



For Disability Ministry

Presented by



Making Your Church Accessible

Principles of Physical Accessibility

The Heart 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 environment 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. Accessible churches...

Provide access without limiting options. Designated wheelchair seating existing in only one part of the sanctuary may 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 symbols. 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 (such as many people with autism) 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. Because people with different kinds of disabilities may experience things differently, 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.

Implementing Changes Accessibility doesn't happen overnight. How do we plan to become increasingly accessible?

Long-term changes. Some changes require budgeting and planning. 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. For help planning accessible architectural changes, please contact churchengagement@joniandfriends.org.

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 with minimal expense.

Immediate changes. Some changes can happen immediately. If a Bible study meets on an inaccessible second floor, simply changing the meeting location makes it accessible. 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.

Accessibility Beyond the Church Campus Apply these same principles to all church activities, such as in-home small groups. Consider how people with disabilities can determine beforehand whether or not they can participate in a ministry event, activity, or meeting happening outside of the church building.