



DISABILITY COMMISSION

DIOCESE OF SYRACUSE

Fifty-Seven Ways to Make your Parish More Accessible for Little or No Cost

Access

1. Consider replacing fixed pews with moveable pews or chairs so that people with disabilities may be seated with the community and participate fully.
2. Create “pew cuts” by shortening the ends of several pews so that users of wheelchairs can sit within the main body of the congregation, not in a designated section, and not in the aisles. Pew cuts also are helpful for people who are deaf-blind because they need to touch their sign language interpreter’s hands. Pew cuts enable persons who are deaf-blind to sit in chairs facing the rear of the church, while the tactile interpreter sits in the pew facing the worship leader.
3. If there are steps into your chancel or sanctuary, consider having a communion station on the floor of the nave. This will permit young children, those who are frail or elderly, and person with disabilities to receive the Sacrament in the same way the rest of the congregation receives.
4. Think about converting two side by side bathrooms into one accessible unisex bathroom. Allow room enough for wheelchairs to turn around. Leave transfer space on both sides of the toilet. Make sure the toilet paper dispenser is close enough for easy reach by the person using the toilet. Make sure that sinks and light switches can be easily accessed by a wheelchair user, and do not forget to lower towel and soap dispensers so that they can be easily reached. Provide a paper cup dispenser near your water fountain. This will transform an inaccessible fountain into one easily accessible to wheelchair users.
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6. Enlist the expertise of your parishioners who are carpenters, plumbers, contractors, teachers, social workers, nurses, etc. to accomplish simple accessibility and disability awareness tasks. For example, if you are creating an accessible bathroom, raising the height of the toilet, moving the toilet paper roll closer to the toilet, etc. are easily accomplished by parishioners who are handy.

7. If any wheelchair users volunteer in your office, consider raising the height of desks and tables to 34 inches so that their wheelchair can fit under these surfaces.
8. Install long-handled door hardware which is easier for everyone to use, especially those who have limited hand function.
9. Apply brightly colored, textured strips at the top of all stairs. These strips alert people with limited vision that they are approaching stairs. People who are carrying things which block their vision will also appreciate this notice
10. In places where winter weather brings snow and ice, remove the snow and ice promptly from all sidewalks and parking-lots. During the fall months, make sure that slippery leaves are also removed.
11. Survey present church lighting to ensure that the wattage is high enough and that the placement of light fixtures ensures maximum visibility.
12. Visit accessible churches in your area, noting especially the non-architectural ways these churches demonstrate their accessibility and inclusion.
13. Set aside a separate bulletin board to display material concerning your own accessibility projects. Be sure the height of the bulletin board is friendly to persons who use wheelchairs. Also ensure that the background is not too distracting for those with low vision.
14. Set aside accessible parking spaces in your parking lot or in front of your church for people with disabilities. Mark these spaces with an appropriate sign.

Education

15. Offer a Christian Education day in which participants explore what life as a person with a disability is like. Ask your parishioners who have disabilities to share their experiences. Explore ways in which life as a person with a disability can be improved and how your parishioners with disabilities can feel more included in the life of the congregation.
16. Invite outside speakers to the parish to talk about issues and needs of persons with disabilities.
17. Show one or more of the excellent video recordings which are available about disability concerns. Prepare questions for discussion following the viewing. If interest is expressed, make plans to address the issues which still separate people with disabilities from the larger community of the church and society.
8. Plan an adult education segment to discuss the non-architectural barriers to inclusion, such as lighting, attitudinal and communication barriers.

19. Make yourselves knowledgeable about the needs of persons with less readily apparent disabilities, such as diabetes, epilepsy, high blood pressure, mental illness, etc. In an adult education session, share this knowledge about these disabilities. In an aging church, more joint replacements are causing more people to need accessible parking, ease of entry, etc.
20. In your parish library, set aside a shelf or two with disability resources related to accessibility, disability awareness, inclusion, etc. Label these shelves with an easy-to-read sign saying “Mini-Library on Inclusion.”
21. Look for educational opportunities about disability concerns in your community. Gather several interested parishioners and parish leaders to attend programs. Publicize these events in your bulletins and newsletters.
22. In an educational program or in a sermon, explore the differences between “healing” (wholeness) and “cure”. All people can receive God’s healing grace. Not all of us will be cured.
23. Because two-thirds of working-age people with disabilities are unemployed (even though they are able to work and want to do so) and because many members of your congregation are employers make sure they are knowledgeable about the issues around employment of people with disabilities both from the point of view of the employer and the point of view of those who have disabilities.
24. Educate your congregation about environmental illnesses. Survey your cleaning supplies being mindful of those with environmental sensitivities. Encourage everyone to curtail the wearing of perfumes and aftershave as well. For some, the use of incense will be a problem. At the very least, when incense is to be used, notify the congregation beforehand.
25. Offer some form of faith formation opportunity to students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. With supports, most students can succeed in inclusion programs with non-disabled peers. When inclusion isn’t possible, find age appropriate material suitable to the child’s abilities, or make use of one of the excellent interfaith special religious education curricula available.
26. Partner with neighboring parishes to provide disability programming for the community.
27. Understand, accept and celebrate your own limitations. All of us are who we are because of, rather than in spite of, our limitations. Encourage people with disabilities to teach us the lessons of imperfection and limitation.

Inclusion

28. Involve people with disabilities in the planning of all architectural modifications.

29. Hold all community activities in areas accessible to everyone. Don't forget about accessible signage.
30. Organize a beep baseball game, inviting one of the organized teams of blind people to play a team of your own blindfolded parishioners.
31. Many activities such as skiing, roller skating and camping can be enjoyed by people with disabilities, especially when they are partnered with someone who is temporarily able-bodied. Encourage your parishioners to look for the fun and fulfillment in these activities.
32. Encourage families with children who have a disability to bring their children to church. Encourage the members of the congregation to be welcoming, even if a child is not always quiet during the service. Welcome children with disabilities to participate in the celebration of the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation.
33. Accept the God-given gifts that people with disabilities bring to the community.
34. Establish a peer mentoring program between your able-bodied young people and young people who have a disability.
35. Explore ways of including people with disabilities in education and ministry as well as worship in your parish.
36. Consult local group homes and nursing homes to ascertain whether your congregation might invite their residents to become members of the parish.

Service

37. After every service, take the altar flowers and service leaflets to those who are shut-in or hospitalized.
38. Provide transportation to church for those who are elderly or without transportation.
38. Maintain regular communication with those who are unable to attend services or other parish events. This allows these people to continue to feel a part of the community, and it allows the community to monitor those persons' "wellbeing."
40. Include the children of the parish in visits to nursing homes. Most elders enjoy short visits from youngsters.
41. Discover sources of large print or taped books, magazines and Bibles. Share this information with older an parishioner whose vision is failing and may not yet be acquainted with these resources.

42. Develop support groups for persons with disabilities such as stroke, diabetes, epilepsy, mental illness, etc., and for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and caretakers of persons with Alzheimer's.
43. Encourage one to one relationships between persons who are elderly and youth and young couples.
44. Encourage parishioners to designate memorial gifts for accessibility projects.
45. Consult local group homes and nursing homes to ascertain whether your congregation might invite their residents to become members of your congregation.
46. Share your facilities with organizations which serve people with disabilities.
47. Consider getting involved in congregate dining, meals on wheels, or your own feeding program for those who are in need. Join other parishes in the area in this effort.
48. Explore ways of working with other congregations and faith communities on projects related to disability access and ministry
49. Suggest that your parishioners volunteer their time at a daycare center, rehabilitation facility or hospital as a way of coming to know persons with disabilities better.
50. Survey your neighborhood to ascertain whether there are unmet needs among those who are elderly, home-bound or have a disability.

Hearing and Vision

51. Use your copier to produce large-print copies of the prayer book or other materials used in worship. (Large print is 18 point and should be produced on paper which is white or off-white and produces good contrast with the type. Use Arial, Tahoma, or other sans serif. Where appropriate, obtain the permission of the publisher duplicate.
52. Suggest that your parishioners who have difficulty hearing sit toward the front of the nave so that they can easily see the preacher and lectors. Ask the preacher and lectors to speak clearly and slowly, looking frequently at the congregation. Make copies of the sermon available before the service as well as copies of the lessons to be read. People who are hard of hearing will find these materials especially helpful.
53. Survey your sound system to ensure that it meets the needs of those who will depend on it. Let people have difficulty hearing test it for you and tell what adjustments are needed.
54. If you have persons in your congregation who are blind or have low vision, install signage in Braille or raised letters. Acquaint yourself with the ADA requirements of size and placement.

55. If you have persons in your congregation who are deaf or have profound hearing loss, install a fire alarm which is light cued. Before installing this kind of alarm, however, make sure that there are no persons with epilepsy in the congregation since this light alarm may trigger seizures for them.

Advocacy

56. Convene a team of parishioners who are willing to call your legislators on behalf of legislation about transportation and housing. Join with other churches in your community on this project.

57. Let your diocese and your council of churches know about your concern that people with disabilities must be welcomed into the ministry of the church.

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Adapted