

Before the service, January 2023



from TORCH TRUST

Before the service



Sight Loss Friendly Church

Equipping churches to enable blind and partially sighted people to contribute to church life..



Before the service

This guide discusses best practices for including a blind or partially sighted person before and during a church service. Please also check out our document on how to be inclusive after the service. For more in-depth information, check out our 'Focus On' YouTube video: 'Before and After the Service'.

Offering a warm welcome is the most important aspect of being sight loss friendly – more so than large print and braille, or markings on steps. Of course, these things need to happen, but a person who is visually impaired is more likely to be patient if you demonstrate to them that they are welcome, valued, respected and appreciated for what they bring to the church.

Some challenges visually impaired people face

- It's hard to get to church in the first place.
- Navigating an unfamiliar setting is tricky.
- Not being able to make eye contact makes it difficult to find people to talk to.
- It's often hard to recognise people and hence get to know them.

- It's frustrating when it isn't possible to tell what's going on around you based on sound.
- Things can change very quickly in some churches. An idea can be used as an interactive prayer in a service or adapted as a prayer space display.

Strategies for identifying people who are visually impaired

Sometimes it's obvious because they have a cane or a guide dog. However, note the following:

- Guide dogs are not just for totally blind people: a significant proportion of guide dog owners have a high degree of useful vision.
- It is more common for a long cane to be used by someone with little or no useful vision, although some partially sighted people also use them.
- If the long cane has a red stripe on it, this may indicate Deaf-Blindness (total or partial).
- Some partially sighted people who do not need a long cane may carry a shorter "symbol cane" and some people might attach symbol canes to their bags or rucksacks.

If a visually impaired person is accompanied by a sighted person, they might hold the other person's elbow or otherwise obviously be guided.

Some visually impaired people might alert the church that they are coming in advance. It is appropriate to ask, at that point, how the church



can identify them on arrival. You should be especially alert if you are aware that such a conversation has taken place.

In the remainder of cases it is more difficult, and you may only notice visual impairment later on. If the person does not inform you of their visual impairment in these situations, they may not wish to draw attention to it, so don't dwell on an apology. Instead, discreetly point out that you have noticed something which has made you aware of their visual impairment and ask whether they would like help.

Introducing yourself

Say your name at the start of the conversation and ask for the name of the visually impaired person at the same time. From then on, address them by name whenever you return to speaking to them.

If they are accompanied by a sighted person, always address the visually impaired person directly rather than the sighted person, unless of course it is the sighted person to whom you wish to speak!

Do not automatically assume that the sighted person and the visually impaired person know each other, or indeed that the sighted person wishes to stay. The sighted person may be a taxi driver, for example, or a passer-by offering help to the front door.

Establishing the needs of visually impaired people

Always ask; never assume! In particular, remember that not everyone who's visually impaired needs large print or braille and to sit at the front of the building. People with tunnel vision, I.E. good central vision but poor peripheral vision, may in fact prefer very small print and to sit at the back of the building.

Alternatively, the visually impaired person might have arranged for the service materials to be sent by email in advance, or might ask you if this can be done in future, in which case further help may not be required there and then.

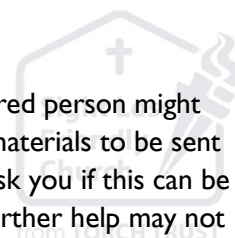
Some visually impaired people may prefer to sit at the end of a row so as to be able to more easily find their way out. Furthermore, if the person has a guide dog, it may be easier to accommodate the dog in the aisle than in the row.

Many visually impaired people like to be guided by holding your elbow or your shoulder; others prefer to simply follow; and others are happy to find their own way. You should:

- Ask whether the person would like to be guided and, if they would, check which side they like to be guided on.
- If a person would prefer to follow, ask whether they need you to verbalise directions.
- When verbalising directions, say "left" and "right" instead of "over there".
- Use the rights and lefts of the person you're talking to, not your own, as they may not know which way you're facing.
- Take the lead from the visually impaired person when setting the pace.
- Indicate where coats and other belongings can be left.

It is a good idea to have some spare capacity in the welcome team to ensure that the need to guide someone does not disrupt the welcome experience for other members of the congregation.

If a visually impaired person needs to be guided to the toilet, it is usually appropriate to show them to the toilet door and no further. However, if help is required beyond this point, and the visually impaired person is of the opposite gender to you,



you will need to ask someone of that gender to help.

You should identify parts of the service where a visually impaired person might need further assistance, and arrange this with them before the service starts. For example, ask whether the person will need help coming forward for communion, and explain who will provide that help.

You should also ask whether they will need help at the end of the service, and ensure that that need is accommodated.

You should avoid asking people how much they can see, as it is not always a straightforward question to answer, especially for partially sighted people whose vision is often difficult to explain. It can sometimes be helpful to ask whether or not someone is totally blind, but this should be the extent of the conversation unless the visually impaired person indicates that it can continue.

It is common for the vision of partially sighted people to fluctuate. Sometimes this is for predictable reasons (e.g. night blindness), but at other times it is seemingly random, or perhaps due to factors such as tiredness or stress. In some cases, this may result in someone appearing to become "less blind" after they have been at church for a few weeks, as they become more comfortable and the stress of entering a new building reduces.

Making visually impaired people feel welcome

You might like to encourage a friendly member of the congregation to sit next to a visually impaired person if they are alone. However, when doing so,

consider how the person has responded to their need for help so far:

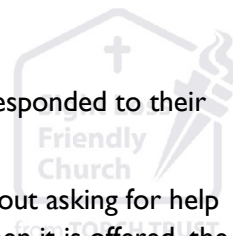
- If they are proactive about asking for help or keen to accept it when it is offered, the person who sits next to them should indicate that they are willing to help.
- If they seem reluctant to accept help, the person who sits next to them should not draw attention to lack of sight or actively offer help, but should instead just be friendly.

The person may take on a number of roles during the service, immediately beforehand and immediately afterwards. For example:

- Pointing out items that might be of interest on the notice sheet.
- Describing the key visual messages in videos or slides where there is no spoken content, or where the spoken content does not convey the same message.
- Describing the facial expressions and body language of others where it is relevant.
- Explaining particularly poignant or humorous visual incidents.

It is not, however, usually necessary to read the entire notice sheet or order of service verbatim.

The person should also resist the urge to describe all of the features of the building, the garments of the church leader (unless particularly striking), etc. It is usually not necessary to offer such descriptions at all unless the visually impaired person asks, but if it is felt to be necessary for some reason, offer a short, high level description and allow them to ask for more information about the particular aspects in which they are interested.



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