

Is your church physically welcoming?

You may have signs everywhere proclaiming inclusion of all. But the building itself can exclude some.

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I couldn't see it until she pointed it out to me.

I was teaching a homiletics class for a lay ministry program, which entailed occasional ventures into my church's sanctuary to hear students preach. One enrollee who had difficulty walking asked if we had a portable ramp for her to manage the two steps up to the chancel.

Deep down, I already knew that we didn't, but I briefly searched hoping otherwise. After confirming that no, we had no such device available, she needed someone's steady arm to navigate what to many is the simplest of walks to the pulpit.

Before this encounter, I hadn't considered how potentially limiting—and really, unwelcoming—the lack of such access was. No ramp for those with such limitations meant that they wouldn't be able to preach, serve as liturgists, or walk up to the choir loft to sing, among other potential exclusions.

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Maybe your church has had conversations about how to be more welcoming. Maybe you've thought about or spoken at length in different ways about how your congregation can adopt a more inclusive spirit. Maybe you position ushers in strategic places or encourage everyone to smile more. Maybe your church has "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here" plastered all over the building as a message to guests and regulars alike about your striving to live into what it says.

So maybe the attitude is there, and if so, that's wonderful.

But has your physical space caught up? Does it embody what your signs and banners proclaim?

Many of our churches are physically unwelcoming. There may be, as in the episode described above, steps that are difficult for some to manage without assistance.

Can everyone participate in worship in the chancel via a ramp or other means?

Do you have large print bulletins or listening devices to include people with poor eyesight or hearing?

If your building has multiple levels, will everyone be able to join after-worship events via an elevator or chair lift?

It would be easy to answer these questions with, "Why does that matter? We don't see the problem." Maybe regular attendees and members have found ways to navigate your church's accessibility issues, or have accepted that they can't completely participate in all aspects of communal life.

But is that good enough? Should a congregation remain satisfied with its members' making peace with such exclusion?

What sort of difference would it make to take time to listen—really listen—to physically challenged members and visitors' experiences regarding the difficulty of navigating your building entrances? Or what it's like to read your bulletin through failing eyes? Or how it feels to always skip potlucks in your downstairs fellowship area?

Taking time to listen and see could make all the difference. And those welcoming posters will be a step closer to being true.

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