

Interior and Exterior of Parish Should Foster Inclusion

Every church building is a gathering place for the assembly, a resting place, a place of encounter with God, as well as a point of departure on the Church's unfinished journey toward the reign of God.

—*Built of Living Stones*, 17

J. Philip Horrigan

The words, actions, gestures, and attitudes that shape the Church's liturgy—in other words, the many ways that we employ to pray together as the People of God, are at the very heart of what it means to be the Body of Christ. If liturgy, in all its expressions and implications, is at the heart of what it means to be Church, then hospitality is at the heart of the very action of gathering for, and participating in, the Church's liturgy.

In daily life it is too often true that our attitudes, manners, and rituals of relating with people can set boundaries, express prejudices, and exclude. Such gestures have no place in the Church, much less in our Eucharistic assemblies. Instead, every effort is made to include everyone. The ministry of Jesus was compassionate, inclusive, and attentive to everyone; our places of worship and our actions within them can do no less. Hospitality is not just a skill or an action, it is an attitude; it is a perspective of life. The manner in which we serve each other, welcome each other, and reverence each other arises from our belief that each of us is created in the image and likeness of God. It is this fundamental conviction that shapes how we arrange our churches, how we accommodate people of every ability, and how we express Christlike kindness, respect, and inclusion.

This article addresses the importance of hospitality and its implication for areas of the church building, and it offers some suggestions for assessing the issue of accessibility for parishioners with different abilities. Some of these areas include: parking, entryways, doorways, aisles, seating arrangements, the sanctuary, places of devotion, the reconciliation chapel, the place of Eucharistic reservation, social areas, and liturgical furnishings.

Any parish community could develop an assessment tool to determine how to make the church property and building more accessible and then make decisions that would implement the required modifications. To do this in a way that would be most helpful, it would make sense to invite one or more parishioners who have a particular disability to be part of the assessment. Firsthand experience of the challenges that come with varying abilities is the best wisdom.



Photo by J. Philip Horrigan

Designers of liturgical furnishings have found various ways to provide for readers in wheelchairs, young children, and those who have visual impairments.

PARISH CAMPUS

Parking

Building codes for public buildings require designated parking spaces for those with mobility challenges. The same should apply to church parking lots. These spaces should be clearly marked, as close as possible to the main entrances of the church, and be properly lit and maintained year round.

Walkways

All walkways that lead to the entrances of the church, and those that are used for exiting, should be barrier free, including curb cuts that allow for wheelchairs to move from one level to another. Sufficient lighting needs to be provided for the safety of everyone.

Doorways

All the entrances to the church should have at least one door that can be operated with an automatic door opener. The same applies to doors that lead from a gathering space into the liturgical space. Although ministers of hospitality provide a worthy service in this regard, there may be times when they are not present. Thresholds should be level so that wheelchairs can roll over them and trip hazards are avoided for those with walkers, crutches, and indeed every pedestrian. Doors with glass panel inserts allow for visual access and provide a measure of safety for small children and for those times when parishioners are



Photo © John Zich

A handrail can steady a reader entering the sanctuary.

leaving as others are arriving. Door handles should be positioned so that people of all heights can access them.

INTERIOR OF CHURCH

Access to the Liturgical Space

Many older churches have one or more sets of stairs both outside and inside the main church doors. Providing access ramps outside the building can be relatively easy. However, inside ramps can be a challenge within an existing space. Other options include elevators or individual chair lifts. Although any one of these options can be expensive, the parish needs to weigh its desire and responsibility to be a welcoming community against the financial cost. The same accessibility should be provided from the main floor of the church into the sanctuary. In existing churches where the sanctuary has one or more levels, an access ramp or a single chair lift are options. Unfortunately, there are some situations where neither is a viable option. In those situations, at least handrails should be installed to assist those liturgical ministers who have trouble navigating steps.

Assembly Seating

The seating arrangements for the assembly should provide various locations for parishioners in wheelchairs. Most people in wheelchairs are accompanied by a family member, a friend, or a health-care attendant. The space that accommodates a person in a wheelchair should be adjacent to a place for those who accompany them. The seating plan should provide an “unimpeded view of the sanctuary by people in wheelchairs or with walkers. Experience indicates that space at the front or at the sides of the church is better than in the rear where a standing congregation obscures the view of those seated in wheelchairs at the back of the church” (*Built of Living Stones* [BLS], 86). In fact, a well-designed and suitably arranged seating area for the whole congregation will provide all with visual access to the ritual actions



Photo © John Zich

A ramp to the sanctuary will assist ministers as they serve the liturgy.

of the liturgy and thereby enhance the full, active, and conscious participation of every member of the assembly.

Other Areas

Several other areas within the church also need to be accessible for everyone. Reconciliation chapels, devotional areas, the place for reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, washrooms, and social areas. Sometimes these areas tend to collect excess furniture that impedes the turning radius needed for a wheelchair. A good rule of thumb is, if only some can access a particular area, then it is not accessible and, hence, is a barrier to the hospitable nature of the Christian community.

The Baptismal Font

Entering the church, the first gesture of prayer made is that of blessing oneself with holy water. Whether the holy water is in small vessels attached to the wall of the church, or contained in a beautiful font at the entrance of the liturgical space, ask whether everyone, including children and people in wheelchairs, can touch the water.

The Music Ministry

The area for the music ministry can often be a barrier for those who wish to participate in this important ministry. The amount of and placement of equipment, cables, furnishings, and choir risers can be obstacles for some musicians. It should be relatively easy to rearrange this area so anyone who wishes to participate can do so. If the parish still uses a choir loft, consideration should be given to installing an elevator, or moving the music ministry to the main floor.

Furnishings

The design of accessible liturgical furnishings is an ongoing challenge for furnishing designers and fabricators. One example that has benefited from some innovative designs is the ambo. Newer designs have included book rests that adjust for readers in wheelchairs, young children, and those who have visual



A chair lift will assure people with disabilities that their presence and their gifts are welcomed in the parish.

impairments. The parish can assist designers in this regard by providing them with a description of the ritual actions associated with the ministry of lector, and the physical needs of every reader. Good lighting for the reading surface, as well as proper acoustics, are also necessary. Some ambos are designed to facilitate a change in height by the installation of hydraulic lifts that are embedded within the ambo itself, or in the cavity beneath the sanctuary platform.

Other Items

The provision of assisted hearing devices, large-print worship aids, and printed material—for example, bulletins—in the languages of most parishioners are other ways to extend hospitality to everyone. One parish provides Braille on all of their signs, including the titles for the Stations of the Cross. Some parishes have a sign language interpreter for one or more Sunday liturgies and for special celebrations, such as the liturgies of Christmas and Easter.

If every faith community is to remain true to its identity as the Body of Christ, gathered in his name and committed to his mission of welcoming everyone into the new household of the Father, communities should carefully examine how they realize that mission in their buildings and their liturgical celebrations. Some adjustments may be necessary, an expenditure of resources may be called for; but “every person should be welcomed into the worshiping assembly with respect and care. It was the prophet Isaiah who announced the Lord’s message: ‘For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’ (Isaiah 56:7)” (BLS, 211).

RESOURCES ON ACCESSIBILITY

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability partners with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and other



Spaces should be provided in areas of the church for people in wheelchairs or for those who need other devices to assist them.

national Catholic organizations and secular organizations. The agency makes available the US bishops’ statements on disabilities as well as other resources. The agency is located at 415 Michigan Avenue NE, Suite 95, Washington DC 20017-4501. The following may be accessed from their website, www.ncpd.org:

- *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities. Pastoral Statement of the US Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995).
- *A Loving Justice: The Moral and Legal Responsibilities of the US Catholic Church under the Americans with Disabilities Act* (<http://www.ncpd.org/node/413>).
- *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework for Access and Inclusion* (a statement of the US Bishops, 1998), http://www.ncpd.org/sites/default/files/Welcome%20and%20Justice_0.pdf.
- *Welcoming People with Disabilities So That All May Encounter Christ* (downloadable pamphlet), <http://www.ncpd.org/node/1572>.

Book

Weiss Block, Jennie. *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*. New York: Continuum, 2002. ♦

REV. J. PHILIP HORRIGAN, a liturgical design consultant, is the former director of the Department of Art and Architecture for the Archdiocese of Chicago.