
Everyone Welcome

Accessible church for all



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on behalf Embracing Ministries
Diocese of Canberra-Goulburn

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These guidelines were compiled after significant consultation with people with disability and their families and carers, as well as with disability professionals and practitioners. Thanks to the numerous people who have been involved throughout the consultation, development and production stages of this project for both the first as well as the current edition.

Everyone Welcome 2026

Welcome to the Accessibility Guidelines for the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn	4
Chapter 1: What is disability?	7
Chapter 2: Theological foundations for disability-inclusive ministry.	10
Chapter 3: Characteristics of a disability-inclusive parish.	13
Chapter 4: Seven steps a church can take to make everyone welcome	18
Chapter 5: How our attitudes welcome or distance those with disability.	25
Chapter 6: How our communication invites or excludes those with disability.	31
Chapter 7: How our physical spaces open or close a church to those with disability	40
Chapter 8: Including people with an intellectual disability	45
Chapter 9: Including neurodivergent children, youth, and adults.	50
Chapter 10: Welcoming people with mental health challenges	57
Chapter 11: Including children and youth with disability and their families.	64
Appendices	
<i>Appendix 1: Congregational survey on disability and accessibility</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Accessibility appraisal form</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Appendix 3: Accessible websites</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Appendix 4: Accessible documents & PowerPoint presentations</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Appendix 5: Further information on including kids and young people with disability.</i>	<i>87</i>
Resource List	99
Endnotes.	106



Welcome to the Accessibility Guidelines for the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn

In Australia, over four million people live with some form of disability. That is one in five Australians.¹ A further 2.65 million Australians provide unpaid care to a family member with disability or ageing family members.² In addition, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimates that the average Australian will spend almost 20 years of his or her life with some form of disability, whether that is a physical disability, a mental health condition, or age-related vision or hearing loss.³

These statistics indicate that disability is not only common but an inevitable part of the present world.

Many parishes in the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn have already taken significant steps towards building inclusive church communities that are accommodating of people with disability and their families. Some parishes have focused their efforts on greater inclusion in their children's and youth programs. This has included training 'buddy' leaders to work alongside children and youth with disability, and training leaders in Auslan or Key Word Signing (forms of sign language), which not only supports communication for some children with disability but also helps normalise the use of alternative communication methods.

Other parishes have modified the physical layout of their premises to ensure greater access for people who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices, such as canes and walkers. Some parishes have considered the way they communicate information to their parishioners. They provide large-print options of all print documents and ensure their PowerPoint slides are clear and readable.

Despite this significant progress, many congregations still struggle with knowing where to start or what sort of accommodations to make in order to create more inclusive communities for people with disability and their families.

These guidelines are designed to help parishes within the Diocese (and beyond) work towards reducing the barriers that prevent people with disability from participating fully in the life of the church. These guidelines are not exhaustive but aim to serve as an introduction to some of the barriers that prevent people with disability from accessing our parishes, as well as to offer guidance on ways to overcome them. The guidelines also provide a list of books, websites, and other resources available to further educate parishes about the experiences of people with disability.

We are fortunate in Australia to have initiatives such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which helps provide some people with disability with funding for a range of social services and opens up greater opportunities for community involvement. However, as vital as these community connections are, they do not provide opportunities for people with disability and their families to come into contact with the good news of the gospel that is preached in churches across our Diocese. Paid support workers and therapists play an important role in the lives of many people with disability – in some cases, even assisting people with church attendance and participation. However, they are not a replacement for the meaningful relationships available to people within a Christian community. While paid support workers and therapists play an important role in the lives of many people with disability – in some cases, even assisting people in church contexts – they are not a replacement for the meaningful relationships available to people when they belong to a Christian community. Our parishes can have a vital role in mitigating the isolation and marginalisation experienced by many people with disability across the region of Canberra-Goulburn.⁴ In *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031*, religious organisations are specifically listed as community organisations that need to ensure that “people with disability are able to fully participate (which) requires accessibility to be an integral part of the design of services and systems to avoid barriers arising.”⁵

Our parishes have a vital role to play in sharing the Good News of the gospel and offering friendship, community, and support to people with disability and their families. In turn, our church communities will be enriched through the knowledge, experiences and gifts that people with disability can provide to our parishes.

The church has an opportunity to offer life and hope through Jesus Christ in a world that is so often negative and hurtful for people with disability and their families.

Victorian Anglican minister and academic Dr Michael Bird has written:

In an age where, in many parts of the world, the disabled are gradually being pushed towards euthanasia as the preferred option to eliminate their emotional and economic ‘burden’ upon others, the church must resist the secular cultures of death and advocate for the vulnerable with the full weight of its testimony, advocacy, pastoral ministry, and love-in-action.⁶

While we are yet to see the full impacts of the outcomes from the *Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability* (Disability Royal Commission), there is no doubt that there will eventually be more legislative guidelines with respect to the inclusion of people with disability in our parishes. However, our primary driver for becoming communities of belonging should not be government legislation but our commitment to live as the people of God, demonstrating God’s love and character in the world. One way we can do this is by demonstrating our commitment not only to the care and support of people with disability, but also to creating communities where people with disability can be active participants and feel they belong.

While it is our hope that these guidelines will provide you with a helpful toolbox for working towards greater inclusion of people with disability in your parish, it is important to recognise that inclusion cannot happen with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. While checklists and surveys are useful for setting goals and measuring change, inclusion must be person-focused. For this reason, the most profound and long-term changes will be made in dialogue with people with disability and their families in your parishes. They are your best source of information for working out what is going well and what can be improved in your parish with respect to disability access. These guidelines offer you a starting point, but the real journey towards the inclusion of people with disability and their families in your parish begins with you and your parish members.

We pray God's richest blessings for you and your parish as you seek to create a culture of welcome and make the church accessible to all.

Dr. Louise Gosbell,
on behalf of the Board of Embracing Ministries
An agency of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn
Updated 2026

CHAPTER 1

What is disability?

According to the Australian Network on Disability, 'a disability is any condition that restricts a person's mental, sensory or mobility functions. [Disability] may be caused by accident, trauma, genetics or disease. A disability may be temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired, visible or invisible.' And it may have minimal or substantial impact on a person's abilities.⁷

The *Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (outlined in more detail below) defines disability as broadly as possible. The breadth of impairments and medical conditions covered by the Disability Discrimination Act is as follows:

- Physical – affects a person's mobility or dexterity
- Intellectual – affects a person's ability to learn
- Mental illness – affects a person's thinking processes
- Sensory – affects a person's ability to hear or see
- Neurological – affects the person's brain and central nervous system
- Learning disability
- Physical disfigurement
- Immunological – the presence of organisms causing disease in the body.⁸

However, disability is about more than a person's diagnosis. The current definition of disability, according to the World Health Organisation, states that:

Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support.⁹

This definition emphasises that a person's experience of disability is more than what is happening in their body or mind; it is directly affected by their life circumstances and the environments they inhabit. This highlights that environments designed to reduce barriers can directly affect how much a person is limited by their impairment

or health issue.

This definition is important because it helps us understand that disability is about more than what is happening in a person's body or mind; it is about how a person interacts with the world around them. Certain barriers – such as the absence of ramps or accessible toilets – make it harder for a person with disability to be able to participate in society. The World Health Organisation definition helps us understand that we have a role to play in removing the barriers that prevent people with disability from accessing society and our church communities. The *National Disability Strategy* calls on organisations to ensure that “people with disability are able to fully participate,” requiring us to think seriously about the “design of services and systems to avoid barriers arising.”¹⁰

Our parishes can take an active role in meeting that call.

Disability Discrimination Act

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)* was an act passed by the Australian Parliament in 1992 to promote the rights of persons with disability. The objectives of the DDA (Section 23) focus on providing equitable, independent, and dignified access to services and facilities for people with mobility, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. The DDA covers existing premises, including heritage buildings, those under construction, and future premises. It extends beyond the building itself to include outdoor spaces as well as the furniture, fittings, and practices provided within premises.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission:

Discrimination happens when a person is treated less fairly than a person without a disability. It also happens when someone is treated less fairly because they are a relative, friend, carer, co-worker or associate of a person with a disability.¹¹

The DDA protects people with disability against discrimination in a range of areas, including employment, education, accommodation, accessing or using services (e.g., transport, communication, medical, etc.), as well as accessing public spaces such as parks, government offices, restaurants, hotels, shopping centres, and places of worship such as churches. This means parishes are not exempt from complying with the DDA requirements.

Discrimination can be direct. This arises where a person with a disability is treated less favourably, or not given the same opportunities as a person without the disability in a similar situation (for example, when a person is refused entry because they have an assistance dog).

Discrimination can also be indirect. This arises when conditions or requirements are in place that appear to treat everyone the same, but in fact have the effect of

disadvantaging some people because of their disability. For example, requiring access to a building by stairs will prevent a person in a wheelchair from entering.

Parishes within the Diocese are obliged by the DDA to make 'reasonable adjustments' to church buildings and grounds to ensure equal access for people with disability up to the point that those adjustments would cause 'unjustifiable hardship' for the Parish. Unjustifiable hardship will include considerations such as the nature of any benefit or detriment likely to be experienced, technical limitations and the estimated costs of the work. The bar to demonstrate unjustifiable hardship is generally fairly high.

The Australian Building Codes Board has developed the *Disability (Access to Premises) Standards* and the *Building Code of Australia*, which set out specific accessibility requirements for public buildings. This applies to new buildings, new building work, and changes of use to existing buildings. Compliance with the Standard is deemed to satisfy the DDA's access requirements. More information about the DDA and the *Building Code of Australia* can be found online via the link contained at the back of these guidelines.



CHAPTER 2

Theological foundations for disability-inclusive ministry

The mission of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn is *to engage a world of difference with the love and truth of Jesus*. This mission is the acknowledgment that difference is a “defining characteristic” of our generation and that part of our Jesus-centred response is to be able to engage with different kinds of difference in a way that is “intentional, mutual, and faithful.”¹² In creating communities that are responsive to and inclusive of people with disability in our church communities and beyond, we continue the long legacy of the Christian church in demonstrating the love and truth of Jesus in the world.

However, at present, there are barriers in place that make it harder for people with disability to engage not only in society but also in our church communities. Christian churches need to continue to be beacons of hope and life in a world that needs to know the love and forgiveness of Jesus. This means that we must recognise the ways we have failed to include people with disability and their families in our past. It also means being willing to remove the obstacles currently preventing people with disability and their families from participating in the full life of our church communities today.

The following section briefly outlines some theological principles for a concerted effort to welcome and include people with disability and their families into our parishes.

All people are created in God’s image

Although direct references to humans being created in the image of God are limited in Scripture, it is generally recognised that the concept is fundamental to our understanding of the role and value of all people (e.g., Gen. 1:26–28; Gen. 5:1–3; Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:18). The Scriptures are clear that human beings are still those ‘made in God’s image’ even after the fall, and that this ought to shape our

conduct towards one another (Gen. 9:6; Jas 3:9). This means that our value as human beings cannot be measured by our physical or intellectual abilities or lack thereof, but is something given with our membership of the human species. All human beings bear witness to the Creator God and ought to be viewed first and foremost in that light, as those given unique dignity within the created order.

All people need salvation

The Book of Genesis records the far-reaching effects of human sin on our relationships with God, others, and all of creation. There is no human solution to the problem of sin; the only solution is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, people can repent of their sins and be restored to a relationship with God. The New Testament makes it clear that this message is for all people, as Christ died for all (2 Cor. 5:14–15; John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9).

The message of salvation is not limited to those who are able-bodied, but to all people, irrespective of physical or intellectual abilities or disabilities. However, writing for the Lausanne Congress, Marla Hale suggests that people with disability “are often not included in our gospel outreach, underrepresented in churches, and if they sense God’s call to mission, may encounter many unnecessary hindrances.”¹³ Part of our task in response to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) should be ensuring that the gospel is also brought to people living with disability and their families.

All people have the capacity for relationship with God

God created human beings to live in relationship with him, with others, and with the created world. While sin fractured and distorted our capacity for all of these relationships, God’s act of love through Jesus restores them. Through this restoration, human beings are able once again to have a relationship with God as we are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, formed into the likeness of Jesus. It is God who is the active agent in his relationship with humanity, and he is not reliant on or deterred by the abilities or disabilities of human beings. For this reason, disability is no barrier to a human being’s relationship with God. Faith is not reliant on a person’s cognisance. Rather, it is wholly reliant on the abundant grace and mercy of God poured out in Jesus. The church, therefore, has a responsibility to continue to share the gospel with all people, including people with disability and their families. This includes actively working to break down the barriers that currently prevent this good news from reaching this ‘unreached’ people group.

In Exodus 3–4, God calls Moses to lead the people of God out of slavery in Egypt. Uncertain about this calling, Moses responds to God, saying, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue” (Exod. 4:10). In reply, God says to Moses, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help

you speak and will teach you what to say” (Exod. 4:11–12). Neither Moses’ fear nor uncertainty nor his ineloquent speech is a hindrance to God’s ability to work through Moses to bring about his purposes.

All believers are members of the Body of Christ and have a role to play

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul discusses at length the metaphor of the body of Christ. According to Paul, the body of Christ, the church, is composed of many different members with diverse gifts, all of which have a particular role to play. Paul emphasises that, despite the diversity of its members, the body of Christ is a place of unity. In addition, Paul emphasises the vulnerability and interdependence of all members of the body of Christ, who are not only reliant on God but also on one another to fulfil God’s plans and purposes.

The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. (1 Cor 12: 21–22)

In this body, no one should think higher or lower of themselves than they ought, but should recognise that God has placed all the members of the body where he wishes them to be.

But God has put the body together ... so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. (1 Cor 12: 24b-26)

While the world we live in may measure value and worth by outward appearance or on the basis of things that we do and achieve in this world, it is not so with the body of Christ. In this body, all believers have a role to play and can contribute their gifts in service to God to bring about his purposes. These gifts are distributed by the Spirit for the ‘common good’ of the body (1 Cor. 12:4,7). Irrespective of a person’s physical or intellectual abilities or disabilities, those who are in Christ are gifted by the Spirit and have something valuable to contribute to the community of faith.

CHAPTER 3

Characteristics of a disability-inclusive parish

If asked, most church leaders would affirm that they want their parishes to be places of welcome and inclusion for people with disability and their families. However, knowing what steps to take to facilitate this inclusion might not be immediately apparent.

This part of the guidelines will set out some practical steps parishes can take to ensure they are working towards the inclusion of people with disability as part of the diocese's mission to *engage a world of difference with the love and truth of Jesus*. We encourage churches to do this in two steps: first, by reflecting on the extent to which your parish is already including people with disability; second, by following the seven practical steps towards the full and active participation of people with disability in the life of the church.

To take steps towards greater inclusion in your parish, it is helpful to first reflect on how well your parish is currently welcoming and including people with disability and their families. It is helpful for church leaders to ask themselves: To what extent are the following indicators evident in our congregations?¹⁴

The presence of people with disability

Inclusion begins with presence. It is difficult for parishes to say we are inclusive of people with disability if there is no one with a disability within our parishes. Current statistics indicate that almost 1 in 5 Australians has a disability. It may be useful to ask whether that number is reflected amongst the people in your parish and those who attend your church. If not, it is important to ask why this might be the case. However, it is helpful to remember that not all disabilities are visible. You won't be able to determine the number of people with disability in your parish simply by looking at the congregation.

Accessibility

Accessibility for people with disability refers to the extent to which all people can enter or use buildings or resources. This includes our programs, communication methods, and attitudes towards people with disability.

Once people with disability are present in your services, are they able to access all the public spaces on the church grounds? Are they able to participate in your parish's programs, including Sunday services and midweek programs? Can people with disability access youth groups, Bible study groups, church retreats, and communal meals? Belonging to a church community means being part of the life of the church beyond just Sunday services.

Hospitality

Although it is important for people to have physical access to church buildings, what makes them feel they truly belong in a particular church community is their relationship with others. It is easy to focus on how we greet people at the church door. But hospitality must extend beyond that first welcome. Hospitality must also include opportunities to build relationships over shared meals and shared lives. Being present at Sunday services does not necessarily mean that a person feels like a valued and contributing member of the church community. While people with a disability might be present in your church services on Sundays, are they extended the same kind of opportunities to journey together with others in the same way as non-disabled members of the parish?

A sense of shared lives

A welcoming congregation will allow people with and without disability to serve alongside one another in ministry, rather than separating people with disability into specialist programs. For example, running a separate children's program for children with disability away from the rest of the children's program, can reinforce a sense of difference rather than belonging. By opening up opportunities for people with disability to be on parish rosters, people with and without disability can work together and learn from each other, and be built up in their faith through service to God. To what extent can people with and without disability serve alongside one another in ministries in your parish?

You might answer all of these questions with a resounding yes. This is wonderful news! But do all the members of your parish feel likewise? As part of the next step, you will be encouraged to communicate with people with disability and their families within your parish to learn from their perceptions of inclusion and participation in the parish.

On the other hand, your answers to these questions might reveal that your parish still has some learning and growing to do on its journey towards inclusion. However,

the benefit of this reflection is that it gives you a starting point and a way to measure growth and development as your parish moves towards greater inclusion. Having a realistic understanding of how your parish is currently measuring up in terms of including people with disability is an important first step towards making changes that will be effective and long-lasting.

Safe Ministry requirements

The Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn aims to ensure that all people who attend our gatherings are safe. As such, anyone undertaking ministry to children (those under 18 years of age) must have the following:

A Working With Vulnerable People Registration (WWVP)

In the Australian Capital Territory, it is a legislative requirement that anyone aged 18 or over who works with vulnerable people obtain a Working With Vulnerable People Registration (WWVP). According to the ACT Government, a vulnerable person can be a child or an adult experiencing disadvantage. Disadvantage includes:

- a physical or mental disability
- experiencing social or financial hardship
- an inability to communicate
- difficulty communicating in English.

Any parishioner involved in direct ministry with people with disability is required to hold a current WWVP. For more information about the WWVP, see the [Access Canberra](#) website.

Current Safe Ministry training accreditation

Safe Ministry training provides awareness training for all church workers on the concepts of Safe Ministry, and additional training for those responsible for implementing Diocesan Safe Ministry (safe church) requirements on the ground.

Safe Ministry Essentials (Level 1) – A course for all clergy and lay position holders to develop awareness of the Diocesan Safe Ministry policy, protocols, procedures, and practices. The training includes biblical foundations, healthy team ministry, screening, boundaries, code of conduct, duty of care, child safe practices, responding to concerns (child and adult related) and self-care as church workers.

Safe Ministry with Children and Young People (Level 2) – A course for all children and youth workers (lay and clergy) to develop awareness of Child Safety and Child Protection. This course includes empowering children, identifying and responding to concerns (risk of harm), reducing the risks of child abuse and caring for all parties.

Safe Ministries Implementation for Senior Leaders (Level 3) – A course for all clergy, Parish Council members, Parish Safe Ministry Coordinators and Ministry Program Coordinators aimed at working through the implementation of Diocesan Safe Ministry Policy, Protocols, and Procedures (in particular, the Child Safe Standards, Reportable Conduct Scheme, screening of workers, Grievance Procedure, Professional Standards, and Ministry to Persons of Concern).

A Safe Ministry check for volunteers or equivalent

All employees and volunteers who undertake ministry to children must complete a Safe Ministry Check as part of a Safe Ministry Assessment for their role. This involves completing a written questionnaire and providing references. The Assessment is intended to determine the person's suitability for ministry to children.

Code of conduct

The Diocesan Code of Conduct, *Diocesan Code of Good Practice*, sets out the standards of conduct required for church workers (including volunteers). A copy of the Code should also be given to ministry participants and their families/carers to ensure transparency and accountability in any interactions between church workers and parishioners.

If you have any concerns about the safety of a member of your church with disability (e.g., from their family, carers, group home, workplace, etc) or the safety of members in your church because of a person with disability with violent or inappropriate behaviour, please contact the Professional Standards Unit of the diocese for advice:

Safe Ministry Unit

Phone: 02 6245 7160

safeministry@anglicands.org.au

If someone is in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000).

Seven steps to make everyone welcome

1

Create an inclusion committee

Engage a team of people with disability & other people committed to inclusion to tackle matters of inclusion.

2

Set the vision and communicate it to the parish

The Inclusion Committee & parish leadership should create a vision for accessibility for the parish. Communicate it to the parish & engage support.

3

Assess the current situation

- Undertake a congregational survey to find out more about the people with disability already in your parish.
- Undertake an initial accessibility appraisal to identify some of the physical barriers in your parish.

4

Identify solutions

Use the information gathered in step 3 to identify barriers for people with disability & begin to identify solutions for removing those barriers.

5

Set priorities and goals

Determine both the short & long term priorities for reducing barriers in your parish and determine the next steps for reducing these barriers.

6

Implement

Begin implementing your plans for change in dialogue with the people with disability in your parish.

7

Review, evaluate, and celebrate!

Review your progress, keep evaluating priorities and steps. And don't forget to celebrate the wins along the way!



CHAPTER 4

Seven steps a church can take to make everyone welcome

Very often, ministers and church leaders desire to work towards the inclusion of people with disability in their parishes; however, there is uncertainty about how to begin this process. This chapter provides seven simple steps to help parishes move forward on their journey of becoming places of welcome and belonging for people with disability. Key to these steps is understanding the accessibility needs of people with disability already within the parish, as well as developing a clear plan to identify and remove the barriers that prevent them from participating in your parish. Whether your parish has already been thinking about and working towards inclusion for many years or whether this is the first step in thinking intentionally about disability inclusion, this chapter will help provide some guidance for how you can continue your parish's journey towards inclusion.

STEP 1: Create an inclusion committee or access team

A good way to make inclusion a priority in your parish is to form a disability inclusion committee or access team. It doesn't really matter what you call this committee – you might be able to come up with a much more innovative name for it! The point is that you are creating a group that is committed to seeing the parish become more inclusive for people with disability. Ideally, this group would be set up by, and report to, the parish council. This group of people in your parish could perform a number of different functions, including overseeing the needs of particular parishioners with disability and their families, as well as developing ideas and plans to facilitate greater inclusion in the future. It is vital to recruit people with disability – preferably a range of people with different kinds of disability - as well as people who are family members or carers of people with disability to be a key part of the committee. If you have people in your parish who are Occupational Therapists, Special Educators, Disability or Access Consultants, they can also make a worthwhile addition to your committee. You might also find people in the parish who are committed to inclusion, even if their

lives are not directly impacted by disability. If you have a large number of people in your parish who would be interested in participating, it may be useful to create a core committee and an additional advisory group to share their knowledge and experience with the core committee. By contrast, if you have a smaller parish, your committee might be small as well. In this case, it might be possible to meet with members of other diocesan inclusion committees to share ideas and resources.

It is recommended that the church leadership designate an individual as the chairperson of the accessibility committee. In smaller parishes where a full committee may not be possible, the leadership could invite a parishioner to serve as an accessibility officer in place of a full committee.

The role of this committee would be to:

- give feedback to the parish leadership on issues of accessibility and any potential barriers to inclusion in the parish;
- discuss the needs of particular members of the parish with disability in dialogue with members with disability;
- identify barriers and brainstorm solutions for creating greater inclusion and accessibility;
- create short and long-term goals to work towards greater inclusion and accessibility;
- nominate a particular person on the committee to be the contact person for anyone in the parish who has questions about matters of disability or accessibility;
- meet regularly to measure development and adjust the short and long-term plan accordingly;
- actively seek out people with disability in your parish and invite them to participate in ministries and church rosters;
- coordinate accessibility training for all applicable staff and volunteers.

STEP 2: Set the vision and communicate it to the parish

A good way to make inclusion a priority in your parish is to document some statements that describe your vision or goals for inclusion. You might like to consider what it would be like to be known as an inclusive parish, and how that might differ from how things are at present. A clear long-term vision for working towards greater inclusion and belonging for people with disability will help to keep you focused. A key element in the success of implementing this vision is communicating it to the parish and engaging their support and participation.

It is also helpful to consider ways your parish can advise your local community about your parish's commitment to accessibility. This can be done in numerous ways,

but most importantly by including accessibility information on your parish website, including any accessible features of your parish, such as accessible toilets, accessible parking, a hearing loop, and so on. For further ideas on information to include on your website, and some examples of church websites with good accessibility information, see *Appendix 3: Accessible Websites*.



Parishes can also ensure adequate signage on the church grounds and on buildings visible from a distance. This signage could include the location of the accessible parking and the accessible entrance to the church. Accessible parking and toilets should be marked clearly with the Universal Symbol of Accessibility (pictured left).

Appropriate accessibility signage can be purchased online. Downloadable versions of disability access symbols are also available for signage, hearing loops, sign language interpreters, large-print handouts, captioning, and Braille.

Please note: in the past, the terms ‘disabled toilets’ and ‘disabled parking’ were used. However, the current terminology is ‘accessible toilets’ and ‘accessible parking’).

STEP 3: Assess the current situation

One of the earliest tasks of the inclusion committee is to gather information about the current accessibility of the church, as well as finding out more about the particular needs of people with disability who are already present in your parish. This information can be gathered through two processes.

A congregational survey

The reality is that you will not be able to understand your congregation’s accessibility needs by simply looking around at those present at Sunday services. Who is absent due to chronic illness or depression? How many people have invisible disabilities you may not be aware of, such as anxiety, sensory disability or chronic pain? Are there people with disability in your parish who would like to serve at church but don’t yet have the opportunity?

A congregational survey will give you information about the number of people with disability already in your parish and the kinds of disabilities represented. It will also provide information on how well your parish is caring for people with disability and highlight areas for growth and development. Importantly, it will also help you identify any barriers that might make it more difficult for people with disability to be active and contributing members in your parish.

A sample copy of a congregational survey is located in *Appendix 1: Congregational survey which you can tailor to your own parish context*. If you are going to provide

the survey in paper form, create a large-print version and ensure that people are available to assist those who may not be able to complete it on their own. You could also set this up as an online survey through Survey Monkey or another survey platform for those who would find it easier to respond on their phone or computer. You could create a QR code to share with the congregation for easy access to the digital version.

Please remember that to reach all members of your parish, it is best to use a combination of paper and digital surveys. If you only circulate paper surveys, you will likely miss people who are absent on a given day or those who are unable to read or write. However, if you circulate the survey only in digital format, you will not be able to hear from those who are unable to use or do not have access to digital technologies.

The survey material contains sensitive information. You should explain the purpose of the survey upfront, including how the personal information will be used and disclosed, and only use and disclose the information for those purposes. You should make it clear to parishioners that they are not obligated to participate in the survey, and they can decline to answer any particular questions if they would like. They can also remain anonymous. Parishioners need to be assured that there are no adverse consequences for anyone who chooses not to participate and that they can participate in the survey anonymously. You should store the information securely and destroy it once you no longer have a need to retain it.

Accessibility appraisal

In addition to the congregational survey, it is recommended that parishes also undergo an accessibility appraisal that measures the physical accessibility of your church buildings, grounds, and car park. In order to receive the most accurate information about your parish's accessibility, parishes should consult with a professional access consultant who can undertake a complete accessibility audit of your parish's grounds and buildings. Contact information for access consultants is available through the [Association of Consultants in Access Australia](#).

In preparation for a visit from an access consultant, it may be useful to use *Appendix 2: Accessibility appraisal form* in these guidelines, which contains a simplified accessibility appraisal checklist. This checklist does not provide the kind of detailed report an access consultant would provide; however, it will be a good starting point for thinking about potential modifications that may be required for your church buildings and grounds. Any appraisal of the church grounds should include the participation of people with disability and their families from within your parish. As with the congregational survey, a copy of the accessibility appraisal form is located in Appendix 2 in the back of these guidelines. Again, you can edit the survey to tailor it to your parish's needs.

STEP 4: Identify solutions

The congregational survey and accessibility appraisal will both yield useful information and provide a starting point for improving accessibility in your parish. Perhaps people might note the uneven ground outside the church doors or that the PowerPoint slides used to display the song lyrics are too 'busy' and difficult to read. Perhaps members of your parish might share that they have always wanted to participate in a Bible study group or read the Bible during services, but haven't been able to do so because of the lack of physical accessibility of the venues. Perhaps those who cannot attend physical church regularly due to chronic health issues or disability would like the parish to develop other ways for them to remain connected to the church community. Your newly formed inclusion committee, under the guidance of the church leadership, will be able to help identify the most significant barriers that emerge from the survey and appraisal and begin planning ways to reduce them. Some barriers can be eliminated quickly and easily, for example, by providing large print bulletins for parishioners with low vision. Other barriers, however, will take longer to address, for example, building a ramp into the main church building.

The following sections of these guidelines provide additional information on eliminating barriers and offer possible solutions to some issues.

STEP 5: Setting priorities and goals for reducing barriers

The next role of the inclusion committee would be to set short- and long-term goals for the parish to eliminate barriers to inclusion. Helpful questions to consider during this process might include:

- Which changes can be made immediately, and which will take time to implement?
- Which changes are affordable now, and which will require longer to budget for?
- Which changes will benefit the greatest number of people?
- Which changes will be the simplest to achieve?
- Is it possible to raise funds or apply for grants to complete additional projects in the future?

STEP 6: Implement

The next role of the inclusion committee would be to begin implementing the plans for change in dialogue with people with disability, their families, and carers in your parish. During this process, it is helpful to determine how the goals will be met and who on the committee will oversee each required change. Questions that are helpful to ask during this process might include:

- Who is going to carry out or take responsibility for the work being done?
- By what date is it to be completed?
- Who will maintain communication with parishioners and especially people with disability and their families and carers?
- If major building alterations are required, what provision has been made to ensure that services continue safely?
- What arrangements have been made to review the ongoing progress? How regularly will the committee meet to assess progress?
- STEP 7: Review, evaluate and celebrate!
- The parish, led by the inclusion committee, should undertake an annual (or twice-yearly) review and evaluation of progress.
- The questions and issues to be considered in the review and evaluation stage might be:
- What progress has been made since the formation of the committee or since the last review?
- What tasks are still outstanding?
- What are the next tasks or items to be addressed by the committee?
- How successful has the implementation been to date?
- Do we need to involve new members in the inclusion committee?

It may also be helpful to write a report to the Senior Minister (if they are not on the inclusion committee) on progress to date, successes, and the next steps.

It is also really important to acknowledge your progress on your journey and celebrate it!

Some ways to do this might be:

- Sharing your parish's progress on your social media and on your website;
- Having a morning tea or lunch with parishioners to share updates on the parish's progress;
- Host an event or service dedicated to disability that coincides with International Day of People with Disability (December 3) and invite a local speaker with disability to share about their experiences of living with disability and the difference accessibility makes to them.

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CHAPTER 5

How our attitudes welcome or distance those with disability

For families with disability, fear of not being accepted, fear of being singled out in inappropriate ways, or even fear of seeing people afraid of them – all these keep disabled adults and parents with disabled children away from churches.¹⁵

For parishes to remove obstacles that restrict people with disability from full inclusion and participation in the life of the church, we must first identify the barriers that may pose problems in our particular context. While it is easy to identify some of the physical barriers that limit access for people with disability (such as the absence of ramps to the main church building), other barriers can be more difficult to identify. This is especially the case when something isn't a barrier for you personally. A small step into the parish hall for morning tea may seem inconsequential to many parishioners, but for others, that small step is enough to restrict them from entering the building altogether. This is why conversations around disability and accessibility need to be collaborative and include the voices and experiences of different people in our parishes so we can truly understand the barriers that exist.

The Australian Government's Shut Out report on the experiences of Australians with disability highlights that physical barriers are an issue for some people with disability, but for many others, the primary barriers to inclusion are 'social and attitudinal. It is these barriers that have proved the most difficult to overcome.'¹⁶ It is these attitudinal barriers that can also be the "biggest roadblock" to the inclusion of people with disability in church communities.¹⁷ While physical barriers are easy to identify, they can be difficult and often expensive to modify. By contrast, attitudinal barriers require little financial investment; however, they can be much harder to identify and eliminate.

Attitudinal barriers to inclusion are "behaviours, perceptions, and assumptions that discriminate against persons with disability. These barriers often emerge from a lack of understanding, which can lead people to ignore, to judge, or have misconceptions

about a person with a disability.”¹⁸ Unhelpful attitudes might include:

- assuming that people with disability are unable to participate in church in the same way as able-bodied members (e.g. assuming that because someone has an intellectual disability, they are unable to learn about the Bible);
- assuming that people with disability are only recipients of ministry rather than being gifted contributors to the body of Christ, or contributors only in certain limited ways (e.g., assuming that a person in a wheelchair cannot, or would not want to, serve on the roster for praying or reading the Bible during Sunday services);
- assuming that the presence of people with disability in Sunday services or kids or youth programs will be disruptive to other congregants;
- assuming all people with disability are dissatisfied with their lives as a result of their disability;
- dismissing the possibility of making changes to accommodate people with disability on the grounds that it is too much work or not worth the effort for such a small number of people;
- being afraid to speak to a person with disability for fear of saying something wrong, or not knowing what to say;
- being unwilling to make accommodations in order to facilitate inclusion.

Nancy Lane writes about the experiences of people with disability in churches:

People with disabilities are not only physically excluded but we are psychologically and spiritually alienated from participation in the fullness of life in the faith community. The ramp may get you into a building but there is no point in being there if you are not welcome and included.¹⁹

In a survey conducted in the USA of parents with children with developmental disability, only 32% of parents surveyed said that physical access was holding them back from participation in the church.²⁰ By comparison, 70% of respondents stated that congregation-wide disability awareness training would be most beneficial to them in feeling welcomed and included in their church community.²¹ Closer to home, research conducted in the Canberra and Goulburn Diocese of the Anglican Church acknowledged the challenges posed by attitudinal barriers to inclusion. The research concluded that inclusion of people with disability primarily comes through “establishing intentional ministry opportunities for people living with disabilities so they can be involved and connected in the church.”²²

The best remedy for reducing attitudinal barriers is familiarity, that is, simply getting to know the people with disability in your parish. This will give you the opportunity to find out people’s interests and gifts, the best ways for the church to serve people with disability, and how people with disability might like to serve in the parish. Be willing to

be creative in overcoming barriers to inclusion, for example:

- think about ways you can still include parishioners who have limited mobility, for example, bringing a microphone down into the congregation for someone to do a prayer or Bible reading;
- for members with disability who are unable to attend Sunday services, assist them in recording a Bible reading or prayer ahead of time and incorporate this into the Sunday service.

In 2020 and 2021, churches had to adapt to a range of new technologies due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While for many churches this technology was a necessary short-term solution, it has provided new means of inclusion and participation for some vulnerable and marginalised members of church communities. The challenge moving forward is how we can continue to use these technologies to serve and include church members with disability and other vulnerable people in our parishes.²³

Disability-inclusive language

One of the easiest ways we can begin to make a difference to people's attitudes towards disability is by being careful with the language we use to describe people with disability and the experience of living with disability. Negative language about disability impacts the way people with disability feel and the way they are perceived in society and in the church. In a guide written to inform the Australian media about how to talk about disability, contributors with disability state:

People with disability are often described in ways that are disempowering, discriminatory, degrading and offensive. Negative words such as “victim” or “sufferer” reinforce stereotypes that people with disability are unhappy about our lives, wish we were ‘normal’ and should be viewed as objects of pity.²⁴

When anyone is speaking from the pulpit, such as preachers, service leaders, or people leading in prayer, it is particularly important to use language that is positive rather than negative with respect to disability. For example, someone should be referred to as ‘having a disability’ or ‘living with disability’ rather than ‘suffering from disability.’ Church leaders have the opportunity to set the tone for the parish regarding the inclusion of people with disability. This might include encouraging parishioners to ‘stand if possible’ or ‘stand in body or spirit.’ This acknowledges that while some people in the service may want to stand, they may be unable to do so because of a disability.

In Australia, people talk about disability in various ways. Many people with disability prefer what is called **person-first language**, especially when talking about the experiences of other people with disability (e.g., a person with disability). However, others prefer to describe themselves using **identity-first language** (e.g., disabled person). This is common for people who are autistic and Deaf people, among others.

This issue is helpfully addressed by People With Disability Australia, who state: “Both person-first and identity-first language are used in Australia to refer to people with disability, or disabled people. People with disability often have very strong preferences for either identity-first or person-first language.”²⁵ It is important for people without disability to respect the language choices of people with disability. However, due to the complexity of disability, there are also people who cannot choose one set of vocabulary over another (for example, some people with intellectual disabilities). What is important is to ask people if they have a preference for language used, respect the language choices of those who are able to decide the language for themselves, and in all cases, irrespective of whether you use person-first or identity-first language, uphold the value, dignity and humanity of all people with disability.

It is important to avoid language that expresses a judgment about the quality of life of a person with disability, such as referring to a person as ‘wheelchair-bound,’ ‘suffering from autism,’ or ‘afflicted by mental illness.’ While some people with disability may use this type of language to describe their own particular situation, this is certainly not the case for all people with disability. For this reason, it is better to avoid any language that assumes an understanding of someone else’s experience of their disability.

Although many different words and phrases have been used to describe disability over the years, we should avoid using outdated language that is no longer used to describe people with disability. Words such as ‘retarded,’ ‘mongoloid,’ ‘spastic,’ ‘handicapped,’ and ‘invalid’ are all examples of references to disability that are no longer appropriate. In addition, while Australians are renowned for shortening words, it is also important to avoid doing so in relation to disability. For this reason, it is important to avoid using abbreviations such as ‘downsie’ for a person with Down Syndrome or ‘wheelie’ for a person in a wheelchair.

Euphemisms likewise should be avoided when describing people or their disabilities. For example, avoid using labels such as ‘differently-abled,’ ‘handi-capable,’ or ‘physically-challenged.’

There are also many terms that we use in a colloquial way on a daily basis that can be hurtful for people living with disability, for example, referring to oneself or others as ‘crazy’ or ‘insane,’ which poorly represent the experiences of people living with mental health challenges. Labels like ‘tone deaf’ to describe a person who isn’t socially aware or using the word ‘blind’ to describe someone who is ignorant should also be avoided.

Jesus’ healing stories in the gospels can be complex narratives for many people with disability. The healing stories are important to our understanding of Jesus’ identity as Messiah, and are indicative of the hope and freedom from bondage available to all people in Jesus, especially in the future kingdom. It is important to recognise that the experiences of people with disability in the first century are vastly different from people with disability in Australia today. We should be careful not to assume that all people living today are as desperate for healing as those we encounter in the

gospels. Many people with disability today live full and productive lives as Christians without feeling their disability makes them incomplete. While some people with disability may desire physical healing and seek out prayer from church leadership, this will not be the case for all people with disability. It is important, then, to be sensitive when preaching and teaching on the miracle stories, particularly the story of the man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5), so as not to assume, for example, that every person with a disability has the same intense desire for healing.

Here is a helpful table summarised from the media guidelines from *People with Disability Australia*'s website on language related to disability:²⁶

	Terms to avoid	Recommended Alternatives
When referring to people with disability in general	Afflicted by (e.g., afflicted by autism, afflicted by mental illness) or suffers from (e.g., suffers from dementia, suffers from quadriplegia)	Person-first: Lives with disability, experiences disability, has a disability Identity-first: is disabled
	Differently abled / handi-capable / handicapped	Has / lives with disability
When referring to someone with an intellectual disability	Intellectually challenged Mentally retarded Mentally disabled Simple Retarded	Person with a cognitive/ developmental disability Person with an intellectual disability
When referring to someone with a mental health condition	Crazy Insane Mentally defective	Person with a mental health condition / mental illness Person with mental ill-health Person with depression / anxiety / bipolar etc.
When referring to a person without a disability	Normal person	Able-bodied person or non- disabled person

Disability etiquette

Although the word 'etiquette' might seem like an unusual word to use, it serves as a useful reminder to use respectful language and behaviour when interacting with a person with a disability.

For people who are not used to interacting with a person with a disability, it is natural to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing. By following some general disability etiquette and taking the time to get to know a person with a disability, you will soon find that your discomfort fades. In each of the following sections, you will find some helpful tips on welcoming and including people with particular disabilities into your parish.

CHAPTER 6

How our communication invites or excludes those with disability

Communication between church leaders and members is an important aspect of living together as the people of God. Information is shared with parishioners through notices during services, printed materials, and digital channels such as emails and social media posts. But more importantly, the Word of God is communicated to parishioners through the public reading of Scripture, sermons, and prayers. However, barriers can exist that prevent these forms of communication from reaching all intended recipients. Barriers in communication exist when people with disability are unable to access the same information given to non-disabled church members. If, for example, all the church's printed material is only available in standard-size print (e.g., 12-point font), some people with reduced vision are excluded from accessing it.

To reduce the risk of communication barriers, parishes should provide key information in multiple formats for parishioners. This would include, for example, providing church bulletins and hymn sheets in large print (at least 18-point font) as well as in standard 12-point font. Announcements about church events and meetings or other news should be shared through multiple means, for example, verbally as well as in print format, as well as via email, text message, or communication apps such as *WhatsApp*. This ensures that people who miss a Sunday service do not miss out on important news because of their absence. However, it also ensures that people with low vision or intellectual disabilities, who might find printed information difficult to navigate, can access the information shared verbally in the services.

It is also common now for ministry teams to record videos for social media and the website to update congregants on what is happening in the life of the church. However, without captioning, the content of these videos is inaccessible to people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. In addition, it is very common for people to use captions even when they do not experience hearing loss. A recent study found that more than half of 13-to 39-year-olds use captions regularly when watching videos on streaming platforms.²⁷ Given this, including captions on videos on church websites

and social media will not only benefit people with certain disabilities but also likely increase engagement among younger audiences.

It is also important to ensure that the parish communicates the specific accessibility features you do have, such as physical access features like ramps and accessible parking, as well as communication resources such as a hearing loop and a large-print Bible. These could be communicated in various ways, including parish noticeboards and church websites. This lets people with disability and their families know that the church is prepared to welcome them. It also highlights more broadly that your parish is committed to including people with disability. Phrases such as, 'All are welcome. Please call (insert phone number) so that we can provide accommodations for your participation,' which may be useful in event announcements and on your website.

The following section provides tips to help limit communication barriers for people with disability in our parishes.

Eliminating auditory barriers

Currently in Australia, 1 in 6 people are affected by hearing loss. However, as people age, the likelihood of experiencing hearing loss increases, with 3 out of every 4 Australians over the age of 70 experiencing some hearing loss.²⁸ With our ageing population in Australia, hearing loss is projected to increase to 1 in every 4 people by the year 2050.²⁹ Given these statistics, it is important that our parishes are prepared to accommodate members who experience hearing loss.

Terminology

In Australia, there are various words and phrases used to describe people with hearing loss. It is important to understand the differences between them.

- Deaf – The word *Deaf* (with a capitalised D) is used to describe people who have a significant hearing loss and who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) as their primary form of communication. People who are Deaf are more likely to have been born deaf or become deaf early in life.
- deaf – The word *deaf* (with a small d) is a more general term used to describe the experience of hearing loss for people who *do not* use Auslan as their primary form of communication.
- hard of hearing – The phrase *hard of hearing* is the term that is used to describe people who have acquired a hearing loss in late childhood or adulthood, or who have a mild or moderate hearing loss. These people usually communicate using speech, lip-reading and residual hearing (often amplified by hearing aids). This is also referred to as *hearing impaired*.³⁰

Welcoming people who are Deaf and hard of hearing into our parishes

People's experience of hearing loss varies depending on its extent and when they began experiencing it. Hearing loss can be congenital or acquired in one's lifetime due to an accident, illness, or ageing.

While many churches in the Diocese do not have Deaf members who use Auslan as their primary language, all parishes have members who experience some hearing loss. For many people, hearing loss develops slowly as they age, and they may not notice a change in their hearing right away. For this reason, making accommodations in our parishes to better support people with hearing loss benefits not just those people who are aware of their hearing loss, but also the many others who may not yet realise their hearing has deteriorated, or who have not yet sought medical assistance. People with hearing loss may or may not have a hearing device, such as a hearing aid, cochlear implant or other device.

People's hearing loss can affect their ability to participate in church in several ways. For those who are Deaf and use Auslan as their primary language of communication, most of the average Sunday service would be inaccessible. Many Deaf people use an Auslan interpreter to communicate with hearing people. For other people who are hard of hearing, installing a hearing augmentation system, such as a hearing loop (discussed below), can make it easier to hear what happens during the service, but conversations during morning tea might still be inaccessible. Large, noisy spaces like church auditoriums or halls make it difficult for people who are hard of hearing to pinpoint an individual's voice amid competing sounds. While face masks are important for limiting the spread of COVID-19 and other communicable illnesses, they can make communication harder for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, as they cannot read lips.

Tips for welcoming and including people who are Deaf or hard of hearing

In one-to-one and group conversations

Ensure your face and mouth are clearly visible when speaking to a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing. Do not turn your body away as you speak, as this makes it difficult for people to read your lips.

Look directly at the person you are speaking to. Speak at a normal speed and do not make exaggerated lip movements.

If you are speaking to someone who is Deaf and using a sign language interpreter, talk directly to the Deaf person, not to the interpreter. While working, the interpreter is not a participant in the conversation, but a transmitter for the person who is Deaf.

To get a person's attention, gently tap the Deaf or hard-of-hearing person on the arm or elbow and make sure they are looking at you before you speak.
If spoken communication or sign language isn't working, try using a pen and paper to communicate, or use a notes app on a smartphone to type messages back and forth.
Sometimes, a person who is hard of hearing may ask you to locate yourself or to position yourself so the person with hearing loss can hear you better or lip-read. If this happens, be hospitable and move yourself into a position that facilitates communication.
As noisy spaces can make it difficult for people who are hard of hearing to isolate a person's voice, ask if the person who is hard of hearing would like to move to a quieter space to make it easier to have a conversation.
It is helpful to be aware that people who are Deaf or hard of hearing may find conversations fatiguing, as they often have to concentrate to hear and lip-read in crowded, noisy church halls and auditoriums. Be patient and gracious in your communications and allow time for a person to understand you and respond to your conversation.
During church services, events, meetings and communication:
Ensure all speakers and singers use microphones so the sound can be picked up by assistive technology (for more information, see below).
If possible, make printed versions of sermons and other spoken material available to someone who is Deaf or hard of hearing so they can more easily follow along.
Make the most of visual prompts, such as images on PowerPoint slides, to serve as visual cues for what will happen next in the service. For example, when the service leader announces, 'Please stand so we can sing together,' include a matching image on a PowerPoint slide.
Ensure captions are used for all videos played in church services and meetings, as well as for videos appearing on the parish's website and social media (for more information on captioning, see below).
Although a parish may not have any Deaf members, it could invite a Deaf person and an interpreter to teach church members some basic Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Courses in Auslan are also available online through the Deaf Society.

Ensure the church building and grounds have adequate signage indicating the locations of all public spaces, such as toilets, the kitchen, and emergency exits. It is also essential to include signage indicating the best seating in the church for people using the hearing loop (if available).

Ensure the church has both visual and auditory alarms (e.g., flashing lights that activate when a siren is sounded) to alert people who are Deaf and hard of hearing to emergencies.

Hearing Augmentation Systems (HAS)

Hearing Augmentation Systems are listening devices that connect to an audio signal and assist people who are hard of hearing to hear better and with greater clarity. The Building Code of Australia requires that all venues (including churches) with built-in amplified systems also need to have an effective Hearing Augmentation System.

Advanced technologies and newer hearing aids significantly reduce, but do not entirely eliminate, the need for external hearing augmentation systems in public spaces. To determine the most effective Hearing Augmentation System for your church building's size and layout, consult a technician specialising in installing such systems. Some contacts are provided in the reference section at the back of these guidelines.

Use of microphones for all up-front presenters

While many preachers are adept public speakers and have voices that can carry a substantial distance, it is always better to use a microphone for church services and public meetings. Sometimes, a preacher or leader might ask 'Can everyone hear me?' to determine whether they need to use a microphone when presenting. The problem with this question is that only those who can hear can answer it. It is impossible for a person who is hard-of-hearing to express a need for amplification if they have not heard the person speaking from the front in the first place. Using a microphone not only ensures that those using Hearing Augmentation Systems, e.g., hearing loops, can pick up the signal, but also improves hearing for all participants. Because hearing loss develops slowly over many years in people over 70, many in our parishes have undiagnosed hearing loss. While their hearing loss might not yet require medical intervention, using a microphone ensures that everyone present has greater access to the speaker's words.³¹

Also, remember that in meetings where people are receiving questions and comments from the audience, it is important to have a roving microphone to use for the audience. This ensures all questions and comments are also heard by people using hearing devices. Alternatively, if the church is not equipped with enough microphones to allow this, the speaker can simply repeat the audience's questions

back for the benefit of those using assistive hearing technology, as well as everyone else present who may not be able to hear the audience's questions or comments.

Captioning for videos

Captioning is the process of displaying film and video dialogue as a running text-based transcript, that is, 'captions' on the screen. Captions may also include descriptions of nonverbal sound, for example, 'sound of window smashing' or 'sound of car engine starting.'

Captions can be either open or closed. *Open captions* are always in view and cannot be turned off by the user, whereas *closed captions* can be turned on and off by the viewer.

It is recommended that all videos played during church services in the Diocese include captions for the benefit of people who are Deaf and hard of hearing, as well as people from non-English-speaking backgrounds. If captions are not already embedded in a file you wish to play in the service, it is important to add them before use. There are a number of ways to create and include captions in videos:

- *Use YouTube's automatic transcription services* – You can upload your video to YouTube and allow YouTube's built-in transcription system to add captions to your video file. While this seems like the easiest option, the method is notorious for causing captioning errors. For this reason, this process always requires some additional human editing to ensure the right words are captioned and match the video's speech speed.
- *Use your video editor's speech-to-text feature* – If you are recording or editing your own videos, most video editing software has some speech-to-text ability to add in captions (for example, Camtasia or EaseUS Video Editor). However, as with YouTube's captioning service, these automated captions will need to be checked for accuracy.
- *Caption your own videos* – If you are working with short videos, the best option may be simply captioning videos yourself using a free online program like Amara. This works fine if you have a short video (say, less than five minutes). But longer videos will become more difficult and will take far longer.
- *Send your video to a professional captioning service* – There are numerous companies in Australia that offer professional captioning for videos.

For any videos that are shared on your church's website or social media, it is important to understand that the content of a parish's website is strictly covered by the Disability Discrimination Act, which means that all elements of the website should be accessible. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that any videos appearing on the parish's website or social media pages include captioning to assist people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, as well as those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. As noted earlier, captions are also frequently used by younger

audiences, who increasingly expect any videos they watch to include them. For more information on the regulations of the DDA in relation to websites, see *Appendix 3: Accessible Websites*.

Eliminating visual barriers

An *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report for 2017–2018* found that 55% of Australians experienced some form of long-term vision impairment (including conditions corrected with glasses or contact lenses). This statistic increased to 93% among Australians aged 55 and older.³² Given these statistics, it is important that our parishes are prepared to accommodate our members who experience vision loss.

Terminology

In Australia, a person is considered *blind* if they cannot see at 6 metres what people with 20/20 vision can see at 60 metres. This means that many people who are blind can see some objects, shapes, or light. As with hearing loss, vision loss also increases substantially with age, with the risk of eye disease increasing threefold for each decade after age 30.³³

A person is said to have *low vision* or a *vision impairment* when they have permanent vision loss that cannot be corrected with glasses and affects their daily functioning, but they are not classified as blind.

As with hearing loss, people's experiences of vision loss also vary depending on the extent and duration of the vision loss, as well as when they first experienced it. One person may be able to perceive some shapes or movement while others may not. Some people may have peripheral vision, but not see what is in front of them. Some people may be able to read large print and move about without using a white cane or guide dog in many or all situations, while others may be more reliant on a carer for assistance. Some people may be able to utilise assistive technologies such as screen-reading software, which converts text to speech, or audio publications, while others may find the technology difficult to navigate. It is important for us to understand the broad experiences of people with different forms of vision loss.

Welcoming people who are blind and vision impaired into our parishes

There are many people in our parishes who are living with some form of vision impairment. As with hearing loss, a reduction in visual acuity may develop slowly. Older people may not always be aware of the extent to which their low vision impacts their ability to participate in church services. For these reasons, parishes can ensure they are doing their best to support and include people with low vision by making small adjustments to physical spaces, providing access to large-print materials, and following simple protocols for interaction.

Rev. Dr. John Hull was an Australian-born Presbyterian minister and lecturer in religious education in the U.K. Hull lost vision in one eye at the age of 17 and in the second eye at the age of 45. Hull wrote extensively about his experiences of being a Christian theologian coming to terms with his loss of vision. Hull suggests that 'little things...can make worship much easier for blind people: announcing when you should sit or stand...and remembering to greet blind people.'³⁴

Most people with low vision today use text-to-speech technology that converts printed words or digital words on a smartphone or computer into computer-generated speech. Many people with vision impairment access the Bible in this way. Others can use large-print versions of the Bible, depending on the extent of their impairment.

Tips for welcoming and including people who are blind or vision impaired

In one-to-one and group conversations

Use a natural conversational volume and ordinary tone of voice when speaking to a person who is blind or vision-impaired. There is no need to raise your voice to someone who is vision-impaired.

When you start speaking to someone who is blind or has low vision, make sure you announce your presence first so they know who is speaking to them (e.g., 'Hi Mac, it's Jan').

To get the attention of a person who is vision-impaired, speak their name or gently touch their arm.

Do not push or pull a person with low vision. If you are asked to help a person with low vision, ask them to hold onto your arm and walk slowly behind you. Offer verbal cues about what is ahead when approaching steps, curbs, escalators, or doors, and be specific in your instructions. For example, rather than simply saying, 'there is a door coming up,' say, 'there is a door coming up in front of you about 5 metres away.'

Let a vision-impaired person know when you are leaving. You do not want someone to feel embarrassed for continuing to speak to you after you have walked away. Never leave a person who is blind or has low vision alone in the middle of a room without a way of knowing where they are or where they will need to move in order to leave the room they are in.

During a conversation with a person who is blind or has low vision, give verbal feedback to let them know you are listening. They may not be able to read your expressions, so verbal responses are important.

If you are sitting with a person who is blind or has low vision during a church service, event, or meal, offer to describe the visual surroundings, anything displayed on a PowerPoint, actions in a drama, etc. But as with all tips, don't take it personally if someone says 'no' or doesn't require your help.

Ask someone who is blind or who has low vision if they need help getting food at morning tea or a buffet. But always ensure you first ask the person's permission. You could offer to hold their plate or to describe the variety of food available.

In Church Services, Events, Meetings, and Communications:

Ensure the welcomers are trained to guide someone with low vision into the building and to the best places to sit for lighting, to see the preacher and musicians, and to see information on the data projector, etc.

Ensure PowerPoint slides used in services use a minimum font size of 36-point and use a sans serif font such as Arial, Verdana or Calibri. No more than 6 lines of text should appear on a slide. Colours used should have a strong contrast for easier reading. For more information on accessible PowerPoint slides, see Appendix 4: Accessible documents & PowerPoint presentations.

Have some large print pew Bibles available.

Offer to sit in the service with someone who is blind or has low vision and describe the visual elements of the service (e.g., images on PowerPoint slides, the visual components of a drama performed in the service, etc).

Provide tactile warnings at stairs and changes in gradient throughout your church premises for the benefit of people with low vision.

Encourage service leaders to use verbal instructions to mark service changes rather than relying solely on visual cues. For example, 'if you are able, please stand with us to sing.'

Church buildings and grounds should all have clear signage directing members to main spaces, such as bathrooms, the hall, and the kitchen.

If the church has a library of resources for parishioners, include large-print items and audiobooks.

CHAPTER 7

How our physical spaces open or close a church to those with disability

When people come to your church building for a gathering, what are their first impressions of your buildings and grounds? Is there a ramp that provides access to the main building for people using wheelchairs or other mobility devices? Is there adequate signage indicating accessible parking and accessible toilets? It's often said that a ramp into a church building is like a welcome mat, showing the community that people with disability are welcome.³⁵ When a person who uses a wheelchair is required to use a separate entrance 'somewhere around the back,' - or worse, when there is no accessible entrance to the church at all - what message are we sending to our local community? Does it reflect a genuine desire to welcome and include people with disability into our parishes?

While it is important to consider external access to our church buildings, it is equally important to consider accessibility within them. Once a person with a mobility impairment is inside the church, there may still be challenges with moving around easily in the building or finding a place to sit for the service. Often, people in wheelchairs are put at the back or side of the church, 'out of the way' of others, without considering whether they can hear or see properly from this location. When people with wheelchairs are relegated to the back of the church, 'out of the way,' their view of the song lyrics on the screens is often blocked by the congregants standing in front of them, preventing them from being able to participate in worship in the same way as others in the congregation. Instead, it is helpful to have a number of rows made from shorter pews or with fewer chairs to better accommodate a wheelchair user. This also allows for people who are wheelchair users to be able to sit with their friends or family during the service in the same way that non-disabled members can select from different positions in the church and choose to sit with friends and family.

The Access to Premises standards, the Building Code of Australia (BCA), and Access for Churches

When building work that requires a building application is proposed, the new work must comply with the Access to Premises Standards and the Building Code of Australia. All work should comply with the current design requirements of Australian Standards, in particular the AS1428 suite of standards, *Design for Access and Mobility*.

Under these standards, access for people with disability must be provided to and within buildings by means of a continuous accessible path of travel (without steps or thresholds):

- From the boundary at the point of entry from the road or footpath to the principal doorway at the entrance floor level; and
- From any accessible car parking space on the allotment (whether within or outside the building); and
- From any other building on the allotment to which access for people with disability is required;
- And through the principal public entrance.

Because a church is an assembly building (under Class 9b of the Access to Premises Standards and the BCA), specific requirements must be met.

Firstly, where fixed seating is provided in an assembly building, wheelchair seating spaces must be provided in accordance with the following:

Number of fixed seats in a room or space	Number of wheelchair seating spaces	Grouping and location
Up to 150	3 spaces	1 single space; and 1 group of 2 spaces
151–800	3 spaces; plus 1 additional space for every 50 seats or part thereof in excess of 150 seats	Not less than 1 single space; and not less than 1 group of 2 spaces; and not more than 5 spaces in any other group. ³⁶

In addition, wheelchair access (compliant with the Access to Premises Standards and the Building Code of Australia) must also be available:

- To and within all other areas normally used by the occupants, except that access need not be provided to tiers or platforms of seating areas that do not contain wheelchair seating spaces;
- The main entrance to the auditorium.

Other requirements under the Access to Premises Standards and the Building Code of Australia:

- The provision of statutory signage (including Braille and tactile information). This is required to direct people to the accessible entry to the accessible entry to the building, to accessible toilets, to the location of the hearing loop, etc);
- Tactile ground surface indicators to provide hazard warning for people who are blind or have low vision, at steps and ramps;
- Handrails on stairs and ramps which are compliant with Australian Standards;
- Adequate lighting;
- Accessible furniture and seating;
- Accessible toilets and ambulant toilet cubicles;
- Accessible car parking spaces;
- Hearing Augmentation System (e.g. a hearing loop) where an amplification system is provided.

If a parish is planning to make any modifications to the physical layout or internal or external features of the church, it is important to consult an access consultant or an architect committed to including accessibility features that meet the Access to Premises Standards and the Building Code of Australia. In addition, it is also important to include people with disability and their families and carers as part of the discussions about physical modifications.

Sometimes Community Building Partnership Grants can be obtained from the [ACT Government](#) to assist with funding building works to make the site more accessible.

Welcoming people with physical disability or mobility impairments into our parishes

It is likely that you will already have people in your parish with a variety of mobility impairments. While some people's conditions require them to use a wheelchair, motorised scooter or other mobility aid, other people's mobility impairments may not be as obvious. Some people who experience nerve damage or arthritis may have difficulty walking, standing, or sitting for long periods but do not use any mobility aid. Other people may have muscle weakness or poor hand-eye coordination, which can make it difficult to hold a Bible or take notes during the service or open or close bathroom doors. Considerations about the physical layout of the church and grounds go beyond the installation of external ramps, but must also consider elements such as:

- the type of seating available and its arrangement,
- the installation of handrails,

- eliminating variances in ground height (putting in small ramps),
- installing textured markers (tactile ground surface indicators) to indicate changes in flooring levels or textures,
- widening doorways, and
- installing kerb ramps.³⁷

It is also helpful to remember that some people experience conditions whose capacity can vary from day to day. Someone who uses a cane or walker one day may use a wheelchair the next. It is also helpful to understand that what one person in a wheelchair may be able to do, another may not, for example, navigate narrow passageways, lean over to grab an item from the other side of the table, or pour their own tea and coffee. For this reason, it is always important to offer help but allow a person with disability to decline it if it isn't necessary.

Tips for welcoming and including people who have a physical disability or mobility impairment

In one-to-one and group conversations

If you are speaking to someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter and you will be talking for more than a few minutes, move to an area where you can sit down and talk face-to-face, rather than having the person look up at you for the entire conversation.

Do not move a person's wheelchair, crutches or walker out of their reach. Ask permission to move a mobility device if it is required to let someone pass.

Do not lean on a person's wheelchair or assistive device.

Do not push a person in a wheelchair unless you are asked to help.

Always ask a wheelchair user if he or she would like assistance before you help, for example, making tea or coffee after church.

Do not make assumptions about what a person with a physical disability can or cannot do. Many people in wheelchairs participate in sports, drive cars, catch public transport, and live independently. Do not assume a person who uses a mobility device will not be able to attend a church event, such as a picnic or house party. Instead, talk to the person about what could be done to make the event more accessible and inclusive so they can participate.

Do not assume that someone with a physical disability also has an intellectual disability.

In church services, events, meetings, and communications:

Ensure the main auditorium includes pew cuts (areas with shortened pews) or an end-of-row space for people using mobility aids. Rather than attempting to keep all people with mobility devices together, create spaces that allow a person with a mobility device to sit with their family and friends in the congregation.

Ensure ushers and welcomers are trained in knowing the best seating locations for people with mobility devices.

In the main auditorium and the church hall, ensure you have some seats with armrests to help people with limited mobility or chronic pain get in and out of chairs more easily.

For church events, when people are seated for eating, make sure there is enough room between tables for a person in a wheelchair or using a walking frame to navigate. Also, ensure that there are tables available that someone in a wheelchair or using a mobility device can use comfortably (e.g., the right height and shape for someone in a wheelchair).

If possible, build a ramp or purchase a portable ramp to provide access to the stage or pulpit. This will ensure that people with physical disabilities have the same opportunity as others to go onto rosters for Bible reading, praying, or music.

Ensure that accessible toilets are not used as storage spaces. Also, ensure they are not frequented by able-bodied users and remain free for people who require them.

If the parish has not yet built an accessible front entrance, ensure there is large, visible signage indicating the pathway to the alternative accessible entrance. As well as signage, have an usher or welcomer escort people with disability to the alternative accessible entrance if possible.

Arrange for some bible study groups to be held on the church grounds or in other accessible venues to accommodate people with mobility impairments.

All ramps should be installed properly – even portable ramps – to meet the Access to Premises Standards and the Building Code of Australia's provisions for accessibility. This will ensure you do not have ramps that are uneven, too steep, or made of inappropriate materials, in line with Australian Standard AS1428 part 1.

Consider providing online Bible Study groups available via Zoom or other streaming platforms to help people with mobility issues, compromised immune systems, or chronic pain still participate in weekly fellowship groups.

For more information and specific requirements on accessible toilets, parking, and building restrictions, see the [Disability Discrimination Act](#) and the [Building Code of Australia](#).

CHAPTER 8

Including people with an intellectual disability

According to the Australian Government's *Shut Out* report, people with intellectual disability often 'struggle for meaningful engagement with the community...(and) are among the most isolated groups (of people)' in Australia.³⁸ People with intellectual disability often have fewer social networks and fewer genuine friendships than people without intellectual disability. Instead, their main relationships are with family members, family friends, and people in paid relationships such as support workers.³⁹

Historically, people with intellectual disability, as with others with disability, have been described with a deficits-based approach emphasising the things a person with disability can't do. Someone with an intellectual disability may experience challenges with processing information (receptive language) or with expressing themselves (expressive language). We understand today, however, that with the right supports, people with disability can thrive in society and in our church communities.

As with other forms of disability, intellectual disabilities will look different for each person. Some people with an intellectual disability work full-time, drive cars, negotiate public transport, and live independently. In contrast, some people with intellectual disabilities may require support with daily living tasks. Some people with an intellectual disability can communicate verbally, while others may be non-speaking. Some people can read and write well, others cannot. As you get to know a person with an intellectual disability, you will gain a greater understanding of their skills and abilities, which will help you understand the best ways to communicate with them and the supports they might need in a church context to help them thrive. Most importantly, you will learn about their strengths and gifts, and how they will be able to contribute to the life of your church community.

Welcoming people with intellectual disabilities into our parishes

Erik Carter, author of *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A*

Guide for Service Providers, Families, & Congregations, writes: “The potential for congregations to dispense grace, extend relationships, and affect the lives of people with developmental (intellectual) disabilities and their families is enormous, but these rich and deep reservoirs of support remain largely untapped.”⁴⁰ The church has great potential to make a difference in the lives of people with an intellectual disability. As a group of people who are so often forgotten, overlooked, and marginalised in society, the church has a great opportunity to be a place of belonging for people with intellectual disability, and to provide social connections and genuine friendships. As communities committed to living out Paul’s concept of the Church as the Body of Christ, we are called to recognise that all members of the Body have gifts given to them to serve God and one another. In our church communities, we have the opportunity to uphold the dignity and value of people with intellectual disability by serving them and ensuring they can use their gifts to serve God and others.

Sadly, the faith of people with intellectual disability is often overlooked and underrated, as the markers of faith we might expect from other Christians might not look the same as they do for people with an intellectual disability. We should not judge the faith of a person with an intellectual disability based on their ability to memorise and recite Scripture. God can be actively at work in the life of a person with an intellectual disability as they see the gospel demonstrated in the lives of others, hear the Bible taught, learn Scripture through worship songs, and actively participate in the community of faith. Yet churches often do not take the time to teach and disciple people with intellectual disability. For some Christians, an overemphasis on cognitive abilities and intellectual capacity means they might not see merit in providing such discipleship or teaching programs for people with an intellectual disability. However, if all people are created by God to be in relationship with Him, then IQ and cognitive ability are no impediment to God’s ability to work in and through all people.

While in the first edition of *Everyone Welcome*, we provided a form to gather information from adults with an intellectual disability in your parish, we now recommend that you simply use the same intake forms you use for all adults in your parish. However, we encourage you to take the time to get to know someone and their support needs, as well as their gifts, as you develop connections and relationships with them. In collaboration with an adult with an intellectual disability, you can work

together to determine the best ways for them to become an active participant in the community while accessing any support they may need.

A helpful Bible translation for people with intellectual disabilities is the NIV (New International Reader’s Version). In particular, there is an NIV Accessible New Testament with simple text, large print, and pictures that do not make it look like a child’s Bible.



Tips for welcoming and including people with intellectual disabilities

In one-to-one and group conversations

Speak directly to a person with an intellectual disability rather than speaking through their carer or support person.

It is better to overestimate rather than underestimate someone's intellectual ability. Speak to a person with an intellectual disability as you would anyone else, and then you can modify your language if you find the person is having trouble understanding you.

Be patient in waiting for a response, as sometimes it can take a little while for a person with an intellectual disability to process information and formulate a response.

Do not finish a word or sentence for someone who has slow speech or speech difficulties. Give them time to speak for themselves.

Treat adults as peers and do not patronise them or treat them like children. Respect their agency and decisions unless doing so would put them or others in danger.

In 'get to know you' conversations, people often ask 'What do you do for work?' This can be an awkward question for many people, such as those who have retired, stay-at-home parents, the long-term unemployed, as well as people with disability who may not be able to find meaningful employment. A helpful alternative question to 'what do you do for work?' is 'what do you do during the week?' This question allows people to share any paid or voluntary work and their interests. This question is helpful in many contexts, including for those with an intellectual disability. Finding out a person's interests will give you a greater ability to talk with and learn about a person with an intellectual disability.

Be patient and flexible in your interactions with someone with an intellectual disability. They may be repetitive or have a very specific area of interest they like to discuss at length. Even when these aren't your own areas of interest, look at it as an opportunity to learn something new so you can share knowledge of the topic with this person with an intellectual disability.

Recognise that it can be difficult for someone with an intellectual disability to pick up on social cues, especially vague comments or non-verbal forms of communication. For this reason, someone with an intellectual disability may stand too close or speak louder than others in an enclosed space. It is important to be patient and understanding in these situations. It is also possible to give direct guidance and instruction, provided it is done with care and respect. For example, if a person with an intellectual disability interrupts when you are in the middle of a conversation with someone else, it is possible to gently say, for instance, 'I am just speaking with Max at the moment, but I will be finished in 10 minutes and then I will come and find you to talk to you.' Don't use someone's differences in social awareness as an excuse to be rude or not engage with someone with an intellectual disability.

In Church Services, Events, Meetings, and Communications:

As much as possible, include people with an intellectual disability in services and events with the rest of the congregation. Many people with intellectual disabilities will happily sit through a regular church service. However, if there are people keen to learn more about the Bible, it is possible to run a Bible study tailored to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities during the sermon time.

Find ways to use the skills and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities in your parish. Learn about their gifts and abilities, and help them find ways to use them. Perhaps someone with an intellectual disability in your church likes gardening. Great! Get them to help with this role at church. Perhaps someone with an intellectual disability would be well-suited to the welcoming team. Wonderful! Ask them if they would like to join the team. Take the time to find out what a person is good at and what they enjoy doing, as you would with anyone who would like to serve at church.

Provide opportunities for participation in congregational activities. Do not make assumptions about a person's ability or desire to be involved. Include their family and carers in discussions and planning for participation.

People with intellectual disabilities are often very concrete learners and can find abstract concepts challenging to understand. If you are teaching the Bible to people with intellectual disabilities, props, visuals, skits, and other tactile and sensory activities are often helpful.

If you are creating handouts for people with intellectual disability and learning difficulties, use a clear, large-print font and include pictures of real people rather than emojis or cartoons, which can sometimes be confusing for people with an intellectual disability.

Buddy systems or faith partners for adults with intellectual disabilities

Pairing a person with an intellectual disability with a buddy or faith partner can help provide extra support for a person with a disability if they would like it. The idea of the buddy system or faith partners comes from the education setting, where a student with a disability is paired with a peer without a disability to help both students develop skills in social interaction, compassion, and understanding, and build relationships. There are also benefits for the buddy or faith partner, some of which include, greater understanding of the experiences of people with disability and the gifts and abilities people with disability can offer. For this reason, the pairing can benefit both the person with the disability and their buddy or faith partner.

The two primary purposes of the pairing:

- To make a personal connection that provides support and friendship;
- To increase full participation in congregational life for the person with an intellectual disability.⁴¹

It is important to respect the agency of the adult with disability, who might not wish to be partnered with a buddy or faith partner. It is also helpful to remember that, like everyone, people with intellectual disability will 'gel' with some people and not with others. Simply because a person with intellectual disability doesn't connect well with one buddy does not mean the whole system of buddies is a failure. Work closely with the person with intellectual disability to find people with similar likes and interests and/or who connect well together. Respect their decisions and choices about what will work best to support their faith and experience of the church.

Guide for a buddy or faith partner for an adult with an intellectual disability

"A buddy or faith partner is someone who:

- is a leader through example by focusing on ability rather than on disability and modelling a good attitude;
- is aware of both person-first and identity-first language;
- is aware of disability etiquette;
- is a communication guide who can help a person with disability in conversations with others;
- is a person who is willing to spend time with the person with disability after the service or at a later time to answer any questions that arise from the service or sermon;
- is a friend who can be available for social opportunities such as going to the movies or a café together outside of church time."⁴²

CHAPTER 9

Including neurodivergent children, youth, and adults

The terms neurodiversity and neurodivergence have quickly become part of our vocabulary over the last few years. This section of the guidelines originally focused only on autism but has been expanded to provide an overview of the broad range of experiences that fall under the umbrella term ‘neurodivergence’.

While many people use the terms related to neurodiversity interchangeably, it is helpful to understand the difference between the key words used:

Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity is the recognition that not all brains are ‘wired’ in the same way, and there are differences between people in the way their brains work. These differences are part of the natural variety in human beings. Collectively, a group of whose brains work in different ways represents neurodiversity. Note that a group can be neurodiverse (including both people who are neurodivergent and neurotypical), however, individuals are not described as neurodiverse.
Neurodivergent	Neurodivergent is the term used to describe an individual who has a less typical cognitive variation, which can include autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc.
Neurotypical	Neurotypical is the term used to describe an individual with typical development and intellectual/cognitive functioning.

While we most commonly associate the experience of neurodivergence with people with autism or ADHD, there are a number of conditions/labels that come under the umbrella of the term neurodivergence. These include:

- Autism

- ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia
- Tourette's Syndrome
- OCD

Some people can experience two or more categories or labels of neurodivergence, for example, autism and ADHD, which is sometimes referred to as AuDHD.

The experiences of neurodivergent people are broad and varying, and the relationship between neurodivergence and disability is complex. Some neurodivergent people do not consider their neurodivergence a form of disability but part of the natural diversity of living as an embodied human in the world. They recognise in their neurodivergence strengths and abilities which differ from, but are complementary to, those of neurotypical people.⁴³

For others, there are some aspects of being neurodivergent that can be challenging and disabling, even if they do not consider neurodivergence a disability in itself. Many other neurodivergent people experience their neurodivergence in combination with other forms of disability, such as a physical or intellectual disability or a mental health condition. According to Australian statistics, 91.4% of people with autism in Australia have a disability.⁴⁴ Research also shows the high rates of mental health conditions and other disabilities for those who live with ADHD.⁴⁵

This tells us that the experiences of neurodivergent people vary significantly. Being neurodivergent does not automatically mean that someone requires specialised disability supports to help them engage in church services and programs. It is important not to be quick to judge a person's ability to participate in church, to be an active and contributing member of the church community, or their cognitive abilities, solely based on their neurodivergence. As with the recommendations throughout these guidelines, the best thing we can do is listen carefully and get to know people's individual stories and experiences. It is from these relationships that we will grow in our understanding of the kinds of changes we can make to ensure our church services and programs are welcoming to everyone.

For a fabulous resource on explaining neurodiversity to children in Christian communities, see the resource "[This is Ned.](#)"

Welcoming neurodivergent people into our parishes

While the experiences of people with neurodivergence can differ greatly, there are still changes we can make in our services and parishes that will make it easier for neurodivergent people to participate and be active members of our church communities. As with much of the advice given in these guidelines, the changes we make to help make our services more welcoming and inclusive of neurodivergent people will likely be helpful for many others in our parishes.

Neurodivergent people and their families are your best resource. Respectfully ask questions about what the parish can do to facilitate belonging. What tools/resources work best in other contexts that the parish might be able to adopt? Be open to allowing people to engage in services and programs in ways that work best for them. This might be knitting, doodling, or moving around at the back of the church during the service. While we are finally beginning to let go of some stereotypes, it is still common to believe that eye contact and sitting still are markers of someone concentrating in church. In reality, what people need to concentrate on varies significantly from person to person. Rather than being rigid about what participation *should* look like in church, we need to make space for people to exercise choice and agenda and engage in ways that make sense for their particular brains and bodies.

Social, sensory and cognitive engagement for neurodivergent people

In his book, *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church*, Stewart Rapley considers how churches can be more welcoming and inclusive of neurodivergent people in three particular areas: social, sensory, and cognitive engagement.⁴⁶ While Rapley's book focuses in particular on increasing cognitive engagement for people with autism in the church, he also recognises the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals in social and sensory engagement, and provides a list of resources to help address those areas. Below are examples of barriers that can make it harder for neurodivergent people to belong in our churches, along with recommendations for overcoming them.

As noted earlier in the guidelines, the most significant barrier to participation for neurodivergent people and those with disability is people's attitudes. As Kate Morris writes: "In my research, I've asked many Christian neurodivergent people and families with neurodivergent members what makes church hard for them...many identify the core issue as a lack of understanding. Without understanding, needs go unmet, and they feel judged for being different."⁴⁷

Tips for welcoming and including neurodivergent people

Identifying and overcoming social barriers

Familiarity with church building, layout and people	Many neurodivergent people, especially those with autism, find it easier to engage and interact when they have a clear sense of where they are going, what is going to happen, and what might be expected of them. One key way we can help reduce anxiety around these elements is to provide clear information on the church's website and social media. Questions you could answer in an FAQ section might be: • What happens in a church service in our parish? • How long does the service run for? • What is the layout of the building/grounds? • Who will I see at church? (ministers' names and pictures) • Do I need to bring anything with me to attend?
	Create a social story about going to church and going to children's ministry/youth programs. Social stories explain social settings and can be used for both children and adults to help build familiarity and reduce stress, especially when attending something or somewhere new. There are many examples of "going to church" social stories available online. The best ones, however, use photos of real people and places that visitors will see when they come to your parish. It is helpful to make these downloadable so people can print them for use in preparing to come to church.
Communicate clear expectations	Neurodivergent people, especially those with autism, can be very literal in their understanding of directions. It is helpful if you can clearly communicate what is happening in the program to ensure it is understood. For example, rather than just starting the service with the musicians, ensure someone welcomes people into the service and directs people to "stand if you are able and join with us to sing" or something similar. Do not assume people know they are expected to stand and sing when the music begins. For children and youth, clear communication includes being clear about when it is ok to talk out loud and when it is quiet time. It might also remind children and youth of the expectations for behaviour during the program, which can be reinforced with a visual list posted on the wall. Rather than the vague "behave yourself," give clear guidelines on expectations for what is considered appropriate behaviour.

Identifying and overcoming sensory barriers	
Music can be loud and become a sensory overload	Many neurodivergent people are very sensitive to sensory issues, including noise. What can seem a reasonable level of sound for a neurotypical person might be overwhelming for a neurodivergent person. This can be such a barrier that they may arrive late to church and leave early to avoid participating in worship. Others may not attend church at all because the noise is too much of a deterrent. We can help overcome this barrier by encouraging neurodivergent people and those with disability to do what they need to manage being at church. This might include • Wearing noise-cancelling headphones; • Staying in a quiet area (e.g., a designated quiet zone or in the foyer) during the noisier parts of the service. • Running a low-sensory service. For examples from a church in the USA with a focus on including people with sensory needs, see Sante Christian Sensory Support - Sensory Healthy Church.
Greeting people before, during, and after the service	Talking with people you don't know very well can be difficult for many people, especially when there is uncertainty about whether you should shake someone's hand or have to physically touch people during the passing of the peace. During the return to in-person services, some churches developed stickers for church members to use to indicate whether they were comfortable being touched or preferred not to be. However, this is a system that could continue to be used on an ongoing basis to help accommodate neurodivergent people who do not like touching or being touched. A green sticker on a person's name tag could be used to indicate they are ok with handshakes and 'high fives,' while a red sticker could indicate someone does not want to be touched. This would also be helpful for someone recovering from a virus who wants to avoid infecting others. Systems like this can only be used as an 'opt-in' without forcing people to decide to wear a sticker.
Lighting	Bright fluorescent lighting can make it difficult for some neurodivergent people to concentrate. Fluorescents can also be a trigger for people with migraines and other neurological conditions. More natural lighting or softer yellow lights are better for visibility in general and can make it easier for a neurodivergent person to participate in church.

Movement	As much as possible, allow neurodivergent people to move. Whether this is through the use of fidget devices, stimming, or physical movement through spaces. For adults, this might mean building a culture where it is acceptable for neurodivergent adults to move to the back of the church building/auditorium or to use a sensory room where they can still hear the service. For children and youth, in addition to tools like fidget toys, build in regular movement breaks between activities.
Eye Contact	Remember that neurodivergent people don't need to make eye contact with you to pay attention. In fact, for many neurodivergent people, this may be overwhelming and cause a sensory overload. This is the same when listening to someone speak from the front. Recognise that people learn in different ways and eye contact does not equal paying attention.
Identifying and overcoming cognitive barriers	
Communication regarding changes	Ensure you notify people as far in advance as possible about changes to your program. For example, if the 9am and 11am congregations are combined on one particular Sunday for a 10am service, ensure this information is available in multiple forms and shared across platforms such as social media, in print in the news bulletin, and verbally in the service. Consider people who might not be physically present when announcements are made, so they are advised.
Timetables and orders of service	• Rather than just making runsheets or orders of service for those rostered to help in a service, make them more widely available. Orders of service can provide a sense of safety, comfort and familiarity for many neurodivergent adults as well as some people with mental health challenges. It helps people follow along with what is happening, which can help with concentration. • Many children with disability and/or neurodivergence also benefit from the use of visual timetables that everyone in the group can see, but some children/young people might also like their own copy of the order of service to follow along with during their kids/youth program. • Adding visual elements to the run sheet (such as a picture of a Bible to indicate the Bible reading and a picture of praying hands to indicate a time of prayer) will also be of benefit to those with low literacy, as well as those with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Respect people's need to move during the service	While it is ingrained in many of us that listening to a speaker means watching them intently while taking notes, this is simply not the case for many neurodivergent people (and many neurotypical people, too!). For some people, concentrating requires keeping their hands (or bodies) busy. Some people like to draw or doodle in their notepad. Others like to knit or crochet. Work to develop a culture where it is acceptable for people to do what they need to in order to concentrate (without disturbing the concentration of others).
Use more visuals	If you are teaching the Bible to neurodivergent people – children or adults – visual aids can help. Try using more images on PowerPoint during sermons and talks, or including props or other tactile items to help keep people's focus.
Avoid verbal overload	Keep information, directions and instructions as clear and concise as possible.

As with all the other recommendations in these guidelines, the best place to start is with those you already know in your parish. By completing a community audit and identifying the barriers and needs of those with disability and neurodivergence already in your church, you will have a place to start with making accommodations. If you attempt to make all these changes without understanding the needs of the people you already have in your parish, you are likely to find the process lengthy and overwhelming. Discuss any potential accommodations and adaptations with the people who will be most directly impacted by these changes to ensure they are the best way forward.

It is important to recognise that as our societal understanding of neurodiversity is expanding and developing, more adults are receiving late diagnoses of autism and ADHD. It's important to support people's diagnoses and recognise that, while there are significant benefits to a better understanding of how your brain is wired, a late diagnosis can also require considerable adjustment. Rather than dismissing people's late diagnoses as 'unnecessary' or a symptom of over-diagnosis, listen well to people's stories and journey with them as they come to terms with what the diagnosis means for them personally.

Even with the increasing number of late diagnoses, there are likely many people in your congregation who are neurodivergent who have not been officially diagnosed. Given this, implementing these changes will not only benefit those who are already diagnosed but also those yet to be diagnosed, as well as the broader parish community.

As these guidelines have a particular focus on disability rather than neurodiversity, we recommend that you consult resources and experts specialising in neurodiversity for more detailed information. A range of resources is at the back of these guidelines.

CHAPTER 10

Welcoming people with mental health challenges

While conditions such as anxiety and depression are not always immediately considered a form of disability among the general population in Australia, mental health conditions are considered a form of disability under the Australian Disability Discrimination Act.⁴⁸ According to the Australian Human Rights Commission:

The impact of mental illness on a person's life determines whether it becomes a disability for them and whether it is a permanent or temporary disability. A person may experience one episode of mental illness in their lifetime and completely recover, while another may have to manage their illness for the rest of their life.⁴⁹

Simply put, a person's mental health condition may be considered a disability if it has a disabling impact on their lives. If a mental health condition impedes a person in undertaking employment, accessing social services, experiencing friendships, and so on, then a person's mental health condition can be classified as a form of disability under Australian law. This is referred to as a psycho-social disability. A psychological disability can affect a person's ability to cope with stress, maintain stamina to complete tasks, interact with others, focus, or care for themselves.

If a person is discriminated against on the grounds of their mental health condition or psycho-social disability, this counts as a form of disability discrimination. This means that, as well as making accommodations for people with other forms of disability, our parishes must also consider the way we welcome, include, and support people with mental health challenges and psycho-social disabilities according to the standards set out in the *Disability Discrimination Act*.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 42.9% of Australians aged 16–85 have experienced a mental health condition at some time in their life.⁵⁰ According to the 2020–2022 data, one in five Australians aged 16–85 (21.5%) experienced symptoms of that mental health condition within the last twelve months.⁵¹ Despite this, there is still a great deal of stigma and lack of understanding around the experience of people living with mental ill-health.

The terms *mental illness*, *mental ill-health* or *mental health challenges* refer to a range of “health conditions involving significant changes in thinking, emotion, or behavior (or a combination of these).”⁵² These conditions are often “associated with distress or problems functioning in social, work, or family activities.”⁵³ Mental ill-health can take many forms. “Some are fairly mild and only interfere in limited ways with daily life, such as certain phobias (abnormal fears). Other mental illnesses are so severe that a person may need care in a hospital.”⁵⁴ Many people live with mild depression or anxiety but are still able to participate in work and church and care for family members. However, other people can experience mental health conditions that are much more disruptive to their lives and make it difficult to work, socialise, or fulfil their family responsibilities. This might be the case for someone with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, eating disorders, or other forms of mental illness. “Mental health conditions can affect different aspects of a person, including personality, thinking, perception, mood, behavior, or judgment.”⁵⁵

Many people in Australia today still feel stigmatised and isolated because of their mental health challenges. The World Health Organisation defines stigma as “a mark of shame, disgrace or disapproval which results in an individual being rejected, discriminated against, and excluded from participating in a number of different areas of society.”⁵⁶ People experience stigmatisation when they are told by friends, families or employers to ‘get over it,’ or ‘snap out of it,’ as though a person with a mental health challenge has complete control over the impact their illness has on their lives. Others are stigmatised when they are overlooked for employment or voluntary roles as a result of their mental health condition. Casual language also contributes to this: using terms like ‘crazy,’ ‘insane,’ or ‘nuts,’ to refer to either a person or unusual situation, reinforces harmful stereotypes and discourages people from seeking help.

Stigmatisation in the church can occur when people who have experienced mental health challenges in the past or who have well-controlled mental health conditions are excluded from participating in ministry teams or serving on church rosters on the basis of their mental ill-health. Stigmatisation in the church can also occur if a person’s mental health challenges are dismissed as punishment for sin, demon possession, or a lack of faith, with no attempt to provide counselling, support, or compassion for their condition. In contrast to such damaging stereotypes, church communities have the ability to help individuals, families, and the broader church to recognise the value and dignity of people with mental health challenges and find ways for people with mental health challenges to become active participants in their church community.

Welcoming people with mental health challenges into our parishes

Amy Simpson, in a book called *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church’s Mission*, refers to mental health conditions as “no casserole illnesses.”⁵⁷ By this, she means that when someone has an accident or is diagnosed with an illness like cancer,

people in the church will often offer to help by delivering meals to them. However, due to the stigma and uncertainty around how to support people experiencing mental health challenges, there is often not the same amount of support from church communities for people experiencing depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions. Sometimes people with mental health challenges are made to feel guilty when they struggle to pray or read their Bibles or attend church, as people do not understand how hard these things can be for someone experiencing a mental health condition.

Matthew Sandford suggests that there are three things that the church can offer people living with mental health challenges that professional medical care cannot:

- *Hope* – “hope in Christ transcends circumstances and sustains us when the world around us sees the situation as hopeless.”
- *A holistic view of humans* – A Christian approach means recognising the whole person as physical, mental, spiritual, and relational. “The church’s holistic view of being human offers those struggling with mental health problems a more complete framework for recovery.”
- *Accessibility & supportive community* – As well as booking in to see health professionals, if the church were better equipped to serve and support people with mental ill-health, there would always be a community of people around ready to help, pray, and care for an individual. Understanding and support from a local community network are often considered vital elements in a person’s recovery and management of ill-health, according to health professionals.⁵⁸

It is not the job of the church to replace the role of professionals in the life of someone with mental ill-health. However, the church can have a significant role to play in offering hospitality and care to those who are often marginalised and stigmatised by their mental health conditions. Rather than judgment, the church can provide compassion and understanding. Rather than isolation and hopelessness, the church can offer community support and provide a sense of hope in the message of Jesus. The power of the gospel to transform lives and the support of a compassionate, grace-demonstrating community can make an enormous difference in a person’s ability to cope with mental health challenges.

Amy Simpson, in *Troubled Minds*, suggests that a common story among church-goers who are doing well in managing or recovering from mental health challenges is that they had a core group of people in their church to whom they could turn for prayer and support.⁵⁹ This is not to suggest that people with mental health challenges should rely only on church friendships, but rather that, in conjunction with seeing their health professionals and taking medications when necessary, the church can form a vital component of an individual’s ability to cope with the challenges of mental ill-health.

One of the key ways to make a difference is to provide training for church members

to better understand what mental ill-health is, the challenges that can be associated with it, and how to better support people who live with mental health challenges, either short-term or long-term.⁶⁰ Training for ministers and parishioners on mental health is available through the [Mental Health and Pastoral Care Institute](#) of Anglican Deaconess Ministries in Sydney.

In terms of participation in church life, mental health challenges do not necessarily prevent an individual from contributing to the life of the church if they wish to do so. This will benefit both the church and the person concerned. For most people, mental health can fluctuate, and so their involvement may be variable. It is helpful if the church community recognises and accepts this fluctuation.

Tips for welcoming and including people with mental health challenges

In one-to-one and group conversations

Be supportive of a person and offer support to an individual with mental health challenges. At the same time, recognise when you are out of your depth. Enlist the help of a leader or an additional support person (with the permission of the person you are supporting). Encourage people to seek medical help as well as the prayer and support of family, friends, and other church members.

Make a point of checking in with someone with mental health challenges to see how they are coping. This is important not just on Sundays but also during the week.

Ensure you give someone your full attention when speaking to someone with mental health challenges, and don't rush to give them answers and solutions. Take the time really to listen to their concerns and worries.

Check that people feel safe from harm from themselves and from others.

Offer to pray with a person or read the Bible with someone if they feel unable to do that by themselves, but do not make them feel guilty if they do not accept. If they do not feel they are able to read the Bible with you one week, do not assume the answer will always be the same. Be willing to offer again. Alternatively, share certain scriptures with them through text messages or notes in the mail.

Encourage wise behaviour, such as eating well, sleeping well, and getting daily exercise, but do not make people feel bad if they are unable to do so. Offer to do these things with a person with mental health challenges, for example, by helping them cook a meal or going for a walk with them.

Offer practical assistance as you would for a person experiencing a physical illness. For example, offer to provide a meal, hang out the laundry, or babysit their children.

During Church Services, Events, and Meetings, and in communications:

Talk openly and compassionately about mental wellness and mental health challenges in the parish and encourage leaders and parishioners to be honest about their mental health, and about talking to someone if they need support.

Include general prayer for people experiencing mental health challenges in the church, for instance: 'we pray for anyone in our church who is experiencing mental ill-health.'

Provide training for congregations through a formal training session or by inviting a guest speaker to share their experiences of living with a mental health condition.

Run an awareness-raising event in conjunction with World Mental Health Day (October 10). Resources for this are available from the Pastoral Care and Mental Health Institute's website. The information for these resources is available in the reference section of these guidelines.

Provide books and information on mental health in your church's library or resource area, such as Christian books on mental health, as well as contact information for community organisations and counselling services like Lifeline and Beyond Blue.

Encourage people to work at maintaining good mental health. Encourage parishioners not to overwork, to take good breaks from ministry, to set good boundaries, to encourage others, to take time to slow down and enjoy friendships and nature, and so on.

Develop support groups in your parish or in conjunction with a number of local parishes to support people with mental health challenges as well as support groups for families and carers.

Ministers and church leaders should be familiar with the signs of mental health challenges, and should know where to refer a person with mental health challenges, and when to do so.

There is a range of excellent resources available on mental health and the church to help ministers and congregations better support people living with mental health challenges and their families. For more information, see the reference section at the back of these guidelines.

Mental health challenges and suicide

According to the Black Dog Institute, the statistics on suicide in Australia are incredibly grim:

- Over 65,000 Australians attempt suicide every year;
- Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians between 15 and 44 years of age;
- Young Australians are more likely to take their own life than die in motor vehicle accidents;
- The suicide rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is approximately twice that of non-indigenous Australians.⁶¹

Mental health challenges are considered a major contributing factor to an individual's decision to suicide.⁶²

Given these statistics, we need to ensure we are communities that are prepared to care for people with mental health challenges, that understand the warning signs of suicide, and that know how to refer someone to a health care professional, and how to talk to an individual who is having suicidal thoughts. As Matthew S. Stanford, in his book *Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness*, notes:

The fact that individuals living with mental illness are seeking assistance and counsel from the church should prompt us to rise up and be the hands and feet of Christ to a suffering people. This is best done through the application of both biblical truth and mental health resources.⁶³

Recognising the signs of suicide – from the Black Dog Institute

Behavioural changes

If someone is acting out of the ordinary, it is not necessarily a cause for alarm. However, it is important to pay attention to changes in their behaviour, particularly changes that may include:

- sleep changes (too much sleep or too little)
- withdrawing from family and friends
- loss of interest in things
- changes in eating
- irritability, being moody or easily upset

- self-harming (e.g., cutting)
- putting affairs in order, giving things away, saying goodbyes, writing suicide notes or goodbye letters
- risky behaviour (e.g., consuming excessive alcohol or other drug use)
- decreased academic or work performance
- mentioning or joking about suicide, death or dying.

How feelings are expressed

Some people choose to talk about how they are feeling, however, this does not apply to everyone. They might be feeling hopeless, depressed, angry and irritable, distressed, worthless, exhausted, like there's no way out of their problems or no reason for living at all. They might say things which suggest that:

- they see themselves as a burden – e.g. *'You'd be better off without me.'*
- they can't see a way out of their situation – e.g. *'I've had enough,'* or *'I'm over it.'*
- they're feeling a sense of hopelessness – e.g. *'There's nothing to live for,'* or *'There's no point.'*⁶⁴

If you or someone near you appears to be in immediate danger:

1. Call Emergency Services on 000; or
2. Go to a hospital emergency department.

If you or someone is having suicidal thoughts and need someone to speak to:

3. Call Lifeline on 13 11 14
4. Talk to someone like:
 - A GP or counsellor;
 - A family member or friend;
 - A school, university, or TAFE counsellor;
 - A teacher or coach;
 - A work colleague;
 - A church minister or religious leader.

CHAPTER 11

Including children and youth with disability and their families

Often, the biggest barriers people with disabilities and their families encounter are not inaccessible *stairs but unwelcoming stares*.⁶⁵

Statistics from the *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare* indicate that almost 10% of Australian children and 8% of Australian teenagers live with some form of disability.⁶⁶ 1 out of every 70 children in Australia is diagnosed with Autism.

Getting to church on Sundays can be challenging for any family with children and youth. Lost shoes, missing soft toys, and arguments over the window seat are all too familiar to parents attempting to get to church on time on a Sunday morning. However, that process can become far more complicated when one or more of those children has a disability.

The stresses on families who have children with disability are well documented. The divorce rate among parents of children with disability is higher, carers have an increased risk of mental health challenges, and for many families, the financial cost of caring for a child with a disability can also place additional stress on the family.⁶⁷ It is not surprising that families with children with disability might be exhausted by Sunday and find it difficult to get everyone ready to arrive at church on time. If attending church causes stress to the child with disability, for example, because the music is too loud or the number of people is overwhelming, or, if parents experience 'shushing' and 'eye-rolls' from other families who were able to make it to church on time, the whole process of getting ready can feel like it wasn't worth the effort.

For many families with a child or young person with a disability, there is a great deal of stress, hardship and grief as they come to terms with what it means to adapt to a reality different to what they were expecting parenting to be. This grief and shock can happen in the initial stages of a child's birth or diagnosis, but can also rear up again at many different stages of life, as that child misses growth and development milestones

or experiences isolation or teasing among peers. In fact, this grief can resurface throughout the parenting journey as a child misses milestones or does not grow into the independence that other children around them achieve.

While nuclear families must adjust to the birth or diagnosis of a child with a disability, their church 'family' doesn't always embark on the journey with them. Many families of children or youth with disability can share stories of being asked to leave their child with a disability home on Sundays or to relocate to a church that 'specialises' in disability ministry. Many families would benefit from love and acceptance from their church community. Sadly, this is not always the experience of families living with disability.

Once again, the church has a great opportunity to offer friendship, connection, and grace to families who often experience misunderstanding and exclusion from broader society. The church has the opportunity to create access to our children's and youth programs in order to follow Jesus' directive in Matthew 19:14, to "let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

Welcoming children and youth with disability into our parishes

The following section merely scratches the surface of practical ideas and solutions to facilitate inclusion for children and youth with disability. However, we hope it will provide a useful starting point. There is a range of excellent resources available to equip churches to better include children and youth with disability and better support their families and carers, listed at the end of the guidelines.

Listen to the voices of kids, young people and their families!

Parents, families, as well as children and young people with disability will always be your best resource when it comes to getting to know a child or young person with disability. Rather than relying on the standard enrolment form used for all children in your parish, it is helpful to have an additional form which can be used to gather relevant information about a child or young person with any disabilities or health concerns in order to provide the best support for them in your parish's programs. Often, standard forms give parents only 2–3 lines to describe the child's support needs, likes and dislikes, potential triggers, and best soothing strategies. A form dedicated to collecting further information from the family can be useful not only for gathering insights into the best ways to support the child or young person, but also for serving as a stepping stone to creating an open dialogue between the parish leadership and the family. Arrange a time to meet with the family, including the child or young person with a disability, to learn about them and their particular needs.

In the appendix is a document called 'Parent Conversation Discussion Points' that highlights key topics to discuss when you meet with the parents or carers of a child or young person with a disability in your program. These conversation

points encourages the leader to take the time to hear a family's story of disability, find out about the child's interest and abilities, allergies and medications, level of independence and supports required, strategies for calming, best strategies to manage behaviours of concern (if required), when to notify the parents about issues that might arise, share goals, and more. A sample copy of this checklist is included in *Appendix 5: Further information on including kids and young people with disability*.

As with gathering information from anyone in our parishes, it is important to clearly indicate the purpose of the gathering and who will have access to the information once it has been collected. It is important to respect the privacy of children and young people with disability and their families, and have a clear understanding of how a child/young person/family wish for the disability to be spoken about in front of leaders and other children/young people, and under what circumstances.

By getting to know the child or young person with a disability and their family, you can also encourage families to put together a resource for the child or young person, making it easier for leaders and peers to ask questions and have conversations to get to know the child or young person. One example of this kind of resource is called a 'This is Me' book. A 'This is Me' book is designed as a simple booklet of photos and information about the child or young person, including their likes and interests, to help spark conversation. This can be a great way for a child or young person with disability to start a conversation with others, and vice versa. For children who are non-speaking or find verbal communication challenging, it also provides a way to communicate through their book.

- The child or young person's name, age, parents, siblings, pets;
- Where the child or young person attends school;
- Abilities, interests, favourite activities, such as TV shows, sports, songs, etc.;
- Age-appropriate information about the disability, its impact, and equipment;
- What the child or young person is learning at school;
- Simple ways to support the child or young person at church.

An example of a completed 'This is Me' book is included in Appendix 5.

In light of the information you gather from the parents, you are then able to create an individual 'Ministry Inclusion Plan,' which sets out what you are going to do to implement inclusion for this child. This might include such things as how you will meet physical and access needs, what education for the leaders you will supply, how you will recruit a buddy for the child, how to involve the other children in inclusion, how you will work on parents' goals, and how and when parents are to be notified if needed.

Once you create a draft plan, discuss it with the family to ensure everyone understands the contents and agrees with the information, strategies, and implementation.

A sample Ministry Inclusion Plan is also located in Appendix 5.

Creating inclusive programs

While some churches promote programs that separate children with disability from the main children's or youth program, this is not an approach universally accepted by experts in ministry with children and youth with disability. While on some rare occasions this may be necessary (to be decided in consultation with the parents), this approach is not ideal because:

- This makes disability the focus and reinforces the stigma of 'otherness'. In reality, children are more alike than unlike their peers, and when they are included, the whole group can better understand what it means to live as the Body of Christ.
- The peer group misses out if the child or young person with a disability is not included. Inclusion is socially important for us all. It helps develop acceptance and gives us opportunities to receive from those whose perspectives and gifts we lack.

A question often asked by churches is whether it is better for children and young people with disability to be with others who are the same age or to include them in a group that is closer to their 'functional' or cognitive level. While this conversation needs to take place between leadership and the family, in general, it is more appropriate for children and young people to be with peers their own age. If children and young people are grouped with people deemed to have the same 'cognitive' abilities, then this makes it more difficult for a child or young person to connect with peers of the same age. In addition, placing children and young people with those significantly younger than them will create a disparity in terms of emotional and even bodily development that will continue to mark the child or young person with disability as other.

In her book, *Helping Kids include Kids with Disability*, Barbara Newman addresses at length a range of strategies for helping children and young people include other children and young people with disability into church programs.⁶⁸

Tips for welcoming and including children and young people with disability

During Church Services (before children and youth leave for designated programs or for services when children remain in for the whole service)

Provide packs to keep children busy and calm. A 'Busy Bag' or 'Buddy Bag' is an item that can be collected on the way into church to help children or youth sit through the first part of a church service before heading to a designated children's or youth program. A 'Busy Bag' can include items like colouring sheets and pencils, quiet fidget spinners, squishies, or other quiet items that help keep them occupied without disturbing others. The bag can then be returned at the end of the service.

Create a welcoming and accepting attitude so that if children or youth with disability need to cover their ears or wear earmuffs or headphones to cope with noise levels during the beginning of the service, this is acceptable.

Be understanding if a child, young person, or family decides to wait in the foyer or outside until after the music is finished, if this makes it easier for their child or young person to adjust to being at church.

During Designated Children's or Youth Programs (during Sunday services or mid-week events)

Buddy systems can work well for supporting children or youth with disability in church. For information on buddies for children or youth with disability, see Appendix 5.

In addition to a buddy for a child or young person with disability, it can also be helpful to have a designated leader, especially for children or youth with higher needs. You can assign a leader to oversee a particular child or young person with a disability, or a small group of children or youth, depending on their needs. Leaders can be timetabled each week to fill this role. They can help keep an eye on children or youth who are likely to abscond, who have difficulties with fine motor skills and may need assistance with craft, or who need help remembering to sit and stand at the appropriate times during the program. They can also just help facilitate inclusion and ensure the child or young person is interacting with their peers. This designated leader role works better when the leader has had the chance to meet with a child or young person and their family outside of the Sunday service (ensuring that Safe Ministry principles are followed for this type of meeting).

Routine and predictability are important for all children and young people, but particularly for those with a disability. This does not mean you have to repeat the same format in children's or youth programs every week, but having a visual timetable, for example, can help a child or young person with disability feel comfortable and safe while at their program. A visual timetable can be placed on the wall, with images stuck on with Velcro that can be removed once that activity is complete. Small photocopies of the timetable can also be given to children or youth with disability, as well as to children with low vision or anxiety, if they want or need to refer to it throughout the service. An example of a visual timetable and suggested resources for creating your own are included in Appendix 5.

Consider how you can create or adapt games to make them accessible for all participants.

Try to make transitions between activities as smooth as possible. Children and youth are most likely to get confused or overwhelmed during times of transition. Make sure you have clear instructions for what is happening at each stage of the program, and that these are reinforced verbally as well as visually.

Consider creating a 'quiet zone' for kids with sensory overload. Many children and youth with disabilities, especially those with autism, can find the noise and activity of a kids' or youth program overwhelming. To help children and youth participate and also get the downtime they might need to stay in the program, a 'quiet zone' can be a helpful addition to your kids' or youth program. More information on setting up a 'quiet zone' is in Appendix 5.

Consider allowing children to select from a range of different seating options during children's and youth programs. Allowing children and youth to choose their seating can help those with specific sensory preferences or aversions find the seating that works best for them. However, too many seating options can be expensive and overwhelming for kids. Seating options can be provided by allowing kids to choose between a seat at a table or on the floor during an activity. For kids who like movement while working, chair bands that fit around the legs of a chair are a cheap way to let regular classroom chairs accommodate movement. These can be easily found online.

Allow children and youth the option to sit out of a game if they do not want to participate, especially in the case of games that require physical contact, which can be difficult for many children and youth with disability, especially for children and youth with autism.

Make the program as tactile and sensory as possible to better engage all children and youth, including kids with disability.

It is important for all leaders in a children's or youth program to model inclusive behaviour and language. If a leader refers to a child or young person as 'different' or 'naughty' because of their disability, that label will impact the way other children or youth perceive that child. Instead, use positive, inclusive language to show that every child and young person is welcome and that you are glad they are present.

Don't expect all children or young people to make eye contact with you when you are speaking to them or teaching the lesson. This can be distressing and overwhelming for some children and young people with disability, and they can concentrate better while looking at something in the distance or fiddling with something in their hands. This does not mean they aren't concentrating on what you are saying.

Some children's and youth leaders find it can be helpful to learn some basic Auslan or Key Word Sign Language, which can be used as a visual cue for all children and youth in your programs, but which is also helpful for any specific children or youth in your program who are Deaf or hard of hearing. For more information on Auslan, see the reference section at the back of these guidelines.

Buddy systems for children and youth with disability

The idea of the buddy system comes from the education setting, where a student with a disability is paired with a peer without a disability to help both students develop skills in social interaction, compassion, and understanding, and build relationships. For this reason, the pairing can benefit both the child or young person with the disability and their buddy.

The two primary purposes of the pairing:

- To make a personal connection that provides support and friendship;
- To increase participation in the children's or youth program for a child or young person with a disability.⁶⁹

Finding a buddy for a child or young person with disability

It is helpful to first identify a child or young person's needs and abilities. This process should begin with the Parent Conversation Discussion Points and Ministry Inclusion Plan, outlined above. After learning about the person's skills, abilities, and likes, you will be better positioned to match them with a buddy.

While many children and young people with disability may not require a buddy, others would benefit from having someone to assist them and offer support throughout the programs they attend in your parish. Having a trained buddy assigned to a child or young person with a disability will ensure they get the most out of the program. Older children and young people can make great buddies where minimal support is required. Members of your youth programs can also make great buddies for younger

children who have completed the required Safe Ministry Check and the associated training. It is also possible to use adult leaders as buddies, subject to the Safe Ministry considerations already discussed; however, making friends with peers can be easier for children without the constant presence of an adult leader. But again, this will depend on the individual child or young person's abilities and needs, as well as your ministry context.

It is helpful to have a small team of junior leaders who are trained as buddies for children and young people. These junior leaders could be rostered monthly if there are enough young leaders available. Junior leaders (13–17 years) are required to have a WWVP Check and have completed a Safe Ministry Information System profile. They also need to have completed the online Safe Ministry training before they can volunteer to work with children or other young people. For more information, please refer to the Diocesan Protocol for Safe Ministry Screening and Training, in particular, the Table of Required Safe Ministry Screenings and Training.⁷⁰

Training buddies

After a junior leader agrees to be a buddy, they could meet with the person with a disability, along with their family and/or carers, and the children/youth minister or a member of the Inclusion Committee to train them to serve as a buddy. The meeting would also discuss the scope of the buddy's role, for example, the buddy might be rostered on for one Sunday a month and stay with the child only for the duration of the children's or youth program, or also for morning tea or supper. Safe Ministry standards require that a position description for buddies be provided, so they know what is included and excluded from their responsibilities.

The Diocese's *Embracing Ministries* team can provide more extensive training for buddies.

Supporting families and carers

According to research, in 2018, there were 2.65 million carers in Australia, representing 10.8% of the national population.⁷¹ Research conducted on the role of carers indicates that "while caring for a person with a disability is very important, there are significant emotional, physical, social and economic costs to carers and their families."⁷² This research found that carers had significantly lower mental health, as well as poorer physical health, than the general population. Not only this, but the research also indicated that divorce rates were higher among carers than the general population, and compared to other families, there was a higher proportion of families of carers who experienced financial hardship.⁷³ This research indicates that while it is important for church communities to help support church members with disability, the church can also play an important role in offering love, friendship, and support to the families, siblings, and carers of people with disability.

Some possible suggestions for supporting families and carers might be:

- Creating a Bible study comprised of, or sympathetic to, the needs of parents and carers. Such a group might allow members to participate via Zoom if they are unable to attend in person. They might allow for parents to 'tag team' participation while the other parent is home with the child or young person with a disability. Perhaps the Bible study could even be comprised of whole families, where everyone is in the room together, it is noisy and chaotic, but completely inclusive.
- Consider creating a support group for siblings as well as for parents and carers or consider ways you can support siblings by giving them the opportunity to do things away from their family. Siblings often carry greater responsibilities than those without a sibling with disability and are often relied on in many contexts as additional parents or carers. Provide opportunities for siblings to be with their peers without the responsibility of also being a carer.
- Create rosters for meals, babysitting, sibling outings or other events to help support a family with a child or young person with disability. Allow parents and carers to have a 'date night' once a month by providing respite for family members.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1

Congregational survey on disability and accessibility

Please use the following information as a guideline for creating an accessibility survey for your parish. We recommend creating both a paper and an online version using an online survey platform such as SurveyMonkey for people who prefer to respond online rather than on paper. In your explanation to the parish and on the survey itself, it is important to be clear about why the data is being collected and how it will be used. If you are going to provide a paper version, please ensure you also create a large-print version (at least 18-point font) and let people know they can ask someone to help them complete the form.

Some sample text is provided below.

We would like as many people in our parish as possible to answer this survey so we can:

- Identify any barriers that might make it hard for people to participate in our parish, especially those with disability, chronic health issues, etc.
- Make sure we are doing all we can to serve and support people in our parish, including those with disability;
- Make sure all people, including those with disability, can enjoy full participation in the life of our church.

Disabilities come in many different shapes and sizes, and people's experiences of disability vary significantly. Some people's disabilities are more obvious and might require someone to use a wheelchair or walking stick for mobility. But some people's disabilities are invisible. Intellectual disability, hearing loss, and mental health issues are all examples of invisible disabilities.

Other people might need to feel comfortable with the word disability or use it to describe themselves, but still experience barriers in participating in church due to

reduced vision and hearing through ageing or because someone lives with autism or ADHD (neurodivergence). In gathering information from our parish, we want to think as widely as possible and recognise the barriers that can make it harder for people to participate, whether or not they use the labels of disability, neurodivergence, or any other to describe their experiences.

We recognise that we are asking people to share personal information with us. You are not under any obligation to participate in the survey, or if you do wish to participate, you are under no obligation to answer all the questions on the survey. There are no adverse consequences for anyone who chooses not to participate. You can answer the survey anonymously if you wish to.

The information gathered will be used only by church leadership and members of the parish's inclusion committee to help remove barriers that may currently prevent people with disabilities from participating in our parish. The information will be stored securely *[for example, in the church office]* and will be destroyed *[after a set period of time/at the conclusion of the survey]*.

If you would like to discuss this survey with a member of leadership, you can contact *[insert contact name and information]*.

Below are some suggested survey questions. You might wish to add questions that are more specific to your particular parish, e.g., identifying any features that might prove challenging for parishioners.

1. Name/Contact information *(let people know this is optional)*
2. How long have you been attending this church?
3. Do you consider our church to be welcoming and inclusive of people with disability, chronic health issues and mental health issues? Options: Yes/No/Unsure
4. In what ways do you consider our church to be **welcoming** and **inclusive** of people with disability, chronic health issues and mental health issues?
5. In what areas do you think our church needs to **improve** in the way we welcome and include people with disability, chronic health issues and mental health issues?
6. Do you or an immediate family member identify as having a disability? Options: Yes/No/Unsure/Rather not say.
7. If yes, is that person: Options: Yourself/A family member/Rather not say
8. If yes, would you feel comfortable sharing with us some information about your disability or the disability of your family member? *(Provide an open space for people to answer this rather than providing particular answers. This allows people to use language they are most comfortable with).*
9. What areas or ministries of the church are the **easiest** for you or your family

member to access? *(List all the relevant spaces in your parish, such as the main church building, hall, kitchen, other church spaces, bathrooms, and car park; list all the relevant ministries, such as Sunday services, children's/youth ministries, Bible study groups, church meetings such as parish council/AGMs etc, other ministries/events).*

10. What areas or ministries of the church are the **hardest** for you or your family member to access? *(Repeat the list from question 9).*
11. Is there anything further you would like to tell us about you or your family member's ability to participate in church? Are there any particular barriers that make this more challenging? *(To help people answer this question, you could suggest some particular examples, e.g., stairs to building, lack of transportation to church, gravel on pathways, etc).*
12. What would enhance your/their ability to participate fully in the church? *(To help people answer this question, you could suggest some particular examples, e.g., improved access to inside/outside the church building, large print Bible and documents, the installation of a hearing loop, seating with armrests, seating spaces for people who use wheelchairs or mobility devices, better lighting in the church building, captioning on videos used in church and on the website, communion being brought to people with mobility difficulties, welcomers who can assist you with seating, more understanding about needing to move or crochet during church to increase concentration, a separate quiet space from which to view the services, ability to join church or bible study online, or anything else that might apply to you or others.)*
13. Are there any areas of the church you or your family member would like to be more involved in or would like to serve in (for example, youth ministry, Bible reading in church, welcoming team, Bible study groups, etc)? Options: Yes/no
14. If yes, which ministry would you or your family member like to be involved in and in what capacity?
15. Are there particular barriers or challenges that are making it harder for you to participate in these ministries?
16. Are there any other ways you feel the church could help serve or support you or your family member with disability, chronic health issues or mental health challenges better?
17. Do you have any suggestions for new ministries or programs that might help to serve the members of our congregation with disability and/or their families better? (e.g., a WhatsApp group to connect people who are not able to physically get to church because of disability/health issues, a support group for carers, etc).

APPENDIX 2

Accessibility appraisal form

The accessibility appraisal form has been designed to help you consider the barriers that can prevent people with disability from enjoying full inclusion and participation in our Diocese. This appraisal is designed to be completed in conjunction with other steps towards inclusion, for example, developing a Parish Inclusion Committee, which will then supervise issues of disability and accessibility in the parish. It is also recommended that parishes consult a professional **access consultant** who can undertake a complete accessibility audit of your parish grounds and buildings

This checklist is not designed to be a detailed, measured review; it is intended to highlight potential access barriers to inclusion and failures to meet the intent of the DDA, current building standards, and community expectations.

The Audit should be completed by a parish warden and/or members of the Parish Inclusion Committee by physically moving through the church grounds and buildings, checking items in order, and measuring the relevant spaces. If the Audit is completed without reviewing each of the areas mentioned, it is possible to misjudge the dimensions' height or width.

GETTING INTO THE CHURCH

EXTERNAL PATHS	Y/N	NOTES
Are there step-free paths of travel from • The street/footpath to the church grounds; • From the carpark and accessible parking spaces to the main entry; • From the main church entry to other buildings on site (e.g., hall, toilets, etc)? <i>Paths of travel must include widths and surfaces in accordance with AS1428.1 Design for Access and Mobility Part General Requirements for Access – New Building Work.</i>		
VERTICAL ACCESS	Y/N	NOTES
Is there step-free access to the main church building? (e.g., ramps or lifts). Ramps greater than 1900mm in length require a maximum gradient of 1:14 and must include handrails on both sides, landings with circulation space that facilitates turning or resting and tactile ground surface indicators (TGSi) top and bottom to provide hazard warning to people who are blind. Ramps, including kerb ramps, threshold ramps and walkways with gradients shallower than 1:20, should include dimensions and gradients that comply with AS1428.1 Design for access and mobility Part General requirements for access – New building work. If steps are provided as alternate paths of travel on the site, do they include handrails on both sides, opaque risers, slip-resistant strips on the tread edges, and tactile ground surface indicators at the top and bottom to meet the BCA and AS1428.1 clause 11 requirements? Note: modification of stairs should be undertaken only if the existing stairs can be fully compliant, including constant riser and tread heights.		

PARKING	Y/N	NOTES
Is there accessible parking? Do accessible space(s) include an adjacent space or shared zone to allow a person to enter and exit the vehicle? Parking space dimensions and shared zones are required to meet AS2890.6 Parking facilities Part 6: Off-street parking for people with disability.		
BUILDING ENTRIES	Y/N	NOTES
Is there a step at the main entry door to the church building? (Entry doors should have a level threshold with a maximum of a 5mm lip allowed at bevelled abutting surfaces).		
Does the entry door include a clear door opening of at least 850mm at the active leaf?		
Is there circulation space on the latch side of the door to allow someone in a wheelchair to reach the door handle independently? Door circulation spaces are detailed in AS1428.1 Design for access and mobility Part: General requirements for access – New building work.		
Are 50% of the entries within 50m of each other accessible?		
Are there signs identifying alternate accessible links and entries?		

INSIDE THE CHURCH

TOILETS	Y/N	NOTES
Is there a step-free path of travel to the toilets?		
Is there a unisex accessible toilet that includes circulation space to allow a person using a wheelchair to enter the room, use the WC pan and basin? Unisex accessible sanitary facilities, including circulation space and fit-out requirements, are detailed in AS1428.1.		
INTERNAL PATHS OF TRAVEL	Y/N	NOTES
Are step-free links provided to a range of spaces within the building, including to any stage or elevated area?		
When inside the church buildings are there step-free paths of travel, with circulation space to manoeuvre into a wheelchair seating space and allow others to pass by?		
Do the allocated spaces for people using wheelchairs have good sight lines to the front of the building, and can the person using the space sit adjacent to other people?		
SEATING	Y/N	NOTES
Where fixed seating is provided, are wheelchair seating spaces provided with circulation space to facilitate access? AS1428.1 details space requirements for wheelchair seating spaces.		
Is there an opportunity for people with ambulant disabilities to access seats that are not on extended paths of travel, and seating includes armrests and backrests? (People who have mobility difficulties or limited strength move on and off chairs more safely and easily if they can use the armrests as leverage.)		

HEARING AUGMENTATION	Y/N	NOTES
Does the fixed PA system link to a hearing augmentation system?		
Are there signs to alert people to the type of system and the area it covers? AS1428.5 Design for access and mobility Part 5: Communications for people who are deaf or hearing impaired, details various systems and requirements.		
FACILITIES FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION	Y/N	NOTES
Does your church have adequate lighting, Braille and tactile signage, etc.?		
EMERGENCY EXITS	Y/N	NOTES
Does your church have adequate emergency exits? To meet the objective of the DDA and AS3745 (2009) Planning for Emergencies in Facilities, all users of the facility are to be provided with a means of egress from the premises to a place of safety. People with disability should be provided with the same level of protection as other premises users.		

ACCESSIBILITY OF COMMUNICATION

PRINTED MATERIALS (e.g., BIBLES, BULLETINS, etc.)	Y/N	NOTES
Are large-print pew Bibles available?		
Are there large print versions of any printed materials (e.g., Bulletins/notices, orders of service, event flyers, etc. [large print must be at least 18-point sans serif fonts])		
DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN SERVICES (e.g., VIDEOS, POWERPOINT, etc.)	Y/N	NOTES
Are all videos used in services captioned (captions assist people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, etc.).		
Are all PowerPoint (or alternatives) slides accessible for people with low vision? (e.g., 36-point sans serif font, max. 6 lines of text per slide, contrasting colours, etc.)		
WEBSITE	Y/N	NOTES
Sermons downloadable for people unable to attend in person (audio, video, transcription)?		
Is accessibility information available on the website (e.g., toilets, parking, entrance, etc.)?		
Website compliant with assistive technology for people with low vision who use screen readers?		
Do all videos on the website and social media have captions?		
Do all images have alt text for people who use screen readers?		
Does the website have images of parking, entrances, inside the sanctuary, etc.?		

APPENDIX 3

Accessible websites

There are two important factors to consider in relation to websites:

- The website itself has accessible features and can be navigated by people with disability who rely on screen-reading technology;
- The website holds information about the accessibility of the parish for the benefit of people with disability, for example, outlining the presence of ramps, accessible toilets, accessible parking, etc.

Accessible websites

An accessible website is one that is compatible with a range of technologies used by people with different kinds of disability, for example, someone with low vision who uses screen-reading technology. To fulfil the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, all websites for community groups and organisations – including churches – must be accessible to users with disabilities. The Human Rights Commission website states that:

‘Web designers should be aware that providing access to the navigational features of web resources is not sufficient to make the resource fully accessible. The way in which web content is presented or published will also affect its accessibility... Accessible web design refers to the philosophy and practice of designing web content so that it can be navigated and read by everyone, regardless of location, experience, or the type of computer technology used.’⁷⁴

In addition, ‘The provision of information and online services through the web is a service covered by the DDA. Equal access for people with a disability in this area is required by the DDA where it can reasonably be provided. This requirement applies to any individual or organisation developing a website or other web resource in Australia, or placing or maintaining a web resource on an Australian server.’⁷⁵

The global standard for website accessibility aims to make web content more accessible for everyone, in particular, ‘older people and people with disability, including blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, limited movement, speech disabilities, photosensitivity, and learning disabilities and cognitive limitations.’⁷⁶

The **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines** (WCAG) are part of a series of web accessibility guidelines published by the Web Accessibility Initiative of the World Wide Web Consortium, the main international standards organisation for the internet. The WCAG have four principles that provide the foundation for web accessibility. Under each principle are guidelines that outline basic goals parishes can work towards to

make their web content more accessible.

The four principles are:

- PERCEIVABLE - Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.

This means that users must be able to perceive the information being presented. It cannot be invisible to all of their senses.

- OPERABLE - User interface components and navigation must be operable.

This means that users must be able to operate the interface (the interface cannot require interaction that a user cannot perform).

- UNDERSTANDABLE - Information and the operation of user interface must be understandable.

This means that users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface. The content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding.

- ROBUST - Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies.

This means that users must be able to access the content as technologies advance (as technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible).⁷⁷

For more detailed information on website accessibility, and the four principles and further guidelines, see the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 \(WCAG\)](#) at Web Accessibility Initiative.⁷⁸

Some general principles to consider when building/modifying/editing a parish website:

- Make sure to avoid features that are known to be inaccessible to people with disability (e.g., scanned text images);
- Make sure to create a sufficient difference between foreground (text) and background colours so text is more easily readable;
- Make sure that text is readable on plain backgrounds. Information laid over mottled backgrounds can be difficult to read;
- Make sure websites can be navigated from the keyboard and not just a mouse;
- Provide Alt-Text (alternative text) for all images on the website to ensure people who rely on screen-reading technology have the same access to information as other users;

Accessibility of church grounds and programs outlined on website

In addition to the website itself being accessible, your parish website is the best way for a parish to communicate the features of your church building, grounds, and services. Images from inside and outside your church can help reduce stress and anxiety for a first-time visitor. Other helpful information might include:

- Pictures of church staff;
- Pictures of the entrance to the church and car park, especially the location of the accessible parking spots;
- Information about public transport;
- Photos of what happens in your services as well as children's and youth programs, Bible studies, and other church events;
- Images of people with diverse abilities and disabilities;
- Social stories for children with disability to help with attending your parish;
- A list of your accessibility features, for example,
 - » Accessible toilets
 - » Accessible parking
 - » Hearing loop
 - » Large print documents and Bibles
 - » Children's and Youth programs which cater for children and youth with disability;
 - » Availability of Auslan interpreting;
 - » Any other important accessibility features.

APPENDIX 4

Accessible documents & PowerPoint presentations

Creating accessible documents

- Background and colour contrast
 - » The best contrast is black or dark ink with solid white or yellow paper.
 - » It is harder to read text written with dark ink on a dark background, such as on red, blue, purple, green, or grey paper, or to read light ink on dark paper.
 - » It is difficult to read text on paper (or on an email) that has objects, pictures, patterns, lines, multicolours, or shading in the text area.
- Text size, style, and layout
 - » The standard definition of large print is 18-point font. Standard-sized print is usually considered 12-point font;
 - » Readability is best with a plain sans serif font, such as Arial, Calibri, or Tahoma. For large print documents, use 18-point font for all text, including body text, footers, page numbers, references, and labels on charts and graphs. Larger fonts may be used for headings.
 - » It is harder to read thin or fancy fonts, or fonts with appearance effects, such as italic, cursive, bold, all caps, underline, block, or shadow, or to read text with many different sizes and styles of fonts.
 - » For large print documents, use a minimum of 1.5 spacing or double-spacing when possible.
 - » Left-justify all paragraphs and do not use columns.⁷⁹

Both PC and Macs have built-in accessibility checkers that can be used for Word documents to ensure optimum accessibility

Creating accessible PowerPoint/Keynote slides

- Background and colour contrast
 - » Text is easiest to read on PowerPoint or Keynote slides when the contrast is a solid dark or black background with plain yellow letters.
 - » It is more difficult to read text on a PowerPoint or Keynote slide if the background contains objects, shading, patterns, pictures, or any movement.

- » Uniformity between screens, that is, using the same colours, layout, background, text size, and style, creates a less distracting presentation.
- Text size, style, and layout
 - » It is easiest to read projected text with only 15 to 20 words per screen with the font as large as possible. The minimum font size in PowerPoint or Keynote should be 36 points.
 - » Readability is best with a plain sans serif font, such as Arial, Calibri, or Tahoma.
 - » It is harder to read thin or fancy fonts, or fonts with appearance effects, such as italic, cursive, bold, all caps, underline, block, or shadow, or to read text with many different sizes and styles of fonts.
 - » For large print documents, use a minimum of 1.5 spacing or double-spacing when possible.
 - » Left-justify all paragraphs and do not use columns.⁸⁰

Both PCs and Macs have built-in accessibility checkers that can be used in PowerPoint or Keynote to ensure optimal accessibility.

If a digital copy of the slides will be made available to church members, it is important to include Alt-Text for all images. It is also important to avoid using text boxes, as they make it difficult for people using screen-reading technology.

Large Print Bibles

Typically, Bibles are printed with very small, thin fonts. When Bible publishers use a larger, thicker font than what is standard, these are referred to as 'large print,' 'extra-large print,' 'giant print,' or even 'super-giant print.' However, there is no standardised method for measuring fonts in Bible production, and not all Bible advertising includes the exact font point size. As a consequence, a Bible can be labelled as 'large print' or 'giant print' and can still be only 11 or 12-point font, which is not considered large print on standard documents. Some 'large print' Bibles are available up to 24-point font size, but these are expensive. It is worth doing some research before investing in any large print copies, including showing a sample to some of your parishioners who might benefit from using one.

APPENDIX 5

Further information on including kids and young people with disability

The experiences and circumstances of families of children with disability vary significantly. While some parents feel it is difficult to entrust their child to the care of others without first providing detailed information about their child's needs, others are wary of sharing this information. Due to a range of factors, some parents might be wary that disclosing their child's diagnosis will prevent their child from being allowed to participate, or they might be worried about exclusion or stigma for themselves or their child.

Gathering information may, therefore, occur in different ways for different families. For some families, being able to download a detailed form from the church's website *before* they arrive at the church for the first time might be comforting and feel that the church is really interested and willing to support their child. Although they will know that it might be challenging to make adjustments on the first day, their willingness to share information on first contact will likely make a follow-up conversation to find out more about the family a straightforward experience.

On the other hand, some families may need to meet the church leaders in person first and see how the church works before being willing to share more personal information about a child's diagnosis. This means it is good to consider a varied approach. On your main children's/youth enrolment form, include a question about diagnoses/ disabilities/ support needs, and ask whether families would be willing to chat further with a staff member so the church can learn more about supporting their child. If they wish, they can then fill in the more detailed form. Or the detailed form can be completed before or during the parent interview meeting.

In either case, ensure you advise the family that this information will only be shared with those in leaderships and those responsible for their child and that they can discuss how much or little is shared with various levels of leadership (e.g., while the children's minister might have access to all the child's diagnostic/support needs, volunteers might only have access to parts of this information that are relevant to the way they will need to support the child). Remember to thank families for taking the time to share and for trusting you with their child's care and their information!

Parent conversation discussion points⁸¹

The following points are a conversation guide. Conversations between the children's/ youth minister/leader and the family are better than simply filling in forms.

- Date of meeting:
- Who is present:

- Personal details – name, age, date of birth, address and contact details during session, parents and siblings, school and year level
- Please tell me a bit more about your child?
- What are some of the things your child likes and what are some of their interests?
- What are some of the things your child is good at?
- What activities does your child enjoy?
- What are some of the things your child doesn't like?
- What are some of the things your child finds frustrating or challenging?
- Are there any accommodations we can make in our programs that would make it easier for your child to participate?
- If your child became upset in the program, what could we do to help calm them? At what point would you like us to call for you?
- Are there particular parts of the service/program that we need to think about and consider appropriate supports? *E.g., the beginning of church before the children's program starts, transitions in programs, worship, games, after the service, etc.*
- If any challenges arise during the program, what is the best way to communicate this with you? Immediately after the service? A phone call during the week? Etc.
- What information are you happy for us to share about your child's needs/ supports with the leaders/volunteers in our program?
- What information are you happy for us to share about your child's needs/ supports with other children in the program?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Supplementary Information Form for children with disability/neurodivergence/additional needs

To set the right tone and allay any concerns, it is helpful to provide an opening statement on the form that includes something like the following:

*Our church cares for every child in our care. The questions on this intake form are asked for your child's benefit so we may provide the best experience and safest environment for your child and all those at **[name of church]**. Our church leaders and ministry volunteers will respect your family's right to privacy. These forms will only be viewed by the ministry team/family minister **[edit this list to include the appropriate team members]**, and only relevant information will be shared with leaders caring directly for your child on a 'need to know' basis. If you have any questions, please contact **[Insert Name]** for more information.*

Sample questions are provided below.

Preliminary Information

- Date form completed
- Name of child/youth
- Preferred name (nickname)
- Child's date of birth
- Current grade at school
- Current schooling: *(allow selection between daycare, preschool, infants, primary, high school, home school, other)*

Family information

- Address
- Parents' names
- Parents' address if different to child's
- Parents' email addresses and mobile numbers
- Who does the child live with (parents, grandparents, siblings etc)? What are the ages of the siblings?
- Alternative emergency contact person and their contact information

Please introduce us to your child!

Allow plenty of space for people to answer these questions!

- What would you like us to know about your child?

- Please tell us about some of the things your child likes
- Please tell us about some of the things your child is good at
- Please tell us about some of the things your child doesn't like
- Please tell us some of the things your child finds challenging, frustrating or upsetting

Medical Information

General

- Does your child have any disabilities, medical conditions, or diagnoses?
Options: Yes/No
- If yes, please outline them and provide some information about how they impact your child.
- Please let us know about any medications we might need to know about, especially those we might need to administer in the case of an emergency
- Please tell us the name, purpose and dose/administration of the medications

Allergies

- Does your child have any allergies? Options: Yes/no
- If yes, tell us what your child is allergic to
- What are the symptoms if your child experiences an allergic reaction?
- Do they require antihistamine in the case of a reaction? Options: Yes/no
- Do they require an EpiPen in the case of a reaction? Options: Yes/no
- Do you bring either antihistamine and/or an EpiPen to church? Options: Yes, antihistamine, yes EpiPen, yes both, no neither.

Seizures

- Is your child prone to seizures? Yes/no
- If yes, please tell us how the seizure presents.
- If yes, tell us what triggers the seizures (f known) and how can we prevent/respond if it occurs at church

Physical needs

- Does your child need support with physical needs (e.g., mobility, cutting, games, etc)
- If assistance is needed, how can we best do that?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about their physical needs?

Communication needs

- What are your child's primary ways of communicating?
- Does your child use any kind of augmentative or alternative communication (AAC) (e.g., communication boards, picture cards, tablet device with communication apps, etc)?
- Does your child require any assistance with communication (e.g., understanding instructions, following instructions, writing, etc)?
- What are the signs your child might be beginning to get upset or agitated?
- What things can we say or do to help your child if we see these signs?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about their communication needs?

Sensory needs

- Please tell us about some of the sensory things your child enjoys
- Please tell us about some of the sensory things your child does not enjoy
- Does your child enjoy music? Yes/no/sometimes
- Is there anything that helps your child manage noisy or busy environments such as the beginning of the service before children leave for their programs, worship time in the children's program etc (e.g., noise-cancelling headphones, etc)?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your child's sensory needs?

Toileting

- Does your child need assistance with toileting? No help needed/requires reminders to go to the bathroom/requires assistance in the bathroom
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about their toileting needs?

Ministry Inclusion Plan

Inclusion proceeds by meeting the needs of one child at a time. How is *this* child going to be included?

Use the information gathered during the meeting with the parents/family/carers of a child/young person with a disability to create a Ministry Inclusion Plan. Depending on your church's capacity, a Ministry Inclusion Plan could be as simple as a few sentences:

Thomas' goals

Staying in the kids' church program for the whole program

Participating in class discussions by raising his hand

Completing activity sheets with assistance

Sharing a prayer request when he would like to

And some more practical information

Thomas has a buddy with him for each lesson who uses a buddy bag with fidgets, a visual schedule and he can take a break when he needs to by letting his buddy know.

Areas to consider:

- How will the parish (and/or individual programs) provide support for the child/young person's physical and access needs? Are there any barriers in place currently preventing this child/young person from participating? What can be done to overcome these barriers?
- What training might the parish need to provide to leaders in order to support this child? Is it possible to run a leader's training session on understanding disability?
- How might the parish go about recruiting buddies?
- How can we help the children/young people in programs understand disability and difference in general, and this child/young person's needs in particular?
- How will the leaders/volunteers be informed/trained about responding to the needs of the child/young person?
- How will the parish notify parents if they are needed during the children's/youth program?

A suggested format for a more detailed Ministry Inclusion Plan, along with an example, is included on the following pages.

Ministry Inclusion Plan Template

Participant's Name:

Date:

Disabilities/health conditions/support needs/allergies, etc:

Medications:

This plan outlines strategies to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for **[Child's Name]** within the church community at **[Name of church]**, ensuring meaningful participation in worship, learning, and fellowship.

1. Goals for inclusion & belonging

1. Ensure **[Child's Name]** feels loved, valued, and accepted within the church family.
2. Promote engagement in age-appropriate spiritual and social activities. This includes participation in **[name of program/s]**.
3. Provide accommodations to remove barriers to participation.
4. **[Name any other particular inclusion goals, e.g., "support [child/young person] to be able to stay in kids' program for the duration of the service"]**

2. Team Roles & Responsibilities

Parent/Guardian:

- Continue to share insights on the child's preferences, triggers, and effective strategies.
- Collaborate with church staff and volunteers regularly.

[Children's/Family Minister/Church Inclusion Coordinator/Other]:

- Develop and oversee the implementation of the inclusion plan.
- Train staff and volunteers on disability awareness and accommodations.

Ministry Leaders/Volunteers:

- Apply strategies outlined in the inclusion plan during activities.
- Monitor the child's engagement and comfort, adjusting as needed.

3. Key Supports, Accommodations and Strategies

Main church service:

- List accommodations:
- [e.g., Reserved seating close to exits for sensory breaks or mobility needs; Provide noise-cancelling headphones or sensory tools; Create a quiet space

with visual aids to help the child follow the service, etc.].

Children's Ministry/Youth Ministry

- List accommodations:
- [e.g., Offer a buddy system where a trained peer or adult accompanies the child. Liaise with family about who will undertake this role, what training is required and how/when that will be done, create a quiet space for when it is required].

Outside official service times (e.g., during morning tea/lunch) – if required

- List accommodations:
- [e.g., continue to make quiet space available].

Other programs (e.g., after-school kids' club, evening youth group, etc) – if required

- List of accommodations:
- [e.g., Reserved seating close to exits for sensory breaks or mobility needs; Provide noise-cancelling headphones or sensory tools].

4. Communication Plan

Ensure you have clarity about the best way for communication to take place between the family and ministry leaders.

- **Pre-Service Communication:** Parents inform the ministry team of particular concerns for the week (if required).
- **Post-Service Check-In:** Volunteers provide feedback to parents about child/young person's experience.
- **Parent support during a service/program:** If the child/young person becomes distressed and a parent is required, the parent should be reached by [sending a leader to collect them from the service/sending a text/calling/other].
- **Concerns:** If any concerns arise, the best way to communicate this would be via [phone/email/other – select] and this communication will take place between [parent/carer's name] and [name of staff member].

5. Training and Awareness

- Conduct regular disability awareness sessions for staff and volunteers, e.g., the foundations of a biblical response to disability as well as practical techniques for supporting inclusion of children/young people with disability in church.
- Equip the team with de-escalation techniques and tools for supporting children in distress and/or other training as required.

6. Emergency Protocols

- Assign a specific volunteer to support the child during emergencies (e.g., fire drills).
- 18. Ensure emergency exits and pathways are accessible.
- 19. Have a plan for medical emergencies, including contact details for parents and carers.

7. Evaluation and Feedback

- Collect feedback from child/young person, parents, volunteers, and ministry leaders to assess the plan's effectiveness.
- Celebrate successes and make adjustments to address challenges.

8. Signatures

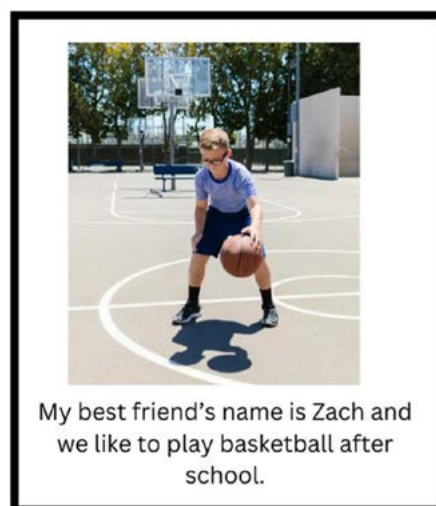
Provide a place for parents and the children's/youth minister to sign once everyone agrees to the plan.

‘This is Me’ Book

A ‘This is Me’ Book is designed as a simple booklet of photos and information about a child or young person with a disability, including their likes and interests, to help spark conversation. This can be a great way for a child or young person with a disability to start a conversation with others, and vice versa. For children and young people who are non-speaking, have limited verbal communication skills, or find social interactions challenging, the book also offers an easy way into communication. This is best done with the support and assistance of the family of a child or young person with disability.

Information that could be included:

- The child or young person’s name, age, parents, siblings, pets;
- Where the child or young person attends school;
- Abilities, interests, favourite activities, for example, TV shows, sports, songs, etc.;
- Age-appropriate information about the disability, its impact, and equipment;
- What the child or young person is learning at school;
- Simple ways to support the child or young person at church.



Resources for Children's/Youth Ministry

Visual Timetables

A visual timetable outlines the sequence of events in a program. They can be used to serve a large group or individualised to suit the needs of individual members. Visual timetables help children and young people know what is happening and in what order, as well as helping them understand what is expected of them at a particular time.

Visual timetables work well when placed on Velcro. Once each activity is finished, the item can be removed from the timetable and placed into a finished box or bag as a visual demonstration that the task is now complete.



You can make your own visuals (such as the samples below), or there are many examples available for free and for sale online.

Downloadable items for church-based visual timetables:

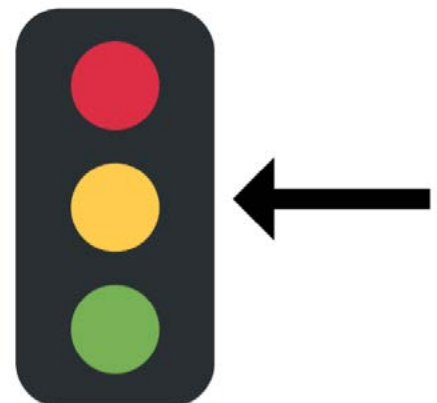
[ASD in Church](#)

[Simply the Gospel](#)

[Special Needs Ministry Resources](#)

Talking Traffic Lights

Rather than having to remind children when it is listening time and when it is quiet talking time, a large set of traffic lights can be printed out with an arrow to point to the right colour – red = teacher talking only, yellow = quiet talking, green = it's ok to talk out loud.



Visual Timer

Time is very difficult to measure for many people, especially if you don't have a watch or a phone! Telling children and youth that you will stop an activity in 5 minutes is meaningless unless there is a clear way for them to measure what that 5 minutes looks like. There are many ways to visually represent the passage of time to help children and youth prepare for program transitions. For example, a visual timer app or website that can be projected on a screen as a countdown timer.



Online versions can be found by searching “visual timer”, or you can purchase a device called a “Time Timer” which has a coloured section that gets smaller as the time passes, making it clearer for children and youth to see when that section of the program will be coming to an end (see picture right). “Time Timers” can be found online and in many educational stores.

Social Stories

Social stories explain social settings and can be used for both children and adults to help build familiarity and reduce stress, especially when attending something or somewhere new. There are many examples of “going to church” social stories available online. The best ones, however, use photos of real people and places that visitors will see when they come to your parish. It is helpful to make these downloadable so people can print them for use in preparing to come to church.

For a guide on how to write a social story, see this information sheet from the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center in the USA, “[How to write a social story.](#)”

Many websites have free or relatively inexpensive templates for creating social stories for churches. Some examples can be found below:

- [Simply the Gospel](#)
- [Special Needs Ministry Resources](#)

Quiet Zones

Children’s and youth programs can be noisy and crowded spaces! This can be overwhelming for any child, but particularly so for children with sensory issues or anxiety. Creating a breakout or quiet zone gives children and youth a place to calm down and regulate their emotions before rejoining the group. The following is an extract from *Every Child Welcome*:

How to Create a Quiet Zone

By thinking creatively and proactively, quiet zones can be incorporated into most children’s ministry activities.

- A corner of a classroom can be fitted out with a portable screen to reduce visual clutter, a bean bag chair, some stress balls, and other soothing items.
- If space allows, a small classroom can be designated as the quiet zone. It can be available during noisy youth group gatherings or during Sunday morning contemporary worship services.
- For outdoor excursions, designate a particular place – perhaps a picnic table, a visible area a short distance from the main action...as the break zone. Stock a backpack with some of the more portable items and place it in the quiet zone.⁸²

Resource List

A helpful introduction to Disability

- Emily Ladau. *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally*. Emeryville: Ten Speed Press, 2021.

Books on Disability, the Bible, and the Church

General

- Michael S. Beates. *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace*. Crossway, 2012.
- Brian Brock. *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body*. Baker, 2021.
- Erik W. Carter. *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, & Congregations*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2007.
- Lamar Hardwick. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*. IVP, 2021.
- Stephanie Hubach. *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability. Revised and Expanded Edition*. P&R Publishing, 2020.
- Sandra Peoples. *Accessible Church: A Gospel-Centred Vision for Including People with Disabilities*. Crossway, 2025.
- Amos Yong. *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*. Eerdmans, 2011.

Theological Approaches to Disability

- Brian Brock. *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*. Baylor University Press, 2019.
- Brian Brock and John Swinton. *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*. Eerdmans, 2012.
- Amy Jacober. *Redefining Perfect: The Interplay between Theology and*

Disability. Cascade Books, 2017.

- Sarah Melcher, Mikael C. Parsons, and Amos Yong. *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*. SCM Press, 2017.
- John Swinton. *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship*. Baylor University Press, 2016.

Disability and Children's and Youth Ministry

- Amy Fenton Lee. *Leading a Special Needs Ministry: A Practical Guide to Including Children and Loving Families*. B&H Publishing, 2013.
- Barbara J. Newman. *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities. Revised Edition*. Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2012.
- Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo. *Every Child Welcome: A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs*. Kregel, 2015.

Autism, Neurodiversity, and the Church

- Daniel Bowman Jr. *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*. Brazos Press, 2021.
- Grant Macaskill. *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*. Baylor University Press, 2019.
- Barbara J. Newman. *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2011.
- Stewart Rapley. *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church*. SCM Press, 2021.
- Armand Léon van Ommen. *Autism and Worship: A Liturgical Theology*. Baylor University Press, 2023.
- Claire Williams. *Peculiar Discipleship: An Autistic Liberation Theology*. SCM Press, 2023.

Mental Health and Mental Ill-Health

- Stephen Grcevich. *Mental Health and the Church: A Ministry Handbook for Including Children and Adults with ADHD, Anxiety, Mood Disorders, and Other Common Mental Health Conditions*. Zondervan, 2018.
- Amy Simpson. *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission*. IVP, 2013.
- Matthew S. Stanford. *Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness. 2nd edition*. IVP, 2017
- John Swinton. *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges*. Eerdmans, 2020.

Online Resources

General Disability

139 Collective – Christian Parents of Children with a Disability

<https://www.the139collective.com.au/>

Ability Ministry

<https://abilityministry.com>

All Belong – Center for Inclusive Education

<https://allbelong.org/>

CBM – Luke 14

<https://www.cbm.org.au/luke14>

Collaborative on Faith and Disabilities

<https://faithanddisability.org/>

Engaging Disability

<https://engagingdisability.org/>

Hope Christian Homes – Creating Christian communities for people with disability

<https://www.hopechristianhomes.org.au/>

Joni and Friends

<https://joniandfriends.org/>

Key Ministry

<https://www.keyministry.org/>

Our Place Christian Communities

<https://ourplacecc.org.au/>

Autism

Autism Society of North Carolina. “Autism and Faith Communities: Welcoming and Supporting Faith Communities.”

https://www.autismsociety-nc.org/wp-content/uploads/Faith-Toolkit_FIN.pdf

Centre for Autism and Theology

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/dhpa/research/centres/centre-for-autism-and-theology/>

Diocese of Oxford. “Welcoming and Including Autistic People in our Churches and Communities”

<https://d3hgrrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/61f2fd86f0ee5/content/pages/documents/20211006-doc-mission-ministry-welcoming-autism-church-guidelines-v01.pdf>

Some additional online resources

- Two free online resources are also particularly helpful:
 - » Anglican Diocese of Truro, UK: “[Welcoming and Including Autistic People in our Churches and Communities](#).”
 - » Autism Society of North Carolina, “[Autism and Faith Communities: Welcoming and Supporting Faith Communities](#).”

Blindness/Vision Impairment

Torch Trust. “Sight Loss Friendly Church: Best Practice Guidelines.”

<https://torchtrust.org/sight-loss-friendly-church/>

Deafness/Hard of Hearing

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) Bible

<https://auslan.bible/>

Auslan Bible Videos + Deaf Bible Studies

<https://www.youtube.com/user/DarrenKirkegard>

Intellectual Disability

With Ministries

<https://withministries.org/>

Mental Health & Ill-Health

The Mental Health and Pastoral Care Institute

<https://mentalhealthinstitute.org.au/>

American Psychiatric Association.

“[Mental Health: A Guide for Faith Leaders](#)”

General online resources on disability

ACT Government

This website includes lots of helpful information about accessible transport and inclusive activities, children and young people with disability, and more.

<https://www.act.gov.au/community/people-with-disability>

Australian Network on Disability -

<https://australiandisabilitynetwork.org.au/>

Australia's National Disability Strategy -

<https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/australias-disability-strategy?language=en>

People with Disability Australia -

<https://pwd.org.au/>

United Nations – Conventions on the Rights of People with Disability -

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-%20persons-with-disabilities.html>

World Health Organization on Disability –

https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1

Autism

Aspect - <https://www.aspect.org.au/>

Amaze - <https://www.amaze.org.au/>

Australia's National Autism Strategy -

<https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/national-autism-strategy?language=en>

Blindness/Vision Impairment

Blind Citizens Australia - <https://www.bca.org.au/>

Vision Australia - <https://www.visionaustralia.org/>

Deafness/Hard of Hearing

Deaf Connect - <https://deafconnect.org.au/>

Deaf Australia - <https://deafaustralia.org.au/>

Resources for learning Auslan (Australian Sign Language)

Deaf Connect - <https://deafconnect.org.au/>

Auslan Signbank - <https://auslan.org.au/dictionary/>

To book an Auslan (Australian Sign Language) Interpreter for a church service or event: Auslan Services - <https://auslanservices.com/>

Mental Health and Mental Illness

Beyond Blue - <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

Black Dog Institute - <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/>

Resources for Accessibility Audits

Association of Consultants in Access Australia - <https://access.asn.au/>

Resources for Installation of Hearing Loops

Hearing Loop Australia - <https://hearingloop.com.au/>

Resources on the Disability Discrimination Act and the Building Code of Australia

Australian Human Rights Commission: Disability Discrimination Act 1992
<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/brief-guide-disability-discrimination-act>

Australian Human Rights Commission: Building Regulation and Equitable Access Australia
<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/building-regulation-and-equitable-access-australian-view>

Resources from the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability

<https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications>

Resources on document accessibility

PowerPoint Slides

Microsoft – “[Make Your PowerPoint Presentations Accessible to People with Disabilities](#)”

Word documents

Microsoft – “[Make Your Word Documents Accessible to People with Disabilities](#)”

Apple Mac Documents and Accessibility

Apple - “[Create accessible documents, spreadsheets, or presentations with Pages, Numbers, or Keynote](#)”

Resources on Website Accessibility

Human Rights Commission Advisory Notes on Website Accessibility

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/world-wide-web-access-disability-discrimination-act-advisory-notes-ver>

World Wide Web Consortium Guidelines on Web Accessibility

<https://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>

Endnotes

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- 3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, "People with Disability in Australia" (Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019), 2.
- 4 Australian Government, "Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia." National Disability Strategy Consultation report prepared by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009.
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- 6 Michael Bird, "The Imago Dei and Human Disability." *Patheos* September 13, 2018.
- 7 Australian Disability Network, "Disability Statistics."
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- 9 World Health Organization, "Disability."
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- 11 Sev Ozdowski, "Disability Discrimination Developments." Australian Human Rights Commission, 2004.
- 12 Anglican Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn, "Diocesan Induction Booklet," 2023, 14.
- 13 Marla Hale, "The Gospel for Every Person: Including Those with Disabilities," *Lausanne Movement*, 5th December 2025.
- 14 The following indicators have been developed from E. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2007), 28–29.
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- 16 Australian Government, "[Shut Out](#)," 52.
- 17 P. Johnson, *The Church and People with Disabilities: Awareness, Accessibility, and Advocacy* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2014 [Kindle Edition]), Loc. 185.
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- 21 Taylor et al, *Welcoming People with Developmental Disabilities and their Families*, 4, 17.
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- 23 L. Gosbell, "[For families living with disability, churches mustn't go 'back to normal' after COVID-19.](#)" ABC Religion and Ethics December 2020.
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- 26 People with Disability Australia, "What Do I Say?" 17–21.
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- 28 Access Economics, *Listen! Hear! The Economic Impact and Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia: A Report* (East Melbourne: Vicdeaf 2006), 5.
- 29 Access Economics, "Listen! Hear!
- 30 Deaf Australia "[Terminology Policy](#)" as cited in "Getting it Right: Roadmap to 2025," 3.
- 31 E. A. Hewitt, "[What You're Saying when you say 'I Don't Need a Mic!'](#)" Unitarian Universalist Association, 31 August 2017.
- 32 AIHW, "[Eye health](#)," Canberra: AIHW, 2019.
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- 41 Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, "Including Adults with Disabilities in Religious Life and Education," 12.

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