

# Barriers to participation: A personal story

By N. Vernon Blankenship

When I was asked by the Board of Church Extension (BCE) staff to serve as a consultant to their new task force on the Americans with Disabilities Act, I was not sure I had anything that would add to their expertise. After all, I had been retired for four years and had not kept up with the literature on the subject.

I also wondered why this new effort in educating congregations on ministering to people with disabilities was necessary. BCE had been advocating accessible church structures for at least 40 years.

When I joined the staff in 1966, our architects were advising churches to build accessible buildings, predominately single-level structures. They said it was not more expensive to build single-level structures than it was to build multi-level buildings. BCE advised the church I served in its relocation project, and we built a totally new facility, all grade-level structures. We moved from a 50-year-old building which required going up or down steps to get to every place in the building. That was more than 30 years ago.

During the past 30 years, BCE has published articles and materials on eliminating barriers to participation. Included in our study materials was a checklist to survey the architectural barriers in the church building. We at BCE had also printed articles about the ADA of 1990. I asked myself what else needed to be done?

But I reluctantly said I would be glad to help them any way I could.

I received a packet of material including the publication *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities*, which was mailed to Disciples congregations in early

1997. I learned that they were working on an accessibility survey document to assist a congregation in the evaluation of its facilities and its ministries.

I saw the program was much broader than making buildings accessible. The emphasis was on helping congregations become more hospitable to persons with disabilities. This included changing the attitudes toward persons with disabilities, developing programs, increasing communication, as well as making the building's facilities accessible. The aim of the current effort is to help congregations become more sensitive to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of persons with disabilities.

Since change of attitude often occurs very slowly and it takes time to change the buildings which house our programs, we must repeat our messages many times before they are heard. It is a moral obligation we have, though not required by law, to see that all persons with disabilities receive equal opportunities to participate in the life of the church. It is a matter of justice consistent with the teachings of the Christian faith.

Barriers to participation have occurred throughout the centuries because of race, class, culture, nationality, physical, and mental disabilities. Therefore, the average American congrega-

tion must be a welcome place for all people. It is an urgent need. The publication *Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community*, published by the National Organization on Disabilities, states it this way: "The ADA has been called the most significant civil rights legislation in recent decades. Indeed, by affirming the rights of forty-nine million Americans with disabilities, the ADA challenges the long-standing myths and stereotypes which have locked people into roles of dependency, stagnation, and unfilled potential."

There is another factor that makes this subject very important to me today. In June of 1995 I was told that I would be one of the forty-nine million disabled people in the U.S. At that time, I was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)—Lou Gehrig's disease. This is a rather rapidly progressive disease in which all voluntary muscles are ultimately disabled, and the person becomes completely paralyzed. The normal life span is from two to five years after diagnosis. There is no known cure or medication which can help stem the tide of the disease.

Since it had affected me minimally at the time of discovery, my wife and I decided that we would accelerate our scheduled move to a retirement place in central Kentucky. In the next



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six months we sold our house and had a barrier-free ranch-style home built in a community where two of our children live. In January of 1996 we joined a Christian Church in our vicinity. We did not shop around but went to the church where our son and his family were members. This became the context for some new adventures and insights into the problems of the disabled.

The importance of the congregation being hospitable and welcoming is a central factor in being able to minister to people with disabilities. Many congregations, while thinking themselves to be friendly and hospitable, have not learned how to greet newcomers and visitors, much less the diversity of people such as physically and mentally disabled.

This was the first church my wife and I had joined in 30 years. We were strangers in a new community and in a congregation in which we knew few people. We expected to be welcomed and acknowledged for our experience and service in the church.

While the people were cordial we were shocked at the lack of genuine welcoming. It was a surprise to us and a lesson for every congregation. Had we not had a reason for joining this church, we would have been tempted to go somewhere else. The morale of the church was low at that time because of some internal difficulties. This partly explains the situation. When you consider the person who is a stranger, or is physically disabled, or has psychological problems, coming for the first time to a congregation where there is no sense of hospitality, it would be easy for them to feel not wanted. First impressions are extremely important.

From my experience, I am certain that persons with physical or mental disabilities come with fear and concern about being accepted. I had no noticeable

physical disability. However, I did have problems with speech and in handling hymn books and communionware which would be noticeable to people sitting nearby. I had emotional problems at unpredictable times of the service and would wipe my eyes. I was concerned about this and was thinking that I would make other people uncomfortable. I was tempted to stay away from the service lest I disturb others and cause some concern. People with disabilities need particular assurance that they are needed and wanted in the life of the church.

Having counseled with churches for 27 years regarding their buildings and being particularly sensitive about physical barriers, I had some problems with the church building. It is a building only 10 years old, a first unit of a master plan, built at two levels. The major problem for people with disabilities is the two-level construction. While a sidewalk does connect the parking lot to the main entrance, it is a long upward incline of approximately 350 feet. In bad weather it would be very difficult to make it to the front door.

The basement entrance has become the main entrance because it is nearest to the parking lot. That makes the flow of traffic go through the basement up a long stairway to the main level. The stairway is long enough that people with problems of mobility would have difficulty getting from the lower level upward to the worship room. While the building has accessible restrooms on both floors, a person in a wheelchair could not participate as a worship leader or choir member. There are steps leading to the chancel and choir areas.

Upon entering the lower level, I found coat racks that were too high for me to use. My arms are very weak and I cannot raise them above the level of my shoulders. The normal height of adult coat racks is too high for

me to use. There was no place for my coat without assistance. Neither was there a place for the children's coats. I installed two coat racks four feet high that I and children could use. Anyone in a wheelchair could not have reached the regular coat racks.

The church provides name tags for all members. However, they were placed on a board at four to seven feet above the floor level and behind a table three feet wide. This made it impossible for me and the children to reach. We moved the table but still have a problem with the height for many people. Again, a person with limited reach or in a wheelchair could not reach the name tag board. Speaking of people in wheelchairs, I have not seen any attending since we have been there. Fortunately, the congregation is now undertaking a capital program to improve the accessibility to the main entrance.

My wife and I have now been members of this congregation for nearly 18 months. We have become active in the church life. We have shared our concerns and have been accepted. It has been said that joining a church is like hurdling a fence. There are always barriers to overcome. I trust that as my disease progresses, my disability will be used to tear down barriers that block participation.

BCE's attempt to educate the public about barrier-free space has covered a span of more than 40 years. A continued push to inform and to lead our congregations to barrier-free buildings and barrier-free attitudes is a task that never ends for the concerned Christian—not because the law requires it but because it is the right thing to do.

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