

Being the Body of Christ for One Another

Social Access

Although we talk about "going to church", and brick-and-mortar buildings provide sacred space for our ministries, ultimately, we affirm, "The Church is not a building...the Church is a people," (R. Avery and D. Marsh, "We Are the Church" © 1972 Hope Publishing Company). Embracing the image of the Church as the Body of Christ helps us to prioritize the relationships and social interactions we foster as the people of God.

Therefore, just as we work to improve physical access to our facilities, so we should also intentionally work to improve social access to our communities of faith. A [congregational audit](#) addresses not only physical barriers, but social barriers, too. Consider using an audit to help you identify areas for change.

Important tools in providing social access are offering social supports and opening up leadership opportunities.

Social Supports

A key source of social support in a faith community is peer support. Whenever persons participate in any of your ministry areas, be sure they are greeted by peers ready to help provide both social and physical access to your community. Equip leaders of all ages to be comfortable and to have an eye for accommodating around disability. Make sure that they are aware of the accommodations and supports that your faith community has available, and that they know how to ask for help. This could be anything from where the elevator is located to where to find a wheelchair, a booster seat, sensory bag, or a person trained as a *peer buddy* (see below). Peer support ministry offers tremendous benefits for those in the peer relationship and is an effective tool in inclusive ministry.

Children and Youth

Peer Buddies

Peer buddies can supply helpful and rich support for young people, offering a chance for both useful supports and real friendship. Initiating a peer buddies relationship requires the buy-in of both young people involved. It is therefore most effective at the middle and high school level, although older youth supporting younger children is also fruitful. Learn more at [Circle of Friends](#), [Reverse Inclusion](#), and [Peer Buddies](#).

Adult Support

Training an adult "shepherd" as an aide in the classroom is a great support for kids in your religious education setting. Often the simplest way to provide accommodations is the presence of a consistent caring adult who can support behavior and engagement. See [Support Others as You Would Wish to Be Supported](#) for guidance on serving as an adult support.

Enhanced Support and Tools

Some faith communities find that they need a bit more support for children with intense behavior needs in their programs.

- You could find that a teacher, a college student studying education, the sibling of a child with disabilities, or an older child with disabilities makes a fantastic support person.
- Be sure to work with volunteers to help them understand the difficult behaviors and how to best support them. It is most important that volunteer leaders/teachers are trained with some basic tips on supporting children and youth with disabilities and learning differences. Be sure that you have a designated go-to person who can be called on to be extra help at the last minute.
- Look for experts in your own congregation who can help to train your volunteers. These can be people with disabilities, parents or siblings of people with a disability, or special education professionals. You may want to reach out to the local schools for help.
- For training, enlist the help of a Special Education Specialist, contact a [Presbyterian Disability Concerns Consultant](#), or see the church resources provided by [All Belong Center for Inclusive Education](#).
- Consider developing ISP's—or Individual Spiritual Plans—similar to the IEP (Individual Education Plan). Formation leaders/teachers, parents, and children sit down together to come up with goals for Christian formation and what kinds of support will help the child be successful and included. You can find more information on the ISP in Erik Carter's [Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities](#).
- Communicate with families. Have informal conversations with families around disability supports. Hold follow-up conversations with families based on the forms that they fill out as part of registration. (See the Guiding with Intentionality Quicksheet for information on designing forms.)

Social Supports in Fellowship and Service

- When planning for a fellowship or service event, enlist a welcome team who will greet and talk to everyone (especially newcomers), facilitate relationships, and provide supports as needed.
- Be intentional about learning names—use nametags—and set aside time for introductions.
- In your programming, consider time for social mixing. Structured socialization is an important support.

Leadership

Inclusive churches work intentionally to engage and provide access to people of all abilities and ages as leaders—recognizing both the value to the individual leader and the importance of modeling inclusion. Here are some general guidelines:

- Support leadership engagement to more people with [partners and teams](#).
- Be sure to provide resources to leaders in accessible formats. For example, the [PCUSA Store](#) has large print versions of the Book of Order and the [Book of Confessions](#) (as well as in).
- Start Small/Start Easy.
- Be open to accommodations the leader suggests.

Find other ideas on leadership development in [Tips to Help You Nurture Your Leaders of All Abilities](#).

Leadership in Christian Formation

Adults

In your small groups or classes, make an effort to include members with disabilities as leaders. Take the time to learn the strengths of all those in the group and encourage people to share out of their strengths. Remember, it's often easier to practice leadership in a safe, small group than, perhaps, in worship or a larger setting.

Children and Youth

Think intentionally about giving every young person some opportunity at leadership on a regular basis. You can even use a check list to help you keep track. Think about the “traditional” roles of reader, candle lighter, and snack helper, but include new roles that fit the strengths and interests of your young people.

Leadership in Worship

Research shows that people identify leadership in worship as one of the primary ways that they feel they find belonging in their faith communities.

- Make accessible materials available to leaders, such as the [Glory To God Hymnal](#) Large Print Edition and the [Book of Common Worship](#) Flash Drive Edition (which allows for enlarged viewing or printing). Print the liturgy or readings out in large print, or send the leader an audio version with which to practice.
- Include children and young people as leaders in worship. Children and youth of all abilities have gifts to share with the congregation. (See Tina Houser's [Let Children Lead Worship](#).)
- All who lead in worship want to feel prepared. When including leaders of all abilities, be sure to talk to them about what they are doing and give them the chance to practice both on their own and in the space.

As the Body of Christ, it is imperative that we extend open arms to people of all abilities as they seek to worship, to learn, to engage in fellowship and service, and to lead. Examining our ministries for the elimination of social barriers, initiating networks of social supports, and opening up leadership opportunities to persons of all abilities will promote the health of all members of the Body.

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