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accessible CHURCH

Disability is not the issue, accessibility is

Many features that benefit people with disabilities are also friendly to children, the elderly, and people with prams, or walking aids.

“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled...”

Hebrews 12:13a, Holy Bible (NLT)³



Simple wins

A church offered a second 11 a.m. Sunday service after receiving feedback that the 8 a.m. service was difficult to attend because it took longer for many older people to get ready in the morning.

Another family were thrilled to have an 11 a.m. service available saying, “We have two children with high needs, and we love that our whole family can now come to church every week.”

What is accessibility?

Accessibility ensures better access to all people, in terms of the design of products, equipment, services or infrastructure.

One in five Australians have a disability, and more than half of people aged 55 years and over have difficulties with mobility, sight or hearing.¹ When we plan to make things accessible for people with disabilities, other members of our community also benefit. For example, providing a ramp creates access for people in wheelchairs and people with prams and walkers can also come in easily.

An accessible church allows everyone to join in independently and says “You are welcome here”.

BENEFITS OF AN ACCESSIBLE CHURCH:

- Making a few changes can increase the number of community members who can join in church activities and may better support current members who have a disability. Stage these changes in your annual budget.
- Some modifications will improve the safety of the building and may reduce the likelihood of accidents and possibly the cost of insurance premiums.
- Public perception and recognition of the church increases. “People told their friends that our church made a space to accommodate the needs of one member, so now others know this is a place of welcome.”

ACCESS STARTS WITH TRANSPORT

Access to transport is essential for a person with a disability to enable their participation in social/community activities, study, work, medical appointments, occupations and church. Here are some issues people with disabilities face accessing transport in their words:

- I am unable to get a driver's license so I depend on public, community transport, friends and family to pick me up.
- I have limited funds and the high cost of transport can limit my participation.
- Accessible buses need to be booked ahead of time and they are not an option on a Sunday.
- Access cabs and taxis are expensive and the number of vouchers I receive has been reduced so I have to prioritise my transport needs.

If I lived in a society where being in a wheelchair was no more remarkable than wearing glasses, and if the community was completely accepting and accessible, my disability would be an inconvenience and not much more than that.

It is society which handicaps me far more seriously and completely than the fact that I have Spina Bifida.²

I cannot attend regular church services and community activities because of transport issues. **Some possible solutions include:**

- Churches and community groups may have a trained pool of rostered volunteers who can help with transport. Please organise a police clearance for these volunteers to ensure my safety.

- Churches can explore local council volunteer transport support or council buses I can use to help me attend.
- I can car pool or share a taxi cost with people who live in the same area.
- A church may sponsor my transport costs and pay for transport to church activities.

RAVI'S TIPS FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Ravi has Spina Bifida and mobilises using a wheelchair. Here are Ravi's tips for an accessible church:

- **Inclusion awareness:** My church has three nominated people who are our 'inclusion champions' (see guide 2 for more information). One lives with a disability, one is a carer and one works with children with disabilities. They share insights, ideas and reminders with our church members, and this works really well.
- **Let's be comfortable:** When possible get level with my eyes when you talk with me. Take a seat next to me if you want to chat, it's easier for both of us.
- **Provide information:** My friend has trouble seeing so speak to her and give her information in large print format. You can also give it electronically and her device's software will convert it to a font size she can read.
- **Ramp it up:** So often I need to search for an accessible entrance to a building. Please consider providing signage and having this information on your church's website. It does not cost much to provide a handrail and a ramp (portable or fixed) where you have steps. Please make sure your ramp has a smooth entrance and landing area for my wheelchair. My friend with vision impairment needs all steps clearly marked so she doesn't trip.
- **Talk to me:** Ask me what would make it easier for me to join in with church life. Consider offering sign language interpretation, or assisted listening devices for people with hearing difficulty. It helps lots of people when they can hear easily so use a microphone, especially in large spaces.

- **Light up my life:** Make sure there is enough light for me to read in meeting areas and in passages so I can use the spaces safely.
- **I'd like to see you:** It's awkward when I go to a reception counter or café and it is that high the person behind can't see me in my wheelchair. It's also easier if part of your community notice board is lower so us folk in wheelchairs can read the notices.
- **Accessible toilets:** It's important that doors to toilets are easy to open and that there are accessible sinks, taps, grab bars and enough space for me to turn my wheelchair. If for any reason you don't have an accessible toilet, please let me know where the nearest one to your church is.
- **Position** light switches, door handles, taps at the right height for a person in a wheelchair.
- **Think about the surfaces:** It is harder work pushing my wheelchair on rough surfaces such as high pile carpets. The smoother the surface the easier it is.
- **Pass the 'wheelchair' test:** If your church is not sure if you are accessible to all, try carrying out an access audit (see www.baptistcaresa.org.au for audit tools with on-line links). Or perhaps you can ask someone in a wheelchair or with any other disability to do the audit with you and point out any access issues.
- **Welcome me:** More than anything else I want to feel welcome. I love it when I go somewhere and I can see other people living with disabilities joining in church activities as equals. Having someone who has a disability welcoming people into your church sends a clear message that 'all are welcome here'.

Remember

Efforts to improve accessibility do not need not be expensive or difficult.

Providing an accessible entry or disability awareness training can make a big difference to the experience of welcome and acceptance for people with disability.



RESOURCES

Livability UK: More than welcome, <https://livability.org.uk/resources/more-than-welcome/>

Church is for Everyone: Accessibility Checklist, <https://exeter.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Church-is-for-everyone-guidance-on-disability.pdf>

Anglican Diocese of Blackburn Disability Audit Checklist, <https://www.blackburn.anglican.org/disability-accessability>

Through the Roof: Inclusive Principles, <https://www.throughtheroof.org/inclusive-principles-2/>

WA Government Accessibility Checklist, <http://www.disability.wa.gov.au/business-and-government1/business-and-government/disability-access-and-inclusion-plans/implementing-your-daip/access-and-inclusion-resource-kit/>

Special needs transport in SA, https://sacommunity.org/thesaurus/14495-Special_Needs_Transport

Public transport help for people with disabilities, <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/driving-and-transport/getting-around-with-a-disability/public-transport-help>

There are more useful accessibility resources at www.baptistcaresa.org.au/connections **with live links to the websites**

REFERENCES

¹ Australian Network on Disabilities website, viewed 5 March 2019 <https://www.and.org.au/pages/disability-statistics.html>

² National People with Disability and Carer Council, Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia - National Disability Strategy Consultation Report, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p.12

³ Holy Bible, New Living Translation, 1996, 2004, 2007, Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois: USA