

PORT PERRY
UNITED CHURCH

“You can make a difference”

**Guidelines to creating
an accessible church**

Volunteer/Staff Guide

Mission Statement

The mission statement of the Port Perry Prince Albert Pastoral Charge, of which Port Perry United Church is one of the two congregations, is as follows:

The Port Perry Prince Albert Pastoral Charge is a Christ-centred community of faith dedicated to fostering a welcoming, loving, caring environment where young and old alike are encouraged to grow spiritually.

We strive to increase opportunities and to encourage participation in: worship, music, mission and outreach, justice-seeking, and Christian education.

We continue to develop as a non-judgmental, exciting, fun-filled faith family where all may share their talents, explore new ideas, and celebrate the Christian faith.

Our Commitment

In fulfilling our mission, Port Perry United Church strives at all times to respect the dignity, worth, and independence of people with disabilities. We are also committed to giving people with disabilities the same opportunity to participate in congregational activities in the same place and in a similar way as do other participants.

What is in this guide?

This guide will help you to learn about:

- The Accessibility Standard for Customer Service and how it will help you to welcome church participants with disabilities.
- How to offer assistance to participants with different kinds of disabilities.
- How to help participants who use assistive devices, like wheelchairs or oxygen tanks.
- Service animals, such as guide dogs, and how to welcome church participants who use them.
- What a support person does and how to help participants who are accompanied by a support person.
- What to do when a church participant with a disability needs help assessing what we offer here at Port Perry United Church.

Background

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) was passed in 2005. Under the Act, the Ontario government is putting accessibility standards in place in the following areas:

- Customer service
- Employment
- Information and communications
- Transportation
- Built environment.

The Accessibility Standard for Customer Service applies to all people or organizations in Ontario that provide goods or services, and have one or more employees.

It affects private, non-profit and public sectors:

- Private
- Non-profit
- Public

The Principles of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* are:

Dignity – service is provided in a way that allows the person with a disability to maintain self-respect and the respect of other people. People with disabilities are not treated as an afterthought or forced to accept lesser service, quality, or convenience.

Independence – allowing a person with a disability to do things on their own without unnecessary help, or interference from others.

Integration – service is provided in a way that allows the person with a disability to benefit from the same services, in the same place, and in the same or similar way as other customers, unless an alternate measure is necessary to enable the person to access goods or services.

Equal opportunity – people with disabilities have an opportunity equal to that given to others to access goods or services.

What we need to do under the standard

To provide accessible “customer” service, organizations need to create and put in place an accessibility plan that:

- Considers a person’s disability when communicating with them;
- Allows assistive devices such as wheelchairs, walkers, oxygen tanks, etc.;
- Allows service animals;
- Welcomes support persons;
- Informs participants when accessible services aren’t available;
- Invites participants to provide feedback;
- Trains staff on accessible customer service;
- Puts their plan in writing;
- Lets participants know how to find their plan (for example, on their website);
- Offers their plan in accessible formats, like large print, if requested;
- Reports their progress online.

How to communicate with people with different types of disabilities

There are many types of degrees of disability. When we think of disabilities, we tend to think of people who use wheelchairs and who have physical disabilities that are visible and obvious. But disabilities can also be invisible. We cannot always tell who has a disability. Openly communicating and responding to church participants’ needs is the key to providing an excellent church experience for all. If you’re not sure about the best approach, just ask a person with a disability how you can best communicate with them.

“Love one another, as I have loved you.” (John 15:12) A loving and caring attitude is our greatest gift to all people. Some people don’t know how to communicate with those who have visible or invisible disabilities – for example, assuming that someone with a speech problem has intellectual limitations and speaking to them in a manner that would be used with a child; or forming ideas about the person because of stereotypes or a lack of understanding. Some people may feel that they could offend the individual with a disability by offering help, or they ignore or avoid people with disabilities altogether. Remember, our attitude is our greatest gift and is completely within our power to change.

Here are a few tips for interacting with people who have various disabilities:

People with physical disabilities

Only some people with physical disabilities use a wheelchair. Someone with a spinal cord injury may use crutches, while someone with severe arthritis or a heart condition may have difficulty walking longer distances.

Tips:

- If you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter, consider sitting so that you can make eye contact at the same level.
- Don't touch items or equipment, such as canes or wheelchairs, without permission.
- If you have permission to move a person's wheelchair, don't leave them in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position, such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.

People with vision loss

Vision loss can restrict someone's ability to read, locate landmarks or see hazards. Some participants may use a guide dog or a white cane, while others may not.

Tips:

- When you know someone has vision loss, don't assume that the individual can't see you. Many people who have low vision still have some sight.
- Identify yourself when you approach and speak directly to the participant.
- Ask if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them (for example, the announcements).
- When providing directions or instructions, be precise and descriptive.
- Offer your elbow to guide them if needed.

People who have hearing loss

People who have hearing loss may be deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing. They may also be oral deaf – unable to hear, but preferring to talk instead of using sign language. These terms are used to describe different levels of hearing and/or the way a person’s hearing was diminished or lost.

Tips:

- Once a participant has identified themselves as having hearing loss, make sure you are in a well-lit area where they can see your face and read your lips.
- As needed, attract the participant’s attention before speaking. Try a gentle touch on the shoulder or a wave of your hand.
- If the participant uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or move to a quieter area.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (for example, using a pen and paper).

People who are deaf-blind

A person who is deaf-blind may have some degree of both hearing and vision loss. Many people who are deaf-blind will be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional support person who helps with communication.

Tips:

- A participant who is deaf-blind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them, perhaps with an assistance card or a note.
- Speak directly to the participant, not to the intervenor.

People with speech or language impairments

Cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or other conditions may make it difficult for a person to pronounce words or may cause slurring. Some people who have severe difficulties may use a communication board or other assistive devices.

Tips:

- Don’t assume that a person with a speech impairment also has another disability.
- Whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with “yes” or a “no”.
- Be patient. Don’t interrupt or finish the participant’s sentences.

People who have learning disabilities

The term “learning disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders. One example is dyslexia, which affects how a person takes in or retains information. This disability may become apparent when a person has difficulty reading material or understanding the information that you are providing.

Tips:

- Be patient – people with some learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand, and to respond.
- Try to provide information in a way that takes into account the participant’s disability. For example, some people with learning disabilities find written words difficult to understand, while others may have problems with numbers and math.

People who have intellectual developmental disabilities

Developmental or intellectual disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, can limit a person’s ability to learn, to communicate, to do everyday physical activities, and live independently. You may not know that someone has this disability unless you are told.

Tips:

- Don’t make assumptions about what a person can do.
- Use plain language.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.

People who have mental health disabilities

Mental health issues can affect a person’s ability to think clearly, to concentrate, or to remember things. Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. For example, some participants may experience anxiety due to hallucinations, mood swings, phobias, or panic disorder.

Tips:

- If you sense or know that a participant has a mental health disability, be sure to treat them with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else.
- Be confident, calm, and reassuring.
- If a participant appears to be in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

How to interact with people who use assistive devices, and how to use equipment that we have in place to assist participants with disabilities

An assistive device is a tool, technology, or other mechanism that enables a person with a disability to do everyday tasks and activities, such as moving, communicating, or lifting. Personal assistive devices can include things like wheelchairs, hearing aids, white canes, or speech amplification devices.

Tips:

- Don't touch or handle any assistive device without permission.
- Don't move assistive devices or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of participants' reach.
- Let participants know about accessible features in the immediate environment that are appropriate to their needs (for example: accessible washrooms, elevator, hearing devices, etc.). These accessible features of our church facility are outlined in the accessibility brochure located in the church narthex.

How to interact with a person who has a guide dog or other service animal

People with vision loss may use a guide dog, but there are other types of service animals as well. Hearing alert animals help people who are deaf, deafened, oral deaf, or hard of hearing. Other service animals are trained to alert an individual to an oncoming seizure. Under the standard, service animals must be allowed on the parts of your premises that are open to the public. In some instances, service animals will not be permitted in certain areas by law (for example, a restaurant kitchen).

Tips:

- Remember that a service animal is not a pet. Avoid touching or addressing them.
- If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask the participant.

How to serve a person accompanied by a support person

Some people with disabilities may be accompanied by a support person, such as an intervenor. A support person can be a personal support worker, a volunteer, a family member, or a friend. A support person might help the participant with a variety of things, from communicating to helping with mobility, personal care, or medical needs.

Welcome support people to the church. They are permitted in any part of your premises that is open to the public. If your group is charging admission for an event, such as a concert or dinner, provide notice, in advance, about what admission fee will be charged for a support person. The church panel suggests that if it is a concert or other similar event that there be no charge for a support person. If the event is a fundraising dinner, the church panel suggests that a support person would be expected to pay for their meal.

Tips:

- If you're not sure which person is the participant, take your lead from the person using or requesting your goods or services, or simply ask.
- Speak directly to the participant, not to their support person.

You Can Make A Difference ...

If you notice anyone having difficulty participating in worship or church life in general, a good starting point is to simply ask "How can I help you?" Participants are the best source for information about their needs. A solution can be simple, and they will likely appreciate your attention and consideration. In this way we all can make a difference and continue to build a world rich in the spirit of God.

Feedback Process

Feedback regarding the accessibility of congregational activities to people with disabilities can be made verbally in person or by telephone, or writing by letter or by email, or by making use of the feedback response form on the back of the accessibility brochure located in the church narthex.

Feedback can be passed on to the volunteer greeters, the ministers, the office administrator, or a member of the Hospitality Committee.

All feedback will be directed to the Hospitality Committee. Participants can expect to hear back from a member of the Hospitality Committee normally within 3 days.

It is important that confidentiality be respected throughout this process.