

The Difficulty of Being Just: Including People with Disabilities in Congregational Life Companion Guide

Opening words (from the UUA Welcoming Congregation Webpage):

Our faith calls us to live a spirit of radical hospitality—only when we are truly open to the wealth of diversity in our world will the inherent worth and dignity of every person be affirmed with a large voice. Let's not rest until all are welcomed into Beloved Community.

Victor Hugo wrote,
“Being good is easy, what is difficult is being just.”

At Emory University, researchers Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal conducted a fascinating experiment on the sense of fairness. They taught brown capuchin monkeys to swap tokens for food. Initially, the reward was a piece of cucumber, a food that capuchin monkeys were only too happy to work for. But when the researchers started rewarding some monkeys with grapes, a food that monkeys much prefer over cucumbers, and rewarding others with cucumbers, the latter group immediately took offense. In some cases, they refused to comply with the task. In other cases, they took the food but refused to eat it, and in some cases, they threw the food at the researcher. You can see a hilarious YouTube video of this at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbb27GQ_X1I.

Scientists say that this research suggests that human's sense of justice is inherited and is not a social construct. The experiment demonstrates our natural reaction to become angry or frustrated when we are treated differently from others or when we see others obtain or achieve things that we aspire to obtain or achieve as well.

Being in right relationship with people who have documented disabilities is more than etiquette. It is more than being polite. It requires that we treat others equally and fairly; that we work as hard as we can to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities, the same resources, and the same rewards. It stems from the basic belief that if I am eating grapes, all those around me should be eating grapes as well.

National Organization on Disability/ Kessler Foundation Survey (July 2010)

- People with disabilities are very likely to say their faith is important to them, but are more likely to not attend services due to accessibility issues. With the aging of the American population, the situation is becoming an increasingly significant factor in worship community vitality.
- About 65 percent of all U.S. residents, both those with and without disabilities, say their religious faith is very important.
- People with very severe disabilities are more likely (73 percent) to say their religious faith is very important to them than people with slight disabilities (55 percent).

- Half of people with disabilities (50%) state that they attend religious services at least once per month. However, 57% of people without disabilities do the same – a gap of 7 percentage points.
- The gap between people with and without disabilities in terms of attendance at religious services is almost identical to that in 2004.

This is a moral issue...

Religion offers community to our lonely human souls. The house of worship represents one place where the barriers fall and we all stand equal before God (Rabbi Harold Kushner, NOD, 2001).

Allah does not judge according to your bodies and appearances, but He scans your hearts and looks into your deeds. (Prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam).

When we think of persons with disabilities in relation to ministries, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us...they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord's work in the world, according to their God given talents and capacities. (Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, no. 17, NOD, 2001).

Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we. (United Church of Christ).

A justice issue...

- People with disabilities experience inequalities – for example, when they are denied equal access to health care, employment, education, or political participation because of their disability.
- People with disabilities are subject to violations of dignity – for example, when they are subjected to violence, abuse, prejudice, or disrespect because of their disability.
- Some people with disability are denied autonomy – for example, when they are subjected to involuntary sterilization, or when they are confined in institutions against their will, or when they are regarded as legally incompetent because of their disability."

And a growth issue...

If people with disabilities are denied access to our religious communities, it impacts on our numerical growth and our organic growth, with fewer talented and committed people to share in the work of the congregation. For current members who are aging and developing disabilities, our unwillingness or inability to accommodate them may force them to leave. As a result, we are all diminished. In other words, it contributes to leaving the back door way open.

Perceived Barriers to Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Congregational Life

Barrier: Religious institutions are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act and therefore do not have to make physical accommodations

Fact: While religious institutions are exempt under Title III of the ADA (Public Accommodations), they are not exempt under Title I (Employment). Thus, congregations that employ 15 or more staff need to make modifications to a religious building to accommodate an employee with a disability even though they do not have to modify the building to accommodate other members of the public. In addition, religious institutions receiving federal funds are not exempt under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Barrier: It costs too much money to make physical changes to the building or its contents.

Fact: While it may be cost prohibitive to make large structural changes, most accommodations require little or no outlay of money. The biggest investment is not in money, but in the effort to find creative ways of enhancing the congregational experience.

Barrier: Since we can't make large physical changes to the building or its contents, there is little we can do to make people with disabilities feel welcomed.

Fact: Being aware of the needs of people with disabilities and addressing those needs with respect and compassion is often more important to the individual than implementing physical changes.

Accessibility and Inclusion Recommendations for People with Visual, Auditory and Mobility Limitations

- Cut-outs in pews for wheelchairs
- Power assisted doors
- Assisted listening devices
- Large print hymnals and orders of service
- Ramps
- Lifts or elevators
- Accessible bathrooms
- Accessible parking spots
- Always use microphones (even if someone says they don't need one)
- Encourage speakers, worship associates, etc. to speak loudly and clearly
- Raise the pulpit so that all can see
- Make sure there is accessibility to the pulpit so that people with mobility limitations can speak or lead the service
- Have a wheelchair or two donated and make it available
- Wear name tags all the time for people with memory problems
- Record services and make them available. Often a CD can be created instantaneously; or have them available on your website. Hand out printed versions of the sermon.
- Leave seats on the aisles for people who have difficulty moving into the aisles

And speaking of seats:

It is not okay to force people who use wheelchairs to sit in front of all the pews or behind all the pews because there is no other seating option. Segregated seating is not an acceptable seating arrangement. Some sanctuaries have movable, or interlocking, or folding chairs. Sometimes these chairs are too narrow to be comfortable for people who are very large. It is welcoming to offer some chairs that are wider and/or more substantial for people who need them. Some people have difficulty getting up from a chair that doesn't have arms. It is welcoming to offer some chairs with arms for people who have knee, hip, or leg problems. It can be pointed out during announcements that it would be welcoming for people to save these chairs for those who need them. Finally, have seating spaced so there is extra legroom for people using crutches, braces, walkers, or who are wearing casts.

Accessibility and Inclusion Recommendations for People with Environmental Disabilities

MCS: multiple chemical sensitivity: Chemical: Symptoms can be debilitating, sometimes life-threatening, and commonly include severe dizziness; headaches; fainting; tiredness; burning/itching of skin and eyes; flu-like symptoms; emotional disturbances; and seizure disorders. Commonplace exposures that trigger symptoms for a sensitized individual include chemical emissions from new carpets, building materials, and furnishings; scented personal care products; maintenance, cleaning, disinfection and pest control chemicals; solvents; dyes; soft plastics; molds and mildew; animal dander; scented or petroleum candles; soaps, shampoos; detergents; wood and tobacco smoke; gas stove and furnace fuel and emissions; vehicle exhaust. 15% have some reaction to chemicals

Electrical sensitivity produces symptoms in the individual exposed to common levels of electromagnetic fields (EMF) from electrical sources in the environment: power lines, motors, computers, transformers, cell phone, etc. It can cause skin itch/rash/flushing/burning and/or tingling, confusion/poor concentration and/or memory loss, fatigue/weakness, headache, and chest pain/heart problems.

- Prohibit vehicles from standing for periods of time with their motors running near the building
- Use unscented beeswax candles
- Keep the property near buildings free of herbicides and pesticides or post notices before and after treatment
- Ensure that at least one restroom is free of air fresheners/deodorizers and scented soaps
- Have a designated fragrance-free area in a well-ventilated area of the sanctuary and make sure that the area is wheelchair accessible
- Consider silk flowers or organic flowers as an alternative to flowers treated with pesticides

According to the Environmental Health Coalition of Western Massachusetts, one in five people experience health problems when exposed to fragrances, and 72% of asthmatics have adverse reactions to perfume. In addition, the Fragranced Product

Information Network reports that 17 million people have asthma, 35 million have chronic sinus problems, 25 million have migraines, and 1-2 percent of the population has skin allergies -- all can be negatively affected by fragrance.

- Inform the Caring Committees of the special needs of people who have environmental sensitivities
- Have maintenance staff and others become familiar with less toxic cleaning products and use them whenever possible
- Make sure the building is adequately ventilated and aired out periodically. Remove mold and mildew from the building
- Give advance notice when chemicals (such as floor wax and pesticides) are to be used within the building

Creating a Welcoming Environment

- Greet everyone
- Ask if the person needs assistance. Wait until the person accepts your offer.
- Train greeters and ushers so that they know where available resources are and how to use them, including the lift or elevator
- When new members join, ask in a sensitive and dignified way if any accommodations would enhance their participation in the faith community.
- Language: instead of please rise or even please rise as you are able, say rise in body and spirit. Use people first language.

Including children with special needs in our classrooms and worship.

- We have a responsibility to make whatever accommodations we can to welcome children with special needs into congregational life.
- Communication with parents is essential to understand the needs of the child and to learn ways to support the child. Physical presence by the parents in the beginning may be necessary.
- Dancing or moving around during a service is an acceptable way to worship. Provide space for children with special needs to do so and be thankful for a congregation that embraces everyone.

Where to begin...

- Form a disability awareness task force...and include people with disabilities on it.
- Conduct an accessibility audit
- Implement changes one step at a time, and get the congregation behind you.

Resources

- UUA Worship Resources for Accessibility / Equal Access
<http://www.uua.org/leaders/idbm/accessibility/62850.shtml>
- Accessible Faith: A Technical Guide in Houses of Worship
 - <http://www.bunkertownchurch.org/docs/accessible-faith.pdf>
- Congregational Audit of Disability Accessibility & Inclusion

- <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/congregational-audit-disability-accessibility-incl/>
- Equal Access
 - www.equalaccess.org
- Additional UUA Resources
 - <http://www.uua.org/leaders/idbm/accessibility/>

In his book, *Year of Our Lord: Faith, Hope and Harmony in the Mississippi Delta*, T.R. Pearson tells the story of Lucas McCarty, a young white man born with severe cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair but also gets around by walking on his knees with the help of knee pads worn over his blue jeans. He shouts and makes vocal sounds, but for the most part communicates through an electronic language device. Lucas became a member of the Trinity House of Prayer, a small, poor African American congregation. He was embraced by the congregation and was in no way considered out of place or disruptive. Lucas even joined the choir. Pearson writes, “Without exception, Trinity’s members treated Lucas with unstudied compassion. At no financial cost to the congregation — no special programs, no architectural alterations— they demonstrated that making people with disabilities, even severe disabilities, feel a part of them is within reach of every house of worship. Sometimes it’s not about building a ramp. Sometimes it really is about opening up your heart.”