

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Children and adults with disabilities have gifts and talents to contribute to their communities. Many of them want to go to church, and have services to offer to God.

Our faith community has been working for some time to improve the accessibility of its churches. What a blessing it would be if we could progress to the point where there were no longer any churches inadvertently excluding people with disabilities: no more architectural barriers preventing anyone with a disability from entering or fully participating; no more attitudinal barriers keeping persons with disabilities from feeling welcome; all churches offering accommodations and supports to remove communication barriers for individuals with sensory disabilities; and all people with disabilities who want to worship at the United Methodist church of their choice, feeling welcomed and included, but most important of all—feeling valued!

People with disabilities, as all people, long to feel valued. In order for this to happen, our congregations must not stop at being welcoming and accessible; they must go beyond that, for it is when people with disabilities are provided opportunities to participate in their churches in meaningful ways that they experience inclusion.

Since the 2nd edition of the *Accessibility Audit for Churches*, newer accessibility guidelines have become available from federal agencies committed to accessible design. Congregations have shared fresh stories about the use of creative accessibility accommodations and of model programs of inclusion. This 3rd edition of the audit continues to provide basic information regarding disabilities and accessibility, recommendations on barrier removal, and an audit checklist and listings of some manufacturers offering information as well as accessibility-related products. This audit also features sidebars with glimpses of model programs at the parish and conference level, material on new print and online resources, and an updated audit checklist with expanded areas of coverage (e.g., library, kitchen, and children's play area). In numerous places this audit adds references and links to the [2004 Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) guidelines](#), and it explores further dimensions of accessibility solutions and opportunities for including, supporting, and empowering people with disabilities.

WHO ARE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?

A total of 54 million Americans are people with a disability, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services.¹ That is one in five persons.

People with disabilities comprise a diverse population. Disability is experienced by all racial, social, economic, gender, and age groups. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Public Law 101-336 as amended,² defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities...major life activities include, but are not limited to, caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working.”³

¹ From Office on Disability, US Department of Health and Human Services (2007). *What is disability and who is affected by disability?* Washington, DC: author. Retrieved September 2008 from http://www.hhs.gov/od/about/fact_sheets/whatisdisability.html

² ADA Amendments Act of 2008, Public Law 110-325, www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm

³ www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm#12102

Types of Disabilities

The term “physical impairment,” more appropriately called “physical disability,” includes a tremendous range and variety of conditions. It covers spinal cord injuries, Spina Bifida, and other congenital malformations. It also includes amputations, arthritis, muscular dystrophy, and additional musculoskeletal conditions. Many physical disabilities can take the form of a mobility disability, a highly visible type of disability. An estimated 10 percent of people with mobility disabilities use wheelchairs, and others use walkers, canes, braces, or crutches.

The ADA term “mental impairment” covers such disabilities as chronic mental illness, or one of the developmental disabilities which include autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy or seizure disorder. An increasingly frequent type of neurological disability is traumatic brain injury (formerly called head injury), most often caused by accidents.

And a disability can be sensory, such as the disabilities experienced by people who are blind, are partially sighted, or have low vision, and people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Disabilities Are Not Always Readily Apparent

Among the less readily apparent disability types are learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, and chronic illness. A chronic illness can persist for months or even years, and its severity may require persons to be hospitalized during periodic flare-ups. The various types of chronic illnesses include diabetes, cystic fibrosis, hemophilia, disorders of the kidneys, multiple sclerosis, sickle cell anemia, asthma and other severe allergies, Lupus, gastrointestinal disorders, cardiac conditions, osteoporosis, chronic back pain, cancer, HIV/AIDS, and chemical sensitivities. Being consistently medically fragile also falls into this category.

A Wholeness of Spirit

In what has become a classic book on inclusion,⁴ we find the belief articulated that God sees in persons with disabilities a wholeness of spirit, where our imperfect vision may see only brokenness of body or mind.

Let us pray that as we journey on our individual paths toward welcoming and inclusion, we see in persons with disabilities a wholeness of spirit rather than only their disabilities.

The Uniqueness of Each Person

The diversity and value of each human individual in the sight of God is an age-old teaching from the scriptures. One modern author with a disability has written, “Our disability is only one of the many differences that make up our identities.”⁵ People with disabilities are also people with abilities. Just as all people, they have gifts to share—gifts that differ according to the grace given each of us.

In our faith communities when we speak or write about accessibility accommodations and inclusion opportunities, and we acknowledge the individuality of persons with disabilities and how they define

⁴ From Thornburgh, Ginny (Editor), (2005). “This We Believe.” In *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities (Revised Edition)*, p. 5. Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability.

⁵ From Enston, Mark (2004). “Take Me as I Am.” In *Reflections from a Different Journey: What Adults with Disabilities Wish All Parents Knew*, by Stanley D. Klein and John D. Kemp. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 30.

themselves, instead of making generalizations about them, we are showing what a well-known early leader of our field referred to as a “mark of a caring congregation.”⁶

FAITH COMMUNITY RESOLUTIONS

“What barrier is there that love cannot break?”

—Mahatma Gandhi

The enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990⁷ represented a momentous advancement in breaking barriers that prevent the full inclusion of people with disabilities in society.

As people of faith, we are guided not only by laws, but also by moral mandates of love and justice. And as articulated in UMC church policy:⁸

“...people all around us, including the church, are in need of God’s transforming love for living in this world and can be changed whenever we bring Christ’s love and truth working within our church...”

Faith communities have long been working to improve the accessibility of their churches for persons with disabilities. But since the ADA’s passage, the religious community has renewed efforts and taken new initiatives to break down barriers in the church that prevent inclusion of people with disabilities—barriers of attitude and communication, in addition to architectural barriers. For example, a policy statement entitled *Disabilities, the Body of Christ and the Wholeness of Society*⁹ was adopted by the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches of Christ. A collaborative effort of leaders of a variety of faiths was led by the National Organization on Disability to produce the publication *Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community*.¹⁰ And different faith communities, our own among them, have passed national level resolutions affirming the tenets of the ADA and calling for the voluntary compliance of their churches.

The following resolution¹¹ was adopted in 2004 by the General Conference of The United Methodist Church:

UNITED METHODIST IMPLEMENTATION OF AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

WHEREAS, our human rights as stated by the United States of America Constitution are God given, and we can set priorities unto ourselves apart from the rest of His creation, and

WHEREAS, these priorities are applied to our life and what it means to us, how we live it, who we are and to become, and *anyone* can have an attainable priority to direct their life, and

⁶ From Wilke, Harold (1980). *Creating the Caring Congregation*, p. 72. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

⁷ <http://www.ada.gov/statute.html> and <http://www.access-board.gov/about/laws/ada.htm>

⁸ From Resolution #46, adopted 2004. *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church. Readopted 2008*. See *The Book of Resolutions 2008*, p. 182, ¶3003. Copyright © 2008 The United Methodist Publishing House. Nashville, TN. Used by permission. <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=4&mid=6558>

⁹ See NCC Policy Statement adopted 1998. *Disabilities, the Body of Christ and the Wholeness of Society*. <http://www.nccusa.org/nmu/mce/dis/#policy>

¹⁰ Available from the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), Interfaith Initiative, 1629 K. Street NW, Suite 503, Washington, DC 20006. Phone: 202-457-0046. <http://www.aapd.com/Interfaith/Interfaith.html>

¹¹ From The United Methodist Publishing House (2008). *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*, p. 182, ¶3003. Copyright © 2008 The United Methodist Publishing House. Nashville, TN. Used by permission. <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=4&mid=6558>

WHEREAS, by applying the use of our love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength in our time, money, and attitudes we can perceive our priorities within ourselves and others, and

WHEREAS, God's grace is with us throughout our lives: birth, disease, accident, crime, and aging, yet, not realizing it till it's been revealed, and

WHEREAS, we *all* are instruments of God's grace in other people's lives when we are open to His grace, and

WHEREAS, we are all priests—the whole church is the holy priesthood, those called to be a mediator between God and a needful world representing Jesus Christ—where *all* are to share God's love and salvation with other people, and

WHEREAS, God's love for us is unconditional; God loves us for who we are—not what we are or how we look; Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and this great love moves us to accept this gift in our hearts of a living relationship with God as a priority for *all* our lives, and

WHEREAS, we are consciously living our lives in relationship with God that can be nurtured through the spiritual discipline of living in God's presence, and these lives are courageous and joyful—not tragic or brave, and

WHEREAS, study brings our minds to Christ like lives, equips us to fulfill the highest calling of *all* of us, and

WHEREAS, Christian study brings *all* to a knowledge of God and knowledge of the world to serve God, and

WHEREAS, sacred moments and practices (through services and discipline) bring us to know, experience, and live in the presence of Christ through the church (*meaning everyone*), including the serving and receiving of the sacraments, and

WHEREAS, baptism and Holy Communion are upheld by all Christian traditions and have been given to us so we may live on growing as disciples in every part of our life, and

WHEREAS, showing Christ as being real and important for others, we *all* must live authentically as our serving Christ gives our hands to Christ by making a friend, being a friend, and introducing our new friend to the friend of all friends—Jesus Christ, and

WHEREAS, through the Resolution of the "Annual Accessibility Audit" (#43, adopted in 1992), Social Principles, ¶ 162I "Rights of Persons with Disabilities," and the section in the *Book of Discipline* on inclusiveness (¶ 139) gives the opportunity for *each person*, and congregation to make a plan for serving Christ, and

WHEREAS, even with God's gift of grace and a new life in Christ, we can still sin in many forms, yet there is still forgiveness, realizing and admitting our sin (physically and spiritually) in our lives as the first step to overcome them, and

WHEREAS, through prayer, repentance, surrendering anew, counseling, and creating a new plan to reevaluate and prioritize to God's direction in *all* our lives, and

WHEREAS, by becoming disciples, we can reply to the call of Christ with *all* our hearts, minds, souls, strengths, hands, and feet as we are able to walk with Jesus and grow into His likeness as our highest priority; to share Christ and to learn to love as Jesus loved, and

WHEREAS, people all around us, including the church, are in need of God's transforming love for living in this world and can be changed whenever we bring Christ's love and truth working within our church, family, work, social environments, and our private times, and

WHEREAS, we are edified by God's grace for growth in our relationships as we live in obedience to His call, the Holy Spirit teaches and empowers us to love as Jesus loved and to mature in the likeness of Christ as children imitate their parents, to be focused upon our call in humble service, and

WHEREAS, the body of Christ is the gathering of *all* disciples who offer their lives to proclaim Christ in the world, and *every member* of the body of Christ has been given special gifts for ministry that need to be sought and exercised to build up the church, to form healthy, living communities, and to show Christ's life of love in concrete ways "that the world may believe," and

WHEREAS, we are called to persevere in grace for the rest of our lives by weekly attendance, commitment to share support, accountability, and guidance, and

WHEREAS, *all* are sent out by Christ's Great Commission, to be Christ's apostles in today's world in the midst of obstacles that can be overcome through Christ and other Christians, and

WHEREAS, there are 56 million disabled citizens at any one time in the United States, and

WHEREAS, disabled persons are real people, with real voices and real choices whose lives have been stolen within ALL cultures within America comprised of young, middle-aged, seniors, veterans, parents, husbands, wives, children from all races and all ethnic backgrounds, and

WHEREAS, people with disabilities constitute a discrete and insular minority, subjected to a history of purposeful unequal treatment and placed in a position of political powerlessness in American society and within the church, and

WHEREAS, prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities based on unjustified stereotypes continues, with disparate treatment and disenfranchisement, and

WHEREAS, such discrimination and prejudice denies people with disabilities the opportunity to pursue opportunities in society and within the Church on an equal basis, to live in their own homes so as to be close to family, friends, work, school, church, recreation, social stimulation, libraries, theaters, community centers, museums, and medical facilities, and

WHEREAS, accommodation for our disabled people (parishioners and visitors alike) are part of our reaching out through the provisions of *The Book of Discipline* through Church and Society empowers and frees us to advocate for personal assistants, accessibility in public and private areas, housing, transportation, and technology to do so, and

WHEREAS, through Church and Society we have a duty to bring justice and fairness in our civil responsibilities (like voting or serving in civil government) for our people with disabilities for Medicaid, Medicare, vocational rehabilitation, housing, education, job training, in-home services, and transportation—all of which are *everyone's* civil right, and

WHEREAS, this inability to participate fully in American society and within the church robs people with disabilities of the opportunity to claim any degree of independence and costs the United States (including the church) billions of dollars annually in unnecessary expenses from enforced dependency and nonproductivity, and

WHEREAS, the body of Christ, the church, need to be vigilant as consumers, advocates, and legislators to reserve funding and accountability to promote choice for persons with disabilities, and

WHEREAS, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by George Bush in 1990 to, in his words, "in the unjustified segregation and exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream of American life," and

WHEREAS, the United States Supreme Court promoted community living through its OLMSTEAD decision, which urges all 50 states to *plan* for people living in the community over institutional placement, and

WHEREAS, the ADA's primary goal is to promote access to *all* aspects of social interaction including education, employment, commerce, recreation, government, and transportation, and

WHEREAS, the ADA provides the means for full implementation of the Act and legal recourse to redress discrimination on the basis of physical disability, and

WHEREAS, The United Methodist Church has brought closely within itself to help people as taught by our Lord Jesus Christ those who are hungry, thirsty, sick or in prison,

Therefore, be it resolved, that the assembled delegates to this General Conference of The United Methodist Church 2004 affirm our support of the full implementation of the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and

Be it further resolved, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church urge all our congregations to implement and enforce the provisions of the ADA and all disability-related programs within every area that members of The United Methodist Church reside with the same vigor and interest as they would any other law affecting their able-bodied constituency.

Through the years many significant resolutions related to accessibility and inclusion in our churches have been passed at the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. And once a resolution is adopted, it becomes church policy. *The Book of Resolutions* contains all current social policies adopted by the General Conference. A resolution entitled "Accessibility Audit"¹² was adopted at the 1992 General Conference of The United Methodist Church. This resolution underscores the denomination's commitment to becoming an accessible and barrier-free church, and advises that "...all United Methodist churches shall conduct an annual audit of their facilities to discover what barriers impede full participation...Plans shall be made and priorities determined for the elimination of all barriers including architectural, communication, and attitudinal barriers..."

ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

Some people think of accessibility as being entirely concerned with removing architectural barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from entering church and participating fully. But accessibility for people with disabilities has many dimensions, and to address it fully requires examination of other issues also. Among these critical issues, in addition to barrier removal, are: welcoming, inclusion, costs, and accessibility for historic churches.

Being a Welcoming Church

We can safely assume any church wants to be thought of as welcoming to all people. But being truly welcoming to people with disabilities and their families requires more than a warm greeting, friendly people, and inviting snacks in the fellowship hall.

An accessible parking space, an accessible route to the main entrance, and doors that are wide and easy to open provide a good start in helping people with mobility disabilities feel welcome in a church. To some individuals with hearing loss, the availability of an assistive listening device and a text copy of the sermon can be important signs that they are in a welcoming church. And having worship materials in large print, for people with some kinds of vision loss, can also send positive signals. Conducting quality disability awareness programs and involving people with disabilities as trainers are important for fostering the positive congregational attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Such attitudes often are readily apparent to persons with disabilities and may add to their overall impression about whether or not they are in a welcoming church. Providing accommodations covering the areas of architectural accessibility, communication accessibility, programmatic accessibility, and attitudinal accessibility, are all important objectives for a congregation striving to be a welcoming and accessible church.

Being an Inclusive Church

As noted earlier, our congregations must not stop at being welcoming and accessible, but must go beyond that to make their church truly inclusive. For people with disabilities, inclusion means providing opportunities

¹²See *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 1992*, p. 184. Copyright © 1992 by the United Methodist Publishing House. Nashville, TN. Used by permission.

to participate in meaningful ways in their church. But it also involves having arrangements in place that allow people with and without disabilities to enjoy activities together. And it helps family members of people with disabilities to enjoy church activities also. Some people with a family member who has a disability may spend much of their time caretaking, and need some respite. Churches have addressed this need in various creative ways.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANET WOODWARD

The Church of the Resurrection UMC, Leawood, KS, supports, empowers, and enables persons with disabilities through its “Matthew’s Ministry” program. Named for a student with a developmental disability, this comprehensive program trains the congregation in disability awareness and offers a variety of inclusion opportunities. A sibling workshop is one part of a “Family Night Out” project. Here, a sibling of a Matthew’s Ministry participant plays Bingo with a volunteer from the church.

Creative Solutions to Dealing with Costs

The idea of possible high costs for a church’s architectural barrier removal can be somewhat daunting; however, there are a number of creative solutions that can be considered. Some have been described in publications.¹³ Others have been shared by annual conferences. For example, in the North Central New York Annual Conference, the United Methodist Men held workshops for church leaders on how to build ramps. Then, these newly trained volunteers went to churches that needed ramps and built them.

Accessibility for Historic Churches

A congregation may hesitate to consider making architectural accessibility accommodations when its church building is historic. However, help is available and in many cases will enable a congregation to make such accommodations.

The 2004 ADA guidelines specifically address this issue in a section about *alterations* to historic buildings and facilities at <http://www.access-board.gov/ada-aba/final.cfm#a2025>. They advise about the role of state historic preservation officers, explaining these are state-appointed officials who carry out responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act. One of their responsibilities is to consult on providing access while protecting significant elements of historic buildings and facilities.

Congregations can find useful information in the online materials developed by Heritage Preservation Services,¹⁴ which works to protect and preserve historic properties. In an important resource entitled *Accessibility Considerations*,¹⁵ Heritage Preservation Services offers five actions that are not recommended, and five that are, as follows:

¹³ See *More Than Fifty Ways to Make Your Parish Accessible with Little or No Cost* (June 2009). By the Rev. Barbara Ramnaraine and Charlotte Hawkins Shepard, Ph.D. <http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/2005.html>, and *Money and Ideas: Creative Approaches to Congregational Access* (2001). National Organization on Disability (N.O.D.). <http://www.congregationalresources.org/MoneyAndIdeas.pdf>

¹⁴ A unit of the National Park Service, US Department of the Interior. <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps>

¹⁵ www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/standguide/preserve/preserve_access.htm

Not recommended:

1. Making changes to buildings without first seeking expert advice from access specialists and historic preservationists, to determine solutions;
2. Undertaking code-required alterations before identifying those spaces, features, or finishes which are character-defining and must therefore be preserved;
3. Altering, damaging, or destroying character-defining features in attempting to comply with accessibility requirements;
4. Making access modifications that do not provide a reasonable balance between independent, safe access, and preservation of historic features;
5. Making modifications for accessibility without considering the impact on the historic building and its site.

Recommended:

1. Identifying the historic building's character-defining spaces, features, and finishes so that accessibility code-required work will not result in their damage or loss;
2. Complying with barrier-free access requirements, in such a manner that character-defining spaces, features, and finishes are preserved;
3. Working with local disability groups, access specialists, and historic preservation specialists to determine the most appropriate solution to access problems;
4. Providing barrier-free access that promotes independence for a person with a disability to the highest degree practicable, while preserving significant historic features;
5. Finding solutions to meet accessibility requirements that minimize the impact on the historic building and its site, such as compatible ramps, paths, and lifts.

ATTITUDINAL ACCESS

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church tells us that we are called to the example of Jesus' ministry—that the services of worship of every local church of The United Methodist Church shall be inclusive and open to all persons. "Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world; therefore, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination."¹⁶ These words do not mean we are called to include every person except that little boy with autism spectrum disorder who rocks in his seat and waves his hands during the service.

The Book of Discipline calls us to "recognize and receive the gifts of persons with disabilities to enable them to be full participants in the community of faith."¹⁷ Full participation means that it is not acceptable to avoid greeting the woman who is blind because she cannot see you as you quickly brush past her in the fellowship hall.

¹⁶From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008*, p. 93 ¶139. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House.

¹⁷From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008*, p. 111, ¶162. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE REV. WREN MILLER

In order to make the main entrance to their historic church accessible, Huntsville First United Methodist Church in Huntsville, Alabama built a ramp. Working with the Board of Trustees and what was then called their Church Administrative Board, the Building Committee that planned the renovation took care to preserve the building's character-defining spaces and features.

The Book of Discipline calls us to observe Disability Awareness Sunday once a year to celebrate our call to full inclusion of people with disabilities.¹⁸ But we can celebrate this call every Sunday, for example, simply by inviting a young man with an intellectual disability to serve as an usher, appreciating his gifts and knowing that if he speaks out of turn occasionally during service, it could be his way of showing that he understands that he is a cherished member of our community of faith.

**For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,
so we, who are many, are one body....
We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.**
(Romans 12:4-6)

Architectural and communicational access can be accomplished with time, money, and materials, but attitudinal access must happen within the hearts and minds of the members of the congregation. Not only must we welcome the parishioner sitting in a wheelchair—perhaps the image that first comes to mind when accessibility is brought up—but also the person whose disability may not be readily apparent. Accessibility means welcoming a person living with mental illness, or with a seizure disorder, or with any one of the innumerable “conditions or disabilities whose particular needs...might make more challenging their participation or that of their families in the life of the Church and the community.”¹⁹

Society's attitudes towards persons with disabilities often require a restructuring of beliefs and a change of heart for the many members of a church to be one body in Christ. Unless members of the congregation have known a number of persons with varying types of disabilities, they may never have had reason to think about the key points and attitudes that make relationships with persons with disabilities easier and more relaxed.

Yet attitudinal accessibility is an absolutely vital part of a congregation's journey to full inclusion. It is only through education that a congregation can create a welcoming and relaxed environment for everyone.

¹⁸From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008*, p. 196, ¶1265. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House.

¹⁹From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008*, p. 111, ¶162. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House.

For this reason, each annual conference has a committee or other structure on disability concerns to advocate for full inclusion, to create educational programs, and “to develop ways to sensitize persons in leadership positions on issues that affect persons with disabilities and therefore the entire Church.”²⁰ Each annual conference committee maintains connectional relationships with local congregations and can be called on to help a congregation increase its attitudinal accessibility.

An essential component of any program designed to foster positive attitudes towards people with disabilities is basic training in “People First Language.” This language is an outgrowth of the self-advocacy movement “People First” that began in the US in the early 1970s.²¹ The basic philosophy of People First is that people with disabilities are people first, and their disabilities come second. This concept has led to a major change in how language is used to refer to people with disabilities. People First Language puts the person before the disability and describes what a person has, not who a person is. For example, we say “John, my neighbor, who uses a wheelchair,” “Mary, who has an intellectual disability,” and “people with and without disabilities.” Among the many excellent resources available about this language are the writings of Kathie Snow,²² a parent of a son with a disability, and a national-level trainer and consultant.



PHOTO COURTESY OF OFFICE OF COMMUNICATION,
NORTH ALABAMA CONFERENCE, UMC

Deborah Wade is convener of Disability Ministries, a conference-level UMC group that has held disability awareness workshops in each of the North Alabama Conference districts. At an annual conference meeting, speaking from the conference’s accessible stage, Deborah described the ministry “Bridge Builders,” through which churches can show they are active in disability ministry.

Disability Awareness Sundays, adult education forums, workshops,²³ and retreats can all be part of a congregation’s journey toward being truly welcoming to people with disabilities.

ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND, ARE PARTIALLY SIGHTED, OR HAVE LOW VISION

Making our church’s ministry accessible to people who are blind, are partially sighted, or have low vision requires an emphasis on communication as well as building access. While the facilities need to be made into a safe and familiar environment, thought also must be given to means of communication.

²⁰ From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church – 2008*, p. 458, ¶653. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House.

²¹ The People First movement in the US began January 8, 1974 at Fairview Hospital and Training Center, in Salem, Oregon, when an articulate resident said at a meeting, “I’m tired of being called retarded; we are people first!” For the history and philosophy of this movement, which in the US grew to more than 800 groups, see the website “People First of Oregon.” www.people1.org/about_us_history.htm

²² Kathie Snow’s website is called *Disability is Natural*. www.disabilityisnatural.com

²³ The following DVD is a UMC resource developed to help in conducting workshops: *Disability Concerns Workshop* (2009). By Jennifer R. Yound. UMCOR Health, General Board of Global Ministries, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 330, New York, NY 10115, 800-554-8583.

Traditionally, many church-related materials are communicated visually. We rely on printed bulletins, newsletters, reminder notes, Bibles, and worship materials, and increasingly on printed materials transmitted electronically to parishioners' home computers. For people who are blind, are partially sighted, or have low vision, printed materials need to be changed or adapted so that they are accessible. Fortunately, computers and copy machines allow us to make these changes relatively easily.

It is not appropriate to generalize about a best method of communication; each person has preferred methods based on background, education, training, and degree of sight loss. These days, fewer than 10 percent of people who are blind read Braille.²⁴ Instead, many use computer technology to read print materials, using text-to-speech technology that converts words on a scanner or on a computer screen to synthetic voice output. For this reason it is very important for church websites and online resources to have all online information in an accessible format. (See *Improving Your Website's Accessibility* on the American Foundation for the Blind's website.²⁵)

Some people who are blind do prefer Braille materials. Many people with partial sight or low vision are able to read if the material is in large print.²⁶ For this reason, churches should make certain that large-print worship materials always are made available.

Among individuals who are partially sighted (visual acuity between 20/70 and 20/200 in the better eye, with correction) and who have low vision, there is an even greater variety of visual loss. Some may have retinitis pigmentosa (RP), which results in "tunnel vision" (loss of peripheral vision). Among persons who have RP, the degree of clear central vision varies widely from person to person. Others may have macular degeneration, which is the opposite of RP. Their central vision is lost to varying degrees, but they do have peripheral vision that allows some individuals to see enough to read and drive.

Some persons may have cataracts and their vision will be blurred until the cataracts are advanced enough to be removed, if their overall health allows. Others may have glaucoma (excessive fluid pressure inside the eye) that can lead to legal blindness. Millions of Americans have limited vision, but are able to wear glasses or contact lenses that correct their vision. For others however, glasses do not restore vision. For many who are partially sighted or have low vision, large-print materials are helpful, and except for people who also have a hearing loss, oral communication is usually appropriate. For people who have a hearing loss and low or no vision, oral communication can be supplemented by assistive listening devices. For people with no hearing and little or no vision, tactile interpreting provides them with a method of communication.

ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF, deaf, DEAFENED, DEAF-BLIND, OR HARD OF HEARING

People with no hearing or limited hearing are seldom considered when a church undertakes the task of becoming accessible, yet access to communication is crucial if we intend to welcome all persons into our community.

²⁴Fewer than 10 percent of the 1.3 million legally blind people in the United States read Braille, and just 10 percent of blind children are learning it, according to a report by the National Federation of the Blind.

http://www.mlive.com/news/us-world/index.ssf/2009/03/fewer_than_10_percent_of_blind.html

²⁵In *Web Accessibility*. By the American Foundation for the Blind, 2 Penn Plaza, Suite 1102, New York, NY 10121. Phone: 212-502-7600. www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=57&TopicID=167&DocumentID=2176

²⁶See *Large Print: Guidelines for Optimal Readability*. <http://www.aph.org/edresearch/lpguide.htm>

Just as those who are blind or partially sighted, individuals who are Deaf,²⁷ deaf, deafened, deaf-blind, and hard of hearing experience a great diversity in their sensory loss and communicate in a variety of ways. While this section of the audit covers all these groups, there is a tremendous difference between people who use a method of sign language for communication, such as American Sign Language or a form of Signed English, and people who rely primarily on printed and oral language to communicate.

Many individuals who are Deaf or were deafened before learning language (prelingually deaf) use sign language as their primary means of communication and English as their second language. Some who were born hearing and later in life became deaf will learn a form of Signed English, while others may depend on speechreading (lip reading) and the printed English word for communication. People who are part of the Deaf culture group (Deaf with a capital “D”) think in visual terms and use a visual-gestural language. American Sign Language (ASL) is a linguistically accepted language, with a different word order than English, and is the native language of the Culturally Deaf community.

People who are hard of hearing are diverse and are found in almost every congregation in the country. Hearing losses occur in different frequency ranges. Some individuals lose high tones and have more difficulty hearing consonants, while others lose the lower tones and may miss some vowel sounds. Many factors besides degree of hearing loss affect people’s ability to hear at their individual optimum level. Background noise, lighting, fatigue, speechreading ability, and residual hearing will affect the ability to communicate easily if a person is hard of hearing.

For people who are Deaf, deaf, or deafened, communication is visual. For individuals who are hard of hearing, assistive listening devices/systems can be used to enhance residual hearing and improve sound reception in church.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTHA STOKES

Types of assistive listening systems include Induction Loop, Frequency Modulation (FM) technology, and Infrared. (*See Glossary of this audit for definitions.*) Any of these systems can be added to your existing sound system, although some can stand alone. All of the devices require that the individual have some residual hearing. The assistive listening system helps people by bringing sound directly to them, without distortion, as long as the speakers use a microphone hooked into the system.

The Rev. Elizabeth Walker, of the Virginia Annual Conference Commission on Disabilities (COD), wears an assistive listening device that was obtained with a commission grant. Such grants in the area of ministry with persons who are deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing also provide for ASL interpreters and Computer-Assisted Notetaking (CAN) to allow better access to conference activities and events. (COD’s overall grant program extends to ministry with persons who are blind, are partially sighted, or have low vision; persons with physical disabilities; and persons with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Grant areas include accessibility grants, program grants, camper scholarships, and respite-care grants.)

²⁷The term “Deaf” with a capital “D” refers to people who have a strong deaf identity and think of themselves as culturally deaf. Many have attended residential schools for the deaf, as opposed to people to whom the term “deaf” with a lower case “d” refers. This later term is used for deaf people who tend to have been mainstreamed, did not attend a school for the deaf, and have little or no association with other members of the deaf community. The capital “D” often is used in the context of deaf culture, and the lower case “d” is used solely in the context of hearing loss.

The assistive listening device is exactly that: “assistive.” It partners with the hearing aid or with the ear for those not using aids, to bring sound closer to the individual.

A comprehensive discussion of assistive listening systems and related issues, such as guidelines for speakers in the sanctuary, can be found in the *Hearing Accessibility Handbook: A Guide for Houses of Worship*,²⁸ by the Rochester Chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA). The HLAA guide can be downloaded or purchased from HLAA directly.

There are various kinds of accommodations congregations can provide.²⁹ For example, for people who are deaf and rely primarily on written English, as well as for individuals who are hard of hearing, a congregation can offer print copies of the sermon and announcements, or at least a summary paragraph. For parishioners who are Deaf and use sign language, an interpreter for worship and other ministry events can be provided, if requested in advance.

People who are Deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing are most likely to contact your church through the local Relay Services, available in every state for communication between persons who are hearing and persons who have hearing loss, or speech that is difficult to understand. Relay Services, also called Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS), is an operator service reached throughout the US by dialing 711. It can connect, over the telephone network, two callers who have different abilities. Voice callers can be connected to people who are Deaf, deaf, deafened, hard of hearing, or who have a communication disorder or speech that is difficult to understand.

Of the different types of calls offered through Relay Services, the most common is TTY to Voice/Voice to TTY. In this type of call, the relay operator types the spoken words of the person using the standard phone to the person using the TTY, and speaks the text of the person using the TTY to the person using the standard phone. The next-most common type of call is Voice Carry Over (VCO). VCO allows a person who is hard of hearing or deaf, and wants to use his or her own voice, to speak directly to the called party and receive responses via the relay operator’s typed text. No typing is required by the calling party. This service is particularly useful to senior citizens who have lost their hearing, but who can still speak.³⁰ Among other relay services are Internet Protocol Relay services (IP Relay) and Video Relay Services (VRS), which use webcam or videophones to voice the sign language of one caller and sign what is voiced from the other caller.

If you want to call someone using TRS, use your TTY or dial 711 on your telephone and you will automatically be connected to a TRS operator, with no charge. The 711 code is not just for use by persons with disabilities. Both voice and TRS users can initiate a call from any US telephone, without having to dial lengthy access numbers. The 711 dialing access does not work for VRS or IP Relay calls, because such calls are made through the internet. Individuals who are hearing and initiating a VRS or IP Relay call may do so by calling a provider’s 800 number. VRS allows people who are Deaf, deafened, hard of hearing, and whose speech is not easily understood to communicate over video telephones with people who are hearing, through the assistance of a sign language interpreter.

²⁸ <http://www.shhh-rochester-ny.org/Accessibility%20Handbook.doc>.

²⁹ For more information contact the United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries <http://www.umcsignsofsolidarity.org/> and the United Methodist Congress of the Deaf. <http://www.umcd.org/>

³⁰ From *Telecommunications Relay Services: FCC Consumer Facts*. <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/trs.html>

ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE ENVIRONMENTAL DISABILITIES

Providing accessibility for people who have environmental disabilities, such as chemical and/or mold sensitivities, is an issue of increasing concern to ecumenical organizations, interfaith groups, and faith communities working to make congregations more welcoming to all God's people. For example, the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC) through its Eco-Justice Program, has held conferences on this topic, and has developed resources,³¹ such as *Christian Principles for a Healthy Body and Spirit* and *Made in the Image of God*, among other environmental health projects.

The United Methodist Church also has taken leadership initiatives in the area of access for people with environmental disabilities. The Rev. Nancy Dawson Firestone is a key UMC leader in this area.³² In workshops on Embodying Wellness and Accommodation, conference keynote addresses, and a major presentation on the spiritual challenges of environmental disability,³³ she has called for congregations to educate themselves in this area and develop policies that lead to accommodation, inclusion, and healing.

A notable effort in this direction was the passage of the following resolution³⁴ by the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference:

RES-4 ENVIRONMENTALLY SAFE CHURCHES

2005 ACTION: Approved as Amended:

Whereas, the Commission on Child Advocacy has been advocating for making every church a Safe Sanctuary for all God's children.

Whereas, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own."

Whereas, John Wesley's health education was rooted in both his sexuality and his assessment of environmental concerns, Wesley urged his readers toward a lifestyle conducive to good health. This expresses Wesley's commitment to minister to the total person.

Whereas, infants and children are entrusted to us and are unable to recognize dangers and protect themselves from harmful environmental influences.

Whereas, millions of children suffer from allergies and asthma related to environmental pollution and this rate is rising at an alarming rate with asthma and allergies being responsible for more than 10 million school absentees every year.

Whereas, the General Church in 1988 recognized the problem of indoor pollution and called for "churches and church institutions to take an audit of sources of indoor pollution and take remedial steps." (*The Book of Resolutions*, p. 78).

Therefore be it resolved that every local church consider a study of the children's nurseries and classrooms to determine the environmental safety especially considering pesticides, cleaners, and air quality.

Therefore be it resolved that every local church consider the environmental health of all toys and snacks provided to children.

³¹ Eco-justice Programs. National Council of Churches of Christ. <http://nccecojustice.org/resources/>

³² The Rev. Nancy Dawson Firestone can be contacted through her website, www.wehearyou.org (website under construction as of this printing).

³³ See *Environmental Disability: Spiritual Challenges to Faith and Community* (2007). Presentation by the Rev. Nancy Dawson Firestone at the John Heinz Institute, Wilkes-Barre, PA. Available from HEAR: Health, Environment and Relationships, www.wehearyou.org (website under construction as of this printing).

³⁴ *Environmentally Safe Churches: Res-4* (2005). A resolution approved by the Central Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church. Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church 2005 Journal. M.A. Publishing, Mobile, AL, p. 291.

Therefore be it resolved that the Commission on Child Advocacy will provide guidelines to help every local church conduct an audit of their nurseries and children's classrooms to meet the requirements of this resolution.

Therefore be it resolved that the Commission on Child Advocacy will provide curriculum and resources for a study on environmental health issues confronting the local church and make these resources available through Discovery Place.

The environmental disability, chemical sensitivities, has been reported to affect between 12.6 percent and 33 percent of the population, according to a major review of research.³⁵ Other reports, from nine studies in the US, indicate 3.5 percent of the population is affected by severe chemical sensitivities, and at least 12 percent is moderately affected.³⁶

People who have chemical sensitivities experience reactions to combinations of low-level chemicals in the air, water, and food. Since World War II over 80,000 chemicals have entered the market, many of which have been incorporated into our lifestyles. Most of these have not been tested for health effects, nor have they been tested as we experience them, in combination and in tightly closed buildings designed for energy efficiency. This makes it difficult to determine safe limits. Sensitivities emerge as the body's detoxification system becomes stressed or impaired. Reactions to exposures vary from individual to individual and from time to time, and may occur immediately, hours, or even days after exposure. Reactions can include one or more of the following: headaches or migraines, sinus pain, fibromyalgia, joint pain, muscle weakness or spasms, other severe pain, digestive disorders, reactive airway, difficulty concentrating, mental confusion, memory loss, depression, mood changes, loss of physical coordination, hyperactivity, extreme fatigue, and malaise. Reactions may be disabling, and since continued exposure may increase the level and duration of disability, persons with chemical sensitivities must avoid all exposure to materials they do not tolerate.

The environmental disability, mold sensitivities, refers to health problems some individuals experience when exposed to indoor mold growth. While federal guidance on minimizing indoor mold growth generally is consistent, guidance on mitigating exposure to indoor mold is sometimes inconsistent about cleanup agents, protective clothing and equipment, and sensitive populations. As a result, the public may not be sufficiently advised about the potential health risks of indoor mold.

In some cases, chemical and mold damage to the body can increase to the point that an individual can no longer perform functions required for working or participating in activities of daily living. Since chemicals and mold are so embedded in our culture, people with chemical sensitivities and mold sensitivities retreat in isolation to protect themselves from further damage.

Fresh air, pure water, nutritional supplements, an alkaline and organic, protein-balanced whole-food diet, and the avoidance of chemicals become the treatment protocol, which prompts lifestyle changes that run counter to culture. These changes stress family relationships, friendships, and community and church relationships.

A community of support is essential to work through the depth and breadth of spiritual, relational, and practical challenges.

³⁵ Gibson, P.R., & Lindberg, A. (2007). *What do we know about multiple chemical sensitivity?: An overview of the research*. Presentation at the 8th International Conference of the International Association for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (IACFS) "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, and other Related Illnesses." January 12-14, Bahia Mar Beach Resort, Ft. Lauderdale, FL.

³⁶ Pall, M.L. (2009). From chapter in *General and Applied Toxicology, 6 Volume Set, 3rd Edition* by Bryan Ballantyne (Editor), Timothy C. Marrs (Editor), Tore Syversen (Editor). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Hoboken, NJ.
http://www.essenceofhealthonline.com/letters/epidemic_mcs_chemical_sensitivity.pdf

The faith community's creation of sanctuary, or safe clean space for communal well-being, embodies saving grace for people who have environmental disabilities. How accessible is your church in this regard?

Suggested measures for achieving environmental accessibility have been in numerous print and online resources. Particularly useful to our faith communities are those developed by the Eco-Justice Program of the NCCC. <http://nccecojustice.org/resources/>.

ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE MOBILITY DISABILITIES

The most common image associated with the word accessibility is a person sitting in a wheelchair. People using wheelchairs or scooters may be the most visible, but they certainly are not the only ones who benefit from a building that is accessible to individuals with mobility disabilities. People who use crutches, walkers, or canes and people with multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, back problems, knee problems, severe arthritis—even people pushing baby strollers or pulling wheeled luggage—all benefit from buildings that are architecturally accessible.

There is a wide range of types and severities of mobility disabilities. For some people, limited mobility may be temporary, but for many it is a permanent condition and may become progressively worse. While this audit covers the range of people with mobility disabilities, there is a



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE HAWKINS SHEPARD

difference between someone with knee problems and someone who is using a wheelchair. Even among those who use wheelchairs, some may have balance problems, others may have paraplegia (paralysis from the waist down with total function of the arms and upper body), and still others may have tetraplegia (also called quadriplegia), paralysis of all four limbs. Some people with one of these conditions have limited use of their

In Bethesda, Maryland, at the Shalem Institute on Spiritual Formation, members of an interfaith group entered into a covenant of sacrifice so that the Rev. Nancy Firestone, a UMC pastor who has chemical sensitivities, could join their weekly meetings. They said, “We cannot control the building or the ventilation system, but we can control what we bring into this room. As we prepare to come next week, let us become aware of the many fragrances we wear, and leave them at home.”

Asbury United Methodist Church, in Phoenix, Arizona, installed a vertical platform lift some years back to provide chancel accessibility to an elderly liturgist, Grace Hamilton. A wheelchair user due to severe arthritis, Grace used the lift for many years to share her gifts with her congregation. The lift remains in use for anyone else needing an accessibility accommodation to the chancel.

upper and/or lower limbs, so that they walk with mobility aids. Involve the people who use wheelchairs in your planning, because the abilities of each individual parishioner need to be taken into consideration as you try to make your church fully accessible.

Our audit contains items about providing bus or van transportation for people in wheelchairs, when there is no accessible public or other transportation available. It is critical, however, that if this is done, appropriate safety measures be taken so the wheelchair and its passenger are safe and secure. See the online article on wheelchair transportation safety in Chapter III: “Print and Online Resources—Access for People Who Have Mobility Disabilities” of this audit.

While many of the audit items focus on the space required to maneuver a wheelchair, there are other items that deal with people who have minor mobility disabilities. We strongly encourage churches to make their facilities accessible for people who use wheelchairs. If your church feels it cannot possibly add a ramp because the steps are too many and too steep, but it couldn't possibly afford an elevator either, don't give up. There are less expensive solutions, such as platform lifts and limited-use/limited-application elevators,³⁷ that can make the church building more accessible for mobility and other disabilities.

³⁷ See information in Chapter III: “Elevators and Lifts.”