

Creating an Access Plan Utilizing the Principles of Universal Design

Achieving universal design which creates enabling and inclusive environments to serve all people at all points during their lives is the goal of an effective access plan, recognizing that what is a necessity for some is a convenience for most. Universal has been defined as “applicable or common to all purposes, conditions, and situationsⁱ.” Thus, universal design is an approach to design that incorporates products as well as building features and elements which, to the greatest extent possible, can be used by everyone. This focus considers the totality of the community and its interactions, allowing for individual and communal growth and recognizing needs created by the aging process.

People with disabilities, who are full members of the Christian community by virtue of their baptism, share in the obligations of the Catholic faith. Yet a 1994 national poll by Louis Harris and Associates reports that people with significant disabilities are missing from our parishes. The study indicates that “adults with severe disabilities are less likely to go to a place of worship on a regular basis. While more than half of those with slight (52%) or moderate (55%) disabilities go at least once a month, only 39% of adults with very severe disabilities make such frequent visits to a church or synagogue.”ⁱⁱ The *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities* stresses the importance of active parish participation:

Just as the Church must do all in its power to help ensure people with disabilities a secure place in the human community, so it must reach out to welcome gratefully those who seek to participate in the ecclesial community....For most Catholics the community of believers is embodied in the local parish. The parish is the door to participation for individuals with disabilities, and it is the responsibility of the pastor and lay leaders to make sure that this door is always open....in order to be loyal to its calling, to be truly pastoral, the parish must make sure that it does not exclude any Catholic who wishes to take part in its activities.ⁱⁱⁱ

Catholics with disabilities answer the call to serve their parish community and the greater church through participation in its liturgical, spiritual, ministerial, educational, and social life. They can do so, of course, only if facilities are barrierfree and if appropriate accommodations are available. This would include, but is not limited to, physical access to the church, including the sanctuary and reconciliation rooms, as well as other parish facilities such as the parish hall and rectory; use of interpreters or real-time captioning; availability of braille, large print, and audio description.

Often problems will be identified which can be addressed with little expenditure of time, money, or effort. Such solutions may include purchase of a TTY (teletypewriter) and large-print missalettes, matching persons in need of transportation with willing volunteers, and moving meetings and other parish gatherings to an accessible site. Some parishes have identified neighboring parishes which offer services that they are as yet unable to provide. Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn, New York, explains this clustering concept:

Parishes are called to respond to *all* needs of *all* disabled persons as fully as possible. But it is possible that an individual parish might not have all the needed resources, or be physically adaptable for their disabled parishioners. For example, there may be no reasonable hope that a particular parish can build a ramp at an acceptable cost.

The parishes in a ministerial cluster should strive to provide a full response to *all* the needs of *all* disabled persons. One church building may be able to have a ramp; another church may have the financial resources for an interpreted Mass. Parishes with different facilities should then publish that information, permanently, in the neighboring parishes' bulletins.^{iv}

Clustering services in this way, while not as ideal as providing the service within your own parish, is a helpful method for enabling the participation of parishioners who might otherwise have to bear the rejection imposed by inaccessibility. If at all possible, this method should be seen as an intermediate step while a long-range plan for developing access within the parish is developed and implemented.

Assessing Needs and Access Options

An assessment of the parish or diocese provides valuable information on existing access and levels of understanding of disability issues, and assists in developing an access plan. A carefully crafted parish census can likewise provide information on parishioners with disabilities. Often pastors are unaware of the significant number of families which include an individual with a disability. A 1991 Louis Harris and Associates survey revealed that one family in three has a member with a disability.^v Yet inquiries about disability may not be responded to by those who do not consider themselves disabled, but whose full participation in the Church could be enhanced by utilization of accessibility techniques and common sense accommodations. For example, often older people whose mobility and sensory acuity have been diminished could use large-print reading materials, enhanced hearing systems, and properly placed railings but do not think to request such.

Thus, questions on a parish or diocesan census should focus on identifying accommodations to enhance participation rather than on specifying disabilities. A further assessment tool is an access survey to solicit specific information on available access features and accommodations which promote and enable participation. Part 3 of this Section offers samples of census questions and access surveys. Section B.6 offers information on assistive technology devices which can

create access and facilitate participation found lacking through a parish census or access survey.

Focusing on Universal Design

Universal design is a very practical approach to creating access because it benefits everyone rather than focusing on differing requirements. By so doing it extends beyond specialization which can be costly and produce separate environments.

Dr. Leon Pastalan, gerontologist and urban planner, describes universal design as follows: “The universal design concept considers those changes that are experienced by everyone as they grow from infancy to old age. Problems related to temporary or permanent disabilities are incorporated into the concept as well. Because all groups are placed within the context of normal expectations of the human condition, trying to justify the importance of each vulnerable population group becomes unnecessary.”^{vi} Mr. Ron Mace, known by many as the father of the universal design concept, explains his approach: “My whole philosophy has been to get away from those labels like ‘special’ and ‘aging’ and ‘barrier free.’ If universal design elements were simply made part of all building codes, it would benefit everyone.”^{vii} The article entitled “Housing for the Lifespan of All People, Universal Design” in Section B.6.a. of this chapter provides further information on this important concept.

Creating such access involves assessment and identification of short-range and long-range goals. This process calls for planning, creativity, commitment, openness and investment of time and resources.

Developing An Access Plan

A long-range access plan addresses various barriers: of attitude; within the physical environment; and in carrying out programs, events and activities. The cost of such remedies varies from low- or no-cost common sense solutions to possible significant expense for some architectural modifications and technology. Of course, people with disabilities are to be consulted throughout this process to offer their expertise and life experiences and to explain their needs.

Attitudes. Often the most challenging barriers faced by people with disabilities are the negative attitudes of others, including those which convey stifling pity, fear, or repressive misconceptions about a person's abilities. An important low-cost first step involves familiarizing personnel and volunteers with the concerns and needs of people with disabilities, emphasizing patience, respect, and willingness to ask questions and admit mistakes or misconceptions. Training on assistive technology demonstrates to staff and volunteers the capabilities of people with disabilities, and ways in which communication can be enhanced. For example, a lesson on use of the telephone relay system or a TTY will educate staff on how to communicate over

the telephone with a person who may be deaf or hard of hearing or have a speech impairment. Or a person may simply be alerted to the fact that some individuals need extra time to speak their message over a telephone due to stuttering or use of a respirator.

Common Sense Approaches. The following suggestions have been found useful in helping to sensitize those persons who have had little interaction with people with disabilities:

- Treat the person as you would anyone else. Relax when communicating, relying on natural courtesy, consideration, and common sense. Avoid getting flustered or irritated if misunderstandings arise. Repeat yourself if you sense misunderstanding, or ask the person to repeat if you do not comprehend.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions about a person's disability.
- Encourage use of initiative and ability, and expression of ideas. Allow people to do things for themselves, even if it takes longer or results in mistakes. Do not always “do for” the person.
- Treat adults with disabilities as adults, rather than as children, regardless of the disability.
- Speak at a normal rate, without exaggeration or over-emphasis.
- Respect the individual's personal space and auxiliary aides. Do not:
 - lean against or push a wheelchair;
 - pet a service animal in harness;
 - grab an arm or hand when attempting to guide;
- move wheelchairs, crutches, white canes, or other assistive devices out of reach of a person who uses them.
- Be patient and flexible.
- Encourage participation, welcoming the contributions that each person has to offer.
- Offer assistance, but do not impose if help is not desired.
- Address the individual, not an assistant, interpreter, or family member.
- To facilitate communication, have on hand paper and pen, and familiarize yourself with other aids such as communication boards and synthesized speech.
- During gatherings or meetings, allow time to attend to personal needs and rest.

Components of an Access Plan

Creating a plan to address the long-range access needs of parishioners with disabilities can be approached through a three-fold process involving identification and implementation of needed renovations, facilitating access to programs on an ongoing basis, and development of policy statements. Such a plan is not static, but rather evolves through evaluation and ongoing assessment of need. Each component of this plan is essential in ensuring that full participation of Catholics with disabilities is facilitated and encouraged.

Identifying and Implementing Renovations. Assessment of parish and diocesan facilities identifies onetime renovations needed to create environmental access.

Depending on the age and condition of the physical plant (church, rectory, school, social hall, office), such renovations might include any of the following:

- Ensuring that doors are at least 32" wide and can be opened with minimal effort.
- Modifications of bathrooms to include grab bars, toilet seat 17-19" from floor, lever-type faucet and door handles, wall-mounted urinal with the opening of the basin no higher than 17" from the floor, towel racks and mirrors mounted no higher than 40" from the floor (creation of a unisex bathroom which may be entered by the disabled person and a parent, spouse or personal assistant is optimal).
- Installation of the following equipment:
 - ramp, lift, or elevator;
 - permanent hearing enhancement system, or purchase of a portable system;
 - additional lighting to enhance visibility;
 - braille and raised letter signage for restrooms, floor, and room numbers;
 - accessible playground equipment which can be enjoyed by all;
 - teletypewriter (TTY);
 - amplified telephone;
 - visual-alert system;
 - audio-alert system.
- Designation of reserved parking spaces (minimum width of 12' 6") near the accessible entrance.
- Creation of wheelchair accessible seating in designated areas and dispersed throughout the sanctuary or auditorium.

Specific information on access requirements can be obtained from the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (see Chapter Six for address), which developed and disseminates the *ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG)* and a variety of other technical assistance resources.

Creating Program Access. The access plan also includes procedures for providing access to programs and activities on an ongoing basis to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities within the faith community. Such access would include provision of the following:

- personnel to assist as note-takers, guides or personal attendants;
- print materials in alternative media such as braille, large print, and cassette tape or computer disk;
- real-time captioning;^a
- audio description;^b

^a Real-time captioning displays on a screen the actual words as they are being said.

- transportation services;
- special diet when a group meal is offered; and
- sign language interpreters fluent in American Sign Language, signed English or whatever language is requested by the individual.

Developing Policy Statements. An important feature of the access plan is the development of policies to emphasize commitment to fostering the participation of people with disabilities. Such policies are courses of action adapted in relation to special issues. Those developed by a diocese can then be modeled by parishes. Some bishops have issued such policies which govern all activities within the diocese. Development of policies on the following topics is recommended:

- service animals;
- provision of print materials in accessible format;
- use of interpreters;
- enhanced hearing systems;
- leadership development and other opportunities to serve in ministry;
- commitment to hiring qualified people with disabilities;
- non-discrimination employment practices (with reference to Title I requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act);
- utilizing accessible locations for events and activities;
- barrier-free construction and renovation of diocesan and parish properties; and
- environments accessible to people with allergies and respiratory conditions (smoke-free, moderate use of incense).

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- i. “Housing for the Lifespan of All People: Universal Design,” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, 1988, reprinted and distributed by the Center for Accessible Housing, North Carolina University, Raleigh, NC, p. 2.
- ii. Louis Harris and Associates. *N.O.D./Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities*

^b Audio description involves low power FM transmission and small individual receivers with an earplug. An individual with a microphone seated in an unobtrusive location describes verbally those events or images which might be missed by visually impaired or blind participants.

- (New York: Louis Harris and Associates, 1994) 136. Survey commissioned by the National Organization on Disability.
- iii. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereafter NCCB). *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1989), par. 12, 18. The original version of this *Pastoral Statement*, published November 16, 1978, was revised in 1989 to update language used in referring to people with disabilities.
- iv. Bishop Thomas V. Daily. *Come To Me: The Church's Response To Disabled Persons* (Brooklyn, NY: Catholic Charities Office for Disabled Persons, 1992) 9.
- v. Louis Harris and Associates. *Statistical Report: Public Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities* (New York: Louis Harris and Associates, 1991).
- vi. "Housing for the Lifespan of All People: Universal Design," p. 3.
7. Johnson, Mary. "Universal Man," *Mainstream*, August 1994.