

Making God More Accessible

By [MARK I. PINSKY](#)

The television commercials were disturbing: Traditional-looking churches barring or physically ejecting racial and ethnic minorities, gay couples—and people with disabilities. One tag line was "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." The national campaign, which aired several years ago, was sponsored by the liberal United Church of Christ. "We included people with physical disabilities in these commercials—in a wheelchair or with a walker—as an extension of the call and hope that churches would be intentionally inclusive of 'all the people,'" said the Rev. Gregg Brekke, a spokesman for the denomination.

Instead, the imagery provoked grumbling from some denominations because of its implied critique of other church traditions. But at least when it came to the physically handicapped, the criticism had more than a grain of truth. Churches, synagogues, mosques and temples are places where people with disabilities might not expect to feel excluded, isolated or patronized. Yet that has often been the norm. For years congregations have effectively excluded the disabled from worship—by steps, narrow doorways and straitened attitudes—or segregated them in "special" services. Houses of worship (except those with more than 15 employees) were excluded from the 1992 Americans with Disabilities Act, which, among other things, bars discrimination against people with physical or intellectual disabilities—including access and architectural barriers—in public accommodations and transportation.

Most faiths' scriptures mandate corrective steps, and pragmatism may soon require them. The U.S. Census in 2000 counted 54 million disabled individuals—one in six Americans—and that number is probably growing. Wounded Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans are swelling this population. Thanks to neonatal care and technology advances, at-risk infants with severe disabilities now survive into adulthood. Most significantly, the boomer generation is aging and getting ill. Many of them may develop disabilities but still want to pray at houses of worship.

There are challenges to accessibility and inclusion, even for people with the best intentions. The elderly and people with disabilities provide uncomfortable reminders of life's fragility and of death. Those with mental disabilities can distract during solemn moments. Religious people generally want to be sincere, welcoming and open, but, like everyone else, they often lack the experience to respond the right way.

And, to be sure, money is an issue, especially for smaller, cash-strapped congregations. "When it comes to spending for architectural accessibility, there is sometimes reluctance on the part of finance committees," said Rabbi Lynne F. Landsberg, senior adviser on disability issues at the Washington-based Religious Action Center, the social-justice organization of Reform Judaism. In addition to shouldering the burdens of poverty if they are no longer able to work—and the high cost of medication, treatment and rehabilitation—would-be worshippers "may feel socially stigmatized by their inability to provide financial support for their congregations," according to the rabbi, who suffered traumatic brain injury in a car crash. As a result of their shame, they may not come to services even when they are accessible.

But there are also some potential benefits for congregations that are willing to make the investment in architecture and attitude in order to become more welcoming. Mainline congregations with declining memberships, for example, would have much to gain. More families with a disabled member would attend religious services, experts say, if congregations would make efforts to open their buildings and programs. Older people tend to attend services in greater numbers than the young.

The good news is that some churches, synagogues, mosques and temples are already getting ready

for the coming influx of the disabled, tapping technology and simple thoughtfulness to reach out in creative ways to this faith-hungry community:

At Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Norfolk, Va., priest Joe Metzger instructs an 11-year-old autistic girl in an empty sanctuary, while wearing vestments, so she'll feel at ease making her First Communion.

At Bet Shalom Congregation in Minnetonka, Minn., no sanctuary steps lead to the pulpit; congregants approach it using a long ramp, symbolizing that all people come to the Torah equally.

At St. John's Episcopal Church, in Charlotte, N.C., and St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exton, Pa., adult members with Down Syndrome serve as altar servers, "greeters" and Sunday morning ushers.

As these examples suggest, it takes more than just automatic door openers, large-print Bibles and improved signage to make a congregation disability-friendly. In recent years—sometimes under pressure—numerous Christian and Jewish denominations have also established national outreach networks to make their congregations accessible. Through groups like Joni Eareckson's Joni and Friends Disability Center, evangelical megachurches have become increasingly involved in this effort.

"Of all the barriers to full participation and inclusion, the barrier of unexamined attitudes is the most difficult to address," said Ginny Thornburgh, director of the American Association of People with Disabilities' Interfaith Initiative. Its goal, she says, is "to bring the powerful and prophetic voice of the faith community to the 21st-century disability agenda," and to involve all religious communities. "There are no barriers to God's love," Ms. Thornburgh says. "There should be no barriers in God's house."

—Mr. Pinsky, a longtime religion writer, is at work on a book about congregations that welcome people with disabilities, to be published in 2010 by the Alban Institute.

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