

DISABILITY AWARENESS SUNDAY FAQ's

Why should we celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday?

Because, as United Methodists, “We recognize that God made all creation and saw that it was good. As a diverse people of God who bring special gifts and evidences of God’s grace to the unity of the Church and to society, we are called to be faithful to the example of Jesus’ ministry to [and with] all persons.”¹

Because *The Book of Discipline* states that “Disability Awareness Sunday shall be observed annually on a date to be determined by the annual conference. Disability Awareness Sunday calls the Church to celebrate the gifts and graces of persons with disabilities and calls the Church and society to full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the community.”²

Because nearly twenty percent of the population live with some type of disability³, and many more are affected as family members. Yet fewer persons with disabilities attend church at least once a month than persons without disabilities, for reasons which may include buildings that are not accessible and past experiences of not being welcomed.⁴

Because any one of us who does not already have a disability may, at any moment, gain a disability through an illness or accident.

Because the church is not complete until all of us are present and included.

How should we celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday?

Each congregation is different. Start with a planning committee that includes individuals and family members who experience disability. Assess the needs of your congregation and local community, and set a goal for your event. Be prepared to implement long-term changes based on the results of your event.

Complete an accessibility audit.⁵ Involve the trustees and other groups, including persons with disabilities. Find ways to make your church as accessible as possible. For instance, rent a ramp to the chancel, hire an interpreter, hold the service outdoors or in an accessible part of the church, borrow assisted listening

devices, print some of the bulletins in a larger/ bolder font, and remind parishioners to avoid wearing fragrances. If communion is offered, use gluten free bread.

In addition to your members who have disabilities, reach out into the community to invite other persons with disabilities to participate in the worship service and educational offerings. Be creative in locating people through preschool programs, deaf service centers, rehabilitation centers, community disability organizations, vocational counseling programs, etc. Place a notice in the newspaper. Offer transportation to persons who no longer drive as well as persons in nearby group homes or nursing homes.

Typical activities start with a worship service themed around God's love and acceptance of all of us. Read a story for the children's time that features a child with a disability, or a sibling. Teach everyone a song in sign language. Take an offering for Golden Cross Sunday or for an accessibility project for your congregation or community. Have children, youth, and adults participate in all aspects of the service, serving as musicians, ushers, and speakers. For instance, you might have someone who is Deaf sign the scripture and have the interpreter provide voice interpretation to the congregation.

There may be an adult forum on living with a disability or a similar topic. During the Sunday School time, offer the children a chance to meet people with disabilities, and to learn about equipment or techniques used by these persons. Finish with a potluck for fellowship. Encourage people to bring foods that everyone can enjoy, including healthy low-sugar, low-sodium, and low-fat options. Have members bring a copy of the recipes to so others can check for foods they may be allergic to, or write down a favorite. Plan a program highlighting gifts of individuals with disabilities, or show slides of moments of inclusion in the life of the church.

How do we select the best music and liturgy for our Disability Awareness worship service?

Start with your theme, which will vary from year to year. Select hymns and songs that pertain to your theme, but pay extra attention to making sure that the words are appropriate. Don't use hymns that equate deafness or blindness with sin, or that speak of persons with disabilities as objects of charity who need to be ministered to. Pick instead songs that mention diversity, unity, and serving

together. See [link to be added when available] for a list of possible hymns from United Methodist resources.

Edmonds U.M.C. selected classical music written by composers with disabilities for the offertory, introit, and other sections of their service. The bulletin included information about the composers.

Many of the sample services in the resource section below contain liturgies which may be used as long as you give credit to the authors.

When should we celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday?

If your conference has not set a date, you may pick any date that works for your congregation. Popular times are mid-October, early November, or early February before Lent begins. You should plan this to be an annual observance, with a difference emphasis and theme each year.

Once you pick a date, consider having an awareness week with additional events. Edmonds U.M.C. has a movie night during the week where they show a movie such as *Praying with Lior*⁶ or *Wretches and Jabberers*.⁷ They offer popcorn, drinks, and childcare, and they discuss the film afterwards. Other churches have Disability Open Mic events or art shows by groups including VSA chapters.⁸ You could also organize a service project such as building a wheelchair ramp for a family in the community.⁹

Is it a good idea to have a disability simulation as part of our event?

While once a popular way to raise awareness, this type of activity in which people are given a disability for a day is no longer recommended. Sitting in a wheelchair, being blindfolded, or wearing ear plugs do not give one a realistic sense of what actually living with a disability is like. Instead, the simulation tends to make the participant either feel sorry for people with disabilities, or to minimize what those of us with disabilities go through on a daily basis. Would you try to teach what life is like as a person of color by changing the participant's skin color for the day, or do gender awareness by having someone dress as a person of the opposite sex?

People with disabilities learn many strategies to carry out everyday tasks despite physical and social barriers. Instead of simulation, try pairing participants

with people who have disabilities and have them accomplish a task together.¹⁰ For instance, complete an accessibility audit with someone who uses a wheelchair or find out how accessible your church website is by viewing it with a person who uses a screen reader.

An exception to this guideline is when a speaker who has a disability uses simulation of their disability with a group of children, and processes the experience afterwards. Children can benefit from experiencing the challenge and then seeing the person with a disability demonstrate their skills in dealing with similar challenges.

What are hints for making sure that our Disability Awareness Sunday is successful?

The event needs a champion who spearheads the initial celebration and is involved on an ongoing basis. Sharon Ryder of Edmonds U.M.C. near Seattle has been instrumental in her church's program. She cautions that having full buy-in from the pastor is crucial. Sharon suggests using as many local resources as you can; her church arranged for speakers from a nearby seminary. She has also used on-line seminars for congregational education, including talks from the annual Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, available through Bethesda Institute at <http://bethesda-institute.org/theology>.

Nancy O'Loughlin from Morningside U.M.C. in Salem, OR explained that the annual event begins to take on a life of its own. They have found that members relax more around people with disabilities and provide more personal feedback to the speakers each successive year. Themes emerge from the experiences of the congregation and observations of the Disability Connections team. A different team member takes the lead each year. One year they selected the theme of autism after hearing that members were blaming behavior of a child with autism on poor parenting. Coincidentally (or not!) this topic was scheduled just prior to the pastor's grandchild receiving an autism spectrum diagnosis, and the pastor's daughter was able to add her witness to the event. The church now has five participants who are on the spectrum and integrated into the life of the congregation. Nancy echoed the importance of involving people with disabilities in leadership for planning and implementing the worship service. She also suggested the use of appropriate humor to help take down barriers.

Are there resources to help us develop our Disability Awareness Sunday?

Your conference Committee on Disability Concerns can provide names of resource persons, and may have developed a liturgy for use in your annual conference. Check the list of conference disability links to determine if your conference has an active committee:

<http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/3100.html>. If you don't find your conference on this list, ask around to find out who carries out the work of the Committee on Disability Concerns.¹¹

The United Methodist Committee on DisAbility Ministries has a website with a growing number of resources, including ways to help celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday: <http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/2000.html>.

Jennifer Yound designed a model Disability Awareness worship service for UMCOR: <http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/2804.html>.

The North Texas Conference developed a resource that includes several liturgies and ideas for other aspects of the event. Find it at http://www.northtexasumc.org/images/amazon/78D1D2A54DF345F6AE27750F89E9C00B_RG%20sect%20%20Dis%20Aware%20Sun%20Complete.pdf

For information on adapting worship for children, consult Naomi Mitchum's article on "Zoom, Shout, or Whisper Worship with Children" at <http://naomimitchum.com/special-needs/worship-information/classroom-worship-with-children-with-special-needs/>.

A thought-provoking site for increasing disability awareness pertaining to children with disabilities is Kathy Snow's Disability is Natural:

<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/>

Subscribe to *The Voice of the United Methodist Disability Connection* and check out past issues in the Archives for ideas at

<http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/5000.html>. Post a sign-up sheet at your event so that interested persons can receive the bi-monthly newsletter.

If you decide to focus on mental health issues for your event, helpful websites are Mental Health Ministries (<http://www.mentalhealthministries.net/>) and

Pathways to Promise (<http://www.pathways2promise.org/>). See also <http://umc-gbcs.org/content/articles/creatingcaringcongbrochure.pdf> .

Other denominations have additional materials. The United Church of Christ has several litanies at <http://www.uccdm.org/access-sunday/> and at <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/nlb/pentecost-and-sundays-following/pentecost-ordinary-time.html> that you may want to incorporate into your service. The Christian Reformed Church has a variety of documents available at http://www2.crcna.org/pages/disability_worship.cfm.

What books will help us learn more about disability awareness and ministry with and by people with disabilities?

Bolduc, Kathleen, *A Place Called Acceptance: Ministry with Families of Children with Disabilities*. Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 2001.

Carter, Eric, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, & Congregations*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing, 2007.

Johnson, Diane Winters, *The View From Under the Pew*: Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. (children's book)

Johnson, Mary, ed., *Disability Awareness: Do it Right! Tips, Techniques, & Handouts for a Successful Awareness Day*. Louisville: Advocado Press, 2006.

Meyer, Donald J., ed., *Views from Our Shoes: Growing Up with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs*. Bethesda: Woodbine House, 1997. (children's book)

Newman, Barbara J., *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Revised and Updated Version*. Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2011.

Nouwen, Henri J.M., *Adam: God's Beloved*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Pinsky, Mark I., *Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion*. Herndon, VA: The Albin Institute, 2012.

Thornburgh, Ginny, *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 2005.

Thornburgh, Ginny, *From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations and People with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: National Organization on Disability, 2001.

Walker, Robert L., ed., *Speaking Out: Gifts of Ministering Undeterred by Disabilities*. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2012.

Webb-Mitchell, Brett, *Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*. New York: Church Publishing, 2010.

¹Neil M. Alexander, ed., "Called to Inclusiveness, ¶140" *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 99 ().

² Ibid., "General Provisions Regarding Special Sundays Without Offerings, ¶265.4", 209.

³ John M. McNeil, "Census Brief: Disabilities Affect One-Fifth of All Americans, US Department of Commerce, December 1997, <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/97pubs/cenbr975.pdf>.

⁴ [Kessler Foundation/ NOD, "The ADA, 20 Years Later," July 2010, http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/pdfs/surveyresults.pdf](http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/pdfs/surveyresults.pdf), 128-130.

⁵United Methodist Committee on Disability Ministries, "Annual Audit," revised June 2013, <http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/2410.html>.

Alexander, "Board of Trustees' Powers and Limitations, ¶ 2533.6," 745.

⁶ <http://www.prayingwithlior.com/>

⁷ <http://www.wretchesandjabberers.org/>

⁸ <http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/>

⁹ Lynn Swedberg, "Ramp Building Ministries," *The Voice of the United Methodist Disability Connection*, July/August 2011,

<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs017/1104745249463/archive/1106909966699.html>

¹⁰ Mary Johnson, ed., *Disability Awareness: Do it Right! Tips, Techniques, & Handouts for a Successful Awareness Day* (Louisville: Advocado Press, 2006), 50-61.

¹¹ Alexander, "The Annual Conference, ¶1653", 490-491.

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