

Motivating Congregational Transformation

I'm here to present approaches I've found useful when attempting to help change the common resistance of a congregation when welcoming a person who lives with a disability (PWD). I write this article in hopes of opening a conversation between myself and those interested in this topic, and, this forum has the opportunity to act as a way to share insights of successful ways that help promote congregational inclusion!

The first thing that I must mention is that there are a few congregations that have *already* transformed themselves to include PWDs in a thriving manner. Most often the push towards inclusion is initiated by family members of children who live with a disability; longtime members have either been injured or are old enough to have "aged into" the need to ambulate with a walker or wheelchair. These achievements need to be celebrated; even though one should recognize that only a limited fraction of disabling conditions is manifested as obvious physical impairments.

The two most common reasons that congregations remain mostly limited to the temporarily able-bodied (TAB) is the perceived lack of need, and/or the anticipated cost to make a church physically accessible to all. The supposed lack of need is easily shown to be a false presumption when one considers the data from the [CDC](#) which states that *25% of Americans alone have a disability!* The average age of those people who attend church is 57 years old, currently, while the average age of an American today is 39 years. This fact, combined with the inevitable likelihood of living with a disability is always *increased* with aging, one would expect that the percentage of religious congregation members living with a disability would be **GREATER** than the noted CDC percentage! People with compassion, who hold to the exemplified justice of our God, should be concerned and strongly motivated by these growing numbers of people who acquire a disability!

When considering the transformation into becoming a community that's inclusive of PWDs, there is an assumption that it's especially expensive: this is false and is belied by the fact that the primary reason that faithful PWD do not attend church is because their interactions with congregants or staff have made them feel excluded and/or misunderstood.

It's not the lack of physical accommodations that keep PWD out of many churches – it's the off-putting attitude of congregants that does!

Houses of worship need recall that the physical plant requirements of the **ADA** actually **do** apply to them if their space is used by community groups that are not directly associated with religious activities (like public musical events, schools, or AA meetings). **If significant and regular nonreligious use of church facilities is made, according to the ADA, even religious facilities must be accessible!** (Another possible benefit of transforming worship spaces to accommodate PWD is that, often, zoning laws which limit worship space alteration are lifted once the community zoning board is presented with the problem of how the local rules limit the participation of PWD at the services offered.)

With all this in mind, I turn to the question of how congregations can improve their welcome of PWD. The first and perhaps most important bridge for those without a disability to those who do have one, is realizing this fact:

people with disabilities are not very different from yourselves!

We are *all* challenged when performing certain activities — be it when attempting to simply walk up a flight of stairs or something more difficult, like jogging in a marathon. **All humans live on a spectrum of abilities.** In public situations, the important thing that we should do is to try to be as inclusive of all others as possible.

In conclusion, almost everyone reading this reflection, will eventually have some experience with their own version of a disability. From that realization, wouldn't you prefer to feel welcomed in your religious community once you become disabled, and wouldn't it be especially important during this time that you are embraced by your spiritual community? The strong imperative for religious communities to work to open their doors and minds in the welcoming of **all** peoples can be used to transform many lives and to truly live out the values and teachings learned from God's great example.

