

Making Your Church Accessible

Removing Barriers: Physical and Social



Principles of Accessibility

God's heart is to welcome people of all abilities into his church (Luke 14). For those with disabilities, that requires churches to remove the physical and environmental barriers that can make it difficult or even impossible to participate in worship services and programs. Though churches are not mandated to follow the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the principles of universal design behind ADA help churches welcome everyone. Though some changes can be expensive, many can be made at little or no cost. It is important to invite church leadership to participate in the process by demonstrating the accessibility barriers found in your church facility. When discovering these barriers, evaluate what can be done immediately, soon, and in the long-term. Consider these principles as you plan the next steps towards accessibility.

Provide Access Without Limiting Options

For example, designated wheelchair seating existing in only one part of sanctuary can have the effect of segregating or isolating people with disabilities.

Enable Independence

A wheelchair ramp that leads to a door that cannot be opened by a wheelchair user is not an accessible door. Things like doors, wheelchair lifts, and elevators should be operated with minimal strength, motor skills, or cognitive ability. Signage should be legible to people with visual or cognitive impairments using braille, high-contrast letters, and simple symbols. Ask yourself: can people with disabilities get from the parking lot into all buildings and the rooms in the buildings? Can they get onto all stages and platforms, navigate every doorway, and access additional facilities, such as drinking fountains, sinks, and bathroom stalls?

Respect Sensory Needs

Disability sometimes affects the five senses. Sight and hearing are the two most well-known. Things like announcements, sermons, worship, and fire-alarms all need to be communicated in multi-sensory ways. Sign-language interpreters, audio induction loop systems (for hearing aids), and lyrics projected on a screen are all ways of improving sensory accessibility. Consider also how those who have sensory sensitivities may also be impacted by the sights, sounds, and smells of the facility.

Include People with Disabilities in the Decision-Making Process

Designing a space for people whose experiences and needs differ from your own requires inviting them into the decision-making process. It is important to survey a broad cross-section of people.

Improve Safety

How would someone who is deaf know the fire alarm is going off? How can someone who is blind tell when they are getting near a staircase? Consider how your church design improves the safety of people with disabilities.

Barriers to Accessibility

Applying the principles listed above requires being able to see what barriers are preventing access for people with disabilities. Broadly speaking, there are two types of barriers your church may encounter.

Physical Barriers

Some barriers can be purely physical. A staircase or narrow doorway can make a space inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair. Loud noises, bright lights, and strong scents can make a space inaccessible to someone with sensory processing disorder. Lack of transportation can make it impossible for someone to get to church. These barriers are physical in nature and require physical solutions.

Social Barriers

Some barriers are not visible but may exist in the attitudes and expectations of those in the church. Unwelcoming attitudes may be beliefs that, *People with disabilities are not created in the image of God, or people with invisible disabilities need to just get over it.* The expectation of absolute silence during a worship service, for example, may mean someone with involuntary repetitive movements or vocalizations can never fully participate. Social barriers are the more difficult types of barriers to remove, since people may not even realize they exist.

Implementing Changes and Removing Barriers

When barriers have been identified, what do we do? There are three options:

Remove the Barriers

A simple change to the physical or social environment may be all that is needed to make a space accessible. Building a wheelchair ramp is a modification to the physical environment that makes it more accessible. An awareness event or sermon on the theology of disability may help change the hearts and minds of the congregation, modifying the social environment to become more welcoming.

Provide Supports

If a change to the environment is not possible or insufficient, providing supports may aid participation. A simple example is our everyday use of reading glasses. Text can only be made so large, so at some point modifying the environment (the text itself) becomes unfeasible. When this is the case, the use of tools like glasses aid participation. People with disabilities may require similar supports, ranging from seeing eye-dogs for people with visual impairments, noise-cancelling headphones for people with autism, or a one-on-one buddy for someone with developmental delays.

Create a Specialized Environment

In some rare cases, modifications and supports will prove insufficient and a specialized environment will need to be created. This may be as simple as a breakout sensory room allowing someone to “cool down” and avoid a meltdown, or a companion bathroom with an adult changing table. Even when a specialized environment is available, the goal is always integration and mainstream participation whenever possible.

Accessibility doesn't happen overnight. The three ways of dealing with barriers listed above may happen on different timetables. How do we plan to become increasingly accessible? We need to identify what we act on now, what we can act on soon, and what we will need to plan on for the future.

Long-Term Changes

Some changes require budgeting and planning. Others simply require time. Most churches will be unable to simply cut a check and install an elevator. But the first step to making needed changes is to discover the needs. People who have never befriended someone with a disability may be unsure and uncertain how to act. Gaining familiarity and seeing healthy friendships modeled may take time.

Near Future Changes

Many (perhaps most) changes can be done with a modest budget. Ordering new signs, painting accessible parking spaces, or building mobile plywood ramps can be done relatively quickly and with minimal expense. Beyond thinking in terms of dollar amounts, consider who in your congregation may be able to lend expertise and labor in making simple changes to the church.

Immediate Changes

Some changes can happen immediately and without any monetary cost. If a Bible study meets on an inaccessible second floor, simply changing the meeting location can make it more accessible. If disability has never been spoken about, beginning a conversation can get the ball rolling. Adding more wheelchair designated spaces throughout the sanctuary may be as simple as removing a few chairs. Consider what changes can be made at no-cost. Something is always better than nothing and taking the first step is often the most difficult.

Accessible Beyond the Church Campus

Apply the principles described above to all church activities, such as in-home small groups. Consider how people with disabilities can determine beforehand if they can participate in a ministry event, activity, or meeting happening outside of the church building.