



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How can we make our worship space accessible?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquires on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Welcoming people with disabilities to worship actually involves two issues: the first relates to the physical building where you worship, and the second relates to ways that the worship experience is made accessible to people with a broad range of disabilities. This question will deal with the first issue. The second is dealt with in the frequently asked question, [“How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?”](#)

We like to think of our congregations as places where all are welcome. Our church building, however, may have barriers that we do not see because we are so accustomed to the way things are. We may not be aware of how our space hinders rather than helps those who regularly worship. Lack of accessibility may also make it more difficult for members of the community to be invited to worship.

What barriers prevent participation by all in your congregation? Some of the questions people with disabilities might ask are: How will I get to worship? Will I be able to come to worship in my wheelchair? Will I be able to hear? Are assistive listening devices available? Will I be able to see or to read the bulletin or the hymnal? If I am among the fifteen percent of the population affected by environmental illnesses, will I be able to worship in your building? Is the ventilation system adequate? Are the chemicals used for cleaning compounds environmentally friendly and unscented? Are the candles unscented? Will incense be used? ([See “Why and how do we use incense in worship?”](#)) Is there an accessible restroom close to the worship space? Is there nearby space for handicapped parking?

One way to begin a thorough accessibility study is by gathering a committee and taking a walk through your building. Include people with disabilities on this committee. All committee members should try to view your building from the perspective of those with disabilities. (A similar approach can be taken when considering worship from a child’s perspective. [See “How do we involve children and youth in worship?”](#)). Before you begin your survey, create a list of questions to be answered as you take your tour. You may consider surveying the congregation to see what questions they would suggest regarding this issue.

You might want to contact one of the agencies listed in the resource section. These agencies can provide suggested audit questions for you to use as you take your tour through your church. Or simply create your own list, asking yourself: If people have a disability,

- How will they get from the parking lot to the building?
- How will they get into the building?
- Will they have a place to sit in the nave?
- Will they be able to see the altar when the congregation stands?
- Will they be able to move with dignity to the altar for communion?
- Will they be able to hear or understand what is being said and sung?
- Will they be able to see to read hymnals and other printed materials?
- Will they be able to participate as worship leaders?

Your tour should include classrooms, fellowship areas, and restrooms, in addition to the worship space. Do not forget that the worship space includes the chancel! Making a building accessible involves more than building a ramp or installing an elevator, although these may be appropriate steps in your overall plan.

After you have completed your audit, you will want to begin formulating a plan to correct any deficiencies you have found. Now you have a new set of questions to answer. What will these changes cost? How will you pay for the changes? What strategies will you use to report the needs as well as the costs to the congregation? Will you need to prioritize the list, so that you begin with several basic changes and then implement the others as you find funds for them? Who will do the actual work? How will you let the community know that your building is becoming accessible? What kind of service will you plan to celebrate your new space?

As you prepare to act on your plan, you might educate the congregation to the need to remove barriers. For example, you might schedule a series of forums or temple talks featuring input from those who are willing to share their experience worshipping in your congregation.

One ELCA group that may be helpful is *Church Building Consultants*. They have regional offices and may be contacted through the Mission Investment Fund. In addition, the Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA has loan funds available for projects related to making church buildings more accessible.

Accessibility is an issue of hospitality, but it is more than that. It is a way that we make sure all people can join in worship.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↳ How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?
- ↳ Why and how do we use incense in worship?
- ↳ How do we involve children and youth in worship?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 [ELCA Accessibility Guide.](#)

-  [Resource Page for Disabilities Ministries, Blindness and Visual Impairment](#)
-  [A Practical Resource on Working with Rostered Leaders and Seminarians Who Are Differently Abled](#)

Other Resources

-  *ADA: Facilities Compliance Workbook*. Evan Terry Associates, P.C. Birmingham, AL: John Wiley, 1993. A massive and comprehensive compendium of checklists, guidelines, and sketches for evaluating facilities.
-  *The ADA Cost Catalog for Access Modifications*. Published by LRP Publications, Dept. 400, 747 Dresher Rd. P.O. Box 980, Horsham, PA, 19044. 1-800-341-7874.
-  *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities*, produced by the [National Organization on Disability](#), 910 16th Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006, 202/293-5960.
-  Access Ability Recognition Emphasis symbols to advertise your access-ability for people with mental, or physical challenges are available by contacting: Festival of Faith Committee, c/o Ms. Mary Smith, 2260 Alsace Rd., Apt. A3, Reading, PA 19604; 610/376-1260.
-  [Lift Leadership Network](#). “Through conferences, curriculum, research material, and leadership development Lift elevates disability ministry.” Churches may become members of this organization and receive access to an electronic magazine and other resources.
-  “[Congregation lends a helping stand](#)” article at the www.livinglutheran.com
-  [American Association of People with Disabilities](#) (AAPD)
-  [Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA](#). Contact the Vice President, Director for Operations, 866.732.3522. A brochure explaining the loans available from the Mission Investment Fund is available. E-mail: mif@elca.org

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