

First Impressions Matter

A Quick Guide for Church Greeters

As a greeter, you are often the first person a family encounters when they arrive at church. For individuals and families affected by developmental disabilities, a thoughtful, calm, and flexible welcome can make the difference between feeling overwhelmed and feeling at home.

This guide reflects widely accepted best practices from disability advocacy organizations and church inclusion ministries. It highlights cues to watch for and simple ways to respond with kindness and respect.

What Greeters Should Watch For

Environmental & Sensory Cues

Some individuals may be sensitive to their surroundings or need help navigating the building.

Watch for:

- Difficulty using entrances, ramps, or aisles
- Hesitation entering crowded or noisy areas
- Covering ears, pacing, rocking, or appearing overwhelmed

Helpful responses:

- Offer quieter entry or seating options
- Lower your voice and reduce unnecessary movement
- Share the location of a Quiet Zone or Sensory Room

Interaction & Communication Cues

Not everyone communicates or engages in the same way.

Watch for:

- Limited or no eye contact
- Nonverbal communication or delayed responses
- Staying close to a caregiver or support person

Helpful responses:

- Speak clearly and simply
- Allow extra time for responses
- Ask before offering help or physical assistance
- Avoid touching unless permission is given

A simple phrase you can always use:

“We’re really glad you’re here. How can we help today?”

Structural & Predictability Needs

Uncertainty can increase anxiety.

Watch for:

- Questions about where to go or what happens next
- Distress during transitions (music starting, moving rooms)

Helpful responses:

- Briefly explain what will happen next
- Point out restrooms, exits, or quiet spaces
- Offer large-print materials or visual schedules if available

Active Engagement & Belonging

Inclusion goes beyond entry—it's about participation.

Watch for:

- Interest in helping or participating
- Strengths or skills that could be used in service roles

Helpful responses:

- Make introductions when appropriate
- Share inclusive activities or buddy options
- Encourage participation in comfortable ways

Preemptive Support Greeters Can Offer

When possible:

- Ask if anything would make the visit easier
- Reassure families that flexibility is welcome
- Communicate that movement, noise, or breaks are okay

Sometimes the most welcoming response is simply grace.

What to Avoid

- Don't insist on eye contact
- Don't assume help is needed—always ask
- Don't escalate energy if someone appears overstimulated
- Don't draw attention to behaviors that may be self-regulating

A Final Encouragement

You don't need special training to show Christ's love—just awareness, patience, and humility.

Every person who enters your church carries unique needs and gifts. A calm, respectful welcome helps create an environment where individuals and families of all abilities can experience belonging.

When possible, simply ask:

“How can we best support you?”

For more information about starting or strengthening a disability ministry, visit our website.

