

# Accessible Welcome

## A Toolkit for Rural Churches



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CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS





# Introduction

A minister was trying to encourage a church congregation to make adaptations to the building for people with disabilities. To get ideas, a group decided to spend a day visiting churches who had made such provision. The group included Ted, a long-term member who was a wheelchair user. Helping Ted to be loaded into the minibus in his chair certainly broke the ice, allowing people to ask questions they might otherwise not have done. As they visited other church buildings, the group began to see things through Ted's eyes, and became quite critical on his behalf. By the end of the day, the group were determined to change things so that their friend Ted could feel comfortable in their building. What had begun as a way of complying with legislation had become an exercise in true hospitality.

## How accessible is your church?

The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 and the Equalities Act of 2010 make it clear that we have a legal responsibility to make our church buildings accessible. On a practical level, an accessible building will be of benefit to everyone, not only those people with disabilities; improving access for a wheelchair also improves access for a baby buggy. However, for Christians taking action is about more than practicalities and legal requirements; making our buildings accessible is about love, care and welcome.

This guide contains some practical tips to encourage that welcome. Some adaptations may be costly – ramps and adapted toilets, for example – but there are various pots of funding available for these (see the list of resources at the end of this booklet). Other things may be a matter of good housekeeping and thinking about how we might feel if we needed extra help. If you undertake any kind of structural work you will need to contact the relevant church bodies and seek professional help.

## Rural church buildings

Rural church buildings vary in size and lay out. There can be challenges with small doors, narrow corridors and uneven floors. External access can also be an issue if, for example, a church is at the top of a steep hill. On the other hand, a small space which is warm, comfortable and easy to access can be a great place to get to know people. Rural churches can sometimes be the only community space in a village, so it is important they are accessible to everyone.

You may not need to do everything suggested in this publication; we are trying to offer advice to churches of all shapes and sizes. Think of your building and your community and what would really make a difference to your ability to welcome people. Remember the story of Ted with which we began: is there someone in your community who may find it difficult to use your building? If so, do you know them well enough to ask them – without causing them embarrassment – what they might find helpful? Remember their concerns may be with other aspects rather than physical access, such as the readability of signage or leaflets.

At the end of this booklet you will find an extensive list of organisations and initiatives that support churches to become more accessible; we hope these will be useful as you work out what your next steps are as a church. We'd love to hear your stories of the ways in which you are seeking to offer an accessible welcome to those in your church and community!

*Elizabeth Clark*

National Rural Officer for the Methodist  
and United Reformed Churches

*Rachel Clark*

# Conversation Starters...

“

What does it mean to be an accessible church?

”

“

How can we welcome everyone into our church buildings?

”

“

What does the Bible say?

Have a look at these two passages:

**1 Corinthians 12:12-21  
and Romans 15:7**

What do they say about being an accessible church and why that is important? It is interesting to note that elsewhere Paul refers to his 'thorn in the flesh'; we have no idea what that was. It might have been a physical, mental or emotional difficulty.

Perhaps that is why he had such an inclusive view of church; what do you think?

”

## Outside the building

### Activity

**Look at the approach to the building and walk around the outside. Are there any potential hazards, such as overgrown paths or broken steps? Is there any parking?**

**The outside of the church is all about first impressions. Why not have a regular 'tidy up', and make sure the entrance looks attractive, as well as being easy to negotiate.**

### For people with visual problems

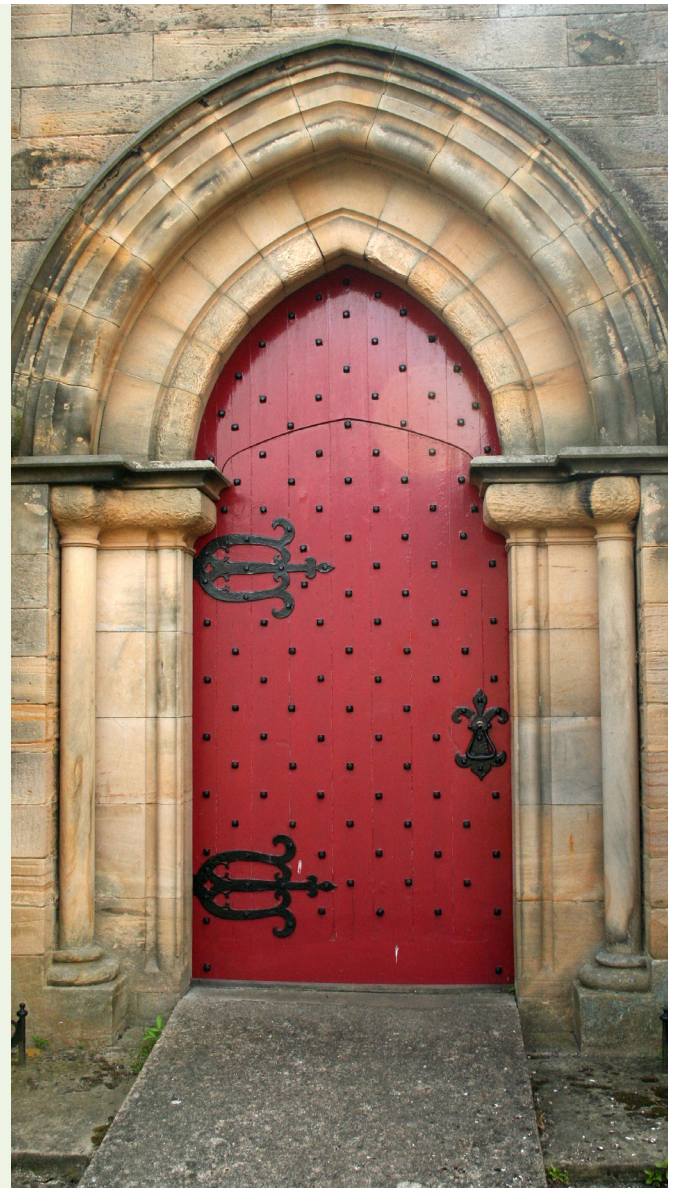
Provide clear signage at the appropriate height for everyone, to welcome people to church.

Steps should have handrails and be well lit.

### For people with mobility problems

If the building has steps at the entrance, is there room to build a ramp? (To do so, you will need to seek professional advice.) If not, you can purchase a portable ramp, but do keep it near the church door so you do not have to go searching when it is needed.

If you have the space, consider creating a parking space reserved for those with disabilities.





# Inside the building

## Activity

**Walk around the inside of the building together and take note of any loose wires or leads that need to be taped down, and remove any obstacles from walk ways.**

## For people with visual problems

There are many conditions that can affect a person's sight. These include some forms of dementia, which alter the way people see and perceive distances. Look at the layout of your building and see how easy it is to get around; straight lines are easier to negotiate. Can you arrange the chairs and furniture accordingly?

Make sure any steps inside have handrails and are well lit.

Light switches are easier to see if they are a different colour from the wall. Contrasting colours around doorframes and painting different rooms in different colours can help people to navigate their way. Blue is a particularly good colour for those with dementia.

If you have a toilet and other rooms which have a specific purpose – such as a kitchen – make sure they are clearly

marked with signs. Use both words and pictures on the signs as this helps those with dementia. Make sure the signs are at the right height for everyone, including those in wheelchairs; this may involve having two sets of signs on the door.

If the building echoes, consider fitting a carpet to dampen down the noise and help those with hearing problems. Plain carpets are better for those with certain visual problems.

## For people with mobility problems

Is the building wheelchair-friendly? Why not borrow a wheelchair and try getting around, or ask someone you know who uses a wheelchair to come and give you a report on the accessibility of your building?

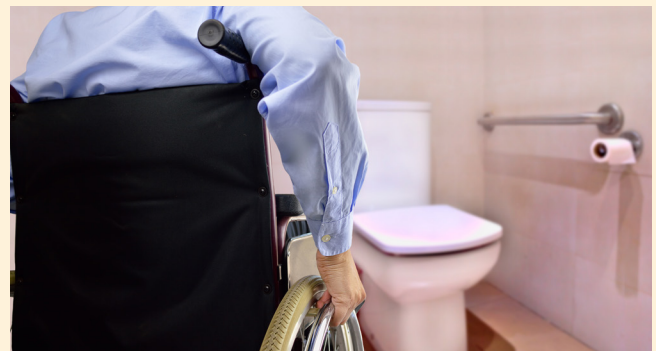
If the worship space has pews, you may need to consider removing a row to provide space for wheelchairs (subject to suitable consent, particularly if yours is a listed building). Please do not put people in wheelchairs at the front so they are on show or lose them at the back. Consider removing a row in the middle, if it is accessible.

If you have chairs in the worship area, in making space for a wheelchair remember how long it is from the footplate to the back of the wheels and allow for the handlebars. You may need to remove two chairs, one behind the other, to fit a wheelchair in.

## Disability friendly toilets

There are building regulations concerning disability friendly toilets and, of course, any building work must be done professionally. However, here are some hints and tips to make life even easier for people using the toilet. If you don't have a toilet at all on the premises, consider having one built. It may help the whole community; even toilets can be missional!

- A lot of people in wheelchairs will need a space next to the toilet, wide enough to park in, so they can transfer to the toilet. This is important, so please don't leave bins or other items in the space.
- Don't put pedal bins in disabled toilets. They can be quite hard to operate from a wheelchair.
- Ensure that everything is at an accessible height for wheelchair users. Think about the toilet roll, flush, sink, soap dispenser, mirror, hand dryer and paper towel dispenser.
- Be mindful of wheelchair using parents and carers; an accessible baby change platform could be worth



considering. If you have a disabled toilet combined with a baby changing room, then please make sure there is room for both. If there is a fold-down changing table this will reduce the space for a wheelchair, so a sign on it asking for it to be returned to the closed position would be considerate and helpful.

- Remember that while it's necessary to have a wider doorway for your toilet, you also need to make sure any corridors on the way to it are wide enough as well.
- Put an exit sign on the back of the door; this is particularly helpful for those with dementia.

Standard disabled toilets contain fittings that are specially adapted for people with motor issues. However, these can be confusing for people with dementia, something to be mindful of if you are balancing the needs of people facing different challenges.



## In the worship service

As well as making the building accessible, it is important that worship is also open to everyone. Here are some tips:

### For people with hearing difficulties

If possible, fit a hearing loop system and display a sign to say you have one.

Some people with hearing problems will need to lip read so:

- Make sure the pulpit and lectern are at a height where the congregation will be able to see the speaker's lips
- Avoid obscuring the speaker's mouth with a fixed microphone
- Make sure there is good lighting so that the speaker's lips are not in shadow

### For people with visual problems

People with visual problems appreciate large print books or, if you use a screen, large print copies of the words being displayed. Be aware that people with dementia require print that is even larger than standard large print books.

Make sure all areas are well lit, as this is very helpful for people with dementia; being in shadow can increase confusion.

### For wheelchair users

If you use a screen for worship wheelchair users may need a print-out of the service in case their view of the screen is obscured.

## Welcoming people with dementia

Since rural communities have a higher age profile than urban ones, statistically your congregation is likely to include those with dementia. Some of us can feel nervous about how to treat people with dementia, so why not consider registering your church as a Dementia Friends-affiliated organisation ([dementiafriends.org.uk/register-partner-admin](https://dementiafriends.org.uk/register-partner-admin)) and take part in the training that they offer? The introductory session would fit into a normal worship service slot.

Some tips to bear in mind:

- Be welcoming: remember only 7% of communication is verbal, so smile and shake hands.
- If someone with dementia has a regular role in the church community, don't take it away from them. Support them to continue for as long as they wish to do so.
- If someone shouts out at the wrong time, acknowledge and embrace it and move on. This takes away the pressure from the carer and stops any embarrassment that the person with dementia, or their companion, might be feeling.
- Think about holding specific dementia-friendly services as well as welcoming people with dementia into ordinary services.







## Welcoming people with 'special needs'

People with special needs are those with **'any of various difficulties (such as a physical, emotional, behavioural or learning disability or impairment) that causes an individual to require additional or specialized services or accommodations (such as in education or recreation)'** (merriam-webster.com).

Helping people with special needs to join in worship is less about the building and more about the service itself. Here are some tips to bear in mind:

- Sermons and children's talks etc. need to have all sensory elements covered – people with learning difficulties can't just sit, listen and understand.
- Provide places where they can get up, move around, jump on the spot, spin etc. and accept their need to do so; sitting still for anything more than five minutes is hard.
- Processing times are very slow: it can take anything up to seven minutes to process a request or question, so if asking a question give plenty of time for answers.
- Be aware that for autistic people personal space, eye contact, smells and tastes can be incredibly hard to understand. Don't be surprised if an autistic person gives no eye contact or struggles with having lots of people around.
- Sensory overload is both real and painful for people with learning difficulties. Too much going on – things being too 'busy' – can create pain for some. Have somewhere very quiet where people could be taken to – or can take themselves to – if this occurs. This needs to be advertised so people know it exists.
- Families with special needs children or adults need more support than others; provide support for the wider family too: they are going through a constant coping process and need lots of understanding.

## Above all, BE KIND. ALWAYS.

# Resources

## General advice and information

**simplifiedsafety.co.uk** – for advice on practical measures

**throughtheroof.org** – for help and advice in including people with disabilities in the life of the church

## Funding for disability-related improvements

**throughtheroof.org/obtaining-funding-to-make-disability-related-improvements**

## Advice and information on specific accessibility issues

### Deaf and Hard of Hearing

**resourcingmission.org.uk** – search ‘Accessible Church Buildings Deaf and Hard of Hearing People’

### Dementia

**dementiafriends.org.uk**

**dementiafriends.org.uk/register-friend** – for individuals

**dementiafriends.org.uk/register-partner-admin** – for organisations / churches

**resourcingmission.org.uk** – search ‘Dementia Friendly Church Buildings’

**mha.org.uk** – search ‘Growing dementia friendly churches’

**livability.org.uk** – search ‘Dementia friendly church’

### Mobility issues

**wheelchair-ramps.co.uk** – for regulations regarding wheelchair ramps and advice about installation

### Special needs

**additionalneedsalliance.org.uk**

**urbansaints.org/additionalneeds**

### Visual impairment

**henshaws.org.uk** – search ‘7 tips to make your business more accessible’

**resourcingmission.org.uk** – search ‘Church Lighting’

## Buildings resources from Germinate

- **Rural church buildings: How to look after, develop and utilise them**
- **Open Welcome**

To access these resources go to **arthurrankcentre.org.uk** and search by resource name. You can also find other resources relating to accessibility and welcome by searching the resource section of the website.

## Book

James Saunders: *Dementia Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Care* (Grove Books Ltd.)

## Denominational property bodies

Before making any changes to your building you should get the relevant permissions particularly if your building is listed. Listing does not preclude alterations but it can take longer.

### Baptist Union of Great Britain

Consult the resources section of the BUGB website.

**baptist.org.uk/Groups/220869/Property\_Churches.aspx**

### Church of England

Speak to your Archdeacon or the Secretary of the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) for your Diocese in the first instance as rules about changing the church and its contents are very strict.

### Methodist Church

In the first instance contact your District Office or visit the Methodist Church website.

**methodist.org.uk/for-ministers-and-office-holders/property/property-contacts**

### United Reformed Church

Contact your Synod Trust Officer.

### PLEASE NOTE:

This resource is designed to supplement, not replace, denominational and statutory advice regarding work with people with additional needs. It is neither the first nor the last word on enabling churches to become more accessible, just a step along the journey!



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