



EQUIPPING FOR... **EVANGELISM & MISSION**

Opening your Doors to People with Diverse Abilities

Written by Dr. Michael Walker, *Our Doors are Open*

God's Invitation to Welcome All

From the beginning, God has protected and honoured creation's diversity and called people with all abilities to further the work of the kingdom. In the Old Testament, God used Moses, who had a speech impediment, to liberate the Israelites from bondage and asked the people of Israel to take care of widows, orphans, and strangers.¹ In sending Jesus, who embraced those on the margins and made them central to the kingdom, God lifted up the most vulnerable to the most high place. Through his ministry, Jesus cared for many people with varied abilities, and he called upon his followers to live out his example by welcoming and loving all people.² In this *Equipping for Evangelism and Mission*, Dr. Michael Walker from *Our Doors are Open* explores ways congregations can welcome people with disabilities into their places of worship.

Opening Our Doors to Access

Our Doors are Open is a project that offers faith communities simple and creative ideas to help increase inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities in worship services, events, and activities.³ At the heart of this project is "inclusive thinking"—a way of seeing the world, and other people, that takes



"The solution to one person's challenges may not work the same way for someone with different abilities. I have spastic cerebral palsy and experience difficulties with mobility, flexibility, and spatial orientation. I don't require assistive devices for hearing, or Braille signage, but the people I go to church with may need those things. Solutions are contextual." — Michael Walker

1. Exodus 4:10-16; Leviticus 25:35; Deuteronomy 26:12.

2. Mark 1:40-45; Luke 6:6-11; John 9; Mark 12:28-31.

3. *Our Doors are Open* is a project of the Ontario College of Art and Design's Inclusive Design Research Centre. <https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca/>

Barriers of Attitude –

Negative or misinformed perceptions of people with disabilities and/or social and cultural assumptions that result in people with disabilities being treated differently than those without disabilities.

Barriers of Communication –

When a person with a disability cannot easily understand or receive information that is available to others.

Structural Barriers –

The design elements of a building that prevent access for people with disabilities.

into account all sorts of abilities. Learning to think inclusively will help congregations live into the fullness of who we are as Christians: one body with many different and diverse parts.

When planning *what* we do as a church to be inclusive, it is important to remember that people with disabilities have unique needs, so there is no “one size fits all” solution. When adapting *how* we do things, we need to be open to changing our behaviours, habits, and buildings, even if it means extra time, energy, and money. We *need* to make these changes because many of us have (or will have) disabilities and most of us have loved ones and neighbours with varied abilities whom we want to be able to engage in all aspects of congregational life. What’s more, we *want* to make these changes because we want to follow Jesus’ example of showing radical hospitality towards *all* people

***Our Doors are Open* Accessibility Checklist**

Our Doors are Open has created an accessibility checklist to help communities of faith identify the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in church life. We recommend that the leadership team (or Session) discuss this checklist and form an inclusion committee to address barriers of attitude, barriers of communication, and structural barriers.

Steps to Becoming an Inclusive and Accessible Congregation

- 1) Form an inclusion committee. Be sure to invite members of your congregation with disabilities to be part of the committee.
- 2) Talk with all members of your congregation, including members with disabilities, about whether they feel welcome in worship, leadership, and other programs. Listen carefully and note the needs they identify that are not yet being addressed.
- 3) Use the *Our Doors Are Open* checklist to identify what your congregation is already doing and what still needs to be done to improve accessibility and inclusion.
- 4) Make a Plan: Gather a list of the items from the checklist that you’ve marked as “not yet” as well as the needs identified by those in your congregation. Select the order that you would like to address them. For each item, determine what resources you will need and how you will get them. Have a short term and long term plan that will allow you to address each item in a manageable timeframe.

Thank you for Opening Your Doors!

- Visit the *Our Doors are Open* website for more detailed resources, guidance and support: <https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca>.
- Each province has their own accessibility standards and guidelines. Be sure to visit the accessibility webpage for your province for more information.
- Also, visit The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s accessibility webpage (<http://presbyterian.ca/accessibility>) as well as our webinar web page to view a webinar, facilitated by Dr. Michael Walker, on accessibility: <http://presbyterian.ca/webinar-wednesday/previous-webinars>.

“Remember, people with disabilities are people too, and God wants us to include them (us!). Treat us with respect. When your congregation offers hospitality to people with disabilities, it is actually offering God’s welcome.”
– Michael Walker

Brief Accessibility Checklist



Our Doors Are Open

Welcoming People with Disabilities in Places of Worship

Barriers of Attitude

- All members, including members with disabilities, have been asked whether they feel welcome in worship, leadership, and other programs.
- Our community is intentional about engaging people with disabilities in all aspects of the community. People with disabilities have the same leadership and volunteer opportunities as people of able body.
- Our community has an accessibility committee and/or disability advocate.
- Ushers, teachers/leaders, and youth leaders/mentors have been instructed regarding appropriate ways to greet and respond to the needs of people with disabilities (for instance, we ask them to place laminated cards with our community's accessibility features on pews or chairs).
- Worship and other functions respect various sensitivities (e.g., bright light, loud noise, strong scent, etc.).
- Accessible transportation (e.g., carpool or shuttle) is offered for people with disabilities who cannot drive; subsidies and funds for transit are available.
- Our community has adopted a Policy on Disabilities and/or an accessibility policy.
- Our community leaders work with people with disabilities (and caregivers) so that needs are addressed. For instance, some members of our congregation are fluent in ASL; many can speak, write, and/or gesture plainly, should an ASL interpreter not be present.
- A list of the accessibility features is available at visible and accessible locations.

Barriers of Communication

- Our community has assistive listening devices (infrared, hearing loop, FM) available for people with hearing impairments.
- Sign-language interpretation is provided when prior arrangements have been made. Simple written language or sketches, and gestures can be used in case of absence of ASL interpreters.
- Overall lighting is adequate for signing and speech reading, or for individuals with low vision.

Barriers of Communication (Cont'd)

- Printed materials are available in alternative formats such as large print, audio, ASL/signed video, and digital (also Braille and Videos with sign language, when requested in advance, such as an audio copy of the Qur'an); offering people computers or pen and paper is another alternative format.
- Information about them is prominently displayed and readily accessible.
- Copies of spoken elements of worship are available for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing and large-print captioning is used with visual projection.
- Be sure to ask which format is best for people to understand and use printed and spoken elements of worship and all programs.
- Plain language is used when possible, to ensure written information understood by everyone (Grade 6 or 8 reading level ideal)

Architectural or Structural Barriers

- Accessible parking is provided.
- High contrast signage can be easily seen by the entrance.
- Entrances and hallways are free from barriers that can impede a wheelchair (door bases, grates, thick mats), and floors have colour contrast.
- Door handles are lever style on all inside doors.
- A ramp is available for access into the building.
- Doors to rooms, especially washrooms, are at least 36 inches (0.91 meters) in width.
- Proper handrails are installed in all toilet areas for assisting in transfer and standing.
- At least one toilet stall has a raised seat and space next to the toilet for side transfer, and has room to turn around a large, power wheelchair.
- Coat racks can be accessed by all people.
- All levels of the building are accessible from the inside.
- People who use wheelchairs have choices in where to sit in any rooms.
- Emergencies are communicated in accessible manner (e.g., visual flashing alarm for fire alarm, gesture/tap on shoulders for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing).
- Furniture can be easily moved around for an accessible configuration.
- Instructions on how to arrange the room to be accessible are located at a visible location in the room (e.g., picture of accessible layout).