

Guideline Leaflet L12: Churches and Disability Issues

Churches should be taking positive steps to ensure that people with disabilities (and not just those in wheelchairs) can access services provided by the church at a standard that is as close as possible to those offered to everyone else. This leaflet looks at what churches should be doing and gives information about various organisations which can help.

This Guideline Leaflet is regularly reviewed and updated. To ensure that you are using the most up to date version, please download the leaflet from the BUGB website at www.baptist.org.uk/resources

The date on which the leaflet was last updated can be found on the download page.

L12: Churches and Disability Issues

These notes are offered as guidelines by the Legal and Operations Team to provide information for Baptist churches.

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[L17 Legal and Operations Team – Regulatory Information](#)

These notes can never be a substitute for detailed professional advice if there are serious and specific problems, but we hope you will find them helpful.

If you want to ask questions about the leaflets and one of the Baptist Trust Companies are your property trustees, you should contact them. They will do their best to help.

If your church property is in the name of private individuals who act as trustees they may also be able to help.

INTRODUCTION

It is now more than 20 years since the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was introduced which made it unlawful for service providers (which includes churches) to treat people with disabilities less favourably than others for a reason related to their disability. As part of the Act service providers are expected to make reasonable adjustments to their way of working to ensure people with disabilities are not discriminated against. From 2004 service providers have had to make reasonable adjustments to the physical features of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access.

The Equality Act 2010 was introduced to bring together various pieces of anti-discrimination legislation and this included the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Under the Equality Act it is still unlawful to discriminate against someone because of their disability. The Act also includes a duty to make a reasonable adjustment for a disabled person.

DEFINITIONS IN THE ACT

A Person with a disability is someone who has a physical or mental impairment, the effect of which is substantial, and adverse long term to their ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

- Physical or mental impairment includes sensory and hidden impairment.
- An effect is substantial if it is more than minor or trivial.
- An effect is long-term if it has lasted (or is likely to last) for at least a year or is likely to last for the rest of the life of the person affected.

Discrimination occurs in two possible ways.

- A disabled person is unjustifiably treated less favourably than others for a reason related to the disability.
- A service provider unjustifiably fails to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments for the disabled person.

WHAT SHOULD CHURCHES BE DOING?

Churches (as 'service providers') should be taking positive steps to ensure that people with disabilities can access services provided by the church at a standard that is as close to possible to those offered to everyone else. This includes churches making reasonable adjustments to physical features in their buildings so that

people with disabilities are not at a substantial disadvantage compared with non-disabled people.

For churches this may involve

- making changes to organisational practices, policies and procedures which currently make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for people with disabilities to take part in church activities.
- providing reasonable alternative methods of making church activities available to disabled people where a physical feature makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for them.
- providing an auxiliary aid or extra help if it would enable (or make it easier for) disabled people to take part in church activities.

It should be noted however that the duty to make reasonable adjustments is a continuous one and churches should be reviewing the changes they have already made at regular intervals.

It is important to remember however that the Equality Act is about people and not buildings. Churches should regularly review all areas of church life to see if there are improvements that could be made to better facilitate the ways in which people with disabilities can participate.

ATTITUDE

The basic issue is about how we see people and welcome them. It is not just about whether people who use wheelchairs can easily get into our buildings and access toilet facilities or whether everyone can read the words of the songs. If we truly value the person with a disability we will want to see that they are not disadvantaged but are welcomed, included and enabled to participate.

It is changes of attitude that are crucial. It is important to see each person as an individual with gifts and abilities to share rather than focus on the challenges disabled people may present to a church or the adjustments that may need to be made to welcome everyone.

One of our *Five Core Values* is to be an *Inclusive Community* and there is a clear injustice involved where we are found to be excluding considerable numbers of people from participation in the life of our churches. To proclaim that the Gospel is for everyone and then to exclude people because we are inflexible is a contradiction. What we are actually saying to people is that they and their concerns and needs do not matter to us. Conversely, by welcoming disabled people into our midst, we are affirming them and enriching the life of the church. The Act should therefore be seen as a mission opportunity rather than a burden.

CHANGING A PRACTICE, POLICY OR PROCEDURE

Over time a church will establish, either formally or by custom, particular ways of doing things. Practices, policies and procedures (and traditions!) will develop which may, unintentionally, create difficulties for disabled people. The church must take reasonable steps to change them so that they no longer have that effect. This should be something that the church reviews regularly.

PROVIDING A REASONABLE ALTERNATIVE METHOD

With the intention of welcoming and including everyone, churches have to consider all the circumstances affecting their church and the needs of people with disabilities. Using some imagination, thinking carefully and discussing this issue widely should help to determine what a reasonable adjustment is.

The Act does not define 'reasonable adjustments' but some of the factors which churches might take into account are:

- Whether taking any particular action would be effective in solving the problem;
- The extent to which it is practical to take those steps;
- The extent of any disruption;
- The financial and other costs;

- The extent of the church's financial and other resources;
- The amount already spent on making adjustments;
- The availability of financial or other assistance.

PROVIDING AN AUXILIARY AID OR EXTRA HELP

The duty to provide auxiliary aids or extra help requires churches to take reasonable steps in the circumstances to make its buildings and activities accessible to disabled people. What is reasonable may depend on the size of the church and the factors mentioned above. What is important is that the church is willing and seen to be willing to respond to those needs so far as they can reasonably do so.

UNDERTAKING AN AUDIT OF YOUR BUILDINGS

Churches will find it helpful to undertake an audit of their premises on a regular basis. Where possible try and include people with disabilities in making an assessment as they are more likely to be aware of the issues than others. Alternatively invite someone who doesn't normally attend your church to comment on the building. In terms of physical barriers and problems the following list may be helpful. Some of the organisations listed near the end of this leaflet produce more detailed resources for undertaking assessments of your church.

Getting to the Premises

Signs
Position and definition of entrance
Car Parking
Routes-Surfaces, lighting, obstacles

Getting in and out

Steps and ramps
Alternative access
Doors
Thresholds
Widths
Handles
Ease of opening
Entrance mats
Entrance lobbies
Getting out in an emergency

Moving around

Layout and possible hazards
Use of colours
Signs
Lighting
Lifts, stairlifts or platform lifts
Handrails
Facilities for wheelchairs

Seating

Space for wheelchairs
Some chairs with armrests
Space for guide dogs

Communication

Amplification and acoustics
Induction loop
Lighting
Shelves and display racks
Signs
Other means of communication
Signing
Large print books and sheets
Braille copies
Size and style of printing

Toilets

Signs
Accessible for wheelchair users
Grab Rails
Free from obstructions

DO YOU NEED TO ALTER YOUR BUILDINGS?

If you do decide to make significant alterations to the buildings remember that you will need to seek approval from the Baptist Union Corporation or your own Trust Company as well as obtaining planning permission and/or building regulation approval from your local planning authority. Churches should seek professional advice and must obtain the necessary consents before doing any work.

Churches that need to alter Listed Buildings will also need to obtain consent from the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee. (This scheme applies to most Baptist Churches with Listed Buildings)

You may want to look at the following Guideline Leaflets.

- PC04 *Redeveloping or Altering Church Premises*
- M01 *Loans to Churches*
- M06 *Grants for Building Work*
- LB01 *Introducing the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee*
- LB02 *Applying to the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee*
- LB06 *Looking after your Church Buildings*

VALUE ADDED TAX

There is some VAT relief for churches seeking to make adjustments and improvements to help disabled people to participate fully. Before commencement of any work the church and contractor should check the position carefully. The contact number for the National VAT helpline is 0845 010 9000 and there is also a useful document on the HMRC website. (Search for Notice 708 – headed 'Buildings and Construction') We are not able to offer advice on VAT but your professional advisor should be able to offer guidance in relation to any building or installation work.

UNDERTAKING AN AUDIT OF CHURCH LIFE

Churches will also find it helpful to undertake an audit of their activities on a regular basis to check how inclusive they really are. This is not quite as straightforward as an audit of your buildings and will require some thought and imagination. There will be ideas for this in the resources offered by the organisations listed below. A good place to start is the "All welcome" resource from 'Through the Roof' which costs £5.

SOURCES OF ADVICE AND SUPPORT

CHURCHES FOR ALL (www.churchesforall.org.uk)

'Churches for All' is a network of UK Christian disability organisations who between them have a breadth of experience and depth of knowledge on disability issues – challenging and enabling churches to fully include disabled people. Their aim is to help churches create and sustain an environment where disabled people can participate fully in church life for the benefit of all. Their website has links to their Partners and other organisations – some of which are listed below.

The website also has details of the 'Enabling Church Course'; which can be purchased for £25 as a download package or £35 for a hard-copy version. This is an eight session course "exploring how to enrich church life through sharing mission and ministry with disabled people."

THROUGH THE ROOF (www.throughtheroof.org) Tel: 01372 749955

'Through the Roof' is a national, pan-disability, Christian ministry who, since 1997, have been seeking to ensure that the good news of the Christian message is accessible to everyone. They want to see a world where disabled people and others who have experience of disability are valued equally, fully included, and able to contribute their gifts and skills. As a registered charity, they equip churches and organisations to fulfil the Biblical message of inclusion. They produce a number of resources which you can find in their 'Shop' section

TORCH TRUST (www.torchtrust.org) Tel: 01858 438260

The Torch Trust's aims can be summarised as enabling people with sight loss to discover Christian faith and lead fulfilling Christian lives. Towards this end they provide Christian resources and activities for blind and partially sighted people worldwide. Their services are offered to all who experience sight loss, of all faiths or none, and including those with sight loss who have other disabilities. They can also help churches provide for the needs of blind and partially sighted people, resourcing them in ways that allow everyone to be included and involved. See <http://with.torchtrust.org/index.php/information-for-churches>

GO!SIGN (www.gosign.org.uk) and OPEN EARS (www.openears.org.uk) Tel: 01425 615215

Both of these Christian organisations cater (in different ways) for the needs of deaf and people with hearing impairments.

OTHER RESOURCES WHICH CHURCHES MAY FIND USEFUL

Easy Access to Historic Buildings – a downloadable resource from English Heritage looking at how church buildings can be adapted to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Although aimed at Listed Buildings its advice is relevant to other churches.

See www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/easy-access-to-historic-buildings

Two books which may be useful for churches looking at how they could become more inclusive.

Making Church Accessible to all by Tony Phelps-Jones (published by the Bible Reading Fellowship February 2013)

"This book provides a strong argument for rethinking the way we present church. Working from the biblical basis for including people with disabilities, Tony Phelps-Jones considers the obstacles that church can put in the way and the practicalities of establishing an effective ministry." The book includes examples of inclusive teaching and worship, together with sections focusing on the following areas: learning disabilities, autism, sight loss, hearing loss, mobility difficulty, mental health conditions and families with children with additional needs. It is a very practical and helpful book.

Enabling Church by Gordon Temple and Lin Ward (published by SPCK May 2012)

"This full and comprehensive resource book/study guide will challenge church leaders, congregations and small groups to tackle with what the Bible says about disability – and what the Church could do in response. The book explores understanding, inclusion and interdependency through discussion, prayer, worship, hands-on activities and listening to the voices and stories of disabled people."

Association Trust Company	Contact
Baptist Union Corporation Ltd East Midland Baptist Trust Company Ltd	Baptist Union Corporation Ltd Baptist House PO Box 44 129 Broadway Didcot Oxfordshire OX11 8RT Telephone: 01235 517700
Heart of England Baptist Association	Heart of England Baptist Association BMS Birmingham 24 Weoley Park Road Selly Oak Birmingham B29 6QX Telephone: 0121 472 4986
London Baptist Property Board	London Baptist Association Unit C2 15 Dock Street London E1 8JN Telephone: 020 7692 5592
Yorkshire Baptist Association	17-19 York Place Leeds LS1 2EZ Telephone: 0113 278 4954
West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd	West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd Little Stoke Baptist Church Kingsway Little Stoke Bristol BS34 6JW Telephone: 0117 965 8828

This is one of a series of *Guidelines* that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Legal and Operations Team and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff in the Legal and Operations Team at Baptist House (or your regional Trust Company) will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible. It helps us to respond as efficiently as possible to the many churches in trust with us if you write to us and set out your enquiry as simply as possible.

The Legal and Operations Team also support churches that are in trust with the East Midland Baptist Trust Company Limited.

If your holding trustees are one of the other Baptist Trust Corporations you must contact your own Trust Corporation for further advice. A list of contact details is provided above. If you have private trustees they too should be consulted as appropriate.

Contact Address and Registered Office:

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Website: www.baptist.org.uk Registered CIO with Charity Number: 1181392

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