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Creating a Local Church Accessibility Committee

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In order to create and nurture a culture of hospitality by which people of all abilities are welcomed in your congregation, a good first step is to set up a task force or committee to assume oversight. The committee can be named the Access Team, Inclusivity Committee, Disability Ministries Task Force, or any other name that fits your needs.

Membership will include persons with disabilities and family members of persons with disabilities. When possible, include health care or education professionals such as occupational therapists or special education teachers, and persons from the trustees and Christian education work areas of the church. If congregations have a parish nurse or health ministry, someone from that ministry should participate. Frequently members will volunteer for the committee based on their interest in accessibility and disability advocacy. Some congregational members may prefer to serve as advisors and contribute via e-mail. Four to six individuals could be a good size for most churches.

Staff relationships are important to ensure that ideas are incorporated into practice and the committee is consulted when appropriate. Large churches will want to invite the appropriate staff members to meetings, small churches to invite the pastor or designee.

Meeting frequency usually ranges from monthly to quarterly, depending on the needs of the church and time availability of the members. Non-members can be invited to attend when the meeting is announced.

Typical tasks of such a committee and its members may include any of the following roles, with each committee setting priorities and determining the tasks to take on at a given time:

A. Welcome, inclusion, and advocacy

- Ensuring that the congregation's welcome statement includes the intention to welcome "people of all abilities" or something similar.
- Monitoring the church website and other communications for accessibility for persons with visual loss; ensuring that information about building and program accessibility is provided on such media.
- Developing ways that visitors as well as members know what accommodations, e.g. large print hymnals and assisted listening devices, are available; methods may include signage, a welcome kiosk, greeter/usher training, and printed or projected announcements.
- Constantly being on the alert to develop ways to communicate welcome and to identify barriers to full inclusion in programs, worship, communications, the physical facilities, and all ministries of the congregation.
- Addressing transportation needs of members who are unable to drive to church.
- Surveying the congregation to determine what unmet needs, such as the need for respite, may be present.
- Interviewing families who have members with disabilities to determine what accommodations would improve their ability to participate fully.
- Advocating for inclusive practices such as use of good contrast on slide lettering, captioning on videos and streamed services, and statements such as "rise in body or spirit" in place of "stand as you are able."
- Serving as or recruiting companions (or "buddies") for attendees who need support during worship or Sunday School.

- Serving as official or unofficial accessibility coordinators to provide hospitality during congregational events, e.g. making sure events are held in accessible spaces, and that accommodations such as sign language interpreters or large print handouts are provided if needed.
- Making recommendations as to whether a lay volunteer can serve as accessibility or disability ministries coordinator, or whether this needs to be a staff position (Book of Discipline 2012, paragraphs 253, 254).
- Developing goals and priorities for the next stages of inclusive congregational practices.

B. Accessibility

- Completing the annual accessibility audit (Book of Discipline 2012, Paragraph 2533), in conjunction with the trustees.
- Educating committee members as well as work areas on specific aspects of accessibility and inclusion; resources are available from the DisAbility Ministries Committee including a newsletter, website, and social media (see umdisability.org).
- Helping (along with trustees, finance, and program work areas) to set goals for increased accessibility in church buildings and grounds, with special emphasis on accessible parking, easy entrance into the church, accessible restrooms, and seating options in the sanctuary.
- Identifying the need for fund-raising and grants for accessibility improvements; helping to raise funds if possible.
- Reviewing any plans for remodeling or building church facilities (including the parsonage) to ensure that accessibility and the principles of universal design are followed (Book of Discipline 2012, paragraph 2544).

C. Education, disability awareness, and outreach

- Planning and implementing Disability Awareness Sunday events (Book of Discipline 2012, paragraph 265).
- Educating the congregation on meeting needs of parishioners who have dietary needs (e.g. gluten or lactose intolerance), allergies and environmental sensitivities, or other hidden disabilities.
- Seeking out education and resources to meet identified needs, e.g. if there are children on the autism spectrum, ensuring that Sunday School teachers receive training and support.
- Recommending books and resources for the church library.
- Raising awareness and communicating with the congregation via newsletter articles, bulletin boards, workshops, or other means.
- Reporting annually to the Charge Conference and ensuring that stewardship campaigns include opportunities for members to offer service or financial gifts for accessibility and/or disability ministry.
- Promoting educational opportunities offered in the community.
- Reaching out to the community to let others know of the services and accommodations the congregation provides.
- Serving as resource persons for nearby churches that are just beginning to become more accessible and inclusive.
- Promoting district, conference, or general church disability ministry fund-raising initiatives.