



## Faith Communities and Inclusion of Persons of All Abilities

There are lots of resources available to help you and your faith community on your path to greater inclusion of persons with all abilities. Here is a list to help you get started. Also consult the Quicksheets in this Disability Inclusion toolkit for specific tips and information.

### General Organizations

- [Presbyterians for Disability Concerns \(PDC\)](#)  
PDC is part of the Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association (PHEWA). PDC has put out [resource packets](#) for inclusion in the context of faith which include articles on topics of awareness, inclusion, advocacy, worship, working with children and youth, older adult needs, and mental health. They provide a [Congregational Audit of Disability Accessibility & Inclusion](#) and [resources for observing Disability Inclusion Sunday](#) each September. [Disability consultants](#) can also be contacted to answer questions, and you can network with [their Facebook group](#).
- [AAIDD Religion and Spirituality Network](#)  
Part of the AAIDD (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disability) that “works for recognition of the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities,” this network provides resources like webinars, newsletters, conferences, and research.
- [Faith Inclusion Network \(FIN\)](#)  
With local chapters, FIN offers [resources](#) for people with disabilities, their churches, and service providers. See if you have a local chapter near you to connect with others interested in faith inclusion, such as [FIN-Hampton Roads](#).
- [Collaborative on Faith and Disabilities](#)  
This organization focuses on training and support on disability theology. They also support research, education, and the role of churches in supporting workforce development. They also provide a [comprehensive list](#) of organizations that promote faith inclusion as well as other [resources](#).
- [All Belong Center for Inclusive Education and Circle of Congregations](#)  
This organization is rooted in the Christian Reformed Church in North America/Reformed Church in America (CRC/RCA) and their support of a large network of faith-based group homes and disability-specific programs. However, they have a dedicated branch for congregational support with free downloads, training videos, etc. Notable resources are:
  - [Everybody Belongs, Serving Together](#), a comprehensive guide to church accessibility/inclusive ministry
  - [Together](#), a disability-specific curriculum from Friendship Ministries.
  - ["Best Practices for Building Belonging in Congregations: Role-Based Tips"](#)

## Media

- [Autism and Your Church](#)  
Author: Barbara Newman  
This book from the CRC/RCA gives the basics about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as well as offering very practical ideas about how to welcome individuals with ASD and best accommodate for differences in children, youth, and adult small groups.
- [Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations](#)  
Author: Erik Carter  
Carter's easy-to-read, comprehensive look at faith community inclusion covers barriers and promoters of inclusion, practical tips to making changes, and ways to work together with other congregations. This is a place to get started or to refine your work toward creating belonging in your church.
- ["Religion and Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities"](#)  
Authors: Karrie Shogren and Mark Rye  
This article offers important insights into the importance of religious beliefs and practices for persons with intellectual disabilities with implications for disability inclusion.
- ["In Their Own Words: The Place of Faith in the Lives of Young People With Autism and Intellectual Disability"](#)  
Authors: Eleanor Liu, Erik Carter, Thomas Boehm, Naomi Annandale, and Courtney Taylor  
Based upon their research, the authors "offer recommendations to families, faith communities, and service systems for supporting the spiritual formation, expression, and connections of young people with disabilities."
- ["The Call and Opportunity for Faith Communities to Transform the Lives of People with Disabilities and their Communities"](#)  
Authors: Bill Gaventa, Wesley Allen, Harold Kleinert, and Erik Carter  
This white paper for the Putting Faith to Work project explores practical ways that faith communities can take steps to help people with disabilities to "find meaningful jobs, assume valued roles, and share their gifts and vocation with others."
- [State of the Art Practices in Inclusive Religious Education](#)  
Presenters: Barbara Newman, Tory White, and LaTonya Penny  
The Collaboration on Faith and Disability on Inclusive Religious Education's webinar offers a review of current trends and thoughts regarding inclusive religious education and worship, drawing upon the questions raised and solutions put in place by a network of churches.
- [Crip Camp](#)  
Directors: James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham  
This Netflix documentary film addressing disability rights highlights the value of belonging and inclusion at Camp Jened and how it led to empowerment and a national movement for civil rights. This film documents the beginning of the disability rights movement and its young leaders from the first protests to the passing of the Americans with Disability Act. A downloadable [curriculum for use with young adults](#) is available to supplement group viewing. MPAA Rating: R.

## Theology

Gaining a good, basic understanding of disability theology is helpful for all church leaders. Consider spending time reading some of these books with members of your congregation to build a deeper understanding of faith inclusion.

- [Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and in the Church](#)  
Author: Bethany McKinney Fox  
A Presbyterian author, Fox presents an important and accessible look at the healing stories in the gospels. A study guide and training course are available from the [Equip PC\(USA\) Training](#) site.
- [The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability](#)  
Author: Nancy Eiesland

Eiesland's work is the first systematic theology of disability. She offers a liberatory reading situated within the disability rights movement.

- [\*Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality\*](#)

Author: Thomas E. Reynolds

Reynolds looks at the role of disability in transforming the church.

- [\*Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability\*](#) (14 book series)

Curated by: Amos Yong, Timothy J. Basselin, Hans S. Reinders, Heather H. Vacek, John Swinton, Anna Katherine Shurley, Shane Clifton, William C. Gaventa, Brian Brock, David McLachlan, Keith Dow, Peter J. Bellini.

This series provides a comprehensive look at disability and theology curated by foremost disability scholars.

- [\*"Misfit Leadership is What the Church Needs Now"\*](#)

Author: Caroline Cupp

This 2021 article on the value of inclusion is for everyone in our Church.

- [\*"A Place of Belonging: Including Individuals With Significant Disabilities in Faith Communities"\*](#)

Author: Erik Carter

This article "presents a framework for reflecting on the practices and commitments of local congregations that contribute to belonging within a community of faith."

- [\*"From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness"\*](#)

Author: John Swinton

Swinton develops a perspective on a practical theology of belonging.

## **Speaking Words that Welcome**

### **Language**

- This is a helpful [one-page guide](#) for person first language from All Belong.
- This is a great [video](#) from Special Olympics to share with leaders in your ministry—it's memorable and accessible.
- The "[Five Stages Handout](#)" from Elim Christian Services outlines the ways that we think about disability.
- The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) offers [guidelines](#) for language use in forms and policies.
- For support with outdated language, consult:
  - "[Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!](#)"
  - "[Guidelines for Writing about People with Disabilities](#)"
  - "[Here Are Some Dos and Don'ts of Disability Language](#)"

## **Messages in Curriculum**

### **Adults**

- Explore disability awareness using:
  - the [PCUSA's statement on disability, including a study guide](#)
  - [Better Together: Transformed by God's Variety of Gifts](#), an ability inclusion curriculum, also available in Braille.
- These resources include disability in discussions of equity, parenting, Bible study, etc.
  - The [Fuller Youth Institute \(FYI\) on Youth Ministry Podcast](#)
  - [Life with God](#)
  - [Crip Cramp Curriculum](#) for young adults (in English and Spanish) was created to supplement watching this [Netflix documentary on disability rights](#). (See "General: Media" above.)

### **Children and Youth**

- The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) offers these developmentally-appropriate [resources on disability awareness](#).
- These PCUSA curricula for children and youth portray disability in a positive light and include modifications and supports to promote inclusion and belonging:

- [Big God Big Questions](#)
- [Follow Me](#)
- [Growing in Grace and Gratitude](#)
- Tips are available for modifying curriculum:
  - ["10 Modifications for Learner with Sensory Issues"](#)
  - [Out of Sync Child](#)
- To explore disability inclusion in Christian formation programs beyond the Sunday School room, see these "[8 Tips To Make Camp More Inclusive of Kids with Disabilities This Summer.](#)"

## **Communication**

- Unity Presbyterian Church in Fort Mill, SC, makes use of their [website](#) to communicate about Kaleidoscope, their Special Needs Ministry.
- These resources provide examples of the use of visual cues in worship and Christian formation:
  - [Illustrated Bulletin](#) and [Worship Guide](#)
  - [Kids Picture Guide to Catholic Mass](#)
  - [Guide to visuals and instructional materials](#)
  - Pinterest page with [visual bulletin graphics](#)
  - [Visual schedule and Sunday School support example](#)
  - [Growing in Grace and Gratitude's Visual Schedule](#) and [Disability Support Map](#)

## **Creating Sacred Space for All**

### **Physical Access**

- Determine how to best to place furniture using the ADA's [Accessibility Standards](#) and [Seating Area Accessibility Standards](#).
- For information on signage, consult the ADA's [Design Standards](#) or *GreenDotSign*'s more readable "[ADA Sign Requirements Guide.](#)"
- Faith Inclusion's [3 Universal Design Ideas to Welcome People with \(and without\) Disabilities to Your Faith Community](#) covers not only physical access, but social access and communication.

### ***Virtual Options***

- Alex Mooc, Head of Accessibility for *Zoom*, offers "[Tips for Hosting More Accessible Meetings.](#)"
- Harvard University provides comprehensive guidance on "[Hosting Accessible Remote Meetings and Events.](#)"
- Kathy Dawson of *HOPE4CE* suggests [Five Tips for Accessibility in Online Learning.](#)
- Sarah VanderZee McKenney of *Presbyterians Today* asks "[Is Your Digital Ministry Leaving Out People with Disabilities?](#)"

### **Physical Accommodations and Support**

- *Model Teaching* describes the practice of creating accommodations by [considering process, product, and content.](#)
- *Key Ministry* provides tips on [inclusion on mission trips](#) and working with partnering organizations.
- The United Methodist Church describes "[How to Create Pew Cuts,](#)" a physical accommodation for worship spaces.

### ***Auditory Support***

- UUA's Minister of Worship Arts Erika A. Hewitt argues for the use of microphones in all group settings in "[What You're Saying When You Say 'I Don't Need a Mic.'](#)"
- [Hearing loops](#) for worship spaces are a great auditory support option.

### ***Visual Support***

- Include participants who are blind or visually impaired with braille or large print publications for worship or leadership:
  - [Glory to God](#) hymnal – large print, loose-leaf edition
  - [Glory to God](#) hymnal – paperless braille devices edition

- [\*Book of Order\* and \*Book of Confessions\*](#) – braille editions
- [\*Book of Confessions\*](#) – large print, loose-leaf edition
- Use visually accessible curricula:
  - The PCUSA's [\*Follow Me\*](#) curriculum and Presbyterian Women/*Horizons Bible studies* provide materials in large print.
  - [\*Better Together: Transformed by God's Variety of Gifts\*](#), an ability inclusion curriculum, is available [in braille](#).

### **Sensory Strategies**

- Sensory needs may be addressed with pray-grounds, sensory rooms, fidgets, reading highlighters, etc. Here are some resources:
  - ["5 Classroom Friendly Fidgets for Students with ADHD"](#)
  - ["Creating Sensory Space for ASD Kids"](#)
  - ["Cheap Sensory Room Ideas"](#)
  - ["DIY Sensory Rooms on a Budget!"](#)
  - [Pray-ground ideas and a pray-ground example](#)
  - ["15 Fidget Tools \(Not Toys\) for Your Classroom"](#)
  - ["Must Have Fidgets for Any Classroom"](#)
  - ["Teacher Tip: The Dos and Don'ts of Fidgets for Kids"](#)
  - ["Why You Should Use Fidget Tools to Support Classroom Learning"](#)
  - [Inclusion Tool Kit](#)
- Sensory friendly services, described in these resources, provide quieter music, brighter lighting, and some room to move:
  - [The Kennedy Center's Sensory-Friendly Performances](#)
  - [The American Repertory Theater's Sensory Friendly Performances](#)
  - [Sensory-Relaxed Performances](#)

### **Food Accommodations**

- Foodallergy.org provides [some basics on food allergies](#) to consider when including people with serious allergies in your ministry context.

## **Being the Body of Christ for One Another**

### **Social Supports**

- Consider providing peer supports who can welcome and offer assistance to persons with disabilities, whether young or old, whenever they participate in your faith community. Although addressing specifically the use of peer support for children in a school setting, general principles may be drawn from these descriptions:
  - [Peer Buddies](#)
  - ["Reverse Inclusion and the Use of Peer Buddies to Teach Social Skills \[...\]"](#)
  - ["What is a Circle of Friends?"](#)
- [Adult Buddies/Support Persons](#) can provide assistance in programs for children and youth.
- Additional support for children with behavior support needs may be addressed with an Individual Spiritual Plan, or ISP, an adaptation of an Individual Education Plan. Information on creating an ISP may be found in Erik Carter's book [\*Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities\*](#).
- In "[Navigating Neurodiversity: Parenting in a Pandemic](#)," Shannon Bevins offers advice from her perspective as the mother of a teen with ASD.

### **Leadership**

- Include children and young people as leaders in worship. In "[Let Children Lead Worship!](#)" Tina Houser describes how children and youth of all abilities have gifts to share with the congregation.
- Faith Inclusion offers "[5 Tips to Help you Nurture Leaders of All Abilities in your Faith Community.](#)"

## **Guiding with Intentionality**

### **Policies**

- Adopted by the General Assembly in 2006, "[Living into the Body of Christ](#)" is the official policy of the PCUSA on disability and offers insight into crafting congregational policies.
- The "[ADA Pledge for Religious Communities](#)" seeks to provide accountability for faith communities. When the Americans with Disabilities Act was written, faith communities were excluded. Unfortunately, this means that when we renovate our worship spaces, we are not required and therefore often fail to consider inclusion, access, and universal design. The Pledge calls us to commit to accessibility.
- [\*Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations\*](#) by Eric Carter has great resources for developing a statement on inclusion and policies for your church.
- The PCUSA's "[Child/Youth/Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy and its Procedures](#)" provides a model for writing policy addressing the protection of vulnerable adults.

### **Forms**

- *Faith Inclusion* provides tips on [designing registration](#) to support the inclusion of people with disabilities.
- Forms may be modeled from these samples:
  - [Strength and interest inventory questionnaire](#)
  - [Samples of inclusive forms](#)

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