

Extend worship to people with disabilities [part 3]

By Tim Vermande



The first article of this series discussed how to use technology to [extend worship beyond your sanctuary](#) to reach those who are “shutin.” Many of these people are limited more by the inaccessibility of a church’s facilities and communication methods than their health or mobility. Barriers may include transportation, architectural features and communication. In some locations, weather can impose short-term challenges. Outreach must be encouraging, honest and welcoming.

Not all disabilities are the same.

Some people have difficulty understanding complex arguments or articles; others have trouble speaking or cannot hear well. Some people assume these conditions go together. Stephen Hawking uses a motorized wheelchair and speech synthesizer, but he probably has the most brilliant mind ever known in physics. Many people assume that a mobility impairment also means a developmental disability or assume other links that are not the case.

If you want to reach people with disabilities, act positively and proactively to get the word out. These tips will get you started.

What should you communicate on your website?

Concerns about websites fall into two categories: lack of information and access to the site. Here is a short list of what to communicate to those who are consider visiting your church for worship or programs:

- Availability of accessible parking.
- Location in relation to public transportation.
- Any special directions for paratransit operators.
- Presence and location of accessible entrances (including ramps and power doors).
- Availability of large-print or Braille bulletins and hymnals.
- Seating for wheelchair users that allows choices, including sitting with a friend or family member.
- Availability of assistive-listening devices.
- Availability of American Sign Language interpretation with location of interpreter; when it's offered during worship, and availability for fellowship, meetings or classes.
- Availability of age-appropriate classes for children or adults with disabilities.
- The repetition involved in ritual creates meaning and connectedness for some, so provide an indicator of worship style.

Consider including a map and photographs on your site, as well as having maps available in the building. Also have a contact on the website for accessibility questions, and make it available to those who might use email, voice telephone, relay services or TDD/TTY.

Include resources for those who cannot attend: worship bulletins and captioned video if you are streaming the service or making DVDs. In addition to podcasts, provide transcripts of sermons. Consider posting newsletters, devotions,

announcements, prayer ministry contacts, and other ways of ministering to people who cannot attend. Keep in mind that people who cannot attend may wish to participate in ministries such as prayer or writing devotions.

Make your church website accessible.

An accessible website will make potential visitors more likely to consider you. Some people do not have the latest computers with all the bells and whistles. Others may have limited dexterity or other conditions that make it difficult to use a mouse or keyboard. Some of your online visitors with visual disabilities use screen readers, which read the text of the site; others use magnifiers or large fonts, and may not see illustrations. Minimal access features to include are:

- Images tagged with a text description (use [alt text](#) to tag images).
- Low-vision readability (this includes color choices, contrast and font size).
- Keyboard access to menus.
- Links that are clearly referenced and easy to distinguish
- Captioning if you use videos (Read [Software for Creating Captions](#)).

Other features to consider can be found at the UM Committee on Disability Ministries [accessibility page](#). You can evaluate your site's accessibility with [WAVE](#) (Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool).

Make your building accessible.

Access is more than getting into the building. At the very least, consider your restrooms. "If we can't go, we won't show" is a disability culture aphorism referring to this often-overlooked aspect. It is not just about door width and grab bars. Restroom entrances often have sharp, short turns that are difficult to navigate.

Other considerations: can a person with a mobility impairment navigate your building independently? Do your power doors work? Are they turned on? Are doors to and from ramps unlocked? Can people sit where they wish and have friends nearby? For program participation, note if wheelchair users can use the choir rehearsal space or get into the choir loft. Can liturgists, lay speakers or pastors get into the chancel using a wheelchair?

For those who need assistive listening devices, do you have loaner headsets or neck loops? Do you have an area where ASL users will have a clear view of the interpreter? The United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Ministries offers a downloadable guide, [Breaking the Sound Barrier in Your Church](#), with more information about accessibility for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Standards for accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act are available from the [United States Access Board](#). You can learn much about the accessibility of your church and its website from an annual accessibility audit. The United Methodist Committee on Disability Ministries offers [several audits](#) that are geared to church needs and fulfill Disciplinary requirements.

It is equally important that greeters communicate your acceptance of people with disabilities with a welcoming attitude. Training must be available for clergy, ushers and members willing to help. Teachers should know how to work with children or adults with disabilities.

Environmental allergies are an emerging concern. Some churches ask attendees to limit or not use fragrances. Many take steps to control allergens in food, altar candles, cleaning supplies, construction adhesives and more.

Use technology to aid worship.

People with disabilities often are enthusiastic users of technology, and several apps are available to assist people with various needs. One church sets up and posts a QR code that links to each Sunday's bulletin. Worshippers can scan the code to access worship materials on a smartphone or tablet, allowing use of a screen reader to help them follow the service.

If you use a projector, are the projected materials available in a handout or read aloud, for those who cannot see the screen? Are video clips captioned? To learn more, check out these [assistive technology links](#) from the United Methodist Committee on Disability Ministries.

How do you make sure it all works?

First, involve your members who have disabilities in your planning and assessment. They know the reality of getting around your facilities, as well as using your website. Second, be truthful. It's better to be honest and admit shortcomings than to try to make something sound good. If you can't offer some feature, try to find where it is available — for example, if you don't have ASL interpretation, recommend a church that does.

Both the [United Methodist Committee on Disability Ministries](#) and the [United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Ministries](#) maintain websites with “Resource” sections that are frequently updated, and include materials about the topics mentioned in this article, as well as disciplinary requirements, training workshops, accessibility audits, assistive listening systems, simple ways to enhance accessibility and materials for Disability Awareness Sunday. They also offer newsletters and social media contacts with the latest news.

Related Links

[Best Resources for Mac and Apple Device Users with Disabilities](#)

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