

# How Can Our Worship Services Be More Welcoming of People with Disabilities?

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In I Corinthians 12 Paul writes:

*"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:12-13, NRSV).*

Paul recognizes both the diversity and unity of the body of Christ. This recognition presents a challenge to the contemporary church as it seeks to be in ministry with and on behalf of people with disabilities. What are the implications of our bodily diversity in worship? How can we worship together in ways that honor the differing abilities of the body of Christ?

Below are some guidelines to consider in developing worship that is attentive to the participation of people with disabilities. It is certainly not intended to be an exhaustive survey, but rather a helpful starting point for local congregations committed to facilitating the worship of all members of the body of Christ.

## **Invite people with disabilities to participate as liturgists, preachers, ushers, acolytes, and Communion servers.**

Many people with disabilities are willing and able to participate in leading worship in a variety of ways. Using a wheelchair does not prevent a person from reading Scripture or serving Communion. Blindness does not prevent a person from singing or reading Scripture. Don't focus on disability to the exclusion of ability.

## **Develop an awareness of metaphoric language in preaching, liturgy, and hymns.**

While metaphor is a powerful form of expression, it is frequently used in ways that convey a negative attitude about disability. It is never good to be "blind to God's presence" or "deaf to God's voice." But for people who are blind or deaf, such phrases reflect a rejection of their physical way of being in the world. Alter the language or skip stanzas that make pejorative statements about disability. Avoid using the physical realities of blindness, deafness — or any other form of disability — to illustrate our spiritual condition.

## **Use multiple cues in worship services.**

Encourage the use of multiple cues in worship. Combine simple printed directions in the bulletin with oral and physical cues that facilitate the participation of all people in worship. For example, when the congregation should stand, a simple indication in the bulletin combined with the verbal cue, "Please rise as you are able" and the physical cue of raising one's arms effectively provides multiple cues to the congregation.

## **Develop an awareness of the forms and amount of physical movement involved in worship.**

Consider the amount of time that is spent standing, kneeling, and sitting in worship. The flow among these movements may seem appropriate, but for some people — whether temporarily able-bodied or disabled — too much time may be being spent in one of these postures. Solicit and be receptive to feedback. Help create worship services and space that welcome diverse forms of physical participation. Communicate clearly, both in attitude and in print, that anyone may choose not to participate in any action on the basis of comfort or conscience.





### **Establish a system of worship assistants.**

Some people with disabilities may desire assistance during different acts of worship. For example, some people may wish to come forward to receive the Eucharist, but may require some physical assistance to do so. Express openness to receiving requests for assistance, and work with people with disabilities to find creative solutions.

### **Reflect on the sacramental practices of your faith community.**

This is an area of worship where many people with disabilities feel excluded and marginalized. Some know the pain of being told not to come forward to receive the Eucharist, while others have been prevented from more active participation due to a variety of architectural and attitudinal barriers. Ask people with disabilities how they want to participate in the sacramental celebrations of the church. Don't presume to know or make decisions on their behalf.

### **Consider how you preach about disability.**

Reflect on your scriptural interpretation of passages related to disability. Biblical passages related to disability are frequently interpreted in destructive ways that equate disability with sin, a lack of faith, or God's judgment. Consider how your scriptural interpretation may be received by a person with a disability. Ask yourself whether your interpretation reflects the gospel embodied and proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

### **Participate in Disability Awareness Sundays.**

Special services emphasizing issues related to disability can be effective ways to educate congregations and help form more inclusive faith communities, but be attentive to the planning of the service. Seek consultation from people with disabilities and invite them to participate. Learn about and openly acknowledge the ways the church has failed to be inclusive of people with disabilities. Commit to working with people with disabilities to identify and create faith communities that embody inclusion and justice for all people.

### **Speak loudly and clearly.**

This is an easily overlooked, yet crucial aspect of making worship more accessible for a variety of people. Realize that a microphone does not clarify, but only projects garbled speech. Learn how to speak clearly and project your voice appropriately. Teach and encourage other worship leaders to be aware of this. If you preach from a manuscript, consider making copies available before the service begins. If you are aware of a person with a hearing disability, check with him or her to determine whether he or she is able to hear and understand you. Consider purchasing assisted hearing devices. If you have a sign language interpreter, be sure there is appropriate reserved seating for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

### **Provide bulletins and worship resources with enlarged type.**

This is a simple way to facilitate the participation of some people with visual disabilities in worship. Purchase some large print hymnals, and make it known to the community that the hymnals are available for use. Print bulletins using a larger font, or enlarge the bulletin and other worship resources on a copier.

[http://www.gbod.org/worship/worship/articles.asp?act=reader&item\\_id=1820&loc\\_id=9,10,37](http://www.gbod.org/worship/worship/articles.asp?act=reader&item_id=1820&loc_id=9,10,37)