



EQUIPPING FOR... **WORSHIP**

People with All Abilities Participating in Worship

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ” — Romans 12:5a

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How can we go beyond accessibility to full participation in our worship communities for people with a whole range of abilities? Let's begin with a story from an elder of our church.

“Regularly I worship in congregations other than my own. Most often because I accompany my 91 year-old mother-in-law who uses a walker and is visually impaired; sometimes because I want to worship with a friend whose neurological condition has made it necessary for her to use a motorized wheelchair, and we look for an accessible church service, in a convenient location for both of us.

One Sunday I was in such a situation and it was the children's story time. The children gathered to sit on the front pew of the sanctuary. The CE worker welcomed them standing with the microphone to hand to the storyteller who was coming forward from a pew somewhere behind me. I watched as an elderly man came to stand beside her, with plastic tubes connecting him to the oxygen tank in the basket of his walker. Holding the mike in one hand, with the other he picked up his notes and then some pictures from his walker bench as he told the story. It was clear he and the children and the congregation knew one another. He had done this before.

The scene struck me as all too rare and

unusual. Our churches make great efforts to be 'accessible' – meaning that people with disabilities can get into the sanctuary. Because of this I can worship with my mother-in-law or my friend. But how frequently do people with disabilities participate and lead in worship, or in other aspects of congregational life?”

Read Romans 12:3-8.

Pray: Creator God, we have gifts that differ; you made us so. Help us find and celebrate each other's gifts, fitting them together like a puzzle, completing each other, making ourselves whole, one body in Christ. Amen.

Sing or read “Help us accept each other” #632 in the Book of Praise.

View “Talk” by the UK Disability Commission <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3AeIFup1qY>.

Reflect on the quality of uniqueness. Each person has strengths and weaknesses, varying gifts and varying abilities. Some are visible, some not. Some qualities are disabilities only in particular situations; they then become considerations when choosing where to live or apply for work, or what restaurant for a special dinner...or where to worship. Read “Who are people with disabilities?” Consider who in your community might choose *not* to worship in your church because there would be a barrier to full inclusion.

Who are people with disabilities?

Here are some facts from the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability by Statistics Canada.

- An estimated 3.8 million adult Canadians reported being limited in their daily activities due to a disability.
- Over 11% of Canadian adults experienced one of the three most prevalent disability types: pain, mobility or flexibility.
- The next most commonly reported disabilities were mental/psychological, 3.9%; dexterity, 3.5%; hearing, 3.2%; seeing, 2.7%; followed by memory and learning disabilities, 2.3% each.
- The prevalence of disability increases steadily with age: Among the 2.3 million working-age Canadians (15 to 64), those reporting a disability was 4.4% for people aged 15 to 24, 6.5% for those 25 to 44 and 16.1% for those 45 to 64. This proportion reaches 26.3% for those aged 65 to 74, and 42.5% among those 75 and older.
- 8 out of 10 (81.3%) of persons with disabilities reported using some kind of aid or assistive device, for example equipment that facilitates movement (e.g. wheelchairs, hand and arm supports) or helps them hear, see or learn (e.g. hearing aids, magnifiers or specialized computers).

Diversity or inclusion?

Sue Montgomery is a Presbyterian minister and a consultant with Presbyterians for Disability Concerns.¹ In an article in the January/February 2016 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, Sue retells her experience at a retreat where she led a workshop for people living with disabilities. In Sue's workshop they discussed the many gifts that people with disabilities have and how their gifts could benefit the church. "We talk about persons who live with disabilities who are attending seminaries and serving as elders, teachers, counselors, and leaders in the church." Despite the discouragement and skepticism of the retreat planning committee, Sue invited the workshop participants to assist in leading the retreat's closing

"Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."

(Anonymous)

worship. They were delighted and rejoiced at being asked and affirmed. Together they prepared the scripture readings, the prayers, the plan for serving Communion. After the service Sue wrote,

"Everyone who spoke that day was heard and understood. No one dropped the Communion elements (and it would have been OK if they had). The service was led entirely by the community of the faithful. It was one of those moments when everyone in the room knew God was speaking. It was time to put away all the old stereotypes about people living with disabilities... It was time to recognize that God embraces, affirms, and needs the gifts of all people, created in the image of God" (pp. 11-12).

The Question:

"Are all people able to worship with us?"

Here are some tips so that you might be able to answer: "We are trying to make it so!"

Begin with hospitality: What would a newcomer to your congregation experience? A newcomer to Christianity? Review and renew your congregation's commitment to practicing hospitality.

Review the access for everyone: Does everyone have access to see, hear and participate throughout worship? Does everyone feel included in Communion (e.g. food allergies, hygiene)? How could communication be improved (e.g. signing, Braille, large print, lighting, symbols/graphics, overhead projection). Read "An inclusive or isolating Communion?" on page 4.

Assess your worship space first: What could be done to your space so more people would feel included? "This may mean moving pews around so that people in wheelchairs do not always sit in the back, front, or aisles of a sanctuary; placing a ramp up to the platform where a pulpit is situated for the pastor, priest, or lector with a disability; slowing down some congregational prayers and responses so that those who are unable to speak quickly may participate, such as The Lord's Prayer"

¹ For more information about Presbyterians for Disability Concerns and resources go to <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/presbyterians-disability-concerns/>

(*How accessible is your church? Leader's Guide*, 2008, The Thoughtful Christian, p. 3). Complete an assessment or use the Checklist below.

Sensitize yourself to the language used: In speaking it often sounds like it's "people with disabilities" versus "us". The "us" usually does include people living

with disabilities – parents with children with disabilities, spouses whose partners have dementia or memory loss, children who have a parent with a chronic medical condition, siblings of children with a physical or development disability. "If one member of the family is living with a disability, the whole family is affected. And if

Checklist: How inclusive is our church worship?

- Congregation and leaders have made a commitment to be intentional in our welcome and inclusion of people with disabilities.
- People with disabilities are consulted as to what will be best for their situation rather than assumptions made on their behalf.
- Greeters are trained about appropriate ways to interact with, and anticipate the needs of, individuals with a variety of disabilities.
- Preaching and teaching is positive in the portrayal of persons with disabilities; about their contributions, not just their needs; admitting an inability to understand scriptures' healing miracles and the reality that not all God's children have their illnesses and disabilities removed.²
- We observe at least one Disability Inclusion Sunday a year (e.g. the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities is December 3.)
- Leadership is sensitive to adapting the administration of the sacraments to persons with various disabilities.
- We use unscented candles and have gluten-free bread and juice available for Communion.
- We periodically remind our congregation about allergies, encouraging them to refrain from wearing perfume, after-shave lotions and scented deodorants or have designated a "scent-free" area for the 15% of the population who has some type of chemical sensitivity.
- There is a good quality sound system to amplify voices of speakers during the worship service.
- There are listening devices available.
- We provide adequate lighting – on the speaker's face for lip readers and for reading in the pews.
- We provide, or will provide on request, the following in alternative formats (large print, Braille, audio-taped, electronic, etc.): bulletins, hymnals, Bibles, sermons.
- We hire, or will hire on request, someone to sign worship services.
- We encourage people with disabilities to share their gifts and skills, e.g. serve as members of the worship committee, to be greeters, to be choir members, to be lay readers and worship leaders.
- We don't expect family members to take the lead in ministering to their family member with a disability.
- We review our emergency procedures to ensure we can meet the needs of persons with disabilities.
- We attempt to discover where persons with disabilities live and extend an invitation to worship.
- We communicate willingness to assist persons with disabilities with transportation needs to church.
- Our leadership is committed to assisting persons with disabilities in their faith formation.

² *Resolution on Disabilities: A Celebration of That All May Enter*, PC (USA) 2002 pp. 11-13 at https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/_resolutions/resolution-on-disabilities.pdf

An inclusive or isolating Communion?

“Communion is often one of the most isolating experiences in worship for people who live with disabilities. Communion needs to be served in a way that is the same for everyone, to be inclusive. Communion bread can all be gluten-free; it needn’t be something that makes anyone identified as different. Communion needs to be received by everyone the same way. Communion shouldn’t be something that is requested to be served individually after everyone else is served or in a way that is different from the others in the community, in any way.” From *The Seasons of Life in the Family of Faith: Resources for worship and Inclusion*, Presbyterians for Disability Concerns, 2014.

one member of a church lives with a disability, the entire congregation is affected” (*How accessible is your church? Study Participant Handout*, 2008, The Thoughtful Christian, p. 3). Try to change the “us vs. them” to “we”.

Include the voice of a person with disability: Ask people with disabilities to help you assess your worship space. In the disability rights community, a favourite slogan is “Nothing about us without us.” In other words, don’t make changes in your church without including the voice or perspective of a person with a disability.

Covenant with one another to be an inclusive community: Read responsively the “Covenant for Inclusivity” or prepare your own so that your community of faith commits to one another, and to God, to strive to be the body of Christ for all whose lives are touched by your church. Renew this commitment regularly.

Covenant for Inclusivity

Loving God, you created humankind in your image; when you looked at everything you had made,
you saw that all of it was very good.

As part of that creation, we strive to nurture your gifts and goodness in everyone,
to welcome into community each person as an image of you,
as a part of your whole, a part that will complete us.
Awaken in us the focus, tenacity, and creativity to
become an inclusive community –
your community, reflecting all the diversity that is you,
our God and Creator. Amen.

Resources

From book stores

- Carter, Erik W. (2007). *Including People with Disabilities in Faith communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*, Brookes Publishing.
- Mulder, Karen and Jurries, Ginger (2002). *The Compassionate Congregation: A Handbook for People Who Care*, Faith Alive Christian Resources.
- Nouwen, Henri (2012). *Adam, God’s Beloved*, Orbis Books.
- Reynolds, Thomas (2008), *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Baker Publishing Group.
- Webb-Mitchell, Brett (2004), *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church*, The Crossroad Publishing Co.

From the Internet

- How Accessible is Your Church?* A one-session study with a leader’s guide and participant’s workbook. Can be bought and downloaded at www.thethoughtfulchristian.com
- Disability is Natural* www.disabilityisnatural.com
- Inclusion Handbook: Everybody belongs, everybody serves* by Terry A. DeYoung and Mark Stephenson (editors), Reformed Church Press, 2011. Free download at <http://images.rca.org/docs/discipleship/InclusionHandbook.pdf>
- Disability Resource Manual: A Practical guide for churches and church leaders* by Ashley Peterson, Evangelical Covenant Church, 2010. Free download at <http://www.covchurch.org/justice/disability/tools/>
- All God’s Children Have Gifts: Disability and Worship* by Joan Huyser-Honig, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2006. Available online at <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/all-god-s-children-have-gifts-disability-and-worship/>

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from YOU!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of worship that includes people of all abilities. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 Ext. 271. Find us on Facebook at [facebook.com/pconnect](https://www.facebook.com/pconnect).