



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries 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 the worship experience is made accessible. The frequently asked question “How Can We Make Our Worship Space Accessible?” deals with the first issue. In this question we will look at how Sunday worship can be made accessible to people with disabilities.

"Welcome to worship at (you provide the name) Lutheran church. We're glad you're here!" We have probably all said those words as we greeted people on Sunday. Greeting people with a pleasant welcome is important, but there are many other things we can do to make our worship services more accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities. Because we have not always learned how to respond to people with obvious disabilities, we are often uncomfortable and do not know what to do. The result may be that we ignore or sometimes reject people.

It is always appropriate to offer a friendly greeting. We can simply say "hello." It is always better to make a mistake while trying to be friendly and welcoming than to avoid a person because of your fear of offending. It is OK to ask a person whether he or she needs any help. Wait until the person accepts your offer before you try to help. Avoid pity, and do not be patronizing.

Providing assistive listening devices, having an interpreter to sign the services for the hearing impaired, [bulletins and hymnals in large print and braille](#) for people with impaired vision [bookstands for holding hymnals](#), and special seating for people who use wheelchairs can be helpful. It is important to let people know about these resources and also to make sure ushers know where these resources are located. Provide special training for ushers and greeters, who are often the first people to extend hospitality to worshipers.

A multisensory approach in preaching, teaching, or making presentations makes good sense because all worshipers will benefit. ([See also “How does worship involve all our senses?”](#)) Everyone has a preferred method of learning—auditory, visual, or kinesthetic—

whether they have a disability or not. So, do not depend entirely on the spoken word to communicate your message.

Choose bulletin language carefully. Use "people-first" language—language that puts the person first and the disability second. Say, for example, "worshippers with a hearing impairment may request assistive listening devices," as opposed to "disabled worshippers..." When giving directions, language such as "stand as you are able" gives permission for those who cannot stand for any reason (disability, holding young children, etc.).

The celebration of Holy Communion is the time when all of God's people are invited to receive the Lord's body and blood. Make sure that clear instructions are given orally or in writing prior to the distribution, so that everyone gathered will know what to expect. Some people may need assistance getting to the altar or communion station. Some may need the sacrament brought to the place where they are seated. Some may need to commune in one kind (either just the bread or the wine) due to allergy or addiction concerns. For more information, see also ["What kinds of bread are used for Holy Communion?"](#) and ["Where do we keep the sacramental elements?"](#).

Remember that having a disability might limit a person in particular ways, but it does not mean that those with disabilities have no gifts to share. Include people with disabilities in all aspects of worship, including leadership, as they are willing and able. This might require some thought about what needs to be done to facilitate their ministry.

Another concern of those with disabilities is the way language may be used in preaching, hymns, even temple talks or announcements. It is helpful to remember that many, diverse images are used in scripture and in worship, images that will resonate in many and various ways with individuals and communities. For example, hymns and preaching rooted in scripture will address the healing of the blind or the curing of those that cannot walk. It can be a challenge to balance both a faithful witness to the scriptural images while at the same time honoring hospitality concerns. Being aware of this challenge and diversity is helpful for those who plan and lead worship.

The resources listed below give more specific guidance. You might find [That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities](#), produced by the National Organization on Disability, particularly helpful. This resource provides extensive guidance in making worship welcoming for people with such disabilities as mobility impairment, visual or hearing impairment, mental illness, developmental disability, learning disability, and chronic illness. For each category the book provides practical and helpful information, including lists of ways to improve personal interactions and congregational hospitality.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☺ How can we make our worship space accessible?
- ☺ How does worship involve all our Senses?
- ☺ What kinds of bread are used for Holy Communion?
- ☺ Where do we keep the sacramental elements?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- ☰ *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.

Other Resources

- ☎ *A Guide to Feeling Comfortable with Persons Who Have Disabilities*. Published: Bethesda Lutheran Home and Services, Inc., 700 Hoffman Drive, Watertown, WI 53094. This 12-page pamphlet may be obtained by calling National Christian Resource Center at Bethesda Lutheran Home and Services, 800/369-4636. A single copy will be sent at no charge. Additional copies are available for \$.05 per copy.
- ☰ [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.
- ☰ Marilyn E. Bishop. [Welcoming People with Disabilities: Do's and Don'ts for Parish Ministers](#). Published: National Pastoral Life Center. This 16-page pamphlet is available from the National Pastoral Life Center, 299 Elizabeth St., New York, NY 10012-2806, 212/431-7825. The cost is \$1.00. Bulk prices are available for multiple copies.
- ☰ [Rejoicing Spirits](#), a worship and fellowship experience for those with developmental disabilities.
- ☎ [Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability and Inclusion](#) by Mark Pinsky. Available from the Alban Institute.

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