

Equivalent Experience

Keys to truly accessible worship spaces

By Robert D. Habiger, AIA, ACLS

BARRIER-FREE ENVIRONMENTS HAVE BEEN A STAPLE OF ARCHITECTS and Interior Designers since the passage of the American with Disabilities Act in 1990. However, in a majority of church projects the focus has primarily been to provide the minimal accommodation for people with disabilities. The current accessibility dialogue fails to distinguish between accommodation and “equivalent experience.” Equivalent experience is not about doing barrier-free design better. Rather, it is an approach that seeks to learn and understand the connections between disabilities, accessibility, emotional participation, and inclusiveness.

Compared to 25 years ago, people with disabilities today do find it easier to access a church building. But still missing is the understanding of how the psychological aspect of people’s experiences impacts their sense of inclusion and hospitality. One of my favorite songs is “All Are Welcome” by Marty Haugen (GIA Publications). The song’s refrain “all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place” invokes in me a personal desire to design worship spaces that truly welcome everyone. Marty’s cry for a place where love can dwell, where prophets speak, where all are named sets the tone for equivalent experience and the design that supports it.

Often I am disappointed when visiting a recently completed church project. I find wheelchair ramps tucked out of sight, a lectern with no height adjustment, water that is unreachable from a wheelchair, or mandatory segregated seating. It seems in these cases that the architects, builders, and the church community have taken an “only if required” approach to merely meet the minimal ADA requirements. Such an approach is inappropriate when the purpose is to welcome and enhance the worship experience of everyone. Inclusiveness, emotional accessibility, and hospitality for all demands we pay more attention to how we design.

To bridge the gap between ADA compliance and true equivalent experiences, we need to consider a new design approach. I use five steps to work toward the goal of equivalent experience:

- Be intentional in discussing prejudices
- Start with a focus on emotional participation
- Explore situations people with disabilities face in a worship environment
- Design for hospitality
- Don’t succumb to the belief that it is too difficult to accomplish

BE INTENTIONAL

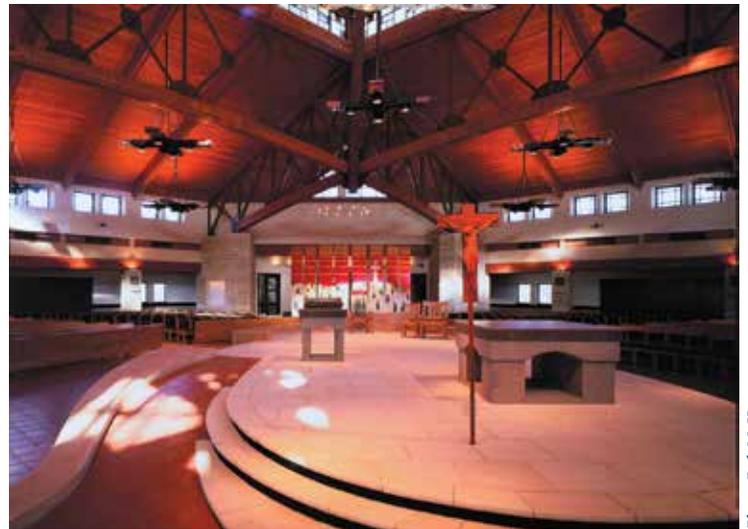
The first step is to recognize that prejudices still exist and often result in the unintentional exclusion of people with disabilities. Stop to reflect for a moment. Have you avoided meeting someone with a physical disability? Do you speak to the person who is with a disabled person rather than speaking directly to them? Do you know the story behind a

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Floor texture, material, and color change at baptismal font at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dodge City, Kansas.

Photo: Rob McHenry



Sloped floor at left side of photo is same material as main floor for access to sanctuary platform at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dodge City, Kansas.

Photo: Rob McHenry



Pull and push door handles at ceremonial doors into worship space are sized for both children and adults and permit multiple modes of grasping at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dodge City, Kansas.

Photo: Rob McHenry

person's disability? Have you accepted a person's mental capacity as being God's plan? We must recognize that prejudices still exist when only lip service, not sincere consideration, is given to the subject of accommodating people with disabilities.

People with disabilities can feel ignored or isolated. The design professional is responsible for bringing these people into the conversation, asking from the beginning what causes them to feel unwelcomed. Be intentional about including and listening to all people who form the community of a project. It is our responsibility to facilitate a design process that explores prejudices and misconceptions. Success is accomplished when honest examination occurs, and new beliefs, attitudes, and approaches are established when we meet the needs of everyone.

FOCUS ON PARTICIPATION

The liturgical reforms of the Roman Catholic Church promoted that all the faithful benefit from a full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy (as noted in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, paragraph 14, 1963). This concept – that fullness in a worship experience requires active participation – is now embraced by the majority of faith communities. But how can a person with a disability participate in the same way as a normal functioning person? Is the worship experience the same for someone in a wheelchair, who uses a walker, who trucks around an oxygen tank, or who is deaf or blind? Of course, not! So we must examine how equivalent experiences shape a person's fullness of participation, realizing that this varies from person to person. While it is impossible to create the same experience for everyone, we can make sure that a person's worship experience is supported by thoughtful design and an environment that accounts for various needs. In that way, we can accommodate a positive emotional and psychological experience that enables people to fully participate in their worship.

An example can illustrate this point. In most religious buildings the altar, chancel, or sanctuary is elevated several steps above the central space or nave. Too often accessibility to this elevated platform is relegated to a ramp or wheelchair lift that is tucked out of sight to the rear or back of the platform. When a person in a wheelchair, walker, or crutches must take a different path into the designated special space than the minister, acolyte, reader, server, or Elder, then not only is their physical experience different, but we have also tacked on a different emotional experience. Symbolically we have



Photo: Robert Habiger

For the deaf community, the signer is positioned adjacent to the ambo at St. Mary Cathedral, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

indicated that a difference exists because of a disability. When we isolate like this, we create exclusions. In this example, if an equivalent experience is to be achieved, the mode of access to the raised platform must be the same for everyone. A gradual sloped floor, rather than a ramp is inclusive and invites full participation.

EXPLORE

To better understand what would create an equivalent experience, it can be helpful to place ourselves into simulations that mimic those faced by people of various abilities. Strap on a full leg brace and try to move into and then sit in a typical pew, and you realize that a seat without any front obstructions would have worked better. Try to pass opposite moving wheelchairs and realize how a restrictive a narrow side aisle can feel. Wear a blindfold and try to navigate around a baptismal font, and you learn that a floor texture change would help you maneuver and find your way. A designer cannot understand potential difficulties until fully exploring situations people are likely to face. The best advice is to carry out experiential research before you design.

What I suggest is meeting with disabled people at the worship space in question. Such a meeting will allow you to develop a design that meets their needs and gives you new insights. Take into consideration their concerns; look into issues that hinder their ability for both physical and emotional participation, and focus on the psychological aspects

that these people face. Of course this requires more effort than merely applying codes or regulations. I can attest that not every meeting will feel comfortable or productive. But I am convinced that new opportunities and innovations will surface. The added bonus is that over time each project adds substance to your design repertory.

THINK HOSPITALITY

In the preceding paragraphs the most important principle is the recognition that inclusiveness occurs when people's experiences are similar and overlap. How is this accomplished? What is needed is to move beyond accessibility to a condition of empathy. Simply put, to implement equivalent experience comes from our empathetic understanding of another person's emotional experience. I already pointed out how the hiding of a ramp to a central platform does more harm than good, and now I offer more examples to spark your imagination towards achieving an equivalent experience in places for worship.

Doorways mark entrances and can symbolically exclude. The door the celebrant uses to enter the worship space should be available for use by everyone. Don't imply that a worthy few can use a door or can access any space within the environment. Doors should open easily. Even if the door has an automatic operation, people prefer to open the door without extra assistance. The desire is to be a fully capable person, and the wrong door handle can create unnecessary anxiety. Therefore, ceremonial

doors should not be the required exit doors. Then the designer can specify push-pull handles that are easily grasped and allow children and elderly the ability to open the door.

Changes of floor texture or pattern allows the visually impaired to know they are entering the worship space. Special areas in the worship space, such as a shrine or place of importance, can be highlighted with a floor color or texture change.

Seating options provide major advantages for equivalent experience. Fixed pews allow stability when sitting, kneeling, or standing. But having no obstructions in front of some seating accommodates people whose mobility does not allow them to move sideways into the narrow space between rows. Chairs allow easy accommodation of wheelchairs by allowing a person in the wheelchair to place themselves where it is best for their family instead of being relegated to a designated location. Make aisles wide enough for two wheelchairs to pass. This will not only help people in wheelchairs, but also people with walkers and canes.

Uniform ambient lighting helps the visually impaired when moving in the space. Avoid large sections of low-level windows in locations that will silhouette people. Eye strain is reduced when a person does not have to compensate for the high levels of contrast while trying to focus on a face that is in shadow.

These examples serve to illustrate how designing with an eye towards emotional accessibility is also designing for inclusiveness and hospitality.

DON'T GIVE UP

By now you may be thinking this is a herculean task, that you cannot possibly accomplish everything that is needed. Your budget is simply too restrictive, or your client says no one in their community needs special accommodations. Such arguments have repeatedly been proven false. I admit that promoting a sloped floor versus steps is hard because it requires valuable floor area. But I believe it is the design professional's responsibility to not only address physical accommodation but to go beyond and address emotional accommodation too. The alternative is to unknowingly perpetuate inhospitable design.

No building or space will ever produce the same experience for all people. I submit, however, that designing for an equivalent experience is possible and serves to support people's emotional, psychological, physical, and participatory experiences. We must make every effort to create worship environments that enhance similar physical and emotional experiences so as to become a fully integrated environment. By embracing differences and understanding how to create inclusive experiences as much as possible, we can design churches that connect people to each other and to their place of worship. 



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