

Addressing Diverse Needs for Congregational Hospitality **By Rev. Dr. Margie Brown**

I have often heard churches say, "We don't need to make the building accessible because we don't have anyone with those needs." And the people are not there because the building is not accessible to them! Instead of just debating the chicken-and-egg-which-comes-first question because of money fears, there are some simple steps that every church can make to shake more dust from the Welcome Mat.

Who are the disabled?

Every congregation is in the midst of a hidden community of people with special needs. They are family and friends of our members. They are people living in the neighborhood with visible or invisible struggles. They are our own dear chronologically-gifted members. And they are all of the rest of us, the temporarily-abled.

Disability awareness encompasses a great many forms. They include various physical mobility issues; blind, legally blind and light-sensitivity; deaf and hard-of hearing; food sensitivities and allergies; cognitive confusion and illiteracy; mental health challenges that make persons hesitant to enter or participate fully or cause them to react to situations in untraditional ways ; social disruptive disorders such as ADHD and other behaviors that are not understood and perhaps even feared by others; and people struggling with various addictions and substance abuse.

Why don't they come to our church?

Plan a day when church leaders, (elders, deacons, teachers, board members, staff), gather for a Treasure Hunt. The treasure is seeing our church campus with fresh eyes. In small groups walk around the whole perimeter and look from curb to foundation. The winning team brings back the most observations of what they never noticed or thought about before.

Are signs directing people toward the church clearly worded or in denominational jargon? Do they need to be redone multi-lingually? Adding a less professional second-language sign tells this potential community that they are less valuable. The different languages of the community need to be either on the same sign or of the same quality. And then, how wonderful to look forward to the day when the signs can also include the blue accessibility sign!

Are the parking directional signs shouting at hesitant people of varying cognitive levels "do not enter!"? At one church, all of the exterior doors were blank except the several that had handwritten scrawling that said "Do not open this door!" Every external door should indicate what room or entry lies beyond, and directional arrow signs pointing towards the office and sanctuary need to be placed at every corner where a newcomer might stand, confused. One is not enough.

Long-timers can make their way around blindfolded, but newcomers need lighting that is both safe and adequate wherever the property might beckon them to lose their way. "Walk towards the light" works for a sermon but is not sufficient for someone trying to find the hidden catacombs where a meeting is being held.

Inside the building, door signs need to be larger than the ones we all ordered in the fifties, and in color and font that is most functional rather than pretty. It is alright to have more than one directory map at the entrance. Look for where additional reminders of which way to turn could help. And signs perpendicular to the doors help encourage hesitant folks down the hallway. No visitors ever attending? Our own people will be aging into confusion and memory loss and in need of some extra direction.

Begin with \$20 worth of rubber stops, duct tape, crackers, paper labels and pens.

Often the bathroom doors are too heavy for people with visible or invisible weaknesses. If they can't be left open during church use times, use a simple door stop to keep it open a tad because it is easier to open a door that is already part-way open.

Put blue duct tape along the edge of steps that are hard to see. This works well for both inside and outside steps. I did so on my outside concrete steps and they lasted through the rain for more than a year before they started to look like they could be redone.

Have a small amount of gluten-free bread or crackers available on the communion trays, and use 100% juice instead of juice with sugar and other additives.

Have a small white-board in or near the kitchen where people can anonymously put food sensitivities or allergies. Label all items on the potluck table, including the name of the one who brought it so someone can quietly ask if they have ingredient questions.

Encourage everyone to put on a name tag as they enter. These can be permanent tags or paper labels. Some churches hang paper labels of an alphabetical print-out of members names each Sunday, then it doesn't matter if people forget to take them off leaving. Often the long-time members bristle at this, declaring, "Everyone knows me!", but they may be the very ones grateful for the clandestine help later on.

Be conscious of needs without them needing to ask.

Have an adequate amount of parking spaces near the door marked for the visitor and for the disabled. Offer large print bulletins. Have printed copies of the sermon ready to offer hard-of hearing persons, or persons who need more time reviewing it to understand the message. Explain in every weekly bulletin how your congregation takes communion, and print the Lord's Prayer without assuming that everyone knows it. Cognitive, emotional and social hindrances need such reinforcement.

Shortening several pews for wheelchair accommodation should happen in several places in the sanctuary for people to have a choice of where to sit. Only providing wheelchair space at the back signifies that they need to sit "in the back of the bus" where people don't need to see them. Consider placing a sturdy chair with arms to help persons sit and rise in one or two of these newly created spaces. The rise and slope of pews are difficult and painful for people with back issues and other physical frailties.

Construction projects under fifty dollars.

You don't need to begin with ripping out the existing bathrooms. Full ADA compliance is the goal, but handicap accessibility can be achieved in varying levels along the way.

Install one or two handicap grab bars, one at an angle alongside the toilet and the other directly across if possible, as people's self-lifting abilities differ.

If you have antique low toilets, buy a ten dollar plastic riser and put it in a nice-looking basket near the bathroom stall. Remember to do this in both male and female bathrooms.

Where there is a step between rooms, install a simple handle on the door frame for an extra hand-hold while navigating.

In the "Fireside Room" or wherever there are low-lying stuffed sofas and chairs, unscrew the feet and replace them with larger and taller feet from the home improvement store. Don't pick spindly new legs because they look nice; pick substantial round or square legs that can hold up to precariously-balanced plopping down.

Ramping it up.

Inexpensive threshold extenders purchased from mobility internet sites can help walkers and wheelchairs negotiate the bump. Where ramps are necessary, research the building codes for length, height, width, degree of slope, and turn-arounds.

At a foot of ramp needed for each inch of height, the length and sprawl of a ramp can be formidable. My own front porch is thirty inches high, involving only three concrete steps, but it would have required thirty feet of ramp! I purchased an electric lift for three thousand dollars, which at installment is set to the exact stopping place. An electrician will need to install the socket and lift.

There are definite benefits to a lift over a ramp. My lift is not an ugly color with an ugly industrial size and shape, but it blends in well with the exterior of my house. It was installed within an hour. There are no building permits needed. When I move, I can just unplug it and take it with me.

Since a lift takes up a much smaller footprint than a ramp, it is perfect for a sanctuary to help folks navigate the steps and landings so they may sing in the choir or serve as worship leaders.

As my own physical mobility idiosyncrasies continue to evolve along with the aging process, I am continually learning little tricks or ideas to make things easier. So keep on ramping up the conversation! This is an ongoing realm of discovery for the whole Body of Christ. God bless each of our unique, quirky, and ever-changing little bit of that Body that we represent.