



Most churches say they welcome everyone; however, on a typical Sunday morning, it is not who is present, but who is *not* in the sanctuary that indicates who is truly welcomed.

Of people in the United States:

- 3%** have developmental disabilities
- 4%** are blind or visually impaired
- 7%** are deaf or profoundly hard of hearing
- 15%** have a learning disability
- 1 in 4** families is affected by mental illness

www.lcms.org/social-issues/disability

Congregational Inclusion of All the Body of Christ

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I am the mother of an adult son who has an intellectual disability. Parents with disabled children have to be advocates for them, and others, in schools, the community, and churches.

“Disability” usually brings “wheelchair” to mind; this is natural, since it is the universal symbol for persons needing some type of accommodation. Disability, however, goes far beyond wheelchairs. Making all areas of a church physically accessible is just one step on the path to inclusion. Also needing accommodation are the visual impaired, the hearing impaired, those with mental illness, the intellectual and developmentally disabled, and those with learning problems, such as ADHD.

One who looks “normal” may shout out, respond to prayer loudly, or sing off key. Attitude change is crucial to success in becoming a welcoming and inclusive congregation for the disabled of all ages and to overcome fear of change and what may be required of them.

Education precedes inclusion. When I asked for a sign for a single handicapped bathroom be changed from “Women” to “Family,” many thought it was a good idea, but no action was taken. When I went to the custodian, he promptly put up a hand-made sign until an appropriate one arrived. Since we previously had no designated bathroom where a person of one gender could accompany someone of the opposite gender who needed assistance, this simple sign made life easier for parents, grandparents, spouses, and caregivers — disabled or not.

Being inclusive of all in the body of Christ requires effort and planning. Churches vary by size and resources, but the first step is to assess congregational needs. Help is readily available. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has an excellent disability ministry website that provides resources for churches to become welcoming and inclusive. By being intentional, all churches can accept, include, and celebrate all members of the body of Christ. *Q*

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