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Planning Accessible Meetings and Events: A Guide for Large Conferences and Events

"God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God's self is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful." (1 Corinthians 12, *The Message*)

As Christians, we acknowledge that God created each person in God's own image, and that God has given each person gifts and abilities that can be used to build up and edify the Body of Christ. However, physical, psychological, and attitudinal barriers in meeting spaces and gatherings can impede the use of these gifts. When someone cannot enter a space or participate in an event, we not only deny them welcome; we deny the gathered group the gifts and abilities of that person.

In thinking about disabilities, a helpful perspective is that we are all "temporarily abled," and accessibility will become more of an issue for each of us as we move throughout our lives. When special care is taken by those of us without disabilities to ensure our meetings spaces and gatherings are accessible to those of us with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities and our families, we move closer to what the writer of 1 Corinthians was envisioning for the Body of Christ: "Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits." That heartfelt desire to help everyone feel that they belong is essential to true accessibility.

What follows is some excellent technical advice on how to make people with various "disabilities" feel welcome and able to participate with your group. We appreciate your interest in increasing accessibility and encourage you to consult with ADN further if you have questions.



How do I use this information?

This guide is intended to be a brief check-list for persons or committees as they plan and prepare for meetings or events, enabling planners to make their meeting or event as accessible as possible to people with disabilities.

But it's too much!

Not every meeting or event requires every possible measure of accessibility. Consider your audience, assess their accessibility needs, and seek to provide the best accessibility services you can.

Key Areas to Consider when Choosing a Location and Venue

Physical Accessibility on Site

- What are transportation options to get to the venue?
- What are the distances within the venue for meetings, meals, lodging, etc.?
- Can a person using a wheelchair or scooter navigate the terrain?
- Is wheelchair or scooter rental available?
- Are ramps and elevators available as alternatives to stairs and escalators? Are they located conveniently and well-marked? Are they able to be used without assistance?
- Are there wheelchair accessible bathrooms in all public areas?

Overnight Accommodations

- Is there enough accessible parking?
- Are wheelchair accessible rooms available?
 - Roll-in showers, accessible toilets and sinks, adequate grab bars, shower seats
 - Turning radius in all areas of private rooms for power wheelchair maneuverability
 - Accessible temperature control in private rooms
- Are there wheelchair accessible bathrooms in all public areas?

Dietary Options

Is the catering or food provider willing to work with you to avoid these common food allergens and sensitivities?

- Gluten
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts
- Fish



- Shellfish
- Dairy
- Soy
- Egg
- Red Dye #40

Reserving Meeting Spaces

- Are there places for parents with infants to view/hear the meeting?
- Are there wheelchair seating and accessibility for:
 - Mealtimes?
 - Meetings?
 - Large-group gatherings?
- Is there a location for sign language interpretation that allows for easy viewing?
- Is there a space that can be designated as a "Sensory Room" for those needing a break from noise and over-stimulation?
 - Note: for adults, this can be a designated "Prayer Room" or "Quiet Place."

Accessibility Services/Information Booth

How will people with disabilities ask for help or services during the event?

Information Booth Location and Set-up:

- Central location
- Clear and visible signage
- Always staffed
- Equipped with:
 - Internet access
 - Phone access
 - Computer, printer, copier
 - Paper maps of venue

Housekeeping Needs

Is the venue "chemical free"? Are they willing and able to stop use of room fresheners and scented products, and to keep public spaces free of cleaning product odor and residue?

Publicity

A key question to ask when publicizing your event: who do you want to attend your event? Are you making it clear that they are welcome, and are you making registration accessible for them? Including people of color, people with disabilities, and other minorities in addition to people who are "in the majority" in publicity documents sends



the message that the Kingdom of God really does include everyone, and it opens us to the possibility that everyone is welcome, and everyone is valued, even at this event.

To make the publicity for your event accessible:

- Note options for accessibility (transportation, etc.)
- Advertise both on paper and online
- Advertise in multiple languages (ie: Spanish and English)
- Include a diverse group of people in photos

Registration Process

- Offer online and paper registration options
- Note any accessible options available
- Include a space for allergies, sensitivities, or disabilities on the registration form, and a space for people to explain their needs.
- Include opportunities to volunteer
 - American Sign Language interpreters
 - Assistants/Hosts
 - Children's activities
 - General events

Setting up Meeting Spaces

- Clearly mark where the available audio/visual assistive technology is located
- IT staff and assistance available as needed
- Microphones for presenters and responders on the floor
- Adequate maneuvering-room for scooters and power wheelchairs
- Adequately spaced seating for all mobility needs
- Raised platform area for presenters to be visible to audience, and wheelchair access to the raised area
- If the room is large, simultaneous video projection of the presenters
- Text captions of spoken words of presenters in near-real-time

Organizing and Preparing Volunteers and Accessibility Coordinators

Questions to consider:

- Will the coordinator be paid staff or a volunteer?
- What are the duties and expectations of the coordinator?
- Will the coordinator recruit volunteers or be given their names?



- Will the coordinator be responsible for training volunteers?
- Who will design the training? When will the training take place?
- How will volunteers be assessed for qualifications prior to the event?

Background checks should be required if volunteers are working with children or vulnerable individuals

Orienting Attendees to the Event and Meeting Spaces

To help orient attendees who are blind or have low vision to the meeting location, provide some descriptive information.

- Include "big picture" information: the layout of the facility and surrounding area, including landmarks and their relation to each other
- Include "small picture" information: the location of the coffee pot, telephone, toiletry products, and the thermostat in a hotel sleeping room, for example
- Include specific directions for getting to and from one area of the meeting place to another. For example, directions from the lobby, elevators, stairs, or other common "starting points" to specific meeting rooms, restaurants, or other spaces

Children's Activities

If Children Participate:

- Create opportunities for clear communication between children's leaders and parents
- Brief all children's leaders on special needs of children before the event. Provide leaders with vocabulary and ideas of discussing disabilities and special needs with child participants.
- Provide a "Quiet Space" or "Sensory Room" to de-stress from over-stimulation. This is not intended to be a "Time-out" or punishment.

Programming needs for children

- Fun/Play opportunities
- Adequate Supervision
 - Two adults always present with minors
 - Provide a 1x1 ratio of adult-to-child with a disability, as needed
 - Find teachers or paraprofessionals to volunteer
 - Follow the "Safe Church Policies" (Click here for [Mennonite Church USA Safe Church website](#))
- Parent/Guardian Release forms



- Safety considerations
- Disabilities to be aware of with Children:
 - Intellectual disability
 - Emotional disabilities and Trauma
 - Autism
 - Physical disabilities
 - Deafness and hard of hearing
 - Blindness and low vision
- Outside Resources:
 - Same and Different: Discussing Disabilities with Children

