

PLOWSHARES #30

Special *Breaking New Ground* Technical Report

Rural Church Accessibility*

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INTRODUCTION

“Nobody with a disability comes to our church.”
“We can’t afford all those modifications.” “Do
people with disabilities even live in our
community? I never see them.” “The law will
force us to spend more on remodeling than we can
afford, so we’re not even going to start.” “The
ADA doesn’t say we have to comply anyway.”
“We’re already serving shut-ins.”



Churches serve as a meeting place in many rural communities.

Are these valid excuses for not making a church accessible to all people?

Local churches have been and continue to be one of the most significant influences in rural America. People gather at rural churches to worship, fellowship, participate in community activities, and vote. Other functions may include day care centers, preschools, senior centers, civic groups, and Cooperative Extension meetings. Participating in a local church offers the

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¹Superscript numbers refer to the corresponding resource at the end of this article.

opportunity to strengthen one another and to grow, as well as to keep up with current community events, make new friends, and be an active part of the community.

Many of the meeting places for rural church services were constructed decades ago, often with volunteer help from members of the congregation. In the design of the simple or the ornate, little attention was given to ensuring freedom of access by those with disabilities. People in the congregation provided the needed assistance, or if the disability made access too difficult, people with disabilities joined the class known as shut-ins and were cared for by the congregation.

A survey of rural churches will typically find the entrances adorned with a large column of stairs and a heavy front door, the restrooms are small and the hallways are narrow. Consequently, these architecturally beautiful church structures, which add so much to rural America, have remained largely inaccessible to many rural residents with disabilities who would like to participate in church activities.

So is this problem really worthy of concern? Are there enough people with disabilities in a rural community to warrant the effort required to make a church accessible? The answer is a well-documented “yes”!

The importance of addressing the issue of rural church accessibility is stated in the final report of the *Assistive Technology Needs Assessment of Farmers and Ranchers with Spinal Cord Injuries* that was completed in 1994 by the Breaking New Ground (BNG) Resource Center⁽¹⁾. This survey explored the needs of farmers and ranchers with spinal cord injuries, including their participation in various community activities. The results revealed a deep need for improving church accessibility in rural communities.

Nearly 60% of the respondents reported being very active or active in their church; however, 40% rated their churches as not accessible or only partially accessible. Other assessments have

produced similar findings. As a result of these observations, the BNG Outreach Program designed and conducted a series of workshops for rural churches that would assist them in improving facility access. This Plowshare is an outgrowth of those workshops. It will consider physical and communication barriers and present solutions often found in rural churches. It will also discuss ways to encourage families of people with disabilities who are part of the church family.

STEPS TO ACCESSIBILITY

There is a logical path leading toward church accessibility. First, remember that to serve the people in the church it is imperative that their needs are known. Identify barriers that are causing difficulty to the current attendees and place them at the top of the priority list. Then evaluate the entire facility using an accessibility checklist, like the one at the back of this Plowshare, to identify all the barriers present. The next major step is to prioritize which barriers are most critically affecting people's participation in various church and church-related activities.



Assessing the physical barriers is a good place to start.

High priority areas may include entrances to the building, accessing the sanctuary or fellowship area, or using the restrooms. Each congregation must decide which areas are the most critical to church participation. Once the priority list is made, a timeline or plan should be laid out to accomplish the various levels of accommodation. If all areas are addressed at the same time, the accessibility project may appear overwhelming and expensive. However, by working on smaller segments of the project, accessibility can be attained over a period of time based on the level of resources available.

When considering extensive modifications, both short and long-term goals should be reviewed. If there is a vision to add onto the existing structure, lower cost alternatives to improve access could be considered for the short-term while working towards a carefully laid out plan of extensive modifications in the future to provide full access. In some situations, the need to improve accessibility

has been the catalyst to bring about an already needed building project.

Experience from the church accessibility workshops suggests that many of the modifications can be made at low cost and often by members of the congregation. Remember, the purpose is not to comply with laws and rules, but rather to ensure that every member is considered essential to the congregation and has the opportunity to participate fully in the functions of the church.

ARCHITECTURAL BARRIERS

The most obvious barriers to people with physical disabilities are the architectural aspects of the church, such as steps, narrow doors, and small restrooms. When someone is using a wheelchair, a four-inch step might as well be a forty-foot wall. When someone has an arm amputation or arthritis, a door with a smooth doorknob might as well be chained and locked. This section will



Steps are a major barrier in most churches.

address the common physical barriers to accessibility and provide suggestions for alleviating the problems. Beginning with the parking areas and pathways, ramps and lifts will follow; then restrooms, the sanctuary, and fellowship areas will be considered.

Parking Areas

The first challenge that might be faced in accessing a rural church is in the parking lot. Parking surfaces at a rural church can range from an asphalt lot with painted lines to a grassy yard under a shade tree or even the shoulder along a gravel road. When providing accessible parking, consider the following guidelines and tips:

- Accessible parking for those with disabilities should be located as close to the building's accessible entrance as possible.

- There should be no less than one accessible parking space for every 25 standard spaces; however, more spaces may be needed depending on the congregation's needs.

- An accessible parking space should be no less than 8' wide with a 5' access aisle. Two accessible parking spaces can share the same access aisle to save space.

- All accessible parking spaces should be well marked. Paint symbols on the lot surface or post signs if possible.



All accessible parking areas should be well marked.

- All accessible spaces should be level and have a well-drained, smooth, hard surface. Avoid sod and loose gravel. Concrete and asphalt are good paving materials. Well packed, crushed limestone containing the fines (residue from stone crushing) also makes a solid, inexpensive surface; however, it will require more maintenance.

- A smooth, accessible pathway should be provided from the accessible parking space to the accessible entrance. Be careful to replace all curbs and steps with curb cuts and ramps. Also avoid thresholds over 1/2”.

- Proper signage is important at all accessible parking, pathways, and accessible entrances. If the main entrance is not accessible, there should be signs to direct people toward the accessible entrance. Signage is also an important tool to inform, and demonstrates that the church openly welcomes people with disabilities and their families.



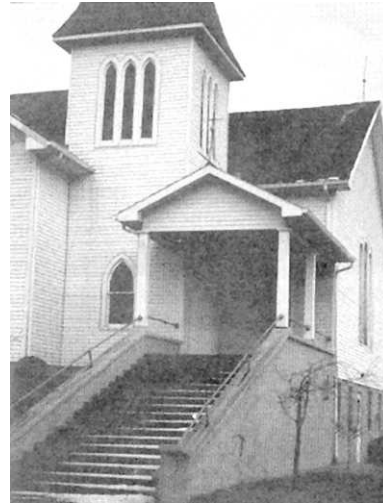
Signage can improve accessibility.

Ramps and Lifts

The challenge of ascending the flight of steps leading to the front door of many churches is daunting, to say the least, for people with lower extremity disabilities. But, before significant modifications are made to the primary entrance, the layout of the entire building should be considered. Does the church have more than one level?

Do all levels require access? Will an interior lift or ramp system be required once inside the front door? Often a series of steps leads up to the front door, and inside the building there is a second flight of stairs leading up to the sanctuary and a third flight leading down to the fellowship area and classrooms. In such a situation it may be beneficial to install a lift box that can access every level. However, if the church is all on one level, a ramp leading to the front door may suffice.

Several general guidelines apply to the construction of ramps for people using wheelchairs or having difficulty climbing steps. The following is a list of ramp specifications:



A ramp or lift can even make this church accessible.

- The slope should not exceed a ratio of 1:12 (1” rise for every 12” run).
- The cross slope (slope from one side of the ramp to the other) should not exceed a ratio of 1:50.
- The ramp should be at least 36” wide.
- For every 30’ of ramp run there should be a level platform as wide as the ramp and 60” long for a resting area.
- If a ramp changes direction, there should be a 60” x 60” level platform for turning.
- If a ramp rises 6” or more, handrails should be provided on both sides at a height between 34” and 38”.
- A level platform at the top of the ramp should be provided for a wheelchair to rest on while accessing the door. This allows the door to be opened without sitting on the sloped ramp surface.

Ramps are typically the least expensive option to climbing steps, so they are used whenever possible to help hold expenses down. Ramps come in various configurations and can be made from materials such as wood, concrete, and metal. They can even be constructed by altering the landscape and pouring a sidewalk to provide a gentle slope up to the church doors. Or, if a ramp needs to go below grade or ground level, soil can be excavated to provide a slope down to a basement entryway. When building ramps, it is important to consider the surface texture since moisture, frost and ice make ramps hazardous if they are too smooth. Adding a textured surface to the concrete, or using a non-slip surface material such as

abrasive paints or rubber mats will improve traction and safety.



A well designed ramp can blend in with the beauty of the existing building.

A ramp does not work in every situation. Sometimes a lift or elevator is the best or only option. Elevators that use cables and counterweights are in many cases cost prohibitive for small congregations to construct and to maintain. Lifts are less expensive to maintain and cheaper to install, and they operate using hydraulic actuators or electrical screw jacks. Lifts can be installed to serve multi-levels with more than one door.



Covering an exterior liftbox protects it from weather.

A lift can cost as much as \$30,000 to purchase and install, so it is a large investment. Placing the lift wisely to provide access to as many levels as possible is important. Potential church expansion should also be taken into consideration when installing the lift to prevent reinstallation when providing access to new additions. Lifts can be built on the interior or exterior of the church. If built inside, the appearance of the church building is not compromised; however, space is lost. If the lift were constructed on the exterior, no space is lost inside, but the looks of the building would be altered. Choosing a location to construct the lift is a decision your church will have to make based on its priorities.

Other options exist for overcoming barriers to steps. Seat or platform stair-climbers are electrically powered devices that follow a track up or down flights of stairs. The seat or platform can fold up against the wall when not in use so the steps are not blocked for other users. When folded up, the seat is about 14" wide and the platform about 20". The seat type lift (capacity 300 pounds) bolts to the steps, while the platform lift (capacity 450 pounds) is usually wall mounted. The cost of an installed seat climber on a straight flight of eight steps would cost around \$5,000 while the platform climber would be around \$13,000. If a curve or turn is required in the climbing track, the estimated seat and platform costs would be approximately \$10,000 and \$20,000 respectively.

The seat stair-climber provides access to upper levels for people who can not climb the steps, but the wheelchair would need to be carried up the steps. The seat option also requires the user to transfer from the wheelchair to the seat and then back whenever the steps are used. For these reasons the seat device may not be a desirable long-term solution; however, the seated stair-climber costs less than half as much as the platform climber. In addition, people with mobility impairments, but not needing a wheelchair, may be more likely to use the seat-climber than the platform-climber.

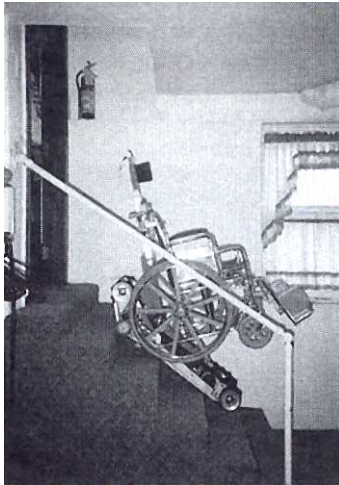


A platform stair-climber can provide access to many levels.

The benefit of the platform-type stair-climber is its capability to transport the wheelchair also. No transfers are necessary between the person's wheelchair and the platform since the platform can carry both the person and their chair. Because it will carry a chair, the platform-climber meets ADA accessibility code requirements. A powered folding option is commonly installed on the platform-climbers to fold them out of the way. It is operated by push-button controls and has safety rails to keep its users from falling during transport.

A fourth option would be to use a mobile stair-climbing device such as the Stair-Trac. This is a mobile, battery-powered device used to carry people in wheelchairs up and down steps. It moves on rubber tracks similar in concept to bulldozer tracks. A wheelchair is strapped onto the device and then driven up or down the steps. The cost of this device is approximately \$5,000, and training is required

on safe and proper use. This may be a valid, less expensive option for churches with several levels and flights of stairs. However, people using the device in wheelchairs may feel insecure on it and it lacks the independence provided by other lifting devices (it does not meet ADA code).



The Stair-Trac can be a short-term, less expensive method of accessing a church.

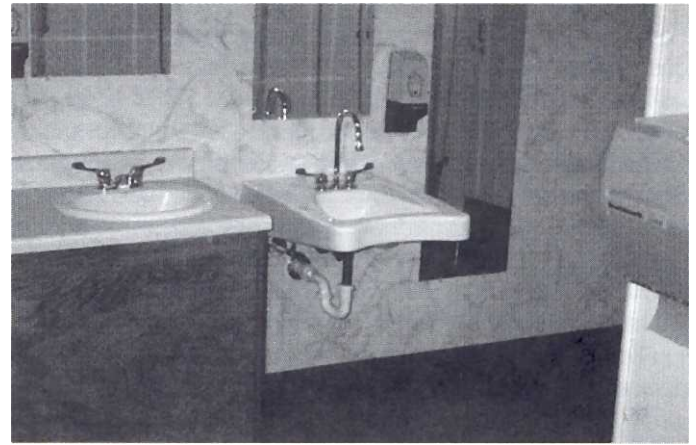
The type of lifting device chosen should be based on the input of the individuals in your congregation who have disabilities as well as the resources and priorities of your church. All four options provide access to different levels of church buildings, but the ultimate question to ask is “Will this adequately serve the people with disabilities in our church with the resources available?” Always remember to consult the church members with disabilities before making decisions that affect them.

Restrooms

Many small rural churches do not have accessible bathroom facilities for several reasons. Since restrooms aren’t central to the church’s purpose, they may be overlooked as an area needing to be accessed. In addition, when many rural churches were built, indoor plumbing was not an option. When indoor plumbing became a priority, churches often converted closets, coatrooms, and other small areas into restrooms.

Typically, these small restrooms are far from being accessible to someone with a mobility impairment or using a wheelchair. The restroom doors are often too narrow, the stalls too small, and there is little room to maneuver a wheelchair. In addition, churches seldom have space enough to create two accessible restrooms. An option is to create one larger, accessible unisex restroom with a lock on the door.

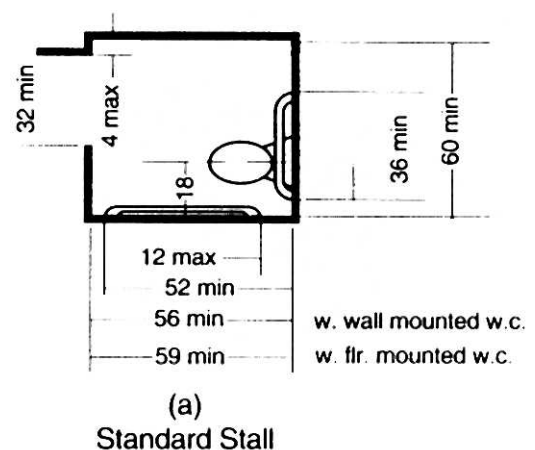
An accessible unisex restroom would require less space and expense than modifying two restrooms for accessibility. Some people with disabilities have an attendant help them in the restroom, and quite often it is that person’s spouse or parent. The unisex restroom allows the attendant to serve without going into the opposite gender restroom.



A high sink, lever handles and a lowered mirror help make this restroom more accessible.

- An accessible restroom should include:
- At least 5’ diameter of clear floor space for turning a wheelchair.
 - A toilet seat 18” high.
 - Grab bars mounted beside and behind the toilet 1 1/2” from the wall and 33”-36” high.
 - 32” high lavatory without a cabinet underneath and all exposed pipes padded and insulated to prevent burns or bruises.
 - Lever type door and faucet handles.
 - A mirror mounted no more than 40” above the ground.

If the existing restrooms in a church are large enough to rearrange or modify for accessibility, other characteristics should be considered in addition to those mentioned previously. Restrooms with stalls will need to have at least one stall that is accessible as shown in the accompanying diagram.



A standard accessible restroom stall should have these characteristics.

SANCTUARY & FELLOWSHIP AREAS

Modifying a church building should allow those with disabilities to comfortably participate. For example, having a person sit in an aisle will cause him or her to feel more uncomfortable than if sitting within the pew area.

Sanctuaries can be modified to accommodate persons using wheelchairs by shortening several pews or exchanging long pews with shorter pews and offsetting them so that a parking space, or “pew cut”, is made outside of the aisle. When pew cuts are installed, it is advised that signage be used indicating that the short pews are reserved for people with disabilities and their families. People with disabilities appreciate sitting with their families just like everyone else. It may be appropriate to have one pew removable to provide open space for several wheelchairs.

When providing general accessibility throughout the church, consider the following suggestions:

- All drinking fountains can be made accessible at low cost by attaching a drinking cup dispenser.

- Coat racks can be made accessible by hanging a bar down lower with chains so people with limited reach can use them.

- All hallways and aisles should be free of steps, and thresholds should be no higher than 1/2” and rounded.

- Door openings should be at least 32” wide (36” is better). In some cases narrower door jams can be retrofitted with offset hinges so that the door’s thickness swings clear of the frame, providing an adequate opening with the existing doorframe.

- All high-traffic doors should have lever door handles.

- Meeting areas should be set up so that people using wheelchairs, crutches, and walkers can maneuver between tables and chairs. Keep chairs pushed under tables to provide wider aisles.

- Tables and desks can be made accessible by placing the legs on blocks and removing chairs. Most tables need to be raised 2” to allow a wheelchair to roll under them.



Coat racks can be made accessible by hanging a bar down lower or installing a lower bar.

- Post an invitation in newsletters, bulletins, directories, offices, and food service areas, that states: “If you need assistance, please ask or contact.....”.

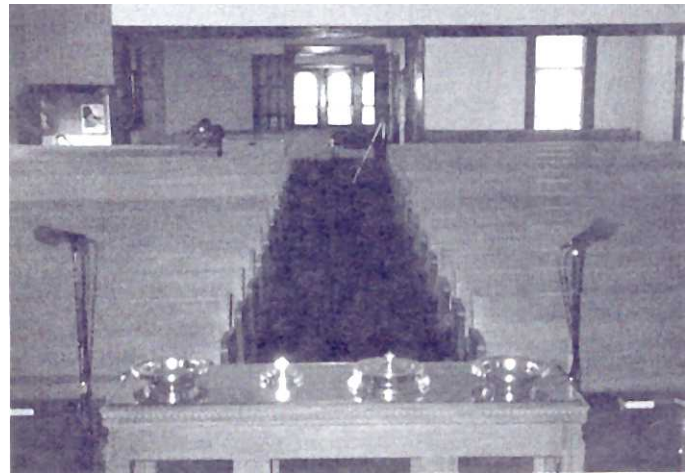
- Special services such as baptisms can be provided at alternative locations such as rehabilitation centers, hospitals, or accessible public pools.

- Changing the location of a meeting or a class is often the best way to achieve accessibility. It may be

easier to move people than to make an inaccessible room or area accessible.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Communication barriers hindering people from accessing the services of a church may be more subtle than the physical barriers. Communication disabilities may not be visible or obvious to others in the congregation, so they are less likely to be addressed. However, hundreds of thousands of people in rural communities have hearing, vision, and speech impairments that may prevent them from full participation in religious events.



Large open auditoriums require proper sound systems so that everyone can hear.

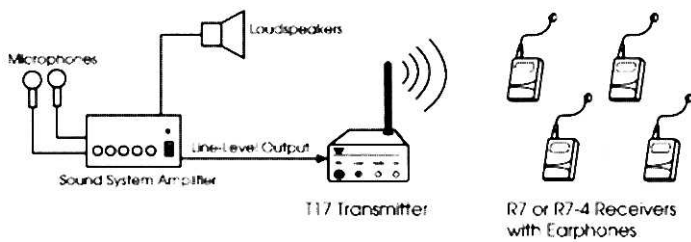
The purpose of church services is to communicate meanings and ideas to the attendees. If communication barriers are unchecked, the entire purpose of the service is lost, and the person with the disability has been effectively excluded. Although a ramp helps people access the front door, it is useless if people can not communicate once inside the door.

Hearing

More than 10% (28 million people) of the American population have hearing impairments, including 50% of the farmers between the age of 45 and 54⁽²⁾. Also, three out of every eight senior citizens have hearing loss. Considering that many farmers hear poorly, addressing the issue of adequate sound systems in rural churches is important.

For personal fellowship or individual conversations, the person with a hearing impairment will probably be equipped with hearing aids or an assistive listening device (ALD). An ALD looks like a hand-held radio with a set of headphones attached. The ALD acts as a microphone, receiving sound signals and amplifying them before sending them on to the headset and the person’s ear.

A person with a hearing impairment may also read lips or communicate with sign language. In such cases, the reader needs a well-lighted room so the fingers and lips of the presenter can be easily seen. This applies specifically to the sanctuary where a lip or sign language reader may be watching. A well-trimmed moustache creates less



This diagram shows the components of an assistive listening system and their function.

interference for those reading lips. The speaker should make a conscious effort not to cover his or her mouth and block a lip reader's view. If notes on the presentation are available, they would help the person with a hearing impairment who is trying to follow along with the sermon.

An ALD and hearing aid will not be as effective in a large room or sanctuary, so other systems must be utilized. *Assistive listening systems (ALS)* are systems used to project sound from one source to many people in the crowd. Four types of ALS's are used to help people with hearing impairments hear the service. The *hardwired system* is the oldest and least used system because of its inflexibility. It uses a headset which is wired directly to the sound system and the sounds are passed directly to the listener. However, the person using it must sit in the same place every service without moving around.

The other three ALS's are more modern and include the *inductance audio loop*, the *FM broadcast*, and the *infrared broadcast* systems. The inductance loop is a wire that surrounds the worship area and anyone inside the looped area with a receiver can pick up the signal. Hearing aids with the T-coil (or telephone switch) option can act as receivers so the user does not need an additional unit. The



The PPA Deluxe System from Williams Sound Corp. is an example of an assistive listening system that would improve accessibility in a church sanctuary.

wire loop acts as a large transmitter, and the T-coil acts as an antennae by picking up the electromagnetic signal from the wire and converting it to sound. The sound quality may be poorer on this system than on others. The approximate cost is \$900 for a loop system and one extra receiver. Fewer receivers are needed since 30% of hearing aids have the T-coil.

The remaining two ALS's operate in a similar fashion to each other. A transmitter is wired into the microphone of a sound system. The transmitter then broadcasts a signal across the worship area to hand-held receivers used by each person with a hearing impairment. The receivers look like hand-held radios, and a small headset carries the sound to the listener's ears. The volume on each receiver can be individually controlled by the listener.

The FM broadcast system is a low power radio broadcast signal between 72 and 76 MHz that will reach about 300 feet and will pass through the walls of a room. This system can be used to listen to a service from outside the room. If a person so desired, he or she could use the receiver and listen to the service from a car or outside the building. This system may have some static interference in the broadcast, but it allows the listener to move about the sanctuary freely and sit in various locations. The cost is about \$900 for a transmitter and four receiver units.

The infrared broadcast system has an infrared frequency transmitter that takes sounds and broadcasts a signal of invisible light at either 95 or 250 kHz, which the receivers pick up. The signal will not pass through the walls of the room, so privacy in the room is an option if necessary. The system cannot be used in direct sunlight, and there may be some interference caused by fluorescent lighting at 95 kHz. The cost is approximately \$1300 for a transmitter and four receivers.

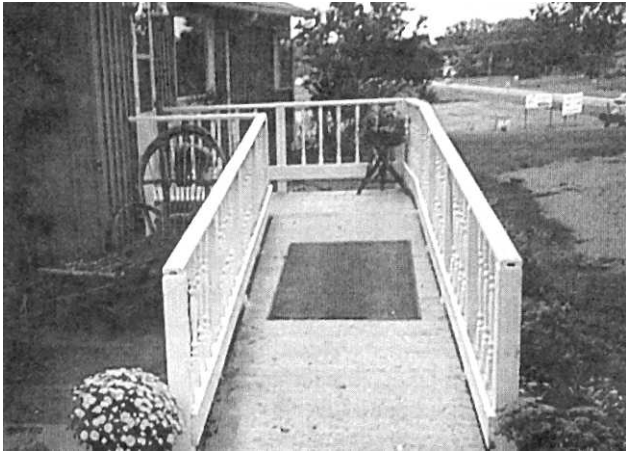
Videos are often used during worship services or subsequent classes. Videos with captioning provide printed text on the screen as it is spoken in the video. This allows people with hearing impairments to follow the video as it plays. Captioning can come in two forms, open or closed captioning. Open captioning displays the printed text at all times while closed captioning can be turned on or off by settings on the VCR.

Other items around the church that may help serve people with hearing impairments would be flashing fire alarms and a text telephone. If fire alarms are used, they should not only make sound, but also flash light to warn people with hearing impairments of danger.

The text telephone, or TTY, allows people to type and read messages into the phone instead of speaking and listening. A telephone relay service for people with hearing impairments is available in each state as required by law. The relay service acts as a translator between a person using a TTY and a person speaking or listening. A person using the TTY calls the relay service which then calls the desired recipient and passes on a message. The recipient responds to the message, and the relay operator types it to the TTY user. This process continues throughout the conversation to allow people without TTY's to communicate with TTY users.

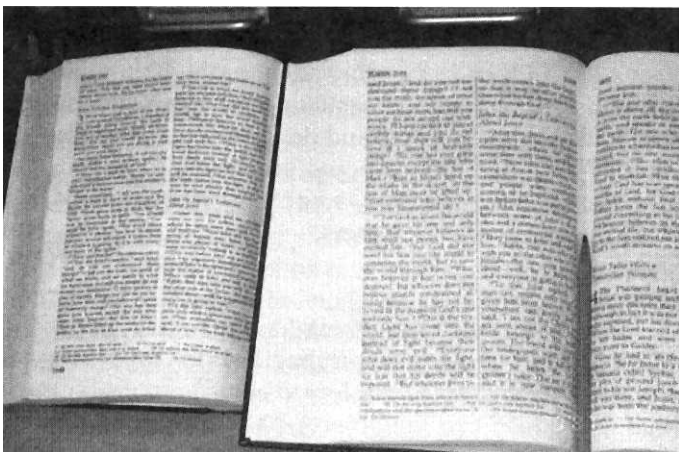
Vision

With 11.4 million Americans having some type of visual impairment, it is also important to take steps to accommodate people with low vision. Low vision means that the person can see objects 20 feet away in the same way someone with healthy vision can see when 50 feet away. Fully half of the people who are legally blind (those who can see at 20 feet what someone with healthy vision could see at 200 feet) are over the age of 65⁽³⁾. By improving the accessibility of the church to those with visual impairments, it will lead to more elderly people attending services on a regular basis.



A textured mat indicates the top or bottom of a ramp to enable someone with a visual impairment using a cane to identify their location.

The first way to improve accessibility for people with visual impairments is to help them reach the worship service if they cannot drive. It may be appropriate to have a member of the congregation provide transportation to the church services. If they are able to walk to church using a cane, make sure any curb cuts are striped with yellow paint or textured so rises can be detected by a cane. Ramps should have a texture difference at the top and bottom to help people using walking canes know when a slope change will occur. Wind chimes might also be hung by the church door to guide them by sound to the door.



Large print material is helpful for those with low vision.

Once inside the church, bright lighting helps people with low vision navigate more easily. Handrails along the walls and along stairways help provide stability and balance. If leading a person with a vision impairment, notify them of steps, slopes, resource materials, posted bulletins, and other pertinent information that they cannot detect. Books such as Bibles, hymnals and other printed materials are available in large print and Braille, and can be placed for use by people with low vision. Bibles and many other religious books can also be purchased on audio tape.

Low Vision Communication Tips

- ♥ Identify yourself.
- ♥ Speak the person's name to get their attention.
- ♥ Face the person and use a normal tone of voice.
- ♥ Give verbal cues when guiding.
- ♥ Describe materials being distributed or presented.
- ♥ Offer handouts and bulletins in large print.
- ♥ Tape services for future reference.
- ♥ Alert people of posted or resource materials.
- ♥ Inform the person when you leave the area.
- ♥ Provide magnifying glasses.
- ♥ Offer to have volunteers read newsletters, mail and lessons.
- ♥ Provide printed material in Braille. Ask state and national denomination offices for Braille resources.
- ♥ Provide newsletters, sermon notes, and lessons on computer disks.

THE CHURCH AND THE LAW

Those involved in churches and other religious organizations may be under the impression that because of the misinterpreted "separation of church and state" concept, laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities don't affect them. In fact, they may have read the exemption for private clubs and religious organizations in Section 307 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and figured this is one law they don't have to worry about. This is not necessarily true.

Churches need to be mindful of the Act's mandates, and at least be aware of other laws in their state that may have an impact in three areas. The areas are employment, accessibility and new construction. This section includes the laws of the state of Indiana as an example of relevant state legislation in addition to the ADA*. Employment and accessibility are covered by the ADA and the Indiana Civil Rights Act (ICRA). New construction is regulated by the ADA Accessibility Guidelines and the Indiana Fire Prevention and Building Safety Commission (IFPBSC).

Employment

There are two laws that impact employers: the ADA and the states' civil rights codes. In Indiana, the Indiana Civil Rights Commission (ICRC) is directed by the Indiana

**Check with local and state officials to determine specific regulations in effect in other states.*

code which contains comparable language to the ADA. So, if the employment requirements of one are understood, the requirements of the other are generally understood. There are certain differences in the two, but not for the purposes of this article. The main difference to understand is that the ICRC enforces the ICRA and the Department of Justice enforces the ADA.

If a church employs fifteen (15) or more people for each working day in each of 20 or more calendar weeks in the current or preceding year, the law applies to how churches hire and employ people with disabilities. (Section 101 of the ADA and IC 22-9-5-10) Section 103 of the ADA and 22-9-5-22 of the Indiana Code reads:

In general. This title shall not prohibit a religious corporation, association, educational institution or society from giving preference in employment to individuals of a particular religion to perform work connected with the carrying on by such corporation association, educational institution or society of its activities.

Religious tenets requirement. Under this title, a religious organization may require that all applicants and employees conform to the religious tenets of such organization.

In other words, a church may require its applicants and employees to adhere to their religious beliefs, but they may not discriminate in their application or employment process against people with disabilities. As for an employer's specific obligations under the law, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has issued guidelines that goes into great detail about what is:

- a qualified person with a disability,
- a reasonable accommodation, and
- an undue hardship.

To get a copy of the laws and guidelines, contact the Great Lakes Business and Technical Assistive Center (listed under organizations in the resource section). A church, and any employer, runs into problems when they make employment decisions based on a person's disability rather than the person's ability.

Accessibility

Religious entities are exempt from the requirements of Title III (Public Accommodations) of the ADA (Section 307); however, if a religious entity rents their facilities to a non-religious tenant, the tenant is responsible for insuring access to those with disabilities. For example, if a community theater group leases a church auditorium for the group's performances, the theater group is covered under the mandates of Title III of the ADA and are responsible for accessibility. If the space is donated, the non-religious group is exempt.

The ICRA does not contain such an exemption, so the ICRA may investigate a complaint of discrimination. If from another state, check with that states Civil Rights Commission for specific applicable laws. The question of accessibility is answered by looking at whether or not a person with a disability can access the services (those things that an entity has to offer). Similar to the employment

section, if someone is excluded because of their disability, this could lead to litigation.

New Construction

The IFPBSC has developed a new building code that requires all new construction to meet physical accessibility requirements. Check specific state's Building Safety Commission to learn of relevant building code requirements. The new code in Indiana is consistent with the ADA's Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) in terms of widths, heights, slopes, etc. It is important to note that if building something that requires a building permit, construction has to conform to this code. As for the enforcement of this, be aware of the fact that the IFPBSC does not enforce the ADA or the ADAAG, but only the building code.

In most instances regarding accessibility in employment, accessibility and new construction, the best test of compliance is to look at the ADA because many of the laws in Indiana were patterned after the ADA. Of course, while churches may be exempt from these laws, they have a *higher mandate* to share with all people. This of course includes people with disabilities.

Ministries to Persons with Disabilities

The rural church is more than a building. It is also a community of people holding a common faith that have come together to worship and serve each other. In most rural churches, ministry and service are central to the life of the church. There are no second class citizens. When trouble strikes, it is often the church that corporately, or as individuals, responds in concrete ways to bring relief to the hurting. In some cases, these responses have become so common-place and institutionalized that they may not even be viewed as ministry but just the way it's always been done.

There is much that even the smallest rural church can do to enhance the quality of life for persons in the congregation with disabilities and ensure their inclusion into the community. The following are a few suggestions.

1. Make a congregational commitment to be accessible to everyone with a disability. Include an accessibility statement in the church mission document, use the universal accessibility logo on church stationary and advertisements, and let the whole community know that people with disabilities are welcomed and valued.
2. Encourage regular visitation to all those members who are recovering from a disabling condition or who are unable to participate in church-related activities. An ember left out of the fire will soon grow cold and burn out. Personal visits, phone calls, and cards can help every member feel attached and significant.
3. Make service to those needing assistance an everyday activity of the church. Everyone, without exception, will someday need someone to help mow the lawn, wash the windows, pick up groceries, or complete a multitude of other daily living activities. The folks in Washington, D.C. or any state capital will never be able to replace the caring assistance that can come from fellow members of a community of faith.

4. Offer workshops and other educational experiences that are directed at specific disability needs such as nutrition, caregiving, and home accessibility. Most communities have access to resources that can be tapped to conduct these activities. Don't be afraid to open these activities up to the community.
5. Provide formal and informal respite services to allow long-term caregivers the opportunity to take a break and refresh themselves. This can take the form of a specialized day care service or volunteering to take over for an evening.
6. Sponsor recreational and learning opportunities for members of the congregation needing specialized activities, but who may be unable to afford them. Sponsor a child to go to camp or participate in therapeutic horseback riding lessons, or cover the cost of a couple with a special needs child to attend a specialized workshop on providing appropriate care.
7. Encourage members of the congregation who are struggling to establish independence through their own business by purchasing their products and services.

CONCLUSION

What is the greatest barrier to making churches and other places of worship accessible to people with disabilities? Is it the steps out front? Is it the narrow doors or small bathrooms? Is it the dim lighting or old sound system? Is it the cost of the modifications? Or is it our attitude toward persons with disabilities?

Why aren't people using wheelchairs attending our churches? Why aren't people with disabilities seen around our community? Of course no one in a wheelchair comes to a church that has twelve steps up to the front door and no ramp or lift. It may be too much effort to simply get out into the community when there is no way to get from the street to the sidewalk, and few of the buildings have doors wide enough for a wheelchair. These difficulties may explain why so few people with disabilities are seen around our communities and in attendance at our churches.



The entire congregation can participate in making the church accessible.

The cost of making a church accessible can be minimal when divided among all the members of a congregation.

The most significant barrier to church accessibility is our unwillingness to consider the needs of all those who desire to worship with us. At times we give property a higher value than people. What is the value of welcoming all people with disabilities and their families to church? Does it not surpass the expense of a ramp, new sound system, or a change to the appearance of the church? A ramp is just not enough. Our hearts must open up and we must want to welcome people with disabilities and their families into our churches, for true access begins in the heart.

Truly accessible churches consider people with disabilities and their families a privilege to serve with rather than a burden to bear. Such service addresses the very mission of the church: all people working together to serve one another. Everyone is included in all services, meetings, activities, and leadership roles. They realize that all people have limitations, and denying access to certain people because of their limits is inconsistent with the life of the church. People with disabilities are the best experts on access, and their talents can be utilized along with the skills of others.

When the hearts of the congregation are open, motivation is from within and not forced. People with disabilities are then really welcomed, doors quickly become accessible, physical barriers are removed, and everyone can feel the support and warmth of being a part of the accessible community.

REFERENCES

- (1) *Assistive Technology Needs Assessment of Farmers and Ranchers with Spinal Cord Injuries*. Breaking New Ground Resource Center, West Lafayette, Indiana.
- (2) Plakke, B., and Dare, E. (1992). Occupational hearing loss in farmers. *Public health reports*, (107) 188-192.
- (3) American Foundation for the Blind (1987). *Low Vision Questions & Answers: Definitions, Devices, Services*. New York: American Foundation for the Blind.

RESOURCES

Organizations

University of Illinois at Chicago
GLDBTAC (ADA information)
1640 West Roosevelt Rd.
Chicago, IL 60608
(800) 949-4232

Mark 2 Ministries
8605 Allisonville Rd., #155
Indianapolis, IN 46250
(317) 598-9147

Christian Church Foundation for the Handicapped
PO Box 9869
Knoxville, TN 37940
(423) 579-0883

National Organization on Disability
Religion & Disability Program
910 16th St., NW
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 293-5960

Christian League for the Handicapped
PO Box 948
Walworth, WI 53184-0948
(414) 275-6131

National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities
PO Box 29113
Washington, DC 20017-0113
(202) 529-2933

National Catholic Office for the Deaf
814 Thayer Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(301) 577-1684

Free Bibles on Tape
Bible Alliance
PO Box 621
Bradenton, FL 34206
(941) 748-3031

Christian Fellowship for the Blind International, Inc.
PO Box 26
South Pasadena, CA 91030

Mennonite Mutual Aid
1110 N. Main St.
Goshen, IN 46527
(800) 348-7468

Special Education Ministries
Church of the Nazarene
6401 The Paseo
Kansas City, MO 64131
(816) 333-7000

JAF Ministries
PO Box 3333
Agoura Hills, CA 91301
(818) 707-5664

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
8080 Old York Road
Elkine Park, PA 19027
(215) 635-9701

Lifts & Ramps

Box Lifts, Platform & Seated Stairway Lift
Access Industries, Inc.
4001 E. 138th St.
Grandview, MO 64030
(800) 925-3100

Mobil Platform Lift
Adaptive Engineering Ltd.
3604 Burnsland Rd. SE
Calgary, Alberta
Canada, T2G 3Z2
(403) 243-9400

Stair-climbing Lift
Garaventa Accessibility
7505 134A St.
Surrey, BC
Canada V3W 7B3
(800) 663-6556

Elevators, Platform & Seated Lifts
Concord Elevator Inc.
107 Alfred Kuehne Blvd.
Brampton, ON
Canada, L6T 4K3
(800) 661-5112

Automatic Door Openers

Stanley
65 Scott Swamp Rd.
Farmington, CT 06032
(860) 677-2861

Dor-O-Matic
4640 North Oketo Ave.
Harwood Heights, IL 60656
(800) 815-1517

Hearing

Audex Assistive Listening Systems
710 Standard St.
Longview, TX 75604
(800) 237-0716

Assistive Listening Systems
Williams Sound Corp.
10399 West 70th St.
Eden Prairie, MN 55344-3459
(800) 843-3544

Vision

Low Vision Aids
LS&S Group
PO Box 673
Northbrook, IL 60065
(800) 468-4789

Miscellaneous

Threshold Ramps, Signs, Pipe Padding, Modular Ramps
Van Duerr Industries
426 Broadway St., Ste. 207
Chico, CA 95928
(800) 497-2003

ACCESSIBILITY CHECKLIST FOR CHURCHES

	Date Checked	Improvement Warranted	Improvement Made
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EXTERIOR

- | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Is parking provided for persons with disabilities near an accessible primary entrance? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Is there a sidewalk without steps from the parking area to the accessible entrance? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. If ramps are necessary, do they have a slope of one inch for every 12 linear inches or less? (1 to 20 is better.) Do ramps have a level area every 30 feet or wherever they change direction? Are the sides of ramps adequately protected with handrails? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Do signs clearly direct persons to ramps and accessible entrances? | _____ | _____ | _____ |

INTERIOR

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Do all doors have a clear opening of at least 32 inches? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Are doors easy to open (max 5 lbs. of pull)? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Is floor level for at least 60 inches on each side of all doorways? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Are water fountains, bulletin boards, etc. at a height accessible to persons in wheelchairs? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5. Are braille signs and textured doorknobs provided at appropriate places? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Is lighting, especially in corridors, adequate? | _____ | _____ | _____ |

RESTROOMS

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Can persons in wheelchairs reach the restrooms easily and without assistance? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Are toilet stalls large enough for a wheelchair? Do they have handrails? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Is the sink accessible? Are the pipes under the sink insulated to prevent hot pipes from burning the legs of a wheelchair user? Are the faucet controls easy to operate? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Are mirrors, soap, and towels accessible to persons in wheelchairs? | _____ | _____ | _____ |

SANCTUARY

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Are several places for wheelchairs provided so that wheelchair users have a choice of seating? Such areas should be at least 36" wide, 52" long. | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Are aisles wide enough (36") for wheelchairs to pass? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Is there a sound amplification system for the hard of hearing? | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Are braille and/or large print bibles, hymnals, and bulletin's provided? | _____ | _____ | _____ |

This checklist is only a general indicator of the barriers that may exist to persons with mobility, visual, or hearing difficulties. It is created to help churches begin to deal with the limitations of their buildings.