

OPEN HEARTS, OPEN MINDS, OPEN DOORS

Creating Access and Inclusion in Worship

PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

Words, whether spoken or signed, are the basic means by which people communicate. Words are powerful tools that can affirm and empower. At the same time, the misuse of words can belittle and demean. Language used to describe people with disabilities often focuses on lack of ability rather than on competency. Don't reinforce common myths about people with disabilities.

When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, words should be chosen with care in order to promote dignity and a positive image. The following suggestions, adapted from guidelines developed by Paraquad, Inc., and The Research and Training Center on Independent Living, may assist in this process:

- **Make reference to the person first, then the disability. Say “a person with a disability” rather than “a disabled person.”**
- **If the disability isn't germane to the story or conversation, don't mention it.**
- **A person is not a condition; therefore, avoid describing a person in such a manner. Don't present someone as an “epileptic.” Rather say “a person with epilepsy.”**
- **Do not portray successful people with disabilities as superhuman, as this raises expectations that all people with disabilities should reach this level.**
- **Do not sensationalize a disability by use of such terms as “afflicted with,” “victim of,” “suffers from.”**
- **Do not use generic labels for disability groups such as “the disabled.”**
- **Emphasize abilities, not limitations. Use “walks with crutches” rather than “crippled”.**
- **Do not use condescending euphemisms. Terms like “handy-capable” and “physically inconvenienced” are considered condescending.**
- **Do not imply disease. People with disabilities should never be referred to as patients.**
- **Speak of people with disabilities as active participants in society. They are!**

Adapted from National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities, “Opening Doors”, Vol. 1