

**Essay Title:** Accessibility

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**Author:** The Reverend Dr. Devorah Greenstein

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A RECENT HARRIS POLL REPORTS that fewer Americans with disabilities attend religious services than Americans without disabilities. Why would this be true? Our first thought is that people with disabilities can't attend because many churches don't have ramps. Our mental equation is "disability equals wheelchair; accessibility equals ramp."

But the majority of people with disabilities are not wheelchair users. They are people with neurological conditions, vision and hearing loss, psychiatric disabilities, chemical sensitivities, and cognitive or learning problems. In truth, what keeps children and adults with disabilities from full participation in our faith communities is more our limiting attitude and stereotypical thinking than the lack of a ramp.

Accessibility is a process that begins in our hearts, with a recognition of and desire to eliminate existing attitudinal and physical barriers and to replace them with attitudes of welcome and acceptance.

Start by setting up an Accessibility Committee that includes people with disabilities. They can decide on initial projects, like training greeters how to welcome people with disabilities, offering alternative formats for printed materials, creating buddy systems for people with behavioral problems, installing an assistive listening system. Start with one success and build on it. Maybe your congregation's journey starts with a ramp—or maybe it doesn't.

Society teaches us to be embarrassed and ashamed of disability, but disability is just part of life. Even though only 15 percent of people with disabilities are born disabled—even though many of us acquire all kinds of physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities—many of us believe that we shouldn't share or explain our situation—should, in fact, just be quiet or drop out—stop coming if we can't hear the sermon—stop coming if we can't drive at night—stop attending if our child needs extra assistance in RE class.

Isn't this foolish? Isn't our church community the one place where we should be able to feel safe enough to speak about our needs?

Accessibility is about the inherent worth and dignity of every one of us. Our Unitarian Universalist values demand, in fact, that our congregation allow full participation for people with disabilities. Ours is a theology of wholeness and justice. Accessibility is about social justice—civil rights. You would not tolerate the exclusion of people of color. Why then, would you tolerate the exclusion of people because of physical or emotional disabilities.

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Disability is part of the variety of human experience. People with disabilities are ordinary people—with disabilities. This is not about “us and them”—this is about “us and us.” In no way should disability prevent people from enjoying full participation in the life of a congregation – in worship, in leadership, in study, in service—in your congregation.

Hold in your heart our first principle, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

There are many resources available to help you and your congregation on your journey toward accessibility – our UUA accessibility website [www.uua.org/programs/justice/accessibility/](http://www.uua.org/programs/justice/accessibility/) is a good place to start. The National Organization on Disability is another. Their website is [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org).

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**Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations**, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108 617.742.2100 [uua.org](http://uua.org)