

## **Reaching Out to People with Visual Impairments**

Living in a world focused on visual acuity, we are challenged to realize that a person's livelihood is largely dependent on his or her own ability to adapt to it. This is especially true for over 10 million children, youth and adults who are either blind or visually impaired in the United States.

This statistic may not be too far from home. As people age, it is a known fact that we all seem to experience some degree of visual impairment. (A visual disability can range from not seeing at all– to having difficulty seeing what is in front of you.)

Some of us may just need to start wearing glasses or find stronger sources of light. Others will develop glaucoma or need lens implant surgery. As people strive to cope with their own limitations, many will shy away from places, programs and events that do not honor their presence by attending to their needs.

There are more than 10,000 people in the ELCA who are either blind or visually impaired. The ELCA Braille and Tape Ministry provides resources such as hymnals, devotionals, *The Lutheran* magazine and *Lutheran Woman Today* to approximately 2000 of these individuals. Bible study, confirmation and Sunday school materials are available upon request.

For more information about the ELCA Braille and Tape ministry, contact Pastor Lisa T. Cleaver, director for Disability Ministries at 800/638-3522, ext. 2692, or by e-mail at [lisa.cleaver@elca.org](mailto:lisa.cleaver@elca.org).

### **Practical Ways to Support People in Need of Visual Accommodations**

- Increase the size of the print in your congregational resources, such as newsletters and worship bulletins. This will also benefit younger readers who are just learning to focus. (14 Pitch is good, 18-20 pitch is better.)
- Print the whole worship service in the bulletin. It will allow for a smooth transition between the various resources used. If you have traditional worship services at your church, you may want to invest in one or two Braille hymnals. They are available through Augsburg Fortress.
- Try not to stereotype. Not all blind people read Braille and visual disabilities come in many degrees. Be observant as you acknowledge the realities of each person and ask what might be helpful.
- Don't hesitate to talk with a visually impaired person. When a person is unable to recognize facial features, voices become important identifiers. Make a point of stating your name at first, when you approach them. But, once they get to know you, you can recognize that they do.
- Discourage media projection during worship. It is difficult to gain a clear focus on a screen especially at the angle and position that many screens are placed.
- Transportation is important. Whether a person is blind or just not seeing so well, the odds are that getting to church is going to be a challenge, especially after dark.
- Nurture a person's right to a sense of dignity and integrity, no matter what their impairment. If the person looks lost or confused, ask if you can help. If you need to assist them in a physical way, let them take your elbow as you lead them.

- Visual impairments do not imply the existence of other impairments, such as hearing. Speak in a normal volume, unless you are aware of a need to speak louder.
- Get good lighting in your sanctuary. Churches that are dark or have high vaulted ceilings often lack sufficient light for reading. It is vital that all people have the opportunity to fully engage in activities that nurture their faith and confidence in the Light of the World.
- Check out the Association for the Blind at [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org) and the National Federation for the Blind at [www.nfb.org](http://www.nfb.org) to gain further insight about the realities of living with visual impairment and resources for accommodating people with visual needs.

*Peter Heide is a pastor at Living Christ Lutheran Church in Hanover Park, Ill.*