

Church Building and Program Accessibility

An Older Adult Ministries Resource

Introduction

The Older Adult Ministries Task Force of the Wisconsin and Michigan Conferences has been meeting for nearly two years, studying ways our congregations can enhance and expand their ministries with older adults. Our goals are not only to serve the needs of older members, but to equip them for service to and beyond their congregations.

We sought feedback from our churches through a survey, and learned that virtually all of our church buildings have barriers to full access, not only for older persons but for all those contending with physical or cognitive limitations. The United Church of Christ has developed a comprehensive document addressing challenges to full access.

Disability Guidelines

When thinking about disabilities, the first image that comes to mind for many people is someone who is in a wheelchair, uses a walker or cane, has a hearing aid that can be easily seen.... However, some disabilities are “invisible,” to the casual observer—yet they interfere with the lives of those who live with them, sometimes in major ways.



Because the UCC is the church of Extravagant Welcome and Hospitality, we have an obligation to ensure that each person who comes in the door—or who is invited in or may come in the future—can share a full experience of worship and fellowship and leadership. We strive to host inclusive, accessible events that enable all individuals, including individuals with disabilities, to engage fully.



Persons with disabilities experience their disabilities as individuals; therefore, two persons with the same disability may have different experiences. It is important to recognize the persons with disabilities as experts and it is always wise to seek out resources about disabilities you may encounter. – From the UCC ADA Guide: <https://uccdm.org/a2a/>

We prepared this shorter guide about major access issues, hoping that our congregations will study it and seek to make improvements. Some suggestions are relatively simple and affordable, while others may be costlier and more complex. Above all, we urge our congregations to commit to making the church and its ministries inclusive of all of God's people!



Mobility

Accessibility into church

- Is there an entrance ramp?
- Are there handicapped parking spots free of curbs or barriers?
- Does the intersection traffic light allow enough time for crossing the street?
- Are the church doors powered or is a person present to assist?

Access while in church

- Are there lifts or elevators with assistance if needed?
- Are large absorbable mats inside the entries?
- Are there any rugs that a walker or cane could catch on causing a fall?
- Are those in wheelchairs able to sit in places other than in the back?
- Is there a rail that an older person can use to step up to the lectionary or altar?
- Is there access to restrooms?
- Do restroom doors open easily from the inside out?
- Are bathroom stalls large enough for wheelchairs?
- Can those in wheelchairs reach the sinks, faucets, and water fountains?
- Is there a restroom that an adult needing help with incontinence issues can use?
- Is there a family restroom?

Vision

- Are the church bulletins available which are printed in a large and bold font?
- Are nametags readable from about 3 feet away?
- Is there highly visible signage pointing to different areas of the church?
- Are restrooms clearly marked?
- Are projection colors decipherable for those with vision problems?
- Is the lighting strong in all areas of the church?
- Does serving communion accommodate those with vision loss? i.e. placing the host in a person's outstretched hands and the wine in individual cups.
- Are steps marked to indicate where the step ends?
- Are all parts of worship accessible both in handheld form and on screen? (some people have difficulties seeing near and some far)
- Has the church considered having a supply of hand magnifiers available?

Hearing

- Are the voices of worship leaders amplified? What about musicians? Are presentations in the church hall or classrooms audible for all?
- Are visual aids used in support of spoken segments?
- Is hearing loop technology available in the sanctuary? Hearing loops are an assistive listening system that works by using electromagnetic energy to transmit sound directly into hearing aids or cochlear implants that have a telecoil.

- Is there a hearing loop sign posted? The standard is blue with a white ear icon and the letter “T” in the bottom right-hand corner.
- Are assistive listening devices, microphones, captioning and (if needed) sign language interpreters available upon request at all services and main congregational events, including Bible study?
- Does speech, vocal performances, and music all sound clear, not distorted or echoey? The biggest problem is background noise, reverberation, and echoes rather than increasing the volume.
- Are prayer requests and other sharing comments repeated with the microphone for all to hear?

Sound-sensitivity

- Are there separate allocated areas in the sanctuary and just outside the sanctuary, for people with neuro-sensitivities? Ideally audio volume could be adjusted by the member, with easy access to the exit door, as well as any assistive technology or equipment to prevent overstimulation.
- Do you offer clearly marked access to quiet spaces? Certain noises (especially loud, high pitched, or sudden noises) affect people with neuro-sensitivity much more strongly.
- Do you provide sound maps of the space, highlighting the average sound levels of each area, allowing attendees to choose their seating?

To learn more about inclusive accessibility, watch for our Older Adults and Mental Health resource with suggestions about educating the congregation, networking, and action steps.