

ACCESSIBLE CHURCH BUILDINGS AND WORSHIP SERVICES



1 Introduction

This document helps you to identify physical barriers to the participation of people with disabilities in your church. It then shows you how to overcome these barriers, creating a church which is open to all.

The way we do things in church often affects the participation of people with disabilities. A person with hearing loss shared her experiences:

"In some churches the speaker (preacher) likes to walk up and down the stage, he forgets that I have to see his lips, to lip-read, in order to following the preaching".

A parent of a 10 year old child with intellectual disability:

"Our daughter becomes a bit restless in Sunday school, but all you have to do is to call her name, fix her attention on the story, and she will be more attentive. However, it is difficult for the teachers to understand this".

A classic example of inaccessibility is the notice board outside a church that says:

"All welcome".

However, a flight of stairs at the entrance prevents people using wheelchairs or crutches, or with mobility impairments from entering.

This document helps you to be sensitive to issues of accessibility and will help people with disabilities to feel welcome. This process can be taken in steps. Much of what makes the church accessible does not cost anything, as it starts with acts of kindness, like offering to find a seat for someone or bringing them a cup of tea.

2 Accessibility: Awareness, principles and priorities

2.1 What do we mean by disability?

To make sure we're talking about the same thing, let's start with a definition of disability:

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 1:

"Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

2.2 What do we understand by the Church?

There are numerous references to the Church in the Bible.

Ephesians 1: 22-23

God placed all things under His [Christ's] feet and appointed Him [Christ] to be head over everything for the church, which is His [Christ's] body, the fullness of Him [Christ] who fills everything in every way.

1 John 1:7

If we walk in the light, as He [Christ] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.

Romans 12: 4-5

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

1 Corinthians 12: 12 & 27

Just as a body, though one has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. . . Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

From the above passages, we understand the word Church as referring to the collective body of believers in the Lordship of Jesus. The word "body" is instructive, as this implies that members will have different functions and skills.

The ability of the Christian community to welcome persons with disabilities, and the ability of persons with disabilities to live joyfully in the midst of the church, is an important measure of the church's ability to live fearlessly and joyfully in the midst of a broken world.

2.3 What does the Bible say about the Church being open to everyone?

Jesus teaches us in Matthew 28: 19-20 "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus teaches that everyone needs to hear the gospel and become disciples. Romans 3: 22-23 teaches us that "righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".

The Church has a duty to minister the gospel to all, including people with disabilities. We can trust God to reveal His truth to people with severe multiple disabilities.

An article published by the Reformed Church in America, refers to Matthew 25:35 where Jesus declares, "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me". The article compares persons with disabilities to strangers in the midst of the

church (that is, to the extent they embody what may seem alien to their more able-bodied neighbour's), they can also represent [as all strangers do] the presence of Jesus in the midst of the church.

The more the church grows in its capacity to welcome such persons, who are strangers, the more deeply the church will welcome and serve Jesus.

People with disabilities assist the church to discover more deeply and powerfully the mystery of its existence; the diverse ways in which we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). The ability of the Christian community to welcome people with disabilities, and the ability of people with disabilities to live joyfully in the midst of the church, is an important measure of the church's ability to live fearlessly and joyfully in the midst of a broken world.

2.4 The response of the international church community to the needs of people with disabilities

In 1998, the USA National Council of Churches General Assembly compiled the following statement regarding people with disabilities:

- All people are created in the image of God [Genesis 1:26]

This image is not a measurable set of characteristics. God's image is reflected uniquely in each person.

- All people are called by God [Ephesians 2:10]

Disabilities do not disqualify someone from being valued by God.

- All people have special gifts [1 Corinthians 12:4]

The gifts God has given each person are needed by all other people and no one is unnecessary.

- All people are invited to participate in God's ministry [1 Corinthians 12:7]

God continually empowers each member of the body of Christ to serve and benefit the church and the broader community.

In God's sight we are all of infinite value and can live a life of purpose.

2.5 Principles of accessibility

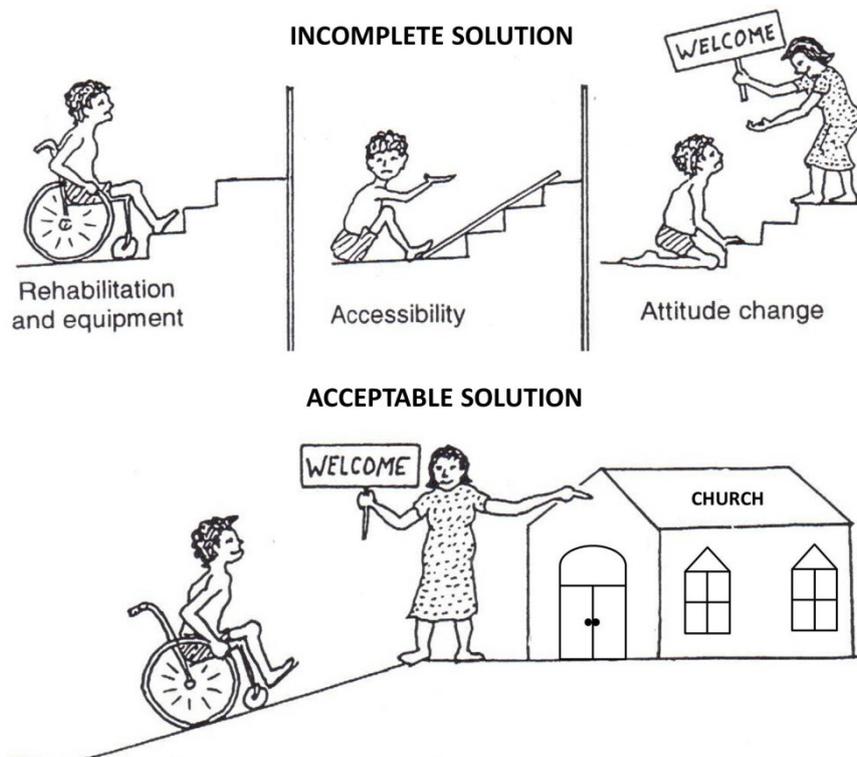
The Ninth Article of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states:

"To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, State Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation ... other facilities and services open or provided to the public ..."

Accessibility is not only about wheelchair access [fewer than 8% of people with disabilities are wheelchair users] but encompasses all disabilities, including physical impairments, sensory impairments, mental impairments and the aged.

A few practical principles that may be helpful:

- Become sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities. Befriend people with disabilities and become sensitive to their needs by simply asking what works for them, as one would do with any other friend. These are simple acts of kindness, as one would do for any friend or fellow believer. Be aware of your prejudices, which may influence your response.
- Consult building regulations which deal with the accommodation of people with disabilities. See the National building regulations at <https://www.sabs.co.za/index.php?page=standardspurchase>
- Learn from people with disabilities in your church. What will make life easier for them at church? Such changes often benefit other members. This means that when working for access for people with disabilities, one is working for universal access.



3 Practical aspects of accessibility

Let's talk nuts and bolts. You're committed to creating an accessible church and we'd like to help you with some of the practical steps you'll need to take. These are things like transport, accessible entrances, seating which makes it possible for everyone to participate, accessible toilets and notice boards that allow persons with disabilities to find their way independently.

4 Getting to church

4.1 Transport

For many people with disabilities, getting to church is probably their biggest hurdle. Their impairments make it impossible to walk or drive to church and if they do not have family members to bring them to church, they're stuck. Public transport is seldom accessible to people with disabilities and most public transport services operate sporadically on Sundays. Consider the following options:

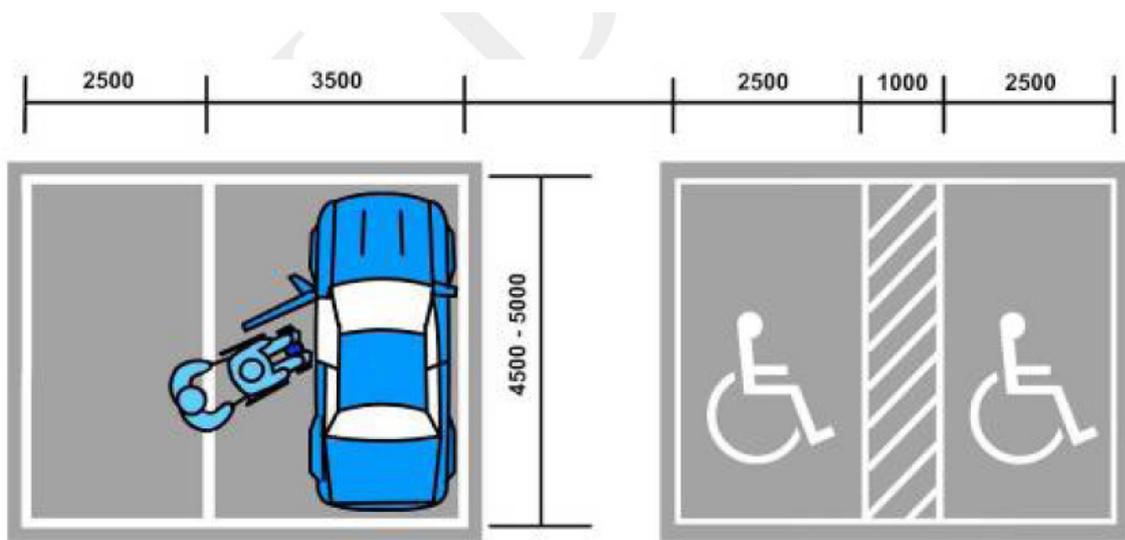
- Arrange a roster of drivers to collect people who need transport. This means that the burden of transport does not rest on the shoulders of one person or family.
- Investigate the possibility of obtaining an accessible van in which wheelchair users can be transported together with their wheelchairs. This vehicle could be shared among a few churches or borrowed from a local disability organization.
- If these arrangements cannot be put into effect every Sunday, consider implementing them once a month.

4.2 Parking bays

Accessible parking is important for people with mobility impairments, because it ensures their safety and allows them to get into the church building with relative ease. Consider the following points:

- Reserve accessible parking bays near the entrance to the church so that people with disabilities do not have far to go, especially if the weather is bad.
- Ensure that parking bays are clearly marked, so that people can see where to park.
- Parking bays for people with disabilities need to be wider than normal parking bays. The reason is that there needs to be space for walkers, crutches and people who find it difficult to bend their legs. This is especially important for people who need to be able to transfer from their cars into wheelchairs. Without the extra width, the person can't open their car door completely and they are unable to pull the wheelchair next to the car seat.
- Ensure that the parking bays are well lit. The surface should be level and paved.
- Ensure that these accessible parking bays are not abused by people who don't need to park there.

Diagram for accessible parking bays:



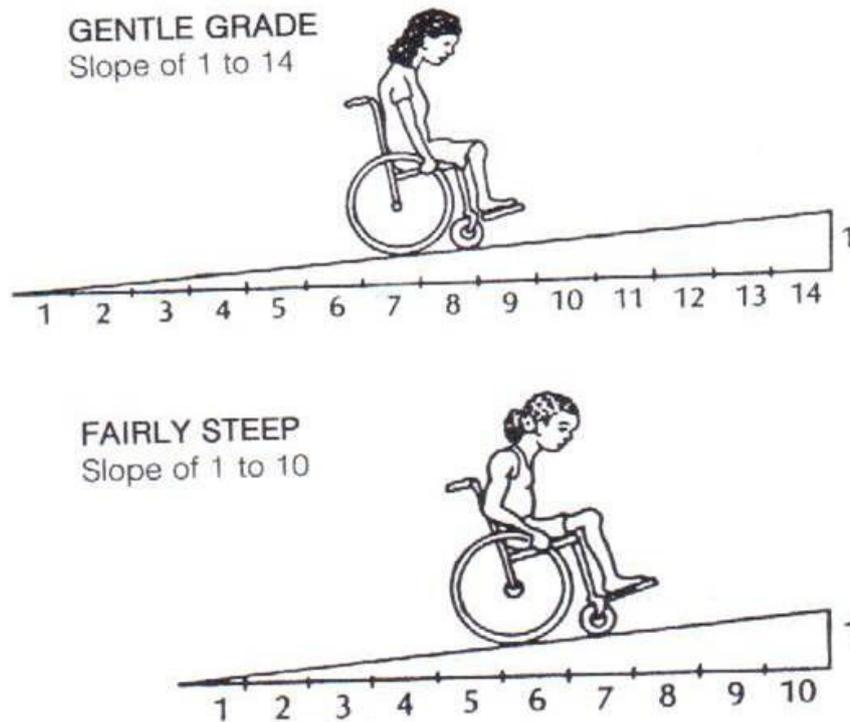
5 Ramps and Entrances: Getting into the church building

5.1 Ramps

Stairs and slopes are a challenge to people using wheelchairs or other mobility devices. When ramps are installed, make them as gentle as possible.

The ideal is a ramp with a gentle grade, that is, a slope of with a "one-in-fourteen" gradient i.e. for every 100 millimetre rise in height, allow a horizontal distance of at least 1 400 millimetres.

Ramps must not exceed a one-in-ten gradient i.e. for every 100 millimetre rise in height, allow a horizontal distance of at least 1 000 millimetres.



For example: if the steps are 600 millimetres high, the length of your ramp must be:

- Gentle ramp [1:14] $600 \times 14 = 8\,400$ millimetres long
- Steep Ramp [1:10] $600 \times 10 = 6\,000$ millimetres long
- Ramps should be at least 1 200 millimetres wide

5.2 Entrances

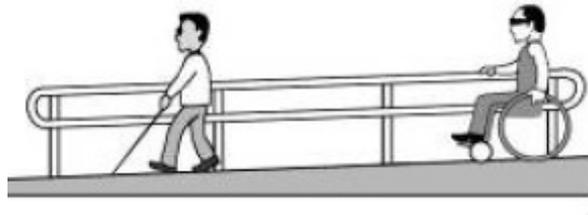
Entrances and doorways should comply with the following specifications:

- People with disabilities should not have to enter via the back or side doors, which emphasize difference and exclusion.
- The doorway should be at least 750 millimetres wide, which is the width of a standard door.
- Avoid raised thresholds / doorsills – even a ten millimetre high doorsill can cause nasty falls for persons with visual or mobility impairments.
- An uneven surface at the entrance that is more than 200 millimetres high needs a ramp, as specified in 5.1 above.
- Uneven surfaces are risks for wheelchair users, etc. Ensure that these are painted in a bright colour.

5.3 Handrails

Adequate railing should be installed, wherever needed for the comfort and safety of all people. Places to bear in mind are walkways, staircases and ramps. Handrails should be between 900 millimetres and 1 000 millimetres

above the floor level, and should extend the full length of the ramp or walkway. Handrails must extend 300 millimetres beyond the start and end of a ramp or stairs.



Person with a cane and a wheelchair using the handrail

Handrails may make life easier for others: people who are temporarily disabled, the elderly, or who have mobility difficulties.

6 Choosing where to sit

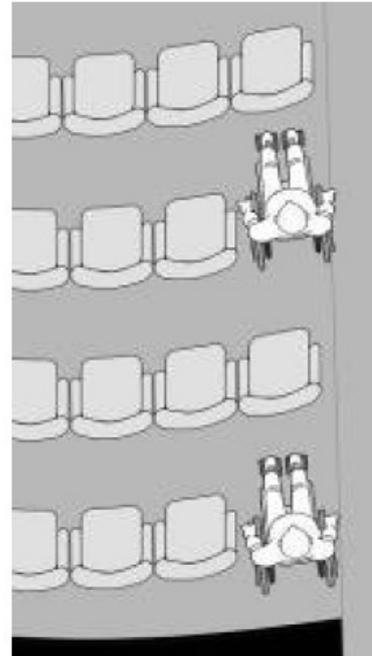
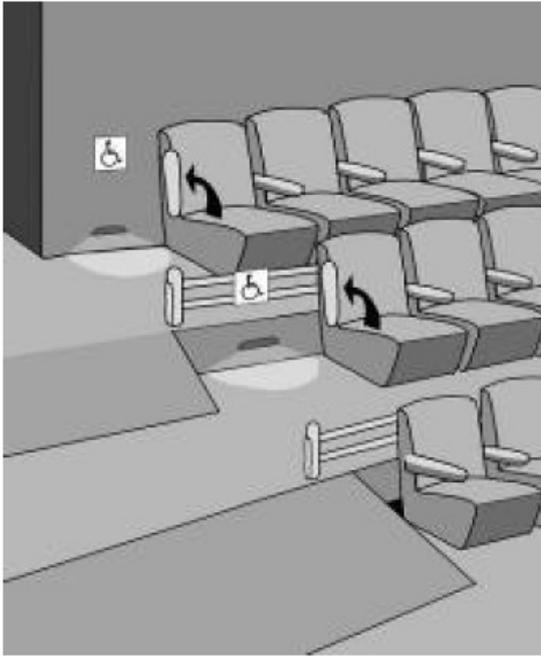
6.1 Allow for choice

As with everybody else, people with disabilities are entitled to choose where they would like to sit during the service. This choice is often denied to them, usually due to the physical limitations of the building and sometimes because ushers and stewards insist on them sitting in a certain place.

Their choice will be determined by their needs. They may want to sit where they can hear the sermon or see the pulpit. For other people, their priority will be to sit with family and friends.

6.2 Seating requirements for wheelchair users and people using crutches or walkers.

- Space for wheelchairs should be incorporated into the pews so that the wheelchair is not placed in the aisle. Space for wheelchairs can be created by removing chairs or by shortening sections of the pews.
- The floor-space for wheelchair seating should be level
- Family members should be able to sit with wheelchair users
- There should be enough space to turn a wheelchair: 1 500 millimetres x 1 500 millimetres.
- Projection screens should be visible, especially when people in front of the wheelchair user are standing.



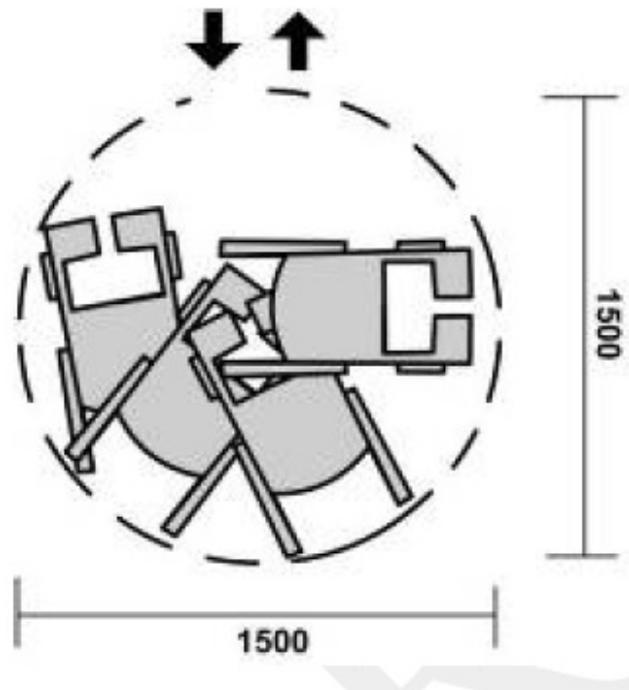
Where there is fixed seating as above, floor space accessible to a person in a wheelchair must be set aside. It should be close to an exit. The wheelchair must not be placed in the aisle.

Other people may want to use this space:

- Parents and children with disabilities
- Blind people with their guide dogs.

Enough turning space for wheelchair users

Wheelchairs need at least 1 500 millimetres to turn. The distance between two rows of chairs must be at least 1 500 millimetres to allow the wheelchair to turn into space provided.



Wheelchairs need turning space. The turning dimensions should be considered when providing space amongst rows of chairs, doors, passages, toilets.

6.3 People with hearing loss

The needs of people with hearing loss are addressed in the document entitled.

6.4 People with visual impairments and blind people

Help people with visual impairments to sit where lighting is good so that they can:

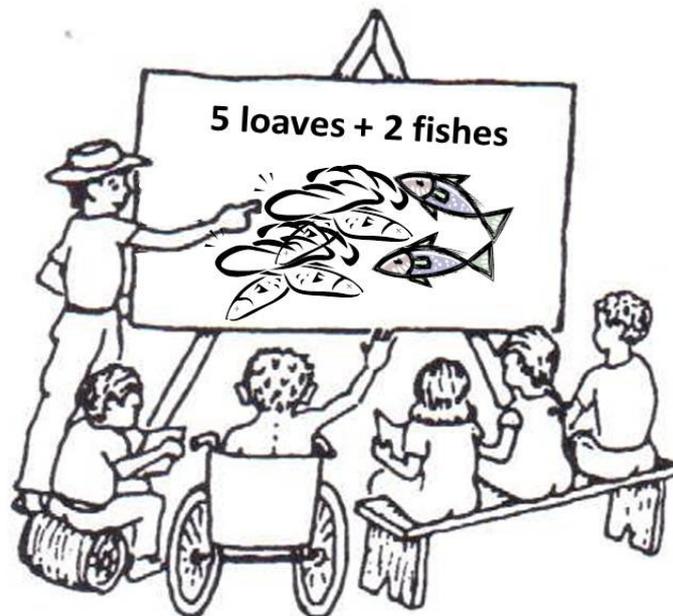
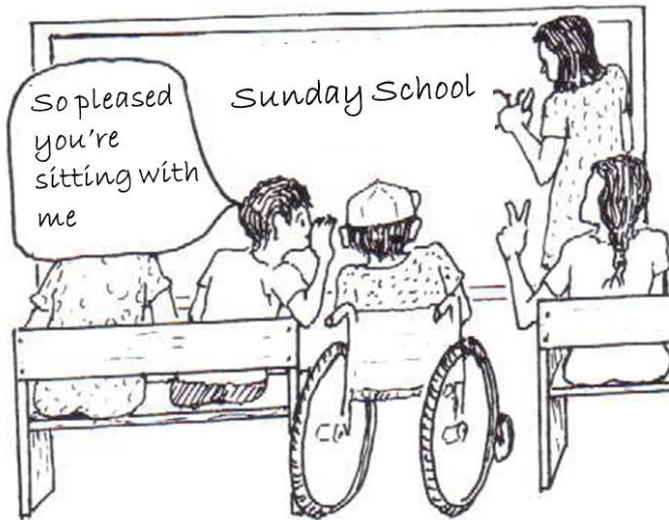
- Read easily
- See the speaker

Blind people:

- People who come with their guide dogs should be allowed to bring them into church
- Help them to find a vacant seat where they can sit with their dog
- Do not make a fuss of the dog, as he is on duty. If you want to pat the dog, first ask the owner if you may.

6.5 Be innovative in including people in the activities of the church

By rearranging seats, children in wheelchairs can sit amongst other children as illustrated below.



7 Promoting participation during worship

There are several ways to promote the participation of people with specific needs in the service. This will make people with disabilities feel accepted. A few examples are as follows:

7.1 People with intellectual impairments

They may be able to follow sermons presented in simple, colloquial language.

7.2 People with mobility impairments

Ensure that it is possible for them to get to the communion rail if they choose to do so; or have an alternative solution available e.g. serving communion at a place in church which is accessible to all.

7.3 People with visual impairment

- Ensure that lighting is adequate throughout the building.
- Have printed materials available for those who cannot see projection screens or video monitors. Some of these materials may be needed in large print, e.g. hymn sheets and notices.
- Large print Bibles may be helpful.
- When using Power Point presentations, ensure that fonts are large and contrast clearly against the background.

7.4 Blind people

- When announcing hymns, allow enough time for people to look up hymns in their Braille hymnbooks.
- Make clear announcements about when to stand or sit.
- Help the person to find the communion rail.
- When information is projected on a screen, talk it through, in order for blind people to follow. Don't assume that everyone can read from the screen.

7.5 People with hearing loss

- A summary of the sermon in print will be helpful.
- Refer to the document entitled Accessible churches for people with hearing impairment on the needs of people with hearing loss.

7.6 People who are housebound and cannot attend services may appreciate receiving:

- Notes from the service and sermon.
- Audio recordings of sermons.
- Regular visits and support from church members.
- People who are housebound may also have a variety of other needs where church members can support them.

8 Include everybody in fellowship

Help people with disabilities to feel included in fellowship activities by:

- Ensuring that the counter where tea is served is not higher than 900 millimetres
- Being aware that conversations flow better when everyone is at eye level, so have chairs available in order to sit down when speaking to a wheelchair users.
- Arranging for people with mobility impairments who use crutches to enjoy their tea sitting at a table.
- Ensuring enough space between tables (at least 1 200 millimetres) for wheelchairs and those using other mobility aids.
- Ensuring that clearance under tables is 820 millimetres. This will allow a person in a wheelchair to sit at the table next to everyone else. The table should be no higher than 850 millimetres.
- Some people will need higher or lower tables. One solution is to have a table with an adjustable height of 700 – 850 mm. Bricks can be used to raise a low table.
- Offer to bring tea to a person with mobility impairment who may not want to do so himself.

9 Ensure accessible toilets

Many churches do not have accessible toilets and those that do often use them as storerooms.

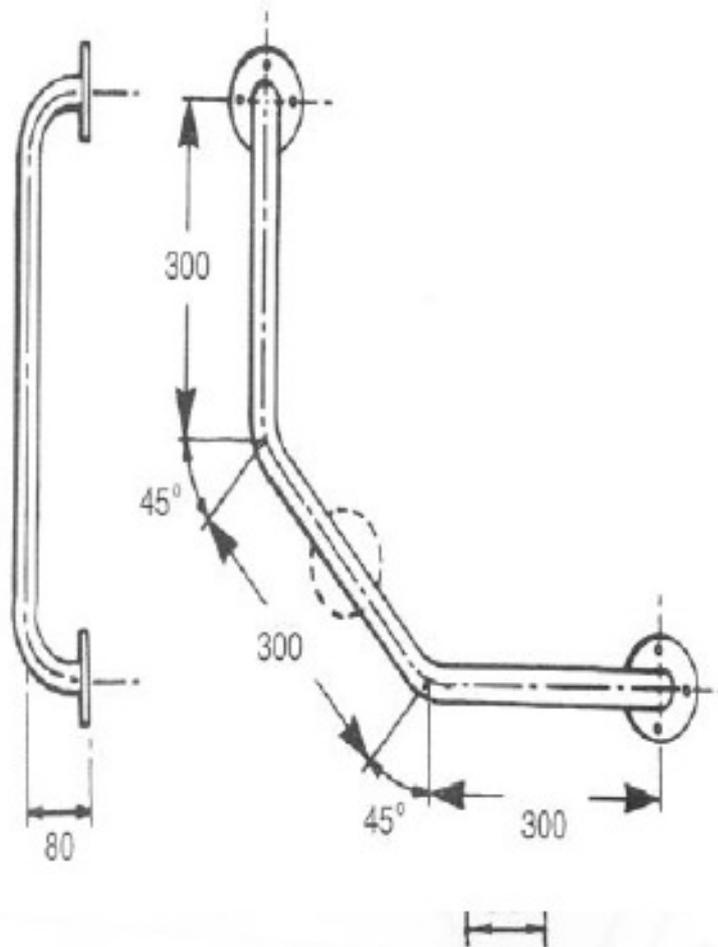
Accessible toilets at church are essential.

Whilst none of your members may use wheelchairs, visitors attending funerals or weddings at your church may need accessible toilets.

The paragraphs below set out the specifications for the toilet, the grab rails and the door.

Grab rails necessary inside the toilet cubicle

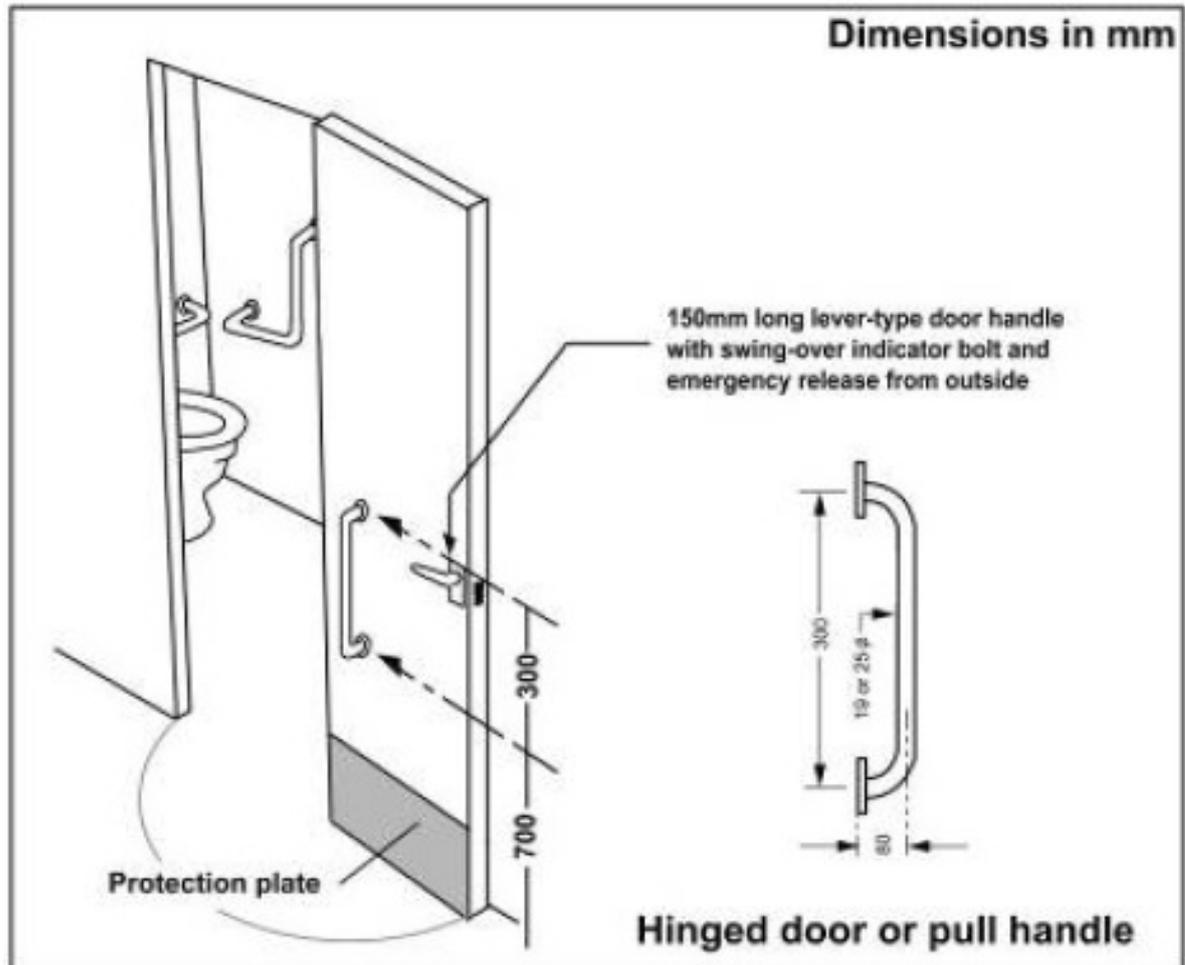
People may need to transfer themselves from their wheelchairs to the toilet and back. A rail within reach to hold onto is important for them.



- The dimensions for the grab rail next to the toilet are shown in the above diagram.
- The diagram above left shows the distance between the grab rail and the wall. The diagram above right shows the angles at which the grab rail should be bent.

9.2 The toilet door

A wheelchair user may want to use the toilet independently and therefore it must be possible to open the door without assistance. The diagram below illustrates the ideal, namely a sliding door. If that is not possible, the door should open outwards.



- Accessible toilets should be clearly signposted
- Light switches should be within reach for a wheelchair user, at a height of 900 millimetres – 1 100 millimetres above the floor.

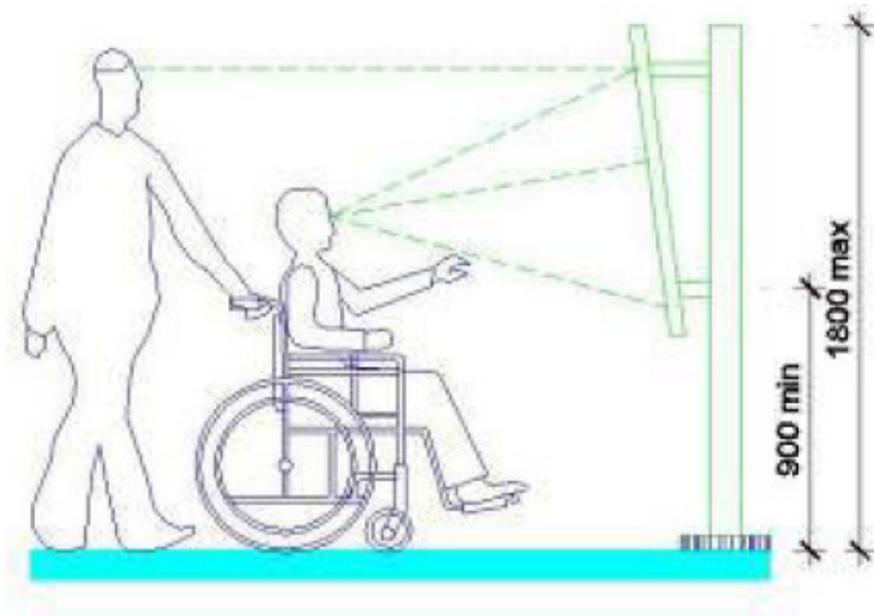
10 Signage and notice boards

Signage and notice boards should enable people with disabilities to find their way independently.

Signs give information about direction, location, safety or form of action.

A successful signage system minimizes anxiety and confusion and prevents people from getting lost. Signs should be visible, clear (easy to see and to understand), concise (simple, short and to the point) and consistent (signs meaning the same thing should always appear in the same manner). Signage (overhanging signs and pole-mounted signs) placed on the sidewalks or

pathways are obstructions; they should be next to the accessible path and detectable.



Vision range for signage

11 Walkways and/or stairs between buildings should

- Be well lit
- Have hand rails
- Have non-slip surfaces
- Have colour-contrasted edges to indicate a change in the level.

12 Emergency exits for people with disabilities

- Emergency and warning signals should be both audible and visible. An example of a visible emergency and fire alarm is illustrated below: there is a red flashing light next to the bell.



Emergency and fire alarm sign

- When planning evacuation procedures in your church, please remember the needs of people with disabilities. Be prepared to help where necessary.

13 Old church buildings

Older, inaccessible church buildings may present a bigger challenge. Speak to congregations who have made their old buildings accessible. If you have already learnt some lessons in this regard, please contact www.rampup.co.za. We would like to learn from you.

In the case of church buildings which are national monuments, the advice of experts will be needed.

14 Times of services and meetings

People with disabilities are aware that not all activities at church can be arranged according to their needs. Early morning or evening meetings may be difficult to attend. People with disabilities may need extra preparation time in the morning, making it difficult to attend early services. Evening functions are difficult for people with visual impairments.

Being sensitive to these issues will go a long way in demonstrating the church's commitment to inclusivity.

ANNEXURE A: PARAPHRASED QUOTES FROM LEGISLATION REGARDING THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

1. SA CONSTITUTION: ACT No 108 of 1996: Bill of Rights

"No person may unfairly discriminate against anyone on the grounds of disability."

"Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected."

"Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing."

2. PROMOTION OF EQUALITY AND PREVENTION OF UNFAIR DISCRIMINATION: ACT No 2000 of 2000

"No person may unfairly discriminate against any person on the ground of disability, including-

(a) Denying or removing from them any supporting or enabling facility necessary to their functioning in society;

(b) Contravening the code of practice or regulations of the South African Bureau of Standards that govern environmental accessibility."

3. NATIONAL BUILDING REGULATIONS and BUILDING STANDARDS ACT no 103 of 1977

SABS 0246:1993: Code of Practice deals with the accessibility of buildings to persons with disabilities

4. CONVENTION on the RIGHTS of PERSONS with DISABILITIES

(Ratified by SA Government April 2008)

"To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States shall take measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment and to facilities and public services. These measures, which include elimination of barriers to accessibility, apply to buildings, roads and transportation."

"States shall take appropriate measures to ensure that private entities take into account all aspects of accessibility for persons with disabilities."

ANNEXURE B: REFERENCES

Reference of drawings:

- STANDARDS SOUTH AFRICA (a division of SABS). 2010. **South African National Standard: The application of the National Building Regulations.** Part S: Facilities for disabled persons. Pretoria: Standards South Africa.
- Nothing about Us without Us by David Werner – HealthWrights 1998

Reference of written material:

- Scripture verses taken from New International Version at www.biblegateway.com dated 2011/06/26
- UN Convention www.un.org/disabilities dated 2011/06/27
- World Health Organization www.who.int/topics/disability/en dated 2011/06/27
- "Special Needs, Special Ministry" by Jim Pierson, Louise Tucker Jones, Pat Verbal, www.grouppublishing.com 2004
- What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=4994 dated 2011/06/27
- "All God's Children" by Joni Eareckson Tada & Gene Newman, Marshall Pickering 1992
- Statement by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director, UNFPA on International Day of Families, 15 May 2007
- "Stress of Raising Disabled Children Often Leads to Breakup of Families" By Melissa Balmain Weiner, 1991
- "Severely Handicapped Young Children and their Families" by Jan Blacker, 1984
- "Parenting a Child with Special Needs" by Rosemarie S Cook, 1992
- Through the Roof – Equipping the Church for Disability Ministry and Outreach" by Joni & Friends, 2005
- "Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities" by Erik W Carter, Paul H Brookes Publishing Co, 2007, 2nd print 2010, www.brookespublishing.com