



ACCESSIBILITY MATTERS

Healthy Church always seeks to create a healthy environment where both attendees and guests feel welcomed. This is not something that occurs accidentally—there must be some intentionality behind it. In fact, it is a vital ministry of the church. This month's church Hack provides best practices and reflective questions to consider your congregation's accessibility.



WHAT IS ACCESSIBILITY?

Accessibility is the inclusive practice of ensuring there are no barriers that prevent interaction with access to or participation in any system, product, or environment.

Accessibility is generally considered to be for inclusion and the removal of barriers for individuals with physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities. However, from a gospel-minded and Healthy Church perspective, this means considering the barriers that may exist for our neighbors to participate in the life of our church.



WHY DOES ACCESSIBILITY MATTER?

GCI's belief in the incarnational, Trinitarian theology informs us that all are included in the love and life of Jesus. This beautiful, inclusive theology fuels our mission of Living and Sharing the Gospel. So how are we doing in connecting with neighbors and co-workers who don't look like us, have different life experiences, or do not believe what we believe? Taking time to reflect on the accessibility of our congregation is a helpful way to ensure we are not unknowingly creating barriers for participation in the life of the Church.



GRACE COMMUNION
INTERNATIONAL



GRACECOMMUNION
WEAREGCI



HOW CAN WE ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY IN OUR CHURCHES?

Take some time to consider the groups that are often excluded from the life of the church. Aside from the groups listed, what other groups should you consider as you make your plans for accessibility?

Groups that we may unknowingly create barriers for participation...



» People with physical disabilities.

- About 15% of the global population, about 150 million have a physical disability. In the U.S., religious institutions are exempt from meeting the American with Disabilities Act and its requirements to remove barriers of participation for people with disabilities. What does this communicate to our brothers and sisters when they find that there are no handicapped parking spaces, wheelchair ramps, handicapped accessible bathroom stalls, accessible seating, adaptive equipment, or you fill in the blank? Have you considered the accessibility of your facility, worship service, and other church events?



» Generations not represented in our congregations (i.e., kids and young adults)

- Many congregations treat youth or young adult ministry as an add-on to congregational life. However, as the body of Christ we are all invited to participate in the ministry of Jesus accomplishing the good works he has set out for all of his children, not just those 18+. Your younger members are not the future of the church; they are the church now. Are there spaces within your congregation for young people to participate and serve? Adults are very good at creating spaces where children can learn from us. However, how good are we at creating spaces where we can learn from them? When we interact with children, do we expect that they have something to teach us?



» Single or Divorced Adults

- A historical strategy for churches is to minister to families with young children. Based on the previous bullet point, we know this is an important aspect of ministry. However, if this is the sole strategy, there are millions of people who are being excluded from the life of your church. Millennials—those born between 1980-1996—are currently the largest generation, with 75 million members of the global population. Currently, only 27% of Millennials are married, and many are electing to never marry or to delay marriage. Gearing ministry toward couples and families is missing the opportunity to minister to 73% of this generation, and the emerging adults in Gen Z (born between 1997 - 2012) who are following the same trend. Another consideration is that many single adults are choosing to have children by themselves, with a partner who is not their spouse, or may have a child from a previous marriage. What spaces do you have in your congregation that would meet the interest and needs of single adults?



» Seekers and new believers

- It has been often said that it is difficult for an unchurched person to visit a church for the first time. There are many factors that make this statement true. What do others experience when visiting your congregation for the first time? Is there clear signage directing them to the sanctuary? Is there a bulletin or announcement slide projected letting them know what to expect?





HOW CAN WE ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY IN OUR CHURCHES?

Best practices for accessibility....



» Make a plan to make your church facility accessible.

- Expect and plan for guests with physical disabilities. Reserve a spot for a wheelchair. If your building isn't accessible to a wheelchair, be in prayer and discernment about finding another space. Always have speakers use a microphone to include listeners with hearing loss. Making an effort to include and accommodate every hearer must outweigh any discomfort a speaker feels over having their voice amplified.
- Expect and plan for the needs of infants and toddlers. Make sure changing tables are available in all bathrooms and designate a space for parents to be able to care for children (feed, comfort, etc.), where they can have privacy but also still hear and/or view the service.



» Anticipate children attending your church.

- Expect children every week. If you don't have a children's program, there are resources in Equipper to help you develop one. In the meantime, you can provide a welcome gift that includes toys and activities to use during the service. Check out some of our recommended [Children's Ministry resources](#).



» Create the Culture of an Integrated Community

- What this means is that church life is developed in a way where all people interact with one another. Couples, singles, men, women, age groups are not separated from one another. For example, develop connect groups based on topic or interest rather than gender or age. Or, plan events with the interest and abilities of the larger group, so that everyone can participate in one way or another.



» Consider the experience of seekers and guests.

- Plan ahead for an accessible message. Expect guests who have no knowledge of the Bible. Don't make fleeting biblical references, like, "Everyone remembers the story of Noah." If you mention Noah, at least briefly explain who he was and the flood. Save the difficult theological terms for the Faith Avenue. Your listeners include those who read on different levels and have a variety of learning styles. If you pass out Bibles, don't assume guests know where to turn to find the passage. It's more inclusive to print the Bible passage in a bulletin and include it in PowerPoint slides.



GRACE COMMUNION
INTERNATIONAL



GRACECOMMUNION
WEAREGCI



WHAT ARE SOME NEXT STEPS?

Developing a more accessible church will not happen overnight and is not a one-time process. Developing an open and guest-centered posture is part of our continual transformation into the image of Christ. Reflect on what you have read and consider the questions in the categories below to continue to refine your congregation's accessibility.

Culture

- » Have you identified an underrepresented group within your congregation? If so, have you asked them about their experience worshipping with you? What are the changes or accommodations that could be made to better include them in the life of your church?
- » Are the people who serve on teams and in leadership representative of your neighborhood? Is there representation from all groups that are present in your congregation?
- » Are there opportunities for an intergenerational culture to be developed?
- » Is there pastoral care provided for groups that may require extra care and assistance?

Communication

- » Is communication shared in way that is accessible to seekers, guests, and members?
- » Are there accommodations for people with visual and hearing impairments?
- » Are translations available for non-English speaking members and guests?

Facilities

- » Are entrances, hallways, and public areas of your building clear and wheelchair accessible?
- » Have you provided signage and greeters to help guests find their way around the facility?
- » Are communication platforms accessible to those with visual and hearing impairments?

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. **John 13:34-35**