

# Supporting Disabilities in Church

*An occupational therapy student's perspective*

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This occupational therapy doctoral capstone project was created in collaboration with the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities in commitment to advancing the belonging of individuals with disabilities and their families in the life of the local church.

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**“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”**

**1 Corinthians 12:24–27**

## **What are we called to?**

Paul reminds us that the body of Christ is composed of many members, each with unique roles, yet perfectly arranged by God. As the body of Christ, we are called to honor and support each member, including those with disabilities. With thoughtful changes, some even quite small, churches can grow in their reflection of God’s love and ensure that all members may more fully participate in worship and fellowship.



## **What is accessible worship?**

Accessible worship means so much more than just ensuring that individuals can physically enter church. It means creating services and programs that include all people, regardless of their abilities. It involves considerations for differing physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, and social abilities. Accessible worship reflects the principles of *universal design*-- a concept that promotes creating environments and experiences that can be beneficial and usable to all people without adaptation or specialized design.

# Accessible Architecture

## Why is this important?

According to the CDC, **12.2% of U.S. adults have a significant mobility difficulty**. Mobility disabilities can result from a spectrum of conditions such as arthritis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, strokes, or trauma.

## Did you know?

Under the First Amendment, **religious organizations are exempt from ADA accessibility regulations**. However, following these guidelines helps create a more inclusive environment for all members.

## What can we do?



### Parking Lot & Entrances

- Provide adequate handicap parking near the building
- Install automatic doors and ensure entrances are step-free
- Verify that doorways are wide enough for wheelchairs
- Ensure ramps have a safe, gradual incline
- Install elevators for access to all floors



### Restrooms

- Offer accessible restrooms on each floor
- Install grab bars in the stalls
- Ensure stalls are wide enough for wheelchair navigation
- Install sink counters no higher than 34" from the floor
- Place soap dispensers no higher than 44" from the floor



### Worship Center

- Ensure clear paths and wheelchair-accessible seating throughout
- Provide accessible communion stations
- Make the stage and sound booth stair-free, or include ramps
- Ensure that baptism is accessible to varying degrees of physical mobility

# Sensory Processing

## What is sensory processing?

Our brains take in information from our senses-- sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and movement-- to produce appropriate responses. Everyone has different preferences for sensory input. It is a characteristic of who we are. Some people need more sensory stimulation ("sensory seeking"), while others prefer less ("sensory avoiding"). Both are natural variations of human experience.

## How many people experience sensory processing challenges?

According to the CDC, it is estimated that **5-16.5% of the general population** struggle with sensory processing. Some conditions frequently result in sensory processing challenges. **50% of individuals with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and 90% of those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience difficulties with sensory processing.**

## What can we do?

### Create Sensory-Friendly Spaces



- Designate a quiet space where individuals can take a break from the service
- Use soft lighting and neutral colors to reduce sensory overload.
- Offer comfortable seating (e.g., bean bags, rocking chairs)
- Provide weighted blankets for comfort

### Provide Sensory Tools



- Offer fidgets, earplugs, or sunglasses during the service to help individuals with sensory regulation
- Provide quiet activities, like coloring books, to help participants focus while working with their hands
- Allow a time/space for physical activity and heavy work before church to increase focus for those who need increased movement

### Welcome Stimming



- Recognize stimming (self-regulating repetitive actions like rocking or humming) as healthy and natural.
- Encourage acceptance of stimming as a reflection of the diversity of the body of Christ

# Worship Service Structure

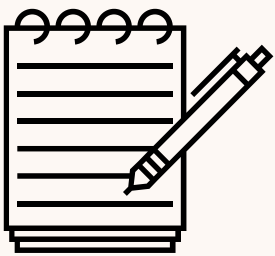
A well-organized worship service structure benefits all members, especially those who may struggle with attention, organization, transitions, or understanding complex ideas. By providing a clear and predictable flow, churches can reduce anxiety, increase focus, and support meaningful participation. Consistency in service elements helps everyone, including those with cognitive and sensory differences, feel more at ease and engaged during worship.

## What can we do?



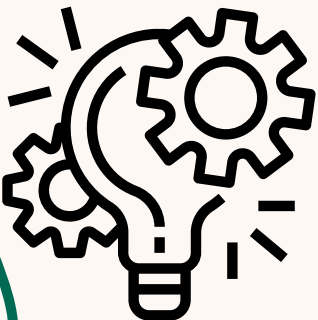
### Consistent Service Flow

- Follow a consistent and predictable order of events each week
- Offer a visual schedule
- Use a countdown timer for the service



### Supportive Materials

- Provide clear and concise bulletin handouts
- Provide sermon notes or structured note-taking pages
- Share the list of worship songs and Scripture readings prior to the service
- Offer large print materials for those with visual impairments



### Accessible Technology

- Use solid-colored, high-contrast backgrounds on projection screens (e.g., black background with white text)
- Display scripture readings on projection screen so attendees can follow along
- List main points of sermon on projection screen
- Offer hearing assistance devices and live captioning

# ACCESSIBLE COMMUNICATION

For individuals with disabilities, such as hearing or visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, or autism spectrum disorders, communication can create barriers to inclusion and understanding. By offering accessible communication methods -- like plain language and visual supports -- churches can create a more welcoming environment where everyone can engage meaningfully in worship and community life.

## What can we do?

### Font Considerations



- Use sans serif and slab serif fonts (avoid fonts with decorative lines or tapers)
- Minimize use of italics
- Utilize boldface for enhanced legibility
- For printed materials, use at least 12-point font
- For large-print and websites, use at least 16-point font

### Color Considerations



- Use high contrast between text and background when printing, on a slide show, and on the website (e.g. black slide with white font)
- Do not use color alone to convey important information, use underlining or icons instead

### Language Considerations



- Use short sentences
- Clearly define complex terms
- Organize information logically
- Break information into smaller sections
- Use bullet points or numbered lists to break ideas down

### Accessibility Considerations



- Include accurate accessibility information on website, announcements, and program descriptions
- Provide information about the content, duration, seating options, physical accessibility, and other important factors when describing events
- Offer contact information for members/visitors who have questions and concerns about accessibility

# Additional Supports

Each individual's needs are unique. By offering supports tailored to these needs, the church can create more accessible and meaningful engagement for individuals with disabilities and their families. The following supports are simple yet impactful ways to help everyone feel more connected, included, and comfortable in worship settings.

## What can we do?



### Implement a Buddy Program

- Intentionally match individuals with a buddy for personalized one-on-one assistance
- Buddies help individuals engage in service and programs
- Buddies provide friendship and connections



### Provide Busy Bags

- Provide small bags with sensory toys, coloring books, or fidgets
- Include items suitable for various ages and interests
- Choose activities that allow for quiet engagement during services
- Place busy bags in a designated spot for easy access prior to service



### Offer Gospel-Centered Respite Care

- Offer regular respite care for families of individuals with disabilities
- Ensure a secure and welcoming space with trained volunteers
- Include activities that teach and reflect gospel principles
- Create opportunities for families to connect and recharge

# SCRIPTURE

## Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind (John 9:1–3, 9:6–7)

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, **“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him”**...Then he anointed the man’s eyes with mud and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and back seeing.”

## Moses Given Powerful Signs (Exodus 4:10–12)

But Moses said to the Lord, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, **“Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”** Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.

## Paul and His Thorn (2 Corinthians 12:8–10)

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong

## Jesus Heals a Blind Beggar (Luke 18:35–43)

As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” And he cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And **Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him.** And when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me recover my sight.” And Jesus said to him, “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.” **And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people when they saw it, gave praise to God.**

# Conclusion

Accessible worship embodies Christ's love by ensuring every person, regardless of ability, can participate and truly belong within the church community. By embracing principles of universal design, churches can remove barriers to worship and create spaces where each member's presence and contributions are cherished. As 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us, we are called to honor and care for each part of the body, celebrating diversity as a reflection of God's intentional design. Through thoughtful, inclusive changes, we can foster a church environment where all members flourish and grow in faith and fellowship together.

**“Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you!”**

**Psalm 67:5**



# Additional Resources

Below are several additional webpages and resources to continue to learn more about disabilities, their impact on participation in daily activities, and strategies and resources to promote increased engagement. By increasing understanding of disabilities, churches can seek to foster communities in which all members can flourish.

## Architecture

- ADA Standards for Accessible Design: <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/design-standards/>

## Communication Resources

- Accessible Communications Guidelines by American Alliance of Museums: <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/07/01/accessible-communications-guidelines/>
- ADA Requirements: Effective Communication: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/effective-communication/>
- AHEAD top ten tips: <https://www.ahead.ie/allyship-accessible-comms-top-tips>

## General Disability Resources

- Autism Research Institute: <https://autism.org/>
- IRIS Center: <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>
- Learning Disabilities Association of America: <https://ldaamerica.org/>
- National Disability Institute: <https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/>
- STAR Institute for Sensory Processing: <https://sensoryhealth.org/>
- The OT Toolbox: <https://www.theottoolbox.com/>

## Faith & Disability Resources

- Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities: <https://bcdd.soe.baylor.edu/faith/resources>
- Collaborative on Faith & Disabilities: <https://faithanddisability.org/>
- Joni & Friends: <https://joniandfriends.org/>
- Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability: <https://www.wheaton.edu/wheaton-center-for-faith-and-disability/>

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