

Congregational leaders make buildings more accessible for people with disabilities

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The Americans with Disabilities Act—marking its 25th anniversary this summer—didn't require places of worship to make their spaces more accessible.

But congregations such as Bet Shalom, a Reform Jewish synagogue in Minnetonka, Minnesota, did it anyway.

In 2000, as they began planning for a new building, they appointed Jackie Hirsh—a longtime member with multiple sclerosis, who used a wheelchair—to serve on the congregation's architectural advisory committee.

“Our community did not want to do something for her, we wanted to do something with her,” said Norman Cohen, the rabbi. The congregation also held “a series of congregational meetings inviting everyone to participate and give input, based on what they would like to see in our new space.”

The new building included a gently rising floor to the pulpit so that people of all abilities in the congregation would approach in the same way. And although Hirsh died about a year after the new sanctuary opened, she enjoyed worshiping there. Her memorial service took place in the space that she helped to make possible.

*Accessible Faith: A Technical Guide for Accessibility in Houses of Worship*

recommends involving all affected people at the outset when faith communities build, renovate, or retrofit their sanctuaries, social halls, and restrooms.

Architects also benefit from working directly with people with disabilities. “In serving the client, it's important for the architect to work alongside people with different abilities in order to directly accommodate their needs,” said Hiba Bhatti, a third-year graduate student at the Yale School of Architecture. “Had I not grown up having a brother who uses a wheelchair, I wouldn't have noticed how inaccessible public buildings can be.”

In part because her family and others with disabilities advocated for access, she said, “our mosque in Chicago has recently been renovated and is now more accessible.”

Sometimes it takes repeated efforts. Mary Lou Luvisa struggled to follow the sermons at St. Barnabas on the Desert Episcopal Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, even with two hearing aids. She went to the rector and got a respectful hearing, but that’s all. After a change in rectors and others in the congregation voicing the same complaints, the congregation made plans to renovate the social hall in 2008.

Luvisa was appointed to the building and grounds committee. She made certain that included in the improvements were special, sound-absorbing ceiling and wall panels. There remained the problem of worship in the sanctuary. So she researched various sound enhancement systems and got a member of the congregation who was an engineer to prepare a report on what it would take to address the problem. In 2010, when the congregation was planning to refurbish the sanctuary, they installed a hearing loop—an unobtrusive sound system that magnetically transmits sound to hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Borculo Christian Reformed Church, in a rural Michigan community not far from Grand Rapids, occupies a 125-year-old building built in a style familiar to the area. The sanctuary is a few steps above ground level, accessible by a concrete ramp and a motorized lift. But until a few years ago, the basement—where the bathrooms, social hall, library, and classrooms are—could only be reached by steps and an awkward chair lift.

One of the members of the committee was Pat Huisingh, who had grown up in the church. Huisingh, who has muscular dystrophy, uses a power wheelchair. Until a few years ago, she was an insurance agent and active in her church, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school, and working with young people. Now she serves as a regional representative on disability issues for her denomination.

She made the case to the building committee, and then to the congregation, that they needed a full-sized elevator. They voted to approve it. “I’ve grown up in the church, and they’ve seen the extent of my disability,” she said.

Huisingh said this sends a message to people from the area who visit the church for weddings, funerals, and vacation Bible school: “We don’t exclude.” —Religion News Service

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