

## **More than Fifty Ways to make your Parish accessible with Little or No Cost**

1. Use your copier to produce large-print copies of the bulletin, hymns, and other materials used in worship. (Large print is 18 point and should be produced on paper which is white or off-white and produces good contrast with the type.) Use Arial, Tahoma, or other sans serif.
2. Consider replacing fixed pews with moveable pews or chairs so that people with disabilities may be seated with the community and participate fully.
3. Create "pew cuts" by shortening the ends of several pews so that users of wheelchairs can sit within the main body of the congregation, not in a designated section, and not being forced to block the aisles. Pew cuts also are helpful for people who are deaf-blind because they need to touch their sign language interpreter's hands. Pew cuts enable persons who are deaf-blind to sit in chairs facing the rear of the church, while the tactile interpreter sits in the pew facing the worship leader.
4. If there are steps into your chancel, consider having a communion station on the floor of the sanctuary. This will permit young children, those who are frail or elderly, and person with disabilities to receive the Sacrament in the same way the rest of the congregation receives.
5. Involve people with disabilities in the planning of all architectural modifications.
6. Think about converting two side by side bathrooms into one accessible unisex bathroom. Allow room enough for wheelchairs to turn around. Leave transfer space on both sides of the toilet.  
Make sure the toilet paper dispenser is close enough for easy reach by the person using the toilet.  
Make sure that sinks can be easily accessed by a wheelchair user, and do not forget to lower towel and soap dispensers so that they can be easily reached.
7. Provide a paper cup dispenser near your water fountain. This will transform an inaccessible fountain into one easily accessible to wheelchair users.
8. If any wheelchair users volunteer in your office, consider raising the height of desks and tables to 34 inches so that their wheelchair can fit under these surfaces.
9. Suggest that worshipers who are hard of hearing sit toward the front of the nave so that they can easily see the preacher and liturgists. Ask the preacher and liturgists to speak clearly and slowly, looking frequently at the congregation. Make copies of the sermon available before the service as well as copies of the scripture lessons to be read. People who are hard of hearing will find these materials especially helpful.
10. Install long-handled door hardware, which is easier for everyone to use, especially those who have limited hand function.

11. Survey your sound system to ensure that it meets the needs of those who will depend on it. Let people who are hard of hearing test it for you and tell what adjustments are needed.
12. Apply brightly colored, textured strips at the top of all stairs. These strips alert people with limited vision that they are approaching stairs. People who are carrying things which block their vision will also appreciate this notice.
13. After every service, take the altar flowers and bulletins to those who are shut-in or hospitalized.
14. Provide transportation to church for those who are elderly or without transportation.
15. Maintain regular communication with those who are unable to attend services or other church events. This allows these people to continue to feel a part of the community, and it allows the community to monitor those persons' "wellbeing."
16. Include the children of the congregation in visits to nursing homes. Most elders enjoy short visits from youngsters.
17. Discover sources of large print or taped books, magazines and Bibles. Share this information with older parishioners whose vision is failing and who may not yet be acquainted with these resources.
18. Celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday by offering a Christian education day in which participants explore what life as a person with a disability is like. Ask your parishioners who have disabilities to share their experiences. Explore ways in which life as a person with a disability can be improved and how your parishioners with disabilities can feel more included in the life of the congregation.
19. Invite outside speakers to the church to talk about issues and needs of persons with disabilities.
20. Show one or more of the excellent video recordings which are available about disability concerns. Prepare questions for discussion following the viewing. If interest is expressed, make plans to address the issues which still separate people with disabilities from the larger community of the church and society.
21. Plan an adult education segment to discuss the non-architectural barriers to inclusion, such as lighting, attitudinal and communication barriers.
22. In places where winter weather brings snow and ice, remove the snow and ice promptly from all sidewalks and parking-lots. During the fall months, make sure that slippery leaves are also removed.

23. Survey present church lighting to ensure that the wattage is high enough and that the placement of light fixtures ensures maximum visibility.

24. Make yourselves knowledgeable about the needs of persons with less readily apparent disabilities, such as diabetes, epilepsy, high blood pressure, mental illness, etc. In an adult education session, share this knowledge about these disabilities. In an aging church, more joint replacements are causing more people to need accessible parking, ease of entry, etc.

25. Develop support groups for persons with disabilities such as stroke, diabetes, epilepsy, mental illness, etc., and for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and caretakers of persons with Alzheimer's.

26. Hold all community activities in areas accessible to everyone. Don't forget about accessible signage.

27. Encourage one to one relationships between persons who are elderly and youth and young couples.

28. Enlist the expertise of your parishioners who are carpenters, plumbers, contractors, teachers, social workers, nurses, etc. to accomplish simple accessibility and disability awareness tasks. For example, if you are creating an accessible bathroom, raising the height of the toilet, moving the toilet paper roll closer to the toilet, etc. are easily carried out by members who are handy.

29. In your church library, set aside a shelf or two with disability resources related to accessibility, disability awareness, inclusion, etc. Label these shelves with an easy-to-read sign saying "Mini-Library on Inclusion."

30. Look for educational opportunities about disability concerns in your community. Gather several interested parishioners and congregational leaders to attend programs. Publicize these events in your bulletins and newsletters.

31. Encourage parishioners to designate memorial gifts for accessibility projects.

32. Set aside accessible parking spaces in your parking lot or in front of your church for people with disabilities. Mark these spaces with an appropriate sign.

33. Visit accessible churches in your area, noting especially the non-architectural ways these churches demonstrate their accessibility and inclusion.

34. Consult local group homes and nursing homes to ascertain whether your congregation might invite their residents to become members of your congregation.

35. Share your facilities with organizations which serve people with disabilities.

36. Consider getting involved in congregate dining, meals on wheels, or your own feeding program for those who are in need. Join other churches in the area in this effort.

37. Set aside a separate bulletin board to display material concerning your own accessibility projects. Be sure the height of the bulletin board is friendly to persons who use wheelchairs. Also ensure that the background is not too distracting for those with low vision.

38. Explore ways of including people with disabilities in the education and ministry as well as the worship of your congregation.

39. Explore ways of working with other congregations and faith communities on projects related to disability access and ministry.

40. Suggest that your parishioners volunteer their time at a day care center, rehabilitation facility or hospital as a way of coming to know persons with disabilities better.

41. If you have persons in your congregation who are blind or have low vision, install signage in Braille or raised letters. Familiarize yourself with the ADA requirements of size and placement.

42. If you have persons in your congregation who are deaf or have profound hearing loss, install a fire alarm which is light cued. Before installing this kind of alarm, however, make sure that there are no persons with epilepsy in the congregation since this light alarm may trigger seizures for them.

43. In an educational program or in a sermon, explore the differences between "healing" (wholeness) and "cure." All people can receive God's healing grace. Not all of us will be cured.

44. Because two-thirds of working-age people with disabilities are unemployed (even though they are able to work and want to do so), and because many members of your congregation are employers, make sure they are knowledgeable about the issues around employment of people with disabilities both from the point of view of the employer and the point of view of those who have disabilities.

45. Convene a team of parishioners who are willing to call your legislators on behalf of legislation about transportation and housing. Join with other churches in your community on this project.

46. Survey your neighborhood to ascertain whether there are unmet needs among those who are elderly, home-bound or have a disability.

47. Many activities such as skiing, roller skating and camping can be enjoyed by people with disabilities, especially when they are partnered with someone who is temporarily

able-bodied. Encourage your parishioners to look for the fun and fulfillment in these activities.

48. Educate your congregation about chemical sensitivities, also known as environmental illnesses. Survey your cleaning supplies being mindful of those with environmental sensitivities. Encourage everyone to curtail the wearing of perfumes and aftershave as well.

49. Designate your church campus as a non-smoking area.

50. Let other people of faith know about your belief that people with disabilities must be welcomed into the ministry of the church.

51. Offer some form of religious education opportunity to students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. With supports, most students can succeed in inclusion programs with non-disabled peers. When inclusion isn't possible, find age appropriate material suitable to the child's abilities, or make use of one of the excellent interfaith special religious education curricula available.

52. Encourage families with children who have a disability to bring their children to church. Encourage the members of the congregation to be welcoming, even if a child is not always quiet during the service. Welcome children with disabilities to participate in the celebration of the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, as well as to take part in Confirmation.

53. Accept the God-given gifts that people with disabilities bring to the community.

54. Partner with neighboring churches to provide disability programming for the community.

55. Establish a peer mentoring program between your able-bodied young people and young people who have a disability.

56. Understand, accept and celebrate your own limitations. All of us are who we are because of, rather than in spite of, our limitations. Encourage people with disabilities to teach us the lessons of imperfection and limitation.

---

Revised edition June 2009

By the Rev. Barbara Ramnaraine, Deacon, Episcopal Disability Network  
and Charlotte Hawkins Shepard, Ph.D., UMC Consultant, Disability Concerns