



The General Conference  
Sabbath School &  
Personal Ministries



TO

# SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES

## BLINDNESS AND VISUAL IMPAIRMENT



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

**Special Needs Ministries: Blindness and Visual Impairment** is created by the General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department.

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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 vision loss or blindness. Specific suggestions and strategies will be given so that the church can make the gospel accessible to all people, including those with a visual impairment.

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.

### ***Blindness/Visual Impairment***

A broad range of disabilities affect vision. Typically, a visual impairment is identified as a condition in which visual acuity is not sufficient for the individual to participate fully in activities of everyday life. Challenges in this category can range from a visual impairment (in which the person has some visual ability, the degree of which varies from person to person) to blindness. Recent statistics from the World Health Organization indicate that 82 percent of people with blindness are over the age of 50, indicating the significance of this type of disability in elderly populations. In addition, 285 million people worldwide have a visual impairment, with 246 million of those being diagnosed with low vision and the remaining 39 million being identified as blind.

Individuals with vision issues may need accommodations such as large-print materials, preferential seating, adequate lighting, mobility assistance, a service animal, and Braille materials.



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 visual impairment. Visual impairment often does not impact the function of intellect or communication. In some cultures, identifying and acknowledging an 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 Visual 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 visual 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 or physical barriers must be addressed and eliminated. For individuals with visual impairment or blindness, lighting must be considered. It is essential to provide sufficient lighting in classrooms, the sanctuary, hallways, the parking area, and all ancillary meeting spaces. Reflective strips placed on the edge of

steps may assist worshipers with low vision. The safety of walking surfaces must also be considered. Uneven or slippery flooring or ground surfaces will pose a safety danger for many worshipers, including those with limited or no vision. Individuals with limited vision are more likely to be injured on sharp corners or protruding physical elements of the church building or its furnishings. These safety concerns must be identified and addressed to ensure the provision of a safe church environment for all who worship.

Some individuals with visual impairment or blindness may require a service dog to maximize their independence. If this is the case, the church congregation should be educated to understand that the dog is not a pet, and that it should not be distracted while working. The service dog is a vital element of the individual's ability to access church. Consider a seating location for the individual that provides ample space for the service animal as well.

Finally, one vital element of access is transportation to church. Individuals with significant vision issues will most likely need transportation assistance to attend church and church activities. It will be important for the Special Needs Ministry team to consider how to provide this vital service to visually impaired worshipers for not only Sabbath services, but all church activities.

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.

As each worshiper is welcomed warmly, a feeling of inclusive worship and community is made evident. For example, the simple action of providing seating that accommodates a service dog conveys to a worshiper who is visually impaired that they are welcome in your church.

Some general suggestions for enhancing the experience of a person with significant visual impairment include:

- Identifying yourself and others with you when you approach a person who cannot see you.
- Indicating when you are concluding your current contact with the visually impaired person and are moving away.
- Remembering that individuals with visual impairment often rely on the use of their arms/hands to help them maintain a sense of safety; therefore, it is best to ask what kind of assistance they would like. For example, instead of automatically taking their arm to guide them, ask how you can assist them to find a seat. They may, for example, ask you to walk in front, with their non-dominant hand on your shoulder. Asking is respectful and will provide the opportunity for church members to offer the type of assistance that is most helpful for the individual. Pushing or touching a person with a visual impairment without asking first may be not only uncomfortable, but offensive.

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

- Ensure adequate lighting in the Sabbath School classroom location.

- Assist individuals with visual impairment in finding a place to sit. Care must be taken to provide seating in a location that maximizes the ability to view the speaker(s) and any screen enhancing the study session.
- Offer magnifying devices when needed.
- Announce the name, not just the number, of congregational hymns during the service.
- Provide a public address system for any speakers to enhance the understanding of Sabbath School and lesson study activities for those who rely more heavily on audio input.
- Order copies of the *Adult Large Print Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* (<http://www.absq.adventist.org/Archives.htm>) in addition to the standard Sabbath School Bible Study Guide.
- Collaborate with the visually impaired worshiper to access a Braille quarterly, if appropriate, from Christian Record Services for the Blind ([www.christianrecord.org](http://www.christianrecord.org)).
- Consider providing an audio player and a recording of each week's lesson (recorded by church members) to those with visual impairment.<sup>4</sup>
- Provide audio cues and prompts during the Sabbath School program to assist all worshipers in following along with the program. By stating what is happening prior to its occurrence, members who cannot successfully see the bulletin or program can still fully participate in the Sabbath School program.
- Encourage active participation by watching for ways to build on individual strengths instead of focusing on a person's challenges. For members with visual

impairments, the church has many tasks and roles that do not require visual acuity.

- Provide large-print bulletins, either by increasing the font size in your printed resource or by using the enlargement feature on the copy machine. The church may elect to print a few bulletins on larger paper for worshipers requiring a large-print copy.

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, offering opportunities for all children (including those with visual impairments) to touch and feel the object(s) to enhance understanding.
- Provide verbal directions for each activity or part of the program. Doing so enables children with a visual impairment to have the same time to prepare for the next part of the program as other children in the class, even though they cannot clearly see visual cues as to what is next in the program.
- Collaborate with the family of visually impaired students to provide Braille versions of primary lessons (for children 6 to 9 years old). These are available through Christian Record Services for the Blind ([www.christianrecord.org](http://www.christianrecord.org)).
- Use a combination of 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 or as a review after teaching the lesson. Kindergarten and primary Sabbath School lessons are provided in audio-video format along with extension activities. (Kindergarten

AV resources: <http://www.gracelink.net/article/3/kindergarten#.VEW0gMnk0p8> and Primary AV resources: <http://www.gracelink.net/article/4/primary#.VEW0yMnk0p8>). These sources provide a way for visually impaired children to hear the lesson repeatedly during the week.

- See if the family of a child with limited vision accesses Christian Record Services. If so, consider asking them to share any Full-Vision books they have borrowed. Full-Vision books offer both written and Braille text, enabling the child to read to their classmates.
- Provide preferential seating for children with low vision so they can better see any visual media you incorporate into your Sabbath School program and lesson study.
- 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, find a meaningful job for a child with visual impairment that doesn't require a high degree of visual acuity, such as selecting songs to sing, providing the welcome, assisting with lesson study, or offering prayer.
- If the child has a service dog, educate classmates on the role of the service dog. Help them understand that the dog is not a pet, and that it should not be disrupted while working.

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

- Produce large-print church bulletins, either by creating a second bulletin in large font or by

enlarging the original bulletin on a copier and printing it on larger paper (such as 11 x 17 inch paper).

- Provide audio cues as to what is happening during the service. This will enable all worshipers to participate fully in the service, even if they cannot see the bulletin.
- Announce the name, not just the number, of congregational hymns during the service.
- See if your church provides written sermon notes or guides. If so, ensure the provision of a version that is appropriate for those with limited vision.

Consider special events in church services and how to include all worshipers. It is critical that support be provided to assist individuals with visual impairments. For example:

- Do new members need the opportunity to review church beliefs in an audio format? Do they understand what will happen during their baptism? Are they in need of anything specific during their baptism? Will additional assistance be needed to guide them safely into and out of the baptismal venue?
- How can you support their participation in the communion service? Will the deacons assist them, or is there a member who can sit with them to assist them?
- How will you assist visually impaired worshipers in the the footwashing service? Will some participants benefit from a worship assistant to help them through the process? Will deacons and deaconesses assist them, or will they have the opportunity to have a specific church member assist them in full participation?

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 worshipers have the resources to access and use technology easily. Large-print handouts may be necessary to help visually impaired participants feel welcome. Calling or verbally contacting them 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.

When individuals with visual disabilities 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. Since many individuals with intellectual impairments 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 visual 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 visual impairments, develop resources for people with these impairments, 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 visual impairment or blindness and no other learning or physical challenges, it is important to understand that some types of disabilities include visual impairment as one component of the disability. It will be important to learn about and address multiple disability challenges 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
- communication disorder
- intellectual disability

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
Wears glasses or contact lenses	Blind as a bat, four eyes
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>5</sup>, you will find information on training church members to provide a ministry inclusive of all people, including those who are blind or visually impaired. 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 visual impairment or blindness can be challenging and isolating. 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. Finally, visual disabilities can impact how a person can gain access to and understand the power of the gospel. It is critical that church members address these issues when present and support worshipers with visual impairment or blindness 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> [www.sabbathschoolu.org](http://www.sabbathschoolu.org); [www.cqbiblestudy.org/podcastlist.php](http://www.cqbiblestudy.org/podcastlist.php).

<sup>5</sup> [www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/specialneedsleaflet](http://www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/specialneedsleaflet)







