

Mission in Context Final Paper

~ Why Accessibility Is More Than Just A Ramp ~

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Mission comes from the Latin *missio* which means “to send”, and it is for this reason that when one hears the word “mission” they primarily think of a person or persons who are sent out to a foreign land, or at the very least outside the church building to do God’s work, and bring others into the Church. This primary connection of mission as “sending”, while true, is not the only way in which we must understand mission. Mission is also defined as “A special assignment given to a person or group” and “An inner calling to pursue an activity or perform a service”. For this reason mission must be thought of not only as what is done beyond the church walls, but also what is done within the church building itself, a sort of “internal mission” which in turn enables the Church to better proclaim God’s message both inside and outside of the physical Church building. This “internal mission” focuses on ways in which churches might be more readily accessible to its current congregants, but also is a means of church growth by way of bringing in those who are currently unable to access the church building/service for any variety of reasons. The focus of this paper is therefore to help define and provide solutions for increased accessibility in our churches, as a means of “internal mission” for current congregants, as well as “immediate mission” to the community in which the church is located. Accessibility – is more than having a ramp. We as Christians have a moral and Christian responsibility to understand that a critical part of “mission” is to welcome into our Body of Christ all people, regardless of physical or mental abilities or perceived “disabilities”¹.

¹ Disability - Often associated with specific medical conditions or difficulties performing tasks of everyday living. Under the ADA, an individual with a disability is a person who: 1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, 2) has a record of such an impairment, or 3) is regarded as having such an impairment <http://assistivetech.net/about/glossary.php>

As the Canadian population ages, the average age of Canadians increases as well, this statistical fact is clearly reflected in our workplaces and most especially in our congregations; a brief glance at a typical congregation on a given Sunday who undoubtedly confirm this to be true. The Canada Census of 2006 reported that the population of Canadians over sixty-five was 13.7%, with a record high 3.7 million who were between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five. At the same time as the aging population is reaching record highs the population of those under age fifteen was at an all time low of only 17.7%.² This shift in demographic must be addressed not only in secular society as a whole, but most importantly within the Church. The Church is called to reach out to those in need, to the marginalized, and to make the Gospel message accessible to all people – increased accessibility in our churches answers this call – and provides a place where all are welcomed and accepted as cherished children of God.

What does it mean to be fully accessible? This is the primary question that must be addressed, especially since it has been proven to be misunderstood by many people. The perfect example of this misunderstanding is the reoccurring statement heard in both secular and church life: “we are fully accessible, we have a ramp and accessible bathrooms”. Accessibility is *more* than just providing a ramp or lift which offers physical access into a church, further to this it is more than having accessible washroom facilities – although it must be stressed that these are important aspect of an accessible church. Accessibility also means providing an environment which is accessible to those who are oral hard of hearing (meaning they primarily rely on hearing and speechreading³ to communicate, though they may also use Sign Language⁴ or Cueing⁵), those

² <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census/index.cfm>

³ Speechreading, also known as lipreading is a method of understanding speech via the mouthshapes of the speaker. Approximately 30% of speech is able to be seen on the lips, as such, speechreading involves utilising the context of words in order to understand what is being said. An example of this is “what’s that big loud noise” looks identical to

who are ‘low vision’/blind (who require large print, Moon print⁶ or Braille⁷ – not only for texts but also in the signage around the church such as washrooms), and those who have cognitive delays (Down’s Syndrome, Autism, Asperger’s⁸, etc. who may benefit from alternative simplified texts, and individualised bible study , baptism and confirmation programming, and pictorials for washrooms, classrooms etc). It should be the goal and mission of parishes to become as fully accessible to all people, and to “check in” with parishioners on a regular (annual or semi-annual) basis via either meetings or conducting surveys⁹ which are given to each parishioner and can be filled out and returned anonymously after which, the results would be reviewed by a group such as the parish Worship Committee.

“what’s that pig outdoors” and “elephant shoe” looks identical to “I love you”. Speechreading is further compromised by moustaches, beards, chewing of gum, and anything that even partial obscures the mouth.

⁴ American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language of Deaf, and many hard of hearing people in The United States, parts of Mexico, and most of Canada. ASL is not a form of English was recognized as a language in Canada first in December 6th 1988 in Manitoba. Other provinces followed suit in short order.

⁵ Cued Speech was invented in 1966 by R. Orin Cornett, Ph.D. Cueing is a manual code for spoken words which using 8 handshapes in various places near or on the face in order to support speechreading. Cued Speech is a “visual coding” of a Spoken Language, this is in contrast to Sign Languages which is its own distinct language,

⁶ The Moon system of embossed reading was invented by Dr William Moon in 1845. Many people know about the Braille system of reading by touch; fewer have heard of Moon. Moon is a simpler method based upon the standard alphabet. This is made up of 14 characters used at various angles, each with a clear bold outline. For many elderly blind people especially, Moon is easier to learn than Braille. However, Moon is increasingly difficult to find so many people gain confidence from learning Moon to move onto Braille.

http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/PublicWebsite/public_moon.hcsp

⁷ Braille is a system in which visual letters, number, and various other symbols including music are translated into a series of raised dots called a cell. Each cell is made up of a series of 6 dot locations (sometimes 8) which make up a letter (or in grade 2 Braille and higher an abbreviation for a word). The most common form of Braille is Grade 2, which utilises abbreviations for some words, unlike Grade 1 Braille in which each letter is written out individually.

⁸ Asperger's Disorder is a milder variant of Autistic Disorder. Both Autism and Asperger’s falls under the category of Autism spectrum disorder, or PDD.

⁹ A sample survey based heavily on a survey created for the Diocese of New York has been attached as an addendum to this paper with hopes that it might inspire congregations to utilise a like survey as a starting point in addressing their own accessibility needs.

Types of Accessibility

Physical Accessibility

There are three main types of accessibility, these are: Physical, Sensory, and Cognitive. Physical accessibility is by far the first thing people think when they consider if a location is accessible. Most parishes, though not all, have managed to find a way to improve physical access by means of a ramp, or a lift. By far ramps or “elevator style” lifts (aka platform or “non-transfer” lifts) are favourable over a “chair style” lift, since chair lifts rely on the person being able to transfer from their wheelchair to the lift and then back again. This may not pose a huge issue for manual chair users, or those using various supportive walking aids such as canes and walkers, however for powerchair users (especially those who may carry a Ventilator¹⁰, Suction machine, Cough Assist¹¹) a chair-style lift will not prove enough to create a barrier free environment. In addition to a ramp or lift which provides access to the Nave, designated seating for wheelchairs allows for wheelchair users to sit within to congregation instead of “sitting on the sidelines” at the back of the worship space. This integrated seating is commonly achieved by shortening a few pews to provide a comfortable space for wheelchairs. Additional accommodation should be made to washrooms so that wheelchair users (and an attendant if required) can comfortably and safely transfer to and from the toilet, as well as reaching lever style taps, soap, towels etcetera independently. These accommodations also make washrooms more accessible to many mobility challenged individuals such as cane, and walker users. The previously stated accommodations allow for greater basic physical accessibility for all parishioners, however some additional points should also be considered, such as how to facilitate those with mobility issues might be able to

¹⁰ A ventilator or “vent” may be used non-invasively via a mask, or invasively via a tracheostomy which is a hole created in the windpipe kept open by a tube, which may or may not be connected to a vent.

¹¹ A cough Assist, also known as an inessffalator is a machine which mechanically mimics a natural cough. This unit is used by people who lack the muscle strength to produce a cough on their own, and as such clear secretions from their lungs and airway.

function as layreaders, intercessors, ushers, communion assistants or any other position within parish life. In the case of layreaders, readers and intercessors providing an additional lapel (or other “hands-free style”) microphone and placing the reader in the aisle facing the congregation allows access, when a pulpit would not. In almost all cases with a bit of ingenuity and care everyone should be able to participate in any given lay role in parish life.

Sensory Accessibility

The second form of accessibility is that of Sensory – which for the purposes of this paper will be limited to visual and auditory. Unlike those who face challenges in mobility which can be seen by others, often times individuals with vision loss or hearing loss are, or feel they are, “invisible” compared to those with comparably obvious physical challenges. Additionally since many people do not have congenital hearing or vision losses, rather loss which is cumulative, or acquired (often later in life) many are quite uncomfortable mentioning that they are struggling in a service – they are often embarrassed and fear that their struggle will be dismissed as “unimportant”. Further to this some people with vision or hearing loss are unaware that their struggle is not shared by the other congregants (inaccurately believing that everyone is missing what is being said, or struggling with the print in the bulletin etc.). Thus for a variety of reasons many well intended caring priests, pastors, and lay leaders are unaware of the challenges and isolation¹² that members of their congregation face in Worship.

¹² While the intent of communal worship is to come together as a group, to share in worship; many with hearing and vision loss feel a tremendous sense of isolation due to the fact they are unable to be an active part of hearing or seeing critical components of the service. Further to this, it is often stressful since they must focus diligently in order to not become “lost” in the service.

Vision accessibility

In addition to children and younger adults who may have low vision or blindness, as our faithful parishioners age, it is not uncommon that they will face some manner of vision challenge. The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) states that over six hundred thousand people have significant vision loss, and 2.1 million Canadians currently have some level of age related macular degeneration or AMD.¹³ Many of these parishioners will not feel comfortable, or confident enough to approach the priest or wardens about providing larger size texts or visual aides such as magnifiers which would greatly increase their comfort level and ability to participate in the services. These same parishioners will however gladly choose large text worship books, hymnals and large print bulletins if they are provided and will often comment how much easier it is to read!¹⁴ In addition to large print copies, or in cases where large print versions are unavailable, a wide variety of magnifying devices are available both in standard retail stores (including “dollar stores”), as well as through CNIB, and other companies who specialise in low vision materials and assistive devices. It should also be noted that many of these specialised companies or organisations also provide services in which standard text can be transcribed into Braille (and in some cases Moon print) copies at a very reasonable fee.

One consideration that should be taken into account when printing bulletins, orders of service, or any other text for use in the congregation is the font which is used. The standard ‘universal font’ for both scholastic works as well as ‘daily life’ has become “Times New Roman size 12”, this does not mean that it is the “best” font to use in order to be accessible. In fact it is quite difficult for many to read since it is a “serif” font, meaning that it has tips and tails which decorate the

¹³ <http://www.cnib.ca/en/faq/vision-loss/default.aspx#3> downloadable educational pamphlets can be obtained at <http://www.cnib.ca/en/about/publications/>

¹⁴ I have found this to be true time and time ago as a former parish secretary. In fact the large print liturgies and bulletins were so successful that we went from having 2 large print copies to almost 10 once parishioners were made aware that all they had to do was request a copy !

letters. These serifs create difficulty and as such CNIB and other vision organizations recommend that a “san serif” font be used for all documents. CNIB as well as many other Vision organizations provide a link to download the free “APHont™ font¹⁵” which is recommended as highly readable for people with low vision. There are however, a number of font such as “Tahoma” and “Arial” which are very close and APHont, pre-installed and readily accessible/readable on virtually any modern computer or PDA. In addition to utilising alternate fonts and texts, in some parishes a projection system which projects the entire text of the service onto a wall may also be a viable option.¹⁶ An additional “eco-friendly” option is to create bulletins which are emailed out a few days prior to the services – making sure that they are in a format which can be read by a screen-reader¹⁷ program such as JAWS.¹⁸ The advantage to this email out system is that it can increase accessibility not only to parishioners who require visual assistance, but also hard of hearing/deaf, homebound (often referred to as “shut-ins”) and “snow-bird” parishioners. Other visual considerations are: clearly marking changes in level (steps, steep drop-offs), and using “high contrast, raised print/Brailled” signage for public areas (washrooms, kitchen, hall etc.). These accommodations in many cases pose relatively little or no cost to the church, especially when many purchasable items such as signage and large print texts

¹⁵APHont™ (pronounced Ay'-font), was developed by American Printing House for the Blind, Inc. (APH) specifically for low vision readers. APHont embodies characteristics that have been shown to enhance reading speed, comprehension, and comfort for large print users. APHont may be downloaded free of charge from <http://www.aph.org/products/aphont.html>

¹⁶ While projection has some benefits, it must be something which fits with the worshipping community, and as such should be presented to the congregation for feedback prior to use.

¹⁷ A screen-reader is a type of software used by individuals who are blind or who have dyslexia that interprets what is displayed on a screen and directs it either to speech synthesis for audio output, or to refreshable Braille for tactile output. Some screen readers use the document tree (i.e., the parsed document code) as their input. Older screen readers make use of the rendered version of a document, so that document order or structure may be lost (e.g., when tables are used for layout) and their output may be confusing. <http://www.w3.org/WAI/EO/Drafts/PWD-Use-Web/Overview.html#screenreader>

¹⁸ JAWS is a text reader program which reads aloud the text on a computer screen. When emailing out bulletins, prayers, parish updates etc, as well as creating of a parish website it is important that consideration is made that it will be accessible to those using JAWS (or similar) readers. This can usually be checked by using the standard “text to speech” utility found on both windows and apple operating systems. More information on JAWS can be found online <http://www.freedomscientific.com/jaws-hq.asp>

last many years. Due to their nature funding might be provided through memorial funds, specifically directed donations, or a fundraiser.

Hearing Accessibility

Hearing accessibility is another of the “invisible challenges” facing many parishioners both young and older. Because of the complicated nature of hearing loss it is very difficult to get accurate statistics on how many Canadians are affected. According to the Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) survey conducted in April of 2001 nearly one in four (23%) of all Canadians has a documented hearing loss¹⁹, the Health Canada website states a more conservative one in ten, however also states that more than 50% of people over sixty-five have permanent hearing loss²⁰. These numbers are increasing in both young and old, as the population ages, and our youth spend an increasing amount of time “plugged in” to various MP3 players, often utilising ear bud style headphone which direct sound directly into the ear and as such over time lead to noise related hearing loss. A common misconception is that sounds must be very loud to cause damage to hearing, however length of time spent listening is just as important as the volume. As with vision loss, many people who have acquired hearing loss (meaning they were not born with it, or acquired it early in life) are, in general, reluctant to mention that they are unable to hear or understand what is being said in a service. The use of a P.A. system will improve the situation somewhat; however even a well adjusted Public Address or P.A. system is not a replacement for an Assistive Listening System ALS.

¹⁹ <http://www.chs.ca/survey/surveyresultsumE.html> , in that same survey 1 in 6 said they would rather live with the hearing loss instead of wearing a hearing aid!

²⁰ http://hc-sc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/info_sheets/hearing_loss/index.htm

Assistive Listening Systems²¹ sends specific sounds directly into an Assistive Listen Device (ALD) receiver – these are commonly headset, or earphones. For hearing aid users with a T-Coil²² setting the sound is picked up either directly by the hearing aid via the built in T-coil as is the case for a Induction loop system, or by the use of a “silhouette” which is a thin “hook shaped” wire that slips behind the hearing aid user’s ear; then all the user needs to do is select “T” on their hearing aid (opposed to the standard “M” or microphone setting which is usually used). There are a number of ALSs available the three most common are: FM²³, Infra-Red²⁴, and Loop systems²⁵.

²¹ Assistive listening devices (ALDs) or assistive listening systems (ALSs) are instruments that are designed to improve a person's ability to hear in specific listening situations. Some ALDs amplify a sound signal, but the primary purpose of an ALD is to make the targeted sound (e.g., a speaker’s voice, a movie, etc.) easier to hear by isolating the sound source from surrounding noise. Assistive listening devices are typically used by people who have some residual hearing or who are hard of hearing. People who have difficulty hearing speech or who need to hear certain sound information in noisy situations may benefit from using an ALD. Additionally, people who need to hear sound at a louder level than other people in the same area may use ALDs. These devices are essentially used for minimizing background noise, reducing the effect of distance between the sound source and person with hearing loss, and overriding poor acoustics such as echo.

http://www.assistivetech.net/at_reports/assistive_listening_devices.php#q1

²² also known as a Tele-Coil, or Telephone setting

²³ An FM transmitter connected to the facility's sound system broadcasts radio signals. The FM radio signals are then received by individual "radios" - small, pocket-sized receivers tuned to the specific frequency used in the transmission. The features of receivers vary; the type of facility will help determine what receiver characteristics are necessary. Some are fixed frequency receivers, while others are tuneable; some include environmental microphones that enable you to hear nearby sounds while others do not; some have rechargeable and some have disposable batteries; and, some permit individual ear adjustments, while others do not. An FM system can be used by people who wear hearing aids and cochlear implants (with or without "T" coils) and by those who don't. A person using a cochlear implant can connect a patch cord from the FM receiver to the external processor for the implant. If the hearing aid or cochlear implant has a "T" coil, a neckloop or silhouette inductor can plug directly into a pocket-type receiver and couple the aid to the FM system. A neckloop fits around the neck like a loose necklace. A silhouette inductor is embedded in a thin plastic shape similar to a behind-the-ear hearing aid. Silhouettes can be very useful for people with severe hearing loss. Non-hearing aid users and hearing aid users without "T" coils can use headphones or earbuds, either monaural or stereo, which are connected to a pocket-type FM receiver. These systems can also connect to the hearing aid or cochlear implant if it has Direct Audio Input (DAI) capabilities.

http://www.assistivetech.net/at_reports/assistive_listening_devices.php

²⁴ Infrared (IR) Systems Operate on infrared light that is beamed from one or several IR transmitters (IR emitting panels) to small, specialized receivers. Receiver choices include a stethophone that dangles from the ears, a headset type that fits over the ears, and a small pocket-size type similar to the FM receiver. The stethophone and headset have all of the needed electronics built in and can receive the IR signal directly. The pocket-size receiver is similar to the FM receiver and can be used by people who wear hearing aids or cochlear implants (with and without "T" coils) and by those who don't. Additionally, a cochlear implant and some hearing aids can connect to the IR receiver through a DAI patch cord. http://www.assistivetech.net/at_reports/assistive_listening_devices.php

²⁵ Induction Loop Systems (ILs) use a wire around the room to transmit an electromagnetic signal that is picked up by a receiver with a "T" coil. http://www.assistivetech.net/at_reports/assistive_listening_devices.php

FM systems are usually easy to set up, however they require an individual to maintain the equipment- batteries must be kept charged, earphones cleaned/sterilized, headsets tested etc. Additionally by the nature of FM interference from lighting, as well as radio interference is a consideration. FM also does not ensure privacy (in certain situations) – which is not usually an issue in public worship, however should be kept in mind for private meetings. FM receivers should be available for both unaided and aided (hearing aid users with T coil settings) congregants. Hearing aid compatible units often look like a large medallion worn around the neck, whereas unaided users wear units that resemble standard headphones.

Infra-Red systems are another option for congregations. These systems rely on “line of sight” in order to transmit signal, as such they are “private/secure” since the signal will not penetrate solid surfaces such as wall and floors. For this reason many cinemas utilise infra-red in their theatres. In a parish, the placement of the transmitter is critical for proper reception from the receivers, reflection and streams of light may cause disruption or static to the signal. As with the FM units the users wear a receiver which either routes the sound via headphone type devices or via a unit which transmits signal to the T-Coil on hearing aids.

The third system is an Induction Loop (IL) system has been quite popular in Europe, and is gaining increasingly popularity in North America – especially since the advent of the ADA. The loop system requires the most initial effort to install, but is also the most low maintenance stable and most discrete of all the systems, hence its popularity. Loop systems consist of a wire which is run around the perimeter of the Nave, Office etc. The loop wire is then connected to a transmitter (and preferably an amplifier) and connected to the sound system. The advantage of the loop is that everyone who has a hearing aid with a t-coil setting is automatically able to access the system – this is of course a tremendous advantage if more than a few congregants

would benefit from the ALS. For those who do not have t-coil access (including un-aided congregants) headphone type units are available which allow them to ‘tap into’ the loop as well. There are also a number of small “portable” Loop systems on the market that are quite inexpensive, and can be quickly set up/taken down for meetings, bible studies, coffee time etc.²⁶

Depending on a number of factors including congregation size, architecture, funds, and the needs of the parish on system might prove advantageous over the others- if at all possible current hard of hearing parishioners (and co-attending family members) should be involved in the process, which may include onsite or “field trip style” demonstrations of different systems. Since many parishioners may be reluctant to initiate a conversation about their struggles hearing in services (just as with those with vision issues) as previously suggested an anonymous survey might be a reasonable first step in determining how accessible or inaccessible the church service (or part thereof) is to the congregation. In addition to Assistive Listening Systems, other “low cost/no cost” solutions should also be permanently implemented such as providing printed copies of any additions to the prayers of the people, announcements, and bible readings (or provide copies of bibles which have been pre-marked with ribbons to the readings). If at all possible copies of the sermon, or a sermon outline should be made available either in print or email to congregants (a few print copies should be provided for guests). Details of all parish activities, parish news, announcements as well as parish contact details should be posted clearly on a main bulletin board – this not only helps those who are hard of hearing, but benefits the parish as a whole.

In addition to improving the ability for congregants to hear, it is important to realise that most people with hearing loss rely to some extent on speechreading (whether they are consciously

²⁶ <http://www.vivid-acoustics.com/portable.html>

aware of this or not) as such it is important that anyone with a speaking role in the service is not only well amplified, but can also be easily seen by the congregation, without obstruction of the face and lips. If handheld/mounted microphones are used they should not be placed higher than the speakers chin, and lapel microphones should be placed higher than “heart level” preferable just below the chin. The newer style headphone style mini boom microphones provide clear hands-free sound, without interfering with speechreading and are an excellent option for many parishes.

Cognitive Accessibility

As Christians we are called to reach out to those who are often misunderstood, ignored, or ostracized from society- those with cognitive challenges or special needs (including those affected by strokes) are all too often undervalued in society. It is all too easy to focus on what an individual cannot do, instead to searching out what they can do. Church should be a place in which every human being is equal, not the “same” of course, but “equal” – because each and every one of us is precious in God’s eye, each a unique and necessary part of the Body of Christ. It should therefore be our responsibility to find ways to effectively minister and involve people who have cognitive disabilities in worship. “Buddy systems” are an easy way in which everyone can be involved in worship. A designated “buddy” helps the individual follow along in the text, assists them to the communion rail, sits with them at coffee hour and generally is there as a self-effacing support. In addition a buddy system (along with some specialised training) allows many individuals to participate as ushers, elements bears, crucifiers, and servers, as they are able. In

this way not only does the individual gain confidence, realising they are an important part of the Communion, but the congregation also benefits from embracing its diversity as a Body of Christ. Another important consideration for those who would benefit from adaptive programs is creating a special baptism and confirmation course, and if possible an ongoing bible study which would be suitable for those with cognitive challenges. A multi-parish bible study would not only provide the specialised access these parishioners need, but also is a perfect out-reach opportunity into the community enabling the church to reach a group of people who may not have access to the gospel in their home environments such as assisted living, or group homes. Within the context of worship, alternate versions of the bible (in a few different levels) might be made accessible for use during the service, or made available to be “signed out” for home use. It is critical that in a Body as diverse as the church, we elect to look at our various “differences” as an opportunity to gain better understanding not only of others, but of ourselves – to challenge the norms of secular society, and make our parishes an example of what the rest of the world *should be*.

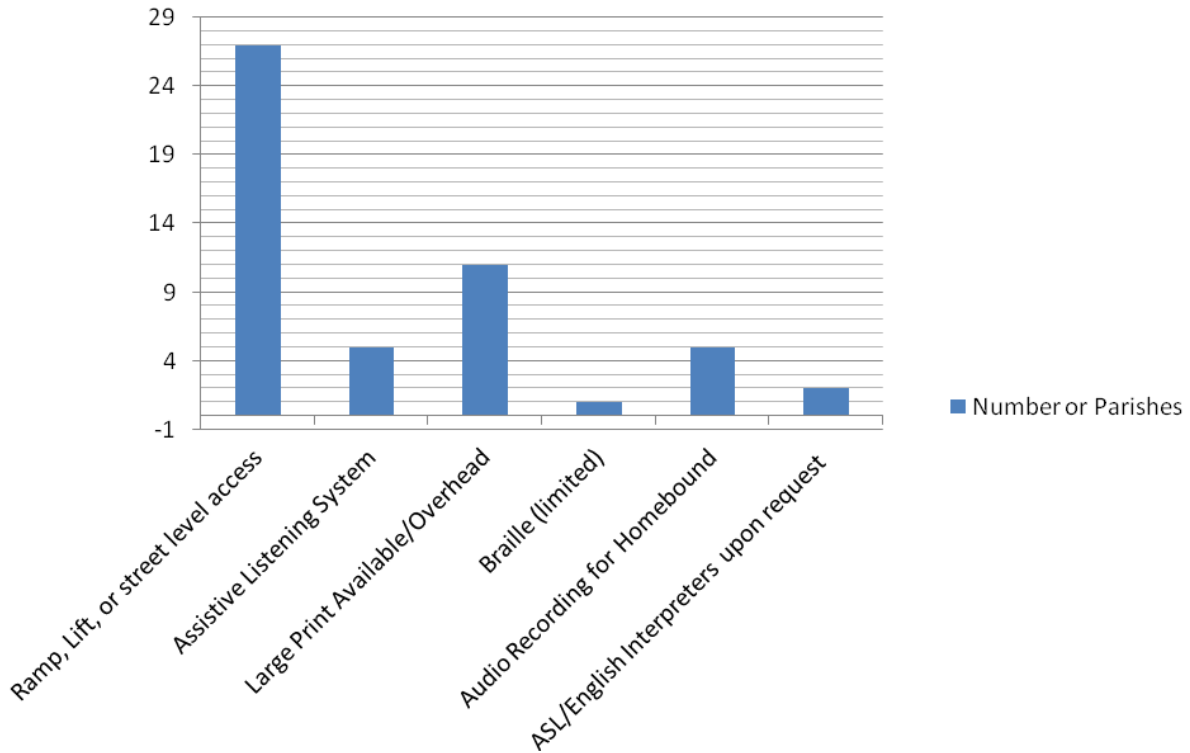
Local Accessibility – How are we doing ?

As seen above there are a number of components which must be implemented in order to create truly accessible parishes, places where anyone regardless of ability or perceived disability can participate in a meaningful and minimally restrictive environment. In Canada we are blessed with a number of organizations which are able to offer suggestions, give demonstrations and clinics on how to increase accessibility in our secular, and parish lives. Canadian Hearing Society(CHS), Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (SHHH), Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Society for Manitobans with Disabilities (SMD) are just a few of the

organizations who offer online and in-person assistance for groups and individuals. As our general population ages, our congregations will continue to face with increasing prevalence a need to become more accessible, for both long time parishioners, and those who are looking for a church for the first time. Our parishes should be a sanctuary, a place of safety and acceptance from an often harsh world. Additionally our churches should be a place in which people who might be struggling to accept the various physical, mental, sensory, and emotional changes in their lives, can come for assistance and support. Accessibility reinforces that each member is valuable, and needed – *being* accessible says that we are fulfilling one of the most important missions and messages of them all – spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, to *all* people.

So how are we as a diocese doing? The chart below reflects a poll of the Diocese of Rupert's Land Parishes taken in April of 2008. Of all the parishes polled, twenty-nine responded and the results are (at least to the writer) unsurprising, yet discouraging in many ways. It is clear that although most parishes have ramp access, other forms of accessibility clearly are lagging behind. This reinforces the author's belief that for many people accessibility means "we have a ramp", an opinion largely formed due to the obvious nature of physical "disabilities". It is not that people intentionally dismiss the other challenges congregants face, rather the "invisibility" of these conditions, as well as the reluctance for many people to request assistance that leads to what might be called "forgotten syndrome" – that is, because we cannot see them, we forget that accessibility means physical, visual, aural, and cognitive accessibility.

Diococese of Rupert's Land Parish Accessibility March 2008



The encouraging news is that of those polled a number of parishes expressed a desire to receive information not only on the poll results, but also requested information on ways they might improve their own parish accessibility. This is very heartening, since as we all know each journey begins with taking that first step. This next step should be for parishes to survey the congregants in an anonymous manner, and to begin to “advertise” the accessibility of their parishes, not only on individual parish websites, but on the diocese site as well. For High

Holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and any time when parishes do “out-reach advertising”; posters and advertisements should clearly state the accessibility details of the parish. The diocese poll also indicated that a few parishes would be able and willing to hire, or have in the past hired, an ASL/English interpreter for Christmas and or Easter services etcetera with enough notice.²⁷ This is important since parishioners may have extended family that uses ASL²⁸, and usually attends a Deaf Church, however would like to worship with the rest of their (hearing) family for special times of the year. Additionally, Winnipeg has fairly large hard of hearing and Deaf population (as well as a school for the Deaf, and many mainstreaming school) and as such providing occasional interpreted services sends a strong message of inclusion to an ASL using individual who many wish to experience worship at a different church.

It was the purpose of this paper to research and discuss the various ways in which Churches can increase their awareness of what it means to be fully accessible, and in so doing take steps in order to increase their accessibility to all Christians. By increasing accessibility, the Church fulfills its mission to reach out to all people regardless of how they may be – at least on the surface- “different” than what we may believe to be the social norm. In creating more accessible churches we also create an environment which opens the doors to many people who might have wish to attend their local church (or any church) and have been unable to do so due to a restrictive environment which is unable to meet their needs. It is for this reason that one can boldly say that “accessibility is mission” – it reaches within our Church walls, and corrects

²⁷ Currently ASL/English interpreters must be booked 3-4weeks in advance, more notices is often required for holidays. The main service for booking interpreters in Winnipeg Manitoba including ASL/English interpreters is ECCOE (pronounced the same as “echo”)

²⁸ Statistically only 10% of deaf children have deaf parents, this means that it is very common for a single individual in a family to be deaf or hard of hearing while the rest of the family is hearing. This can cause familial-social division, which is why opportunities to unite ASL using individuals and their hearing families such as interpreted services can be so beneficial.

deficits and shortcomings many of our buildings have, and in so doing allows the Church to spread its wings and share the Gospel to a much wider group of people, the very people in fact that we as Christians are called to reach out to. Accessibility thusly fulfills the primary goal of any form of Mission – to Share God’s word, to Proclaim Jesus’ salvation to as many as we are able. The secondary purpose of this paper was to provide the reader with hands on solutions, as well as offer local contacts and resources such as Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Society for Manitobans with Disabilities (SMD), Self help for hard of hearing (SHHH), Canadian Hearing Society CHS. These organizations are created not only to provide support for individual and their families, but also act as an educational resource for any individual, parish or community who wishes to better understand the challenges that many people face. Knowledge is a powerful tool; it eradicates ignorance which is all too often the source of discrimination, and “dis-abling” of members of our society. As a Body of Christ we are called to act as Christ-like as we can be. It is Christ who opens the eyes of the blind, opens the ears of the deaf, cures the lame – in our contemporary lives, we do much the same, when make our parishes barrier-free.

Bibliography

Authors note: due to the nature of this paper there is remarkably little in the way of Church specific books, papers etc. written on the topic which is current enough to accurately reflect contemporary thought on what society perceives as the “disabled community” as such most of the research comes from well respected online sources and at times some medical texts. Therefore this bibliography also serves as a concise list of references for further study.

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Accessibility Survey

How inclusive are we in our diocese? How effectively do we reach out to people with disabilities? How well do we use their gifts? Responses to this survey will help us know what we are doing well and what we need to improve.

Please check if:

Any member of your parish has

- difficulty walking or uses a wheel chair.
- physical frailty or breathing problems
- hearing loss
- vision problems
- cognitive or neurological problems

Please check if:

- there is someone knowledgeable about the accessibility of your parish with whom a prospective parishioner or visitor can speak before attending a worship service?
- volunteer escorts are available
- people with disabilities are encouraged to participate in all roles of leadership and service
- there is a disabilities-related project on your vestry's list of annual objectives this year
- your outreach giving includes groups that serve people with disabilities percentage of annual budget _____%

How accessible is your parish to people with impaired vision?

Can your long-time parishioner with failing vision still participate?

Will a visitor with limited vision feel welcome?

Please check if:

- there is lighting with sufficient wattage for people with limited vision, in church, office and meeting rooms, bathrooms, hallways, stairways
- stair treads are marked to show edge of step
- bulletins with the full service in large print are provided
- large print hymnals and BAS/BCP are available
- there are large print signs throughout your buildings
- there are signs in Braille
- the Hymnal and Book of Common Prayer are available in Braille

How accessible is your parish to people with hearing loss? While you are not likely to have a culturally deaf parishioner unless you have a special ministry to those who sign, you are very likely to have parishioners who are hard of hearing.

Check if you provide:

- a bulletin with the entire service included
- a printed copy of the announcements
- bibles or copies of the scripture readings are available
- a printed copy of the sermon
- captioning for videos and films
- sign language interpretation of service

Check if you provide

- an assistive listening equipment in church
- assistive listening equipment in meeting rooms
- head phones and ear buds
- loop systems to be used with hearing aids and cochlear implants
- publicity for this equipment in the service bulletin

How accessible is your parish to those with limited mobility?

In your parish, you might have a person who now has difficulty walking, but can manage a step or two, or one in a motorized wheelchair/powerchair which cannot get over even a single step.

Please check if:

- there is public transportation to your church that can accommodate wheel chairs
- there are accessible parking spaces
- on site public
- there is an accessible entry route (ramp or level) from parking area to the church

Please check if a wheelchair user can move around easily inside your church with a smooth or level path of travel to the following:

- position within the worship space altar pulpit communion rail
- baptismal font lectern choir stalls/area

Please check if there is a level (step-free) passage to:

- coffee hour kitchen class rooms rector's office parish office
- meeting rooms choir room rest room(s)

Please check if:

there is at least one wheel chair accessible rest room with enough space for a wheel chair to turn around and to allow transfer space at the toilet.

Does your parish include people with developmental disabilities, including autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation or neurological impairment?

Your parishioner may be a youngster who has been differently-abled since birth, or an older person disabled by a stroke or Alzheimer's.

Please check if:

you welcome them in the main worship service

you provide special worship services

you encourage them to serve as acolytes or element bearers

there is a Church school curriculum for people with special needs

there is special confirmation preparation

Remarks and comments

Would you please share with us some ways you have reached out and welcomed people with special challenges?

Do you have any questions or wish to have assistance in any of these areas?

We thank you for taking the time to complete this survey questionnaire.

This survey is based on “The Bishops' Survey of Accessibility in the Parishes of the Diocese of New York” <http://access.diocesenyny.org/Survey.pdf>