



Accessibility: beyond the ramp

What is accessibility?

Defined by the International Organization for Standardization, accessibility is the usability of a product, service, environment or facility by people with the widest range of capabilities. An accessible congregation means that everyone can: arrive at the building; enter and exit it; use its services and amenities; participate in its activities; access its information.

So, does this mean that accessibility is just about physical disability?

Accessibility means that the widest range of people can participate fully in the life of a congregation. That means people with:

- physical disabilities – such as cerebral palsy; post-polio syndrome; multiple sclerosis; people who use walkers
- sensory disabilities – such as low or partial vision; blindness; partial hearing loss; deafness; night blindness
- invisible disabilities – such as chronic fatigue syndrome; environmental sensitivities; lupus; asthma; heart conditions
- emotional or cognitive/intellectual disabilities – such as depression; learning difficulties; autism spectrum

If your congregation has a ramp, doesn't that mean you're accessible?

Accessibility is a journey. Some congregations start the “journey to accessibility” by building a ramp so that people who use scooters and wheelchairs can enjoy Sunday services. But for a wheelchair user, accessibility also means that there is/are:

- an entrance door light enough to be opened by a person in a wheelchair or an electric door opener
- pew-cuts or spaces for wheelchairs in the general seating areas so that wheelchair users can sit with family and friends
- a wheelchair accessible chancel, choir area, social hall, meeting rooms, and RE rooms
- attention paid so that all on-site and off-site congregational activities (concerts, dinners, picnics, etc.) are held in wheelchair accessible venues
- an up-to-code wheelchair-accessible restroom

Think beyond the ramp – what about people with other disabilities?

Accessibility is a journey – whether or not you have a ramp there are many ways to show that your congregation welcomes people who are disabled – people with sensory disabilities; invisible disabilities; emotional or intellectual disabilities.



A few simple things to think about:

- √ Make sure your website is accessible to people who are blind
- √ Purchase, promote, and maintain an assistive listening system
- √ Form a disability committee that includes people with disabilities
- √ Provide large print orders of service; large print and Braille hymnals
- √ Welcome people with psychiatric, emotional, and intellectual disabilities
- √ Make sure that everybody uses a microphone; offer text copies of sermons

You will find accessibility audits and other information to help you evaluate your physical accessibility on our UUA website. Go to www.uua.org/accessibility. Once there, click on “Environment”.

The Environment section of our comprehensive accessibility website includes accessibility information about all of the areas of your buildings and grounds. You will find extensive accessibility information about:

- getting to church
- getting into church
- inside the building
- the sanctuary
- religious education
- ministry and pastoral care
- restrooms
- kitchens and food service
- church office
- beyond the building

Remember, everyone, whether they live with a disability or not, is unique. Therefore, it is impossible to make universal decisions about what accommodations will be completely welcoming to everyone. As with all reciprocal relationships, it is always important and appropriate to ask the people being welcomed what will work for them.

“Attitudes are our real disability”

“Attitudes are our real disability” is the slogan on a button created by the UUA Office of Accessibility Concerns. The slogan points out that physical accessibility is not enough. People with disabilities sometimes report having experiences such as being ignored at coffee hour or having their wheelchairs blocked by conversing people who don’t move as they and their wheelchair are trying to get from one place to another. People living with mental health issues report having unwelcoming experiences as well. Resources that can help us welcome people with mental disorders can be found at Rev. Barbara Meyers’ (a UU community minister) website: <http://www.mpuuc.org/mentalhealth/mentalintro.html>.

Until you know someone with a disability, you may never have had reason to think about the key points that make relationships with someone who has a disability easier and more relaxed. With the intent to create a welcoming and relaxed environment for everyone, the UUA website includes some basic ground rules worth keeping in mind.

These rules of “disability etiquette” can be found by going to www.uua.org/accessibility. Once there, click on “Disability 101” in the left-hand sidebar and then click on “Etiquette”.