

Creating Sacred Space for All

Physical Access and Physical Accommodations and Supports

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990, and, for many, served as an introduction to understanding the challenges persons with disabilities encounter when society fails to see them or to take their needs into account. Over thirty years later, many communities of faith still have much to learn about creating sacred spaces for all.

Good news! When you start from the assumption that people are welcome, you can often find ways to make it happen. Working together to provide physical access and to develop physical supports and accommodations around ability may teach you habits and practices that open you up to hear God's voice in new and powerful ways. Taking a stance of *inclusion first* may help you reach out to people for expertise, support fuller engagement in your whole congregation, and help you engage new leaders in your ministry setting.

Physical Access

What do your church's facilities say about who is and who is not welcome to your community? What particular barriers exist to participating in worship or education? How do people with disabilities find transportation? How has your community provided for those who cannot join you physically?

Improving Physical Access in All Areas of Your Facility

- When placing furniture, you can use the [ADA guidelines](#) to give access to a wheelchair or walker and a companion. Keep 60 inches of clearance between pieces of furniture to accommodate these mobility aids.
- If you make use of counters for providing materials, consider setting up on tables as well, including low tables.
- According to [ADA Serving Others](#), keep 36-inch seating areas available at tables for accessible seating.
- Remember to think about restroom accessibility. Make sure that all accessible bathrooms are well marked. If you have a bathroom that is not accessible, then be sure to include directions to the nearest accessible bathroom.
- Provide ramps, lifts, and elevators.
 - Be sure that these areas stay clean, clutter-free, and well-lit. Resist the temptation to store things in or near the elevator.
 - Use signage to make elevators and ramps more inviting and easier to find. Consult [Accessible Design Standards](#) and the [ADA Sign Requirements Guide](#).
- Consider doing a [congregational audit](#) to get a clear picture of your facility and its accessibility.

Physical Access in Worship and Christian Formation

- Offer seating options in worship:
 - [Pew cuts](#) are a great way to provide spaces for people who use wheelchairs and walkers to worship together with friends and family. Pew cuts can be created by shortening a pew, making

the pew behind accessible. Make sure you have signage to make wheelchair-accessible seating obvious.

- Substitute chairs with arms for pews in several places. They are easier for some people to get in and out of, and they can be really welcoming. Also consider including a rocking chair—great for nursing moms, people with ASD, ADD/ADHD, and anyone with a sore back.
- Offer seating in a space outside the sanctuary with a screen where it might be easier for someone to hear, or move about, or nurse. (Just don't forget about those seated outside when serving communion, etc.)
- Consider highchairs for infants and toddlers and smaller chairs and tables just for young children.
- Be sure that spaces for children and youth are also accessible and inviting with the same standards.

Transportation

Transportation has been identified as one of the biggest barriers to inclusion and full participation in the life of the church for people with disabilities. Chaplain Sarah McKinney says that access to transportation comes close to sacramental for the people she serves. If people can't get to your ministry setting, how can they participate? Working with your members, deacons, care providers, the community, and service providers, look for ways to overcome this barrier.

- Work with your local interfaith council to [advocate](#) for public transportation on Saturdays and Sundays.
- If you have a church van/bus, consider using it to help people get to Sunday Services and other church events and activities.
- Work with group homes and continuing care communities to provide a shuttle.
- Partner with a local transportation provider for a discounted rate. (Check out the [National Aging and Disability Transportation Center or the National Center for Mobility Management](#).)
- Provide transportation through an informal network of members who drive.
- You may also want to consider partnering with [peer ride providers](#) (Uber, Uber Health, Lyft), or work with your local disability-specific public transportation providers.

Virtual Options

Hybrid and virtual environments are a regular part of our worship, fellowship, and Christian formation in faith communities now.

- It is important that we make sure that these opportunities are functioning well and that we employ tools provided in the platforms used to be as accessible as possible. It is equally important that we do not use virtual or hybrid environments to separate people with disabilities or to limit them to only virtual participation.
- When people are taking advantage of virtual or hybrid options, it's important to check in with them in real time as well as afterwards, to make real connections, and to make sure that there are in-person opportunities of some kind as well. Consider [these specific tips](#) related to accessibility for virtual and hybrid options. Also read [“Is Your Digital Ministry Leaving Out People with Disabilities?”](#)

Physical Accommodations and Supports

In addition to removing barriers to physical access, creating sacred space—allowing for all to join in Christian formation, worship, and fellowship and service—may also involve introducing new equipment, employing new strategies, and creating new processes to provide physical accommodations and supports. Consider this general guidance:

- When determining when and how you should assist others, ask the simple question “How may I help you?” and then listen to the answer while being ready to offer supports. The video [Etiquette: Interacting with People with Disabilities](#) offers suggestions for respectful interactions. Of course, this inquiry goes beyond merely responding to personal needs to thinking about capital improvements, changes in your programs, and how you do ministry.
- Think about accommodations by process, product, and environment.
 - Process is how things are done—does someone need adaptive equipment?
 - Product is what is done—think about dividing or simplifying a task.
 - Environment—this can be the easiest, or hardest thing to change. In addition to changing the room set-up (see "Physical Access" above), think about adjusting lighting, adding sound equipment, etc.

Model Teaching offers this [helpful article](#) on how to target accommodations.

Consider employing these accommodations and supports throughout your ministries:

Auditory Support

In large group settings, use a microphone—no matter how strong your voice is, it doesn’t sync to people’s assistive technology. (For more ideas and information read [What You’re Saying When You Say “I Don’t Need a Mic.”](#))

Visual Support

Provide large print versions and/or recordings of printed materials and consider high contrast colors.

Sensory Strategies

Sensory strategies have come to the forefront in recent years primarily because of their use with people with ASD, but they have applications to so many more people. They are especially supportive for:

- people of all ages with sensory processing disorders, ADD/ADHD, emotional disability, anxiety, depression, or stress
- young children, teens, or older adults
- pastors or educators
- anyone who just needs a relaxing place to take a break.

From fidget spinners to ball chairs, many of the supports that we originally associated with disabilities are being used by everyone to help us regulate, relax, and engage. Here are some ideas for incorporating sensory strategies in your ministry settings:

- Provide a room or space to take a break from worship, education, or fellowship events. For tips on creating a sensory room in your church, check out [DIY Sensory Rooms on a Budget](#), [Cheap Sensory Room Ideas](#), and [Sensory Room for Kids with Autism](#). Remember also to include creative items you might put in a spirituality center, as were included at the [2019 Presbyterian Youth Triennium](#).
- Provide baskets of [fidgets](#) in your worship, education, and fellowship spaces. In these ministry settings additional items can be included, of course, like labyrinths, prayer beads, prayer walls, and other sensory friendly ways to pray and connect with God, as well as coloring pencils, paper, and books. Here are a few resources:
 - [15 Fidget Tools](#)
 - [Prayer Beads](#)
 - [Finger Labyrinths for Meditation](#)
 - [Fidget tools in the classroom](#)
 - [The Dos and Don’ts of Fidgets for Kids.](#)
 - [Sensory Wiggle Seat](#)

Food Accommodations

Eating together has had an important role in many areas of church life. Yet food can be an issue for many people, including people with disabilities who follow special diets to support their well-being or who may not be comfortable eating with a large group. Being intentional and mindful about food as a part of church life can build community and communicate your worshiping community's commitment to inclusion.

- Consider going nut-free in all settings. So many people have allergies, and the reactions are so serious, many churches simply don't have nuts on campus, especially in preschools or other settings with children. For more on food allergies, see [Food Allergy.org](http://FoodAllergy.org).
- Encourage food labeling, especially for potlucks. People may bring a simple tent card with ingredients, or one can be provided to be placed with their dish.
- When serving food, provide some packaged, wrapped, and labeled items.
- Welcome and accommodate people who bring their own food items.

Physical Accommodations and Supports in Christian Formation

Adults

Remember that many disabilities are not immediately visible. Keep in mind that your participants may have learning differences, attention issues, processing issues, and sensory issues. Helpful support strategies are:

- Use mutual invitation to lead your small groups.
- Never put anyone on the spot to read, draw, or write on the board, but provide opportunities to volunteer by planning and asking ahead of time.
- Plan for responses that are multi-sensory and use multiple intelligences.
- Choose multi-media study materials.
- Look for accessible materials for your small groups, Bible study classes, etc., that may have participants with differing disabilities. The PCUSA's [Follow Me curriculum](#) and the [Horizons](#) Bible study materials from Presbyterian Women, for instance, are available in large print. The disability inclusion curriculum [Better Together: Transformed by God's Variety of Gifts](#) is available in [a braille edition](#).
- Include short videos or other visual elements.
- Provide a summary of the readings (and maybe the questions) before a discussion.
- Provide a recording of a reading in addition to the print version.

Children

A special area for concern in working with children is the use of materials and supplies. Many materials that we use in Christian formation present a challenge for some children, whether it is glue, shaving cream, scissors, frosting, or the Bibles we are reading. Take time to think about how you can offer supports.

- Using a resource like the [Support Map](#) from the PCUSA's *Growing in Grace and Gratitude* curriculum can help you make substitutions and accommodations related to supplies.
- Remember to allow for choice and give young people an option when a craft or activity causes sensory defensiveness.
- You can also steer clear of common allergens (especially nuts and fragrant candles/smells) and provide wipes for a quick hand clean up.
- Make your VBS, Sunday School, youth group gatherings, and family fellowship times judgement-free zones with lots of options. See [10 Modifications for Learners with Sensory Issues](#) and [Out of Sync Child](#) for ideas.
- For more tips for supporting the sensory needs of children, see "Sensory Strategies" above and the Resource Roadmap in this toolkit.

Physical Accommodations and Supports in Worship

- If your church relies on overhead projection, consider printing the liturgy as well, and even providing a hard copy of your sermons.
- Many people who do not struggle with hearing loss in other settings struggle in worship spaces, depending on the acoustics. Talk to members about how to sync the sound system with their assistive hearing devices. Work with the sound team to optimize the ministry setting for hearing loss and consider a [hearing loop](#).
- Having [hymnals](#), Bibles, and bulletins available in large print is a helpful accommodation, especially in dimly-lit sanctuaries.
- Convert part of your worship space into a *Pray-Ground*. Two great resources are [What's a Pray-ground?](#) and [Grace Lutheran Church: The Pray-Ground](#).
- See "Sensory Strategies" above regarding the provision of fidgets and other sensory-friendly supplies to support calm and focus during worship. Consider another take on the worship bags often created with younger children in mind—just broaden the contents and who is welcome to use them.
- Consider the intensity and volume of music. Shaking the whole church during "Joy to the World" is fun, but not if it causes a person in your congregation distress. Consider providing sensory-sensitive services where you lessen the volume and intensity of the music or offering specific places in the sanctuary that may be more comfortable. Sensory-friendly performances and experiences are popping up from Broadway to Main Street, and so there is lots of guidance on simple, inclusive changes. Guidelines for sensory-friendly events with quieter music, brighter lighting, and some room to move may be found at [Kennedy Center](#), [American Repertory Theatre](#), and [SensoryFriendly.net](#).
- Many churches were built with crying rooms in them for babies. These spaces may be converted into sensory rooms to offer people places to worship together without the challenges of organ vibrations, hard pews, and shadowy lighting. See "Sensory Strategies" above for resources.
- Allow and encourage the use of iPads or other assistive communication devices.

Physical Accommodations and Supports in Fellowship and Service

Service Projects

- One of the easiest ways to provide accommodations is to provide choices. When you are planning for service projects, be sure to build in choice.
- Communicate the options and specific tasks ahead of time in any promotional materials, as well as the specific setting.
- Incorporate supports in the project. Consider an assigned volunteer for the most difficult or skill-specific task. It's also great to have "experts" on hand to provide support and guidance to participants.
- Divide up tasks into small pieces. For instance, if you are packing meals or kits, consider having one volunteer open the bags and one volunteer seal them. If you are building a deck, have one volunteer operate the saw, someone hold the wood, and someone else bring supplies.

Off-campus and Overnight Activities

Retreats and mission trips build trust and community, but they do represent special challenges around accommodation for disability.

- People who don't usually need accommodations or supports may need them in a multi-day or overnight program.
- Look to partner with organizations that have accommodations or supports in place. Talk to the person in charge of accommodations before you go. Make sure you have a clear idea of walking requirements, physical accessibility, and other physical requirements of the setting, as well as shower set-up, refrigeration access, and sleeping arrangements. Ask about golf carts or other tools to include people with limited mobility.

- During orientation meetings, be sure to talk to your participants in depth about where you will be staying and what is provided and what accommodations they may need. Make sure to describe the set-up and available supports clearly. Articulate the plan for everything from keeping medications secure, to plugging in CPAP machines, to scheduling flexibility for sleep and shower schedules, to spaces for “taking a break.” You don’t have to think of everything, but when you spell out the plan for accommodations, people will be more forthcoming about what supports they will need.
- Take time before the event to train participants on safety, equipment, and basic skills needed for the projects.
- Understand that a person’s access to sleep is essential for their functioning. As trip leaders, be sure to protect times and spaces for sleep during retreats and mission trips. People may need accommodations around their sleep environment in order to participate.
- Think through how to accommodate and include caregivers or support people in your service experience. Many organizations arrange for a fee waiver for support staff (food, housing, participation fee). Consider offering peer buddies—see the Being the Body of Christ for One Another Quicksheet for a description of social supports.
- More discussion of this topic may be found at [Disability Inclusion on Mission Trips](#).

Creating sacred space for all means intentionally providing physical access, as well as physical accommodations and supports, to allow for the inclusion of all abilities across every sphere of ministry. Necessary to this process is a willingness to ask questions and listen to the responses of those who best understand their own needs. Working together, we provide a concrete demonstration of the Kin-dom of God for our world.

Writer: Deborah Huggins, Assoc. Pastor, Central Presbyterian Church, Summit, NJ

Editor: Lori Ruff-Schmalenberger, Dir. of Children’s Min., Tustin Presbyterian Church, Tustin, CA.

Office of Christian Formation: www.pcusa.org/formation

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