship bulletin](#) that will give people an orientation to what happens in worship. Visual schedules based upon the icons used in your worship bulletin may then be created for all of your church's activities as a great support not only for people who might struggle with processing, but for children, and any newcomer to your church. See a complete discussion of this type of support, including the creation of illustrated worship bulletins, below.

## Using Visual Cues for Communication

Visual schedules and infographics have been used as a support to people of all abilities for years. Speech-language pathologists developed the use of icons to enhance communication, to support behavior, and to encourage engagement. For people with limited English or English literacy, for young children, for people with high visual intelligence, and for some people living with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), a visual format is an easier way to take in information.

One strength of inclusion in faith settings is that so many worshipping communities use a predictable format. Making that format more explicit is a valuable support. You can use a simple, consistent set of icons to create a visual schedule that may be incorporated into your worship bulletin and then used across your media platforms and in all your other ministries.

### *Creating an Illustrated Worship Bulletin and Icon Template for all ministries*

- Step 1 - Identify the parts of your worship service (prelude, opening hymn, prayer, etc.)
- Step 2 - Choose icons for each part of worship—pair these with the titles used in worship.
- Step 3 - Use your icon template to create illustrated worship materials.
- Step 4 - Integrate the same icons in your template to create visual schedules for your other ministry settings. Add them to your slide templates for online worship, use them on screens for in-person worship, post them at your fellowship events, pull them into curriculum, employ them in your small group leader and participant guides, use them on youth retreats and mission trips, etc.

Here are some sources of icons and examples of visual schedules:

- [Worship Guide](#)
- [Visual Schedule](#) and [Disability Support Map](#) from *Growing in Grace and Gratitude*
- [Picture Guide](#) with Pull down windows
- [Pinterest Visual Support Page](#)
- [Christian Worship Icons](#)
- [Boardmaker](#) and [SymbolStix](#) are two systems of icons for creating [visual schedules](#), curriculum, websites, slides, bulletins, and other media. Or go more low tech with some adaptation of [this](#).

Employing simple, consistent icons used as visual cues, as well as improving the accessibility of all our media platforms, can be powerful supports for welcoming communication any time we gather together. Likewise, carefully examining scripture, curricula, and music and liturgy for negative messages about disability can help us prevent excluding those we wish to welcome. Finally, committing to language that is ability positive, by attending to our use of person first or identity first phrasing and to our characterization of assistive devices, not only ensures that our words are welcoming, but also undergirds a positive view of ability diversity for all in our faith communities.

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