
DISABILITY AWARENESS SUNDAY - SUNDAY 30 AUGUST 2026

ACCESS TO FAITH COMMUNITIES: FROM PRESENCE TO BELONGING



Disability Awareness Sunday provides faith communities with an opportunity to reflect on the dignity, participation, inclusion and belonging of persons with disabilities.

It should be about much more than setting aside one Sunday to pray for persons with disabilities. It is an opportunity for churches and other faith communities to ask a more challenging question:

Can persons who have impairments participate equally and meaningfully in the life of our faith community? This provides South African faith communities with an excellent opportunity to consider what genuine disability inclusion means.

More than access to a building

For many years, accessibility has been associated primarily with physical access: ramps, accessible entrances, parking spaces and accessible toilets. These are essential, but they are only part of accessibility. A person can enter a church building, sit with the congregation and still be excluded from almost everything happening around them. This is particularly relevant to persons who have sensory, communication, intellectual, neurological and psychosocial impairments, as many of the barriers they experience are not immediately visible. True access means being able to receive information, communicate, participate, contribute, worship and belong.

The invisible barrier of hearing loss

Persons who have hearing loss provide a powerful example. A person may walk through the church door without difficulty. They may sit in a pew like everyone else. To everybody around them, they appear to be fully included. But...

- **Can they understand the sermon?**
- **Can they follow the prayers?**
- **Can they hear announcements?**
- **Can they understand the words of songs?**
- **Can they participate in Bible study or small-group discussions?**
- **Can they communicate during fellowship after the service?**

If the answer is no, physical presence has not resulted in meaningful participation. Being in the room is not the same as belonging. Hearing aids and cochlear implants do not remove every barrier:

Hearing aids and cochlear implants can provide enormous benefit, but they do not necessarily restore typical hearing. Background noise, distance from the speaker, reverberation, poor acoustics and multiple people speaking can make communication extremely difficult.

Churches are often particularly challenging listening environments because they may have large halls, hard surfaces, high ceilings, music and considerable reverberation. For someone who depends on listening and speechreading, a speaker who turns away, covers their face, walks around while speaking or stands in poor lighting can create another communication barrier. This is why accessibility must consider the individual and the environment, rather than assuming that one solution will work for everybody.

Reasonable accommodation matters

Universal accessibility is important, but it does not remove the need for reasonable accommodation. Different persons who have hearing loss may require different forms of communication access. Depending on individual needs and circumstances, these could include captioning, good lighting, appropriate seating, good-quality sound systems, hearing loop systems, assistive listening technology, written information, reduced background noise and ensuring that speakers' faces are visible.

The important principle is simple

Ask the person what accommodation they require. Inclusion should not be based on assumptions.

Disability is about barriers. The social model of disability helps faith communities understand the difference between impairment and disability. A person may have an impairment, but disability is created or intensified when environmental, communication and attitudinal barriers prevent that person from participating equally.

This changes the question. Instead of asking: "What is wrong with this person?", we should be asking: "What barriers are preventing this person from participating, and what can we do to remove them?"

That is a profoundly different approach to disability.

Disability Awareness Sunday should also challenge the traditional idea that persons with disabilities are primarily recipients of care, charity or prayer. Persons with disabilities are members of faith communities. They are parents, grandparents, children, professionals, workers, teachers, artists,

leaders and people of faith. They have experiences, gifts, knowledge and talents to contribute. The question is therefore not simply how faith communities can help persons with disabilities.

Also, what is our faith community losing when barriers prevent persons with disabilities from contributing their gifts?

“One body, many parts”

A body cannot function as it should when some of its parts are excluded. In the same way, a faith community cannot claim full inclusion while some members remain on the margins because communication, environmental or attitudinal barriers prevent their participation. Inclusion means recognising that people participate differently and may require different forms of support and accommodation.

Equality does not always mean treating everybody exactly the same. Sometimes equality requires doing things differently so that everyone has an equitable opportunity to participate.

From awareness to action

Disability Awareness Sunday should therefore not end when the Sunday service ends. It can become the beginning of a conversation. Faith communities can undertake accessibility assessments, consult persons with disabilities, identify communication and environmental barriers, provide disability sensitisation programmes, establish reasonable accommodation procedures and include persons with disabilities in planning and decision-making.

Most importantly, faith communities should listen to persons with disabilities themselves. For persons who have hearing loss, meaningful access may be as simple as finally being able to understand a sermon, participate in a discussion, follow a prayer or have a conversation after the service without constantly pretending to understand.

Disability Awareness Sunday gives us an opportunity to move the conversation beyond ramps and entrances and towards something much deeper:

- **Can everyone participate?**
- **Can everyone communicate?**
- **Can everyone contribute?**
- **Can everyone belong?**

Access to a building is not necessarily access to a community. True inclusion begins when presence becomes participation — and participation becomes belonging.

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