

Part 1: Dignity

- [Pope: Make your heart accessible to people with disabilities](#)
- "Creating a fully accessible parish requires not only the removal of architectural barriers, but above all, helping parishioners to develop attitudes and acts of solidarity and service toward persons with disabilities and their families," the pope said in his message. For the church, he said, "our aim should be to speak no longer about 'them,' but rather about 'us.'"
- The U.N. theme for the 2020 celebration of the international day was "Building Back Better: Toward a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable post COVID-19 world."
- Pope Francis said he was struck by "the expression 'building back better,'" which made him think of the Gospel story about a house built on rock or on sand.
- When used in reference to the way society, and sometimes even the church, treats persons with disabilities, he said, the rain, rivers and winds that threaten the house in the Bible story "can be identified with the throwaway culture widespread in our time."
- In a throwaway culture, he said, "some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others" or simply pushed aside and ignored.
- Such an attitude "ignores the inevitable fact that frailty is part of everyone's life," he said. And, in fact, some people "with even severe disabilities, despite great challenges, have found the way to a beautiful and meaningful life, whereas many 'able-bodied' people feel dissatisfied or even desperate."
- To "build back better," he said, inclusion is key because "the strength of a chain depends upon the attention paid to its weakest links."
- For the church, he said, religious education programs must be available to those with disabilities, and every seminarian, priest and catechist should be educated about disabilities and familiar with "the use of inclusive pastoral tools."

- "Before all else," he said, "I strongly reaffirm the right of persons with disabilities to receive the sacraments, like all other members of the church. All liturgical celebrations in the parish should be accessible to them, so that, together with their brothers and sisters, each of them can deepen, celebrate and live their faith."
- And, like all members of the church, they should know they are called to be "missionary disciples," sharing the faith with others, he said. "Indeed, the active participation of people with disabilities in the work of catechesis can greatly enrich the life of the whole parish" by their witness.

Part 2: Accessibility in the Church

- [I am a lifelong wheelchair user and I don't feel welcome in the church | National Catholic Reporter](#)
- Imagine going to Mass and not being able to get into a church building. Imagine going to confession and not being able to get into the confessional. Imagine a priest telling you that you are a burden to your parents. Imagine not being able to get on to the altar to be a lector, altar server or eucharistic minister.
- As a lifelong wheelchair user, I have learned that many of the daily hassles, disappointments and discrimination that I experience in everyday life also occur in the Catholic Church.
- Last year, I heard a homily during Mass that was egregiously ableist: A woman with a disability was described as a burden to her parents and disability was equated to sin. The priest added, "She would never have a full life." This was a dehumanizing experience for me.
- I wrote to the pastor to express my sadness following Mass that Monday morning.

- While he recognized the pain that this homily caused me, he directed me to the parish's various ministries dedicated to individuals with disabilities and refused to reaffirm the value of disabled Catholics at a future Mass.
- The priest and pastor failed to see this woman, and me, as the face of God. The experience has had a lasting impact on me and made me question whether another Christian denomination may be a better fit.
- Ableism in our church is rampant. It is not specific to one church, state or region of the country. Before the pandemic, it often took me weeks to find a church that was physically accessible. When I am able to get into the church autonomously, I immediately feel welcome to the community. Unfortunately, that sense of welcome wears thin as red flags appear in the form of sundry barriers. I prefer to receive the Eucharist in my hand, but eucharistic ministers are impatient while I maneuver my wheelchair. There are usually no cutouts in the pews for a wheelchair, which means I am forced to sit in front of the first pew or block the aisle during Communion.
- In a world where many churches say, "All are welcome," I often wonder whether this applies to Catholics with disabilities like me.
- Churches are exempt from being compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. For this reason, many do not have fully accessible facilities with curb cuts or ramps down their sidewalks, an accessible entrance near the common entrance, push-button doors, accessible restrooms, a space to park a wheelchair next to a pew, full access to spaces dedicated to ministry and special events, and access to the altar and rectory. At my former church, few acknowledged me or shook my extended hand during "peace." There was an accessible door, which was, regrettably, always locked. After advocating for myself, a layperson was assigned to open the accessible door. Then, I got shingles and missed weeks of church. When I returned, the door was locked and I asked a parishioner to tell the priest that I needed help getting in. The person designated to keep

the door open came and angrily said, "If you're not going to come, I'm not going to keep the door open."

- I was a faithful parishioner, yet I consistently faced attitudinal and physical barriers that prevented me from truly feeling welcomed at God's table.
- Fighting ableism is a very lonely task, and often church is the loneliest hour of my week. The Catholic Church has a responsibility to welcoming the marginalized, including those with disabilities.
- [What makes a parish 'accessible'?](#)
- Interview with Michele Chronister, who works in adaptive ministry (questions in *italics*):
- *What is the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD)?*
- The National Catholic Partnership on Disability is an organization that works closely with the USCCB (which does not have an "Office of Disabilities") to advise, develop resources (they were instrumental in the recent revisions of the USCCB document, "Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities", for example), advocate for the sacramental and catechetical needs of those with disabilities, and to serve as a national resource for dioceses and archdioceses throughout the country — many of which do not have a dedicated office of disabilities, either due to lack of personnel or funding.
- *What are some of the most important scriptural and theological resources to engage for Catholics who want to think and act more carefully when it comes to disability?*
- I think that we can begin by looking directly at Church documents. For example, the National Directory for Catechesis (another USCCB resource) explicitly calls ministry for those with disabilities a necessity. The guidelines document also summarizes the theological grounds for this ministry, as well as practical implications for sacramental preparation of those with disabilities in a parish setting.

- When we look to the lives of the saints (many of whom lived in a time prior to modern medical diagnostic tools) we find that many of them would have fit into one of those categories! The body of Christ, of whose members are initiated through the sacrament of baptism, is lacking if any of the members are excluded from full and active participation. And, although “full and active participation” does sometimes include active participation in lay or ordained ministry, the scope is far broader than that – it encompasses the opportunity to partake in the sacramental life of the Church, uniting the sacrifice of our lives to the sacrifice of the life of Christ.
- If even one person is excluded from that sort of participation, which our baptism mandates, then the Church is far poorer for it!
- Touching briefly on Scripture: it is important to reflect on the necessity of participation in the sacramental life, as well as the universal call to holiness. Jesus engaged all people in the Gospels, including those who were rejected by society.
- And, it is worth saying, although Jesus did cure many people with a disability in the Gospels, the message there is not that those with disabilities should be praying for healing. Those miracles occurred in a time and place where disability could be a death sentence, and where it often led to ostracization and rejection by society. Today’s culture is entirely different. Those with disabilities can lead full, active lives, especially with assistance from modern medicine and therapies!
- Those with disabilities are ordinary Catholics, and their voices and needs deserve to be heard and listened to in the Church.

Part 3: How we can act

- [It's time to make parishes accessible to people of all abilities](#)
- As director of the Faith Inclusion Network, I routinely field calls and emails from parents who have been asked to leave their church because of a child's behavior, a behavior that the child cannot control because of their disability. Since the family will most likely not attend without their child, the parish has not just lost an individual Catholic but an entire family.
- Additionally, there are still Catholic churches that are inaccessible for people who use wheelchairs. They may have a ramp into the building but do not have accessible bathroom facilities or elevators to the second floor.
- If your parish is considering how to include persons affected by disability, here are five best practices to consider.
 1. Know the needs of your parish.
 - a. There are many ways to ensure a parish is accessible. From ramps and elevators to American Sign Language interpretation, child care, and support during worship and religious education, one church may not be able to provide everything. The most successful inclusion efforts take a congregation's members into account. This can be done through congregational assessment surveys or informal conversations with members of the parish. Once you know the community's accessibility needs, a plan can be put in place to begin meeting some of these needs. Gradually, the parish can add more accommodations over time.
 2. Presume competence
 - a. It is extremely disrespectful to talk down to a person affected by disability or, even worse, to ignore them and only speak to their attendant or parent. Whether a person is affected by cerebral palsy, autism, Down

syndrome, or another disability, it is important to speak directly to that person and assume they understand and would like to communicate. Their means of communication may be different than that of the typical person, but it is likely that they understand some or all of what is being said.

- b. Perhaps the most effective way to presume competence is to offer opportunities for people affected by disability to participate in various volunteer capacities. Does your parish intentionally ask persons affected by disability to usher, read scripture, or sing in the choir? Don't wait for the individual to offer their services (they may have had negative past experiences, even if they are attending your church regularly) but rather just ask them. Even if they don't accept, the fact that you asked presumes competence.
- 3. Don't keep your efforts to be accessible and inclusive a secret.
 - a. I regularly receive requests from people with disabilities and their family members for recommendations of local inclusive and welcoming churches. Families affected by disability do not usually have the luxury of shopping around to find a parish that meets their needs. Churches that offer accommodations need to put their information on their website. A visitor should be able to observe signs that the parish is intentionally including people with disabilities.
 - b. My own church lists my name in the bulletin as our parish advocate. This sends a clear message: We are aware that some people may need help to participate in our parish, and we want them to reach out.
- 4. It's all about relationships.

- a. Developing a relationship starts with open communication. Churches that effectively include children with a disability start by having a conversation, ideally at a time outside of the hectic Sunday worship/religious education, to learn more about the child, the family, and what works best for everyone. How does the child learn best? What are they good at? Once some basic trust begins to develop, everyone will feel more comfortable addressing any challenges that may come along.
- 5. Conduct outreach to develop a culture of inclusion.
 - a. There is a rather large parish near me that offers a social ministry to people of all ages affected by disability. They meet one evening a week at the church and enjoy dinner, activities, and a gospel message from a guest speaker. The regular attendance is around 75 people. For special occasions, such as their annual Christmas party, they will have 200 people or more.
 - b. Do all these people attend their weekend Masses? No, of course not. But by providing this outreach, the parish has attracted adults with disabilities who would not otherwise come to church. By including (and in some cases baptizing and confirming) this community, the church has developed a culture of inclusion and understanding and can pride itself on offering an outreach that gives people with disabilities a safe and loving place to socialize.
 - c. There are other kinds of outreach that can achieve the same outcome. For example, a large parish in a nearby town offers a regular respite night. Caregivers can drop off their children with disabilities and their siblings and go out for a much-needed night out on their own.

My parish offers the following features to make liturgy accessible to all:

84%

Wide aisle so that wheelchairs can pass

66%

Several places for wheelchairs so that people can choose where to sit

49%

Allowing service animals

47%

An assisted listening system

45%

A choir area that is accessible for people in wheelchairs or other mobility needs

11%

Braille and/or large print hymnals and missalettes

- [Ableism Is Still a Core Part of Church Spaces. Here's How to Change It](#)

1. **Do an accessibility audit.** Does your church welcome disabled people without pity or patronizing remarks? Is your church accessible for those with a diverse range of visible and hidden disabilities and access needs? Do you hide, shame, or belittle disabled people? Do you talk down to us or assume we're ignorant? A great way to commit to becoming more inclusive when it comes to accessibility is to conduct an [Annual Accessibility Audit](#) or hire a disability consultant to assess your church's accessibility.
2. **Proactively embrace accommodations without condemnation or critique.** Regardless of whether you understand the accommodations or think they are necessary, welcome ideas for how to make your community more

accommodating for a variety of visible and hidden disabilities. If you aren't regularly receiving accommodation requests, don't assume it's because your church is already accessible. Accommodations shift over time as access needs change, and those changes should be embraced without complaint. Invite disabled people to take the lead in sharing the best way to meet access needs and equip the rest of the community to follow their lead.

Shortened version of Part 3: How we can act

- From Articles: [It's time to make parishes accessible to people of all abilities](#) & [Ableism Is Still a Core Part of Church Spaces. Here's How to Change It](#)
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