



Holiday / Event Accessibility Inventory

Considerations for Increasing Accessibility and Inclusion in Your Church Services and Activities

I was scrolling social media a few days ago and came across a meme which caught my attention. It said this:

“Something to add to the long list of things I wish able-bodied people wouldn't do:

Please don't wrap decorations on the railings of stairways.

It's a common practice for the winter holidays, and a museum I visited today had fake autumn leaves wrapped around the metal railings running down their very steep steps.

Here's the thing: I can't safely go down steps without relying heavily on the handrail. This is ESPECIALLY true when the weather is cold and icy. If there's clutter between my hand and the rail, I'm way more likely to slip and fall.

Please save your festive decor for the architecture that isn't vital to the mobility of others.”

Did you know that [1 in 4 adults](#) in the United States have a physical or mental disability? This includes struggles with mobility, cognition (the highest percentage - think about what this means for your church and your worship services), independent living, hearing, vision, and self-care.

As Christians, and as worship artists, we are called to invite people into a relationship with God and with each other. When we make it difficult for individuals or families to fully participate in our services, studies, or events, we undermine our ability to respond to that call, and we offer a poor reflection of the inclusivity of Christ.

As you spend time at church in the days leading up to any event / seasonal celebration, look around as you move about. Take someone with you for a second set of eyes. Or better still, ask someone in your congregation or community who is differently abled than you are to accompany you around the building and grounds to look for areas of concern. They will notice things that you will overlook, whether because of the difference in ability, or because you have worked at your church long enough that where things are has become second nature to you. Affirm their concerns and make adjustments.

As you go about this inventory, it is important that "we've always done it this way," or "but, it goes there...," or "it's not that big of a deal..." do not rear their ugly heads. Just because it's always been done that way doesn't make it accessible or inclusive. That (insert item here) didn't go there until someone decided it did, and now you can decide to move it if it is interfering with the accessibility of others. It **is** a big deal if it's keeping anyone from fully participating in the life of your church.

To get you started in this process, we've put together a list of things to be attentive to:



Mobility Considerations:

- Are your doorways and pathways clear of decorations which could impact a person's mobility?
 - Pay particular attention to the floorspace between your wheelchair accessible / automated doorways and the doors to your sanctuary and accessible bathrooms. These areas should remain clear at all times.
 - If your church puts luminarias or other decorations along your sidewalks, do they constrict the walkways in a manner that would obstruct wheelchairs, walkers, or crutches, etc.?
- Are your railings free and clear in order to support people as they use the stairs?
 - If decorating your railings is important, consider decorating under the handrail (with no wraparounds that obstruct the rail itself), or at the base of the balusters. This maintains the look without impacting accessibility or safety.
- Do your lighting settings allow people to adequately see as they move about?
 - Are you lowering your lights for this event / service? Doing so creates a beautiful atmosphere for your service, but can make it difficult for people to maneuver. Consider maintaining brightly lit spaces until everyone is seated for the service, and dim the lights once people are in place.
- Are there adequate wheelchair spaces in your sanctuary, and are they dispersed to allow different location choices and viewing angles equivalent to other seating?
 - Did your staff or volunteers use these spaces for added decorative opportunities? If so, clear these spaces of all obstructions.
- Can people take Communion without climbing stairs or being impeded by decorations (think about railings here, too!)?
- Are your non-worship holiday activities being offered in parts of your church that are accessible?
 - Is the pathway to these locations unobstructed?
 - Is there adequate seating for wheelchairs, service animals, etc. without separating the individual(s) from the body?

Physical Considerations

- Individuals who have conditions which affect their coordination may find holding or passing lit candles particularly difficult. Offer a [flameless alternative](#) to whatever is being used by your congregation. Have them available and properly identified and displayed so that individuals know they have that option.



Sound / Hearing

- Are sound levels adequate for individuals with hearing impairments?
 - Knowing that this is a season that draws in new people, if you have audio resources available for individuals with hearing difficulties, is that information adequately displayed / communicated so that they know to ask for whichever options you offer?
- If your church has an ASL interpreter available, can they be seen without shadow if you have dimmed your lights?
- Are you being attentive to those who are sensitive to sound?
 - The holidays often usher in new sounds – instruments you don't normally have in worship, more music, or readers who are not accustomed to microphones. Do you have a quiet room which allows a person to listen to the service away from the additional or higher-volume noise? Do you do sound checks with your volunteer / guest readers so that they and your tech team are prepared for the change in voicing?

Views / Vision

- Are large print and braille Bibles, hymnals, or bulletins available?
- Can speakers and interpreters be seen without shadows?
- Do your lighting settings allow people with vision impairments to see your worship materials or visuals?
 - Dimmed lights can make reading especially difficult for individuals with impaired eyesight. If you do not have large print materials available (and even if you do), perhaps your ushers can keep a [few small magnifying glasses with lights](#) available for individuals who need one – and put out proper signage and communication before each service to let folks know they're available. For added impact, you could order [customized magnifying glasses](#) with your church's name / logo on them, and allow individuals to take them at the end of the service.
- If you offer a quiet room / cry room that usually offers a sightline to the pulpit, do your decorations obscure this view? If so, adjust the decorations to remove the obstruction.
- Do your decorations have flashing lights (think tree lights or outdoor decorations)?
 - This can be a safety hazard for people who experience seizures, or can make an environment completely inhospitable for individuals who are sensitive to this added stimuli.



Sensory-Friendly Considerations

- Do you have flickering lights in your sanctuary?
- Does your worship space have fluorescent lighting?
- Do you have strongly scented perfumes, candles, incense, or lotions in your worship or fellowship spaces?
 - Scented candles are popular at holidays. Opt for scent-free options in and around your church. Or go flameless.
- Provide sensory-friendly toys
- Provide a bulletin so individuals know what to expect

Other Considerations To Help Increase Inclusion / Accessibility During Advent and Christmas...and Year-Round

- At Christmas and / or Easter, offer a service option that is [sensory-friendly](#)
- Offer a Christmas Eve Service that leave the lights fully lit throughout.
 - Moderate / dimmed lights are often helpful for sensory-friendly events, so do not combine this option with the one above.
- Provide additional ways for non-verbal individuals to praise God – streamers, signs, etc.
- Provide Bibles that [accommodate different reading levels / abilities](#)
- Offer a bulletin insert with a brief synopsis of the sermon – detailing theme, takeaways, etc. This can be very helpful for people who have difficulty concentrating or remembering. Everything else is outlined in your bulletin – the sermon is not. This easy act can help people understand the sermon and retain it.
- Offer [gluten](#)-free Communion elements

As you go about your inventory, remember that this isn't about you...and by you, we mean tradition, habit, or preference. Making your services, studies, and events accessible may require you to undo work that has been done, change up the way you've always approached something, or ruffle a feather or two. But we are called to this work.

Every effort should be made to make accommodations and accessibility solutions seamless. The best solutions are effective, but invisible. The point is not to draw attention to those being included, nor is it to be undertaken with the hope drawing attention to, or praise for, your efforts.



If you identify an area of concern, but run into a situation where the solution is still going to seem visible, clunky, or awkward, it is important to again seek out the input of differently-abled members of your congregation / community. Ask them specifically if they can envision a better way of solving the problem. If they offer alternatives, do your best to live into them, even (and especially) if it creates more work. These solutions are an opportunity to live more fully into the inclusivity of Christ, and can make the person(s) feel fully valued and included.

Finally... Communication is Key!

Communication comes in many forms when addressing accessibility concerns. Your local or county government will likely have an ADA Compliance officer. Contact them for information regarding best practices and resources (signage, etc.). But just as we said above, our efforts to include individuals should not draw attention to differences in ability, but rather to offer solutions.

- Try to avoid announcements about resources (audio devices, magnifying glasses), etc., that would draw attention to a person by encouraging them to leave the sanctuary to go retrieve an item. Instead train ushers, add signs, and provide information in all church-related communications to let people know what to expect from your services, what you offer to welcome and include them into the life of your church, and where to find those resources when they arrive.
- In this day of streaming services, you communicate your accessibility and inclusion every time you go live or post a video. You may be removing yourself from someone's potential church options before they ever even visit you in person.

Consider these resources to help you welcome all into the life of your church through effective communication and practices:

- [Etiquette and Communication](#) (United Methodist Church)
- [Consider Your Song Choices](#) (United Methodist)
 - Context matters, and how song lyrics impact our congregants matters. Disability Ministries of The United Methodist Church offers insight into how some of our hymns address themes important to disability awareness.
- [That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome To People With Disabilities](#) (Interfaith)
 - This resource offers lots of great information, but times change, and with them, so do laws and regulations. Check with your local ADA Compliance officer before implementing physical alterations to any structures.
- [Disability Inclusion Toolkit](#) (Presbyterian Church)
- [Congregational Accessibility Network](#)