

# Ministering to and through blind and deaf individuals

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Henry Johnson was a successful businessman. He owned a well-known insurance business in the area. He was an elder in the church. He was well respected by his peers and loved by his church members. But Henry had a disability; he had lost more than 75 percent of his vision.

A few weeks after I took over as pastor of his church, he came to see me. He shared his concerns. He felt that I was not using his talents fully, perhaps because of his disability. He was right. Henry believed that he could be just as effective as anyone else. But I didn't.

After a brief discussion, I realized how I had subconsciously allowed a disability to affect my relationship with him.

You've probably not related to anyone as I did with Henry. Just the same, we all pastors and members alike need to take stock of how we relate to the physically disabled in our churches.

Often the unspoken notion that disability disqualifies a person for service lingers in our subconscious mind. Working with those with disabilities may require a little extra planning, but it's worth the time and effort. These people have talents and the desire to share.

Henry's vision was impaired, but he had a gift for visiting people. He was genuinely friendly and caring, and it showed. After we teamed him with a driver, he became one of our best visitors. We needed Henry!

When I realized my bias and took stock of what Henry's talents could do, it became a lot easier for me to see Henry as my colleague and a valuable member of my ministry team. Not only could I minister *to* him, I could minister *through* him.

## Ministering through those with disabilities

How? Here are five things you can do to help persons with disabilities in your congregation become your partners in ministry.

1. *Begin with an attitude change.* It may be the attitude of the disabled person or perhaps that of the congregation that needs changing. In Henry's case, it was my attitude. And once I changed my attitude, it was easier for my church members to change theirs. As they saw Henry fully participating in church duties and functions, it was easier for them to look past the disability barrier to the talents of other people with disabilities.

Sometimes it's helpful to remind ourselves that vision-impaired people can do everything but see. They can hear (very well!), they can think, and they can participate. A hearing-impaired person can do everything but hear. Changed attitudes lead to changed actions.

2. *Communicate.* Take the first step in meeting the needs of those with disabilities. Don't wait for them to come to you. It's your job to initiate communication. Don't let them feel that you don't care or that you're unapproachable. With a blind person, just sit down and talk. With a deaf person, use anything from pen and paper to an interpreter. Try every possible communication channel. Find out their needs. Make them feel an important part of the church family. Form deep, saving

relationships.

3. *Listen*. Listening is an important part of communication. Get to know individuals with disabilities. Let them express their feelings. What do they really need? What can they do best? How have they ministered in the past? What can they do now? An ear lent is a friend won.

4. *Provide ministry alternatives*. Don't let stereotypes limit you. Offer a variety of ways in which your blind and deaf members can minister in and out of your church. Given opportunities, those who are deaf can surprise you at what they can do. For instance, when was the last time you asked a deaf member in your congregation to tell the children's story, the mission story, or to sing a special song? When was the last time you asked a blind person to collect the offering or lead the responsive reading? Don't just take it for granted that a deaf or blind person cannot do certain things. Ask!

5. *Assist, don't control*. Attitudes of pity or patronizing are forms of control. Disabled persons don't need them; they don't like them. Instead, ask, "What can I do for you?" Make them feel important. They want to participate in their own destiny. They are willing to have you as a coach, but they don't want you to control the process.

## **Meeting the special needs of those with disabilities**

Our pastoral responsibility does not end with making those with disabilities our partners in ministry. We must also affirm their importance in the congregation and where necessary care for the special needs they have as members of the church family.

### **Needs of those who are deaf**

Many of the deaf persons in our churches feel hurt, isolated, and frustrated. The reasons are many and varied. But they all point to a failure in meeting their special needs. For example, deaf persons need to "hear" the worship service. So provide an interpreter if a deaf person requests one. It may be expensive, but it is ministry par excellence. Check the phone book for deaf organizations, state agencies for those who are deaf, and churches that have programs or interpreters for deaf persons. One of these will provide interpreters or refer you to someone who can help you.

A possible problem with interpreters is that they may not be members of the church, and hence unfamiliar with Adventist terminology and theology. Printed page can overcome this limitation. Whenever I had deaf members in my church, I usually gave them printed copies of my sermons. It may be used to clarify thoughts not completely conveyed through lipreading or translation, or may be scanned beforehand to make listening easier.

To communicate with deaf persons personally and more effectively, the obvious thing to do is to learn sign language. Consider taking a class. Pick up words and phrases from your deaf members. Get your church members excited about learning as well. Invite deaf persons to give a sign language class at the church.

For telephone conversations, ask your telephone company about their TDD (or TTY) relay service. This service converts your speech into text on the other end of the line and allows those who are deaf to type their responses. Other services available are computer accessible programs such as CompuServe (SDAs On-line) and America Online that allow real-time typed dialogues between two or more parties.

### **Needs of those who are blind**

Mobility is perhaps one of the immediate needs of blind persons. Handicapped parking spots, for instance, are often located in very illogical places. Point out ramps to those who are blind. These ramps are often just as useful to blind persons as to those in wheelchairs. Have an assistance program to help your blind members get where they need to go on Sabbath and during the week. Many church members would be happy to provide transportation for blind persons if they knew there was a need.

The inside layout of the church may also be confusing. Things we take for granted are often quite hidden from those who are blind. Is it clear to your blind members where the bathrooms and telephones are? Consider placing braille signs around the church.

When all is said and done, there is one thing we cannot afford to forget: ministry needs to touch everyone, including those with disabilities. Jesus Himself defined ministry to include those with disabilities. It was said of His ministry: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matt. 11:5, NIV).