

Essay Title: Accessibility: A Way to Live Out Our Values Audio Track: Disc 2 track 8

At First Unitarian Universalist Church, of Rochester, Minnesota, people who used wheelchairs had to be pushed up a steep hill to get into the sanctuary. And when they reached the sanctuary, they still couldn't get from there to other parts of the building without help.

It was an awkward situation. Other people worried that if *they* became disabled, they'd not be able to attend church. So they did something about it. They undertook a major renovation in 2000, inspired in part by accessibility concerns.

Beth Atkinson, former president of the congregation said, "The biggest concern was that our elderly members weren't always able to come to church, and we were embarrassed when someone would come who couldn't use the stairs. They had to be pushed up the hill. We definitely were losing potential new members because of this issue."

The congregation held a capital campaign and raised \$650,000 and took out a mortgage for an additional \$225,000. A \$10,000 UUA grant completed the project, which included an elevator, remodeled restrooms, and a new front entrance as well as a new roof, bigger parking lot, and air conditioning.

Now, says Atkinson, it's possible for everyone to access all parts of the building. She says "It has also made it easier to transport equipment around the building and our rentals have gone up. We can now indicate our accessibility in our newspaper ads and I can invite friends in wheelchairs to my church. I couldn't do that before."

Helen Bishop, a former district executive of the Central Midwest District, has long been a proponent of improved accessibility in our congregations. She says, "If we are true to our faith we will all do this work." She advises: "When you set up a room, leave spaces for wheelchairs. Make sure a speaker has access to the pulpit and to a microphone. And if you can't make your old building accessible, then do something else. Establish a ministry to people with limited

hearing or vision, for example. Be *the* place in town for teens with cerebral palsy, or where it's okay to have a learning disability.”

Bishop adds, “We all need to ask this question in every board and committee meeting: ‘how does this decision affect people with disabilities?’ When that goes on for a year or two, people start to see it differently.”

The First Unitarian Church of Baltimore has discovered that accessibility is a continuing process. It's looking forward to the day when it can replace its portable wheelchair ramp into the 184-year-old building and install a bigger interior wheelchair lift. Old hearing devices have been replaced with digital ones.

Linda Shaw, who was administrator at First Baltimore when this article was written for *InterConnections*, added, “It's more than just having elevators and signs in Braille and interpreters on Sunday morning. All you have to do is spend a day in a wheelchair to get a feel whether your building is accessible. It's amazing what you find out. Just going over a tiny little step can be a major ordeal. Or it's the way you feel when you have to have someone help you. These are issues many of us run into when we get older. It's an opportunity for the entire congregation to live out its commitment to respecting every person. None of us knows when we might have a disability.”

For more information and resources, go to: uua.org and click on Leaders

Resources

Helpful information about accessibility issues in churches can be found at the website for the National Organization for Disabilities: nod.org.

The National Council of Churches: nccusa.org/nmu/mce/dis/#access has an Accessible Congregations Campaign in which the UUA is a partner.

The UUA website uua.org also has accessibility information, including how to do an accessibility audit of your facilities. From the front page of the website do a search on the keyword “accessibility.”

Interconnections articles on accessibility information can be searched for at:

<http://www.uua.org/publications/interconnections/index.shtml>

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