

Making Your Church Universally Accessible

Here are some great ways to help make your church and church building more universally accessible. This is not an exhaustive list, but hopefully these resources will help churches make big strides towards it. There is a lot here and it can be overwhelming, so start small.

Here are some great questions to start your journey towards universal accessibility.

Starting Questions:

1. Do we have a group of people who would be interested in exploring ways to be more universally accessible?
2. How many of the accessible items listed below are we doing well as a church and where is there room to grow?
3. Are there individuals or families in our church or community that we could engage in conversation about being inclusive/accessible?
4. Would someone in a wheelchair be able to move around this building on their own? What areas would be difficult?
5. How can we be proactive in planning to be inclusive and engaging so that we are prepared to welcome individuals into our church?
6. What is the current attitude of our congregation towards individuals living with disabilities and how might we help with a cultural transformation? (*see ELIM Christian Services “5 Stages: The Journey of Disability Attitude” resource guide)
7. What resources are available to us that can help us on our journey towards universal accessibility?

Physical Space:

- **Accessible parking spots** – make sure there are several accessible parking spots in your parking lot or near your building that allows for both a side and rear car ramp to be utilized.
- **Accessible sidewalks** – make sure sidewalks are level and clear of obstructions. Clear sidewalks after snowfall, and insure there are several curbless entrance/exit points.
- **Low-slope ramps (outside)** – make sure that all entrances/exits have a low-slope ramp into and out of the building. Oftentimes a ramp will be more expensive than stairs which might deter the installation, but remember, everyone can use a ramp but not everyone can use stairs.
- **Power-assisted doors** – make sure all entrances and exits to the building have a power-assisted option.
- **Elevators/low-slope ramps (indoor)** – all levels of a building should be accessible by either an elevator or ramp. Chair lifts can be another option to move from floor to floor but are less ideal for those dependent on custom wheelchairs or who cannot transfer independently.
- **Widen narrow doorways** – all doorways should be a minimum of 32” wide. Wheelchairs can range from 21”-40” wide depending on the model and needs of the wheelchair, so the wider the better.
- **Accessible bathroom stalls** – all bathrooms need to include at least one stall measuring 59”x60” with a self-closing stall door
- **Adult Changing Stations** – it is important to have at least one bathroom that has an adult size changing station.
- **Wheelchair accessible sinks** – make sure all sinks in restrooms are wheelchair accessible
- **Lighting** – adequate lighting is crucial to help individuals with visual impairment navigate spaces. Having motion sensory lights installed is a great way to insure easy lighting. Having dimmer options in gathering spaces is also a great way to adjust lighting for individuals with sensory needs.

- **Handrails** – handrails are important especially in spaces where people with mobility restrictions might be transferring or moving about. Handrails throughout a building are also helpful for those with visual impairments and should be used throughout all common areas in a building to help individuals navigate the space confidently.
- **Wall colors** – wall color is important for helping individuals with visual impairment see subtle differences in building changes (room changes, obstructions, etc.). Colors can also be utilized to help create calming environments for individuals with sensory needs. Soft greens, blues, pinks, and neutrals are great colors to use to create calming spaces. Reds and Yellows are good to avoid.
- **Accessible flooring and transitions** – All floors should be stable, firm, and slip resistant. In addition, floor color and changes in pattern can be used to help individuals orient themselves to changes in texture, elevation, and potential obstacles. Different types of flooring can signal where one space ends and another begins, or can help individuals identify what area of a building they are in.
It is best to avoid soft carpets and transitions that cause any type of quick elevation change. Hardwood to carpet, as well as doorways with elevated bases can cause obstacles.
- **Sensory recalibration room/space** - Some individuals with intellectual disabilities feel disconnected from their bodies and crave physical sensations to center themselves. See our expanded Sensory Recalibration Room guide for steps to making a simple space to serve this need.
- **Furniture arrangement** – it is important to consider how furniture is arranged in any given space. Make sure furniture is not an obstacle for moving through a space. It is best to have furniture that is movable and can easily be adjusted in any given space. Woods pews are a common barrier as they are difficult for individuals to transfer to, and wheelchair designation spaces oftentimes give a feeling of segregation. It is also best to have a variety of different furniture options that range in levels of firmness/softness in common gathering places.

Communication:

- **Audio/Visual Support** – make sure that items shared in group gatherings are communicated through both audio and visual means. Individuals with hearing or visual impairment often struggle when announcements are solely listed on a presentation screen or solely spoken. Doing both helps everyone.

- **Loop hearing assist system** – any larger gathering area that utilizes microphones to communicate can benefit from having a loop hearing assist system installed. This allows for individuals with hearing impairments that rely on hearing aids or cochlear implants to better hear what is being communicated.
- **Font Size** – All written communications should be, or have an option with print that is at least 14+ size font for all communication. This can lead to more paper used, but remember, more people can read the larger font than the smaller font. Normalizing the use of large font is a helpful practice for all institutions.
- **Projector/Large TV Presentation** – Many churches use large TV's or projectors to communicate a variety of things in worship, keep in mind that some individuals will have a challenge reading what is on the screen or won't be able to at all. Oftentimes this can lead to individuals not receiving what is being communicated.
- **Picture signage** – It is important to use signage with both words and pictures. For individuals with reading challenges, pictures can be helpful. Picture signage is also a great way to support individuals with certain disabilities that respond better to visual cues.
- **Website accessibility** – If you use a website it is important to consider navigation obstacles such as drop down bars, forms, validations, and videos/images without closed captioning. Companies like AccessiBe help take any website and make it more accessible for everyone.
- **ASL (American Sign Language) Availability** – For individuals with auditory impairments, having an interpreter present, especially for large group gatherings, is important. This can be a challenge because our world lacks interpreters, but learning some basic ASL is easier in our world today through different online teachings and technology apps. Oftentimes churches might feel this is unnecessary because no one in their congregation currently needs an interpreter, but keep in mind, the lack of such efforts might be the main reasons someone is NOT coming to your church.
- **How Can We Support You forms** – Create a form (or use You Belongs form) to help individuals/families in your community share with your leadership team needs that they or their family have. Make this form available in your building and on your website. When a form is received, review it with your leadership team, generate ideas of how to meet those needs, and reach out to the individual/family and talk about how you can best support them. The best way we can support others is by beginning with asking them how and listening to their responses.

Program:

- **Program Accessibility Analysis** – Make a list of all the different programs/activities/events that your church currently offers and then go through one by one and determine what accessibility barriers might be present in each of them.
- **Hospitality Team** – One of the best things churches can do to help someone feel comfortable and included in a space is to generate a hospitality team. This team is focused on making sure everyone has what they need and are familiar with the variety of options that are available. It is important that individuals from this team receive training on
- **Leadership Training** – It is important to have your leadership team have some fundamental training in working with individuals living with disabilities. There are a number of online resources that could help provide this. A great place for churches to start is Key Ministry which is a group based in Cleveland, Ohio that focuses on equipping churches to care for people of all abilities.
- **Trained Volunteers** – When your church is hosting an event or activity, it is important to have a handful of individuals whose only job is to make sure individuals have extra support when they need it. These individuals should have some basic training and are comfortable working one-on-one with individuals. This can be incredibly important in a classroom setting with children. Ideally, these individuals will have knowledge gathered from the “How Can We Support You Forms” that will help instruct them in ways to be supportive.
- **Alternative Learning Options** – With all programs, leaders should consider how to make all aspects of the program accessible. Don’t plan a section of program that some individuals would not be able to take part in. Instead, be creative and come up with inclusive activities.