

EVERY ABILITY. EVERY CALL. EVERYONE BELONGS.

Disability Awareness. Inclusive Church. Stronger Together.

Clergy with disabilities are called by God, gifted by the Spirit, and essential to the life and ministry of the Church.

When we remove barriers, we reveal the gifts God has given.

"The body of Christ has many members, and all of them are one body."
1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27

Disability is not a limitation—it is part of the beautiful diversity of the body of Christ.

A DISABILITY-AWARE CHURCH IS A WELCOMING, ACCESSIBLE, AND INCLUSIVE CHURCH. *Together, we reflect the love of Jesus.*

WELCOME EVERYONE

- Everyone belongs
- Respect and dignity
- Listen, learn, and include

Belonging changes lives.

REMOVE BARRIERS

- Physical access
- Communication
- Technology
- Attitudes

Accessibility is hospitality.

VALUE GIFTS

- Diverse experiences
- Unique perspectives
- Stronger ministry
- Shared leadership

Every gift matters.

SUPPORT CLERGY

- Offer accommodations
- Encourage wellness
- Provide equity
- Celebrate calling

Support helps ministry flourish.

BUILD COMMUNITY

- Inclusion at every level
- Challenge ableism
- Grow in compassion
- Walk together in faith

Together we are stronger.

REFLECT CHRIST

- Justice and love
- Hospitality
- Grace in action
- Hope for all

We reflect God's inclusive love.

Practical Ways to Make a Difference

- Ask what accommodations are helpful.
- Communicate directly and respectfully.
- Make worship, meetings, and spaces accessible.
- Include people with disabilities in leadership.
- Address ableism and challenge stereotypes.
- Plan for accessibility from the beginning.
- Celebrate diversity as part of God's design.

One body. Many gifts. Together in Christ.

OUR COMMITMENT

We commit to building churches where clergy with disabilities are welcomed, supported, empowered, and able to thrive in their calling.

ONE BODY. MANY GIFTS. TOGETHER IN CHRIST.

You are called.
You are valued.
You are supported.
You are not alone.

Learn more and access resources at amd-umc.org

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Disability Awareness and the Church Learning Module

A Resource Guide for Supporting Clergy with Disabilities

For Congregations, Church Leaders, Staff-Parish Relations Committees, and Ministry Teams

Introduction

The Church is called to be a community where every person is welcomed, valued, and empowered to use their God-given gifts. This includes clergy with disabilities, who enrich the life of the Church through their leadership, lived experience, resilience, and faith.

Disability is not a barrier to God's call. Throughout Scripture, God calls ordinary people, some with disabilities and some without who bring life experiences to lead, teach, preach, and serve. Yet many clergy with disabilities continue to encounter physical, communication, technological, attitudinal, and institutional barriers that limit full participation in ministry.

Disability awareness is more than learning about different disabilities—it is learning to recognize and remove barriers so that everyone can flourish. An accessible church reflects the inclusive love of Christ and bears witness to the belief that every member of the Body of Christ is indispensable.

Understanding Disability

Disability is a natural and valuable part of human diversity.

Disabilities may be:

- Physical
- Sensory
- Blind or low vision
- Deaf or hard of hearing
- Intellectual or developmental
- Autism
- ADHD
- Learning disabilities
- Chronic health conditions
- Mental health conditions
- Cognitive disabilities
- Neurological conditions
- Temporary or permanent
- Visible or invisible

Many disabilities are not immediately apparent. Avoid making assumptions based on appearance.

What Is Disability Awareness?

Disability awareness is the intentional practice of understanding, respecting, and including people with disabilities by recognizing their strengths, removing barriers, and creating environments where everyone can fully participate.

Disability awareness includes:

- ✓ Respect

- ✓ Accessibility
 - ✓ Inclusion
 - ✓ Equity
 - ✓ Belonging
 - ✓ Partnership
 - ✓ Shared leadership
 - ✓ Justice
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What Is Ableism?

Ableism is discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that non-disabled people or ways of functioning are inherently superior.

Ableism can be intentional or unintentional.

Examples include:

- Assuming disabled clergy cannot lead effectively.
- Viewing accommodations as "special treatment."
- Excluding disabled people from leadership.
- Using inaccessible buildings or technology.
- Speaking to companions instead of the disabled person.
- Equating disability with weakness or lack of faith.

Recognizing ableism is the first step toward creating a truly welcoming church.

Why Disability Awareness Matters

Disability awareness helps churches:

- ✓ Remove unnecessary barriers.
- ✓ Welcome diverse leadership.

- ✓ Improve hospitality.
- ✓ Strengthen ministry.
- ✓ Reflect God's justice.
- ✓ Increase participation.
- ✓ Build healthier congregations.
- ✓ Demonstrate Christ's inclusive love.

Accessibility benefits everyone—not only people with disabilities.

Understanding Clergy with Disabilities

Clergy with disabilities may:

- Use wheelchairs or mobility devices.
- Be Deaf or hard of hearing.
- Be blind or have low vision.
- Live with autism or ADHD.
- Manage chronic illness.
- Experience mental health conditions.
- Live with cognitive disabilities.
- Experience episodic disabilities.
- Acquire disabilities later in ministry.

Every pastor's experience is unique.

Disability does not determine effectiveness, leadership ability, or God's call.

Best Practices for Churches

Communication

- Ask what accommodations are helpful.

- ☐ Speak directly to the person.
 - ☐ Respect preferred communication methods.
 - ☐ Provide information in accessible formats.
 - ☐ Use captioning whenever possible.
 - ☐ Make websites accessible.
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Worship

- ☐ Provide accessible seating.
 - ☐ Ensure wheelchair access.
 - ☐ Offer large-print worship materials.
 - ☐ Use assistive listening systems.
 - ☐ Include captions or interpreters when needed.
 - ☐ Verbally describe visual elements.
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Meetings

- ☐ Share agendas in advance.
 - ☐ Provide accessible documents.
 - ☐ Schedule breaks.
 - ☐ Offer hybrid participation.
 - ☐ Reduce unnecessary sensory distractions.
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Church Facilities

- ☐ Accessible parking

- ☐ Automatic doors where possible
 - ☐ Ramps or elevators
 - ☐ Accessible restrooms
 - ☐ Clear signage
 - ☐ Good lighting
 - ☐ Safe pathways
 - ☐ Accessible classrooms
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Supporting Clergy with Disabilities

Church leaders should:

- ☐ Focus on gifts rather than limitations.
 - ☐ Discuss accommodations collaboratively.
 - ☐ Encourage accessibility planning.
 - ☐ Respect confidentiality.
 - ☐ Review barriers regularly.
 - ☐ Promote leadership opportunities.
 - ☐ Value disability as part of diversity.
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The Role of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC)

The SPRC can:

- ☐ Learn about disability inclusion.

- ❑ Budget for accessibility.
 - ❑ Support accommodations.
 - ❑ Evaluate ministry fairly.
 - ❑ Address ableism promptly, even complete a training.
 - ❑ Foster a welcoming culture.
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Disability Etiquette

Do

- ✓ Ask before helping.
 - ✓ Speak directly to the person.
 - ✓ Respect adaptive equipment.
 - ✓ Use inclusive language.
 - ✓ Listen carefully.
 - ✓ Focus on the individual.
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Don't

- ✗ Make assumptions.
 - ✗ Offer pity.
 - ✗ Touch mobility devices or service animals without permission.
 - ✗ Speak to companions instead of the person.
 - ✗ Define someone by their disability.
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Language Matters

Use respectful language that reflects dignity and personhood.

Examples:

- Ask the individual with the disability how they refer to themselves and follow that
- "Person with a disability" (when preferred)
- "Disabled person" (when preferred by the individual)
- "Wheelchair user" rather than "wheelchair-bound"
- "Accessible restroom" rather than "handicapped restroom"

When in doubt, ask individuals how they prefer to describe themselves.

Creating a Culture of Belonging

A welcoming church:

- ✓ Assumes everyone belongs.
 - ✓ Plans for accessibility before someone asks.
 - ✓ Includes disabled leaders.
 - ✓ Celebrates diverse gifts.
 - ✓ Removes barriers.
 - ✓ Encourages shared leadership.
 - ✓ Treats accessibility as hospitality.
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Self-Reflection for Church Leaders

Ask yourselves:

- ☐ Would clergy with disabilities feel welcomed here?
- ☐ Have we examined our buildings for accessibility?

- ☐ Are our websites and communications accessible?
 - ☐ Have we addressed attitudinal barriers?
 - ☐ Are disabled leaders represented in ministry?
 - ☐ Are we budgeting for accessibility?
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A Theology of Disability

The Bible presents disability not as a reason for exclusion but as part of the diversity of God's creation. Jesus consistently welcomed people whom society marginalized, restored them to community, and challenged assumptions that equated disability with sin or spiritual failure.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22). Disability is not a problem to be solved but an opportunity for the Church to discover new expressions of grace, interdependence, and faithful leadership.

When churches remove barriers and embrace clergy with disabilities, they more fully reflect the Body of Christ, where every member contributes unique gifts for the building up of the whole Church.

Hospitality Statement

We affirm that clergy with disabilities are called by God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and essential to the ministry of the Church. We commit ourselves to building congregations that remove barriers, reject ableism, embrace accessibility, and celebrate the diverse gifts of every leader. Together, we seek to embody the inclusive love of Jesus Christ by creating churches where everyone belongs, everyone participates, and everyone has the opportunity to flourish in ministry.

Recommended Resources

United Methodist Resources

- Association of Ministers with Disabilities (AMD)
- Disability Ministries Committee (The United Methodist Church)
- General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM)
- General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR)

Disability Organizations

- Job Accommodation Network (JAN)
- ADA National Network
- National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)
- American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)

Books

- *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* — Amos Yong
- *The Disabling God* — Nancy L. Eiesland
- *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* — Amy Kenny
- *Disability and the Way of Jesus* — Bethany McKinney Fox
- *The Disabled God* — Eiesland (classic disability theology)

Appendix: Disability-Aware Church Checklist

Review annually:

- Have we conducted an accessibility audit of our facilities?
- Are worship services accessible to people with diverse disabilities?
- Have church leaders received disability awareness training?
- Do we regularly consult with people with disabilities when making decisions?
- Have we developed a plan for supporting clergy with disabilities?
- Is accessibility included in our annual budget?
- Are we actively challenging ableism and promoting a culture of belonging?
- Do we have an annual Disability Awareness Sunday?

Conclusion

Disability awareness is not simply about learning facts or complying with accessibility standards—it is about becoming a Church that reflects the inclusive ministry of Jesus Christ. By recognizing the gifts of clergy with disabilities, removing unnecessary barriers, confronting ableism, and embracing accessibility as an expression of hospitality and justice, congregations become stronger, more faithful communities. In doing so, they proclaim the Gospel through their actions, demonstrating that every person is created in the image of God, every calling is sacred, and every member of the Body of Christ is indispensable.

*This guide by the Association of Ministers with Disabilities was developed with assistance from AI and reviewed, and heavily edited. Any questions can be sent to Rev. Dr. Leo Yates at leoyjr@gmail.com.