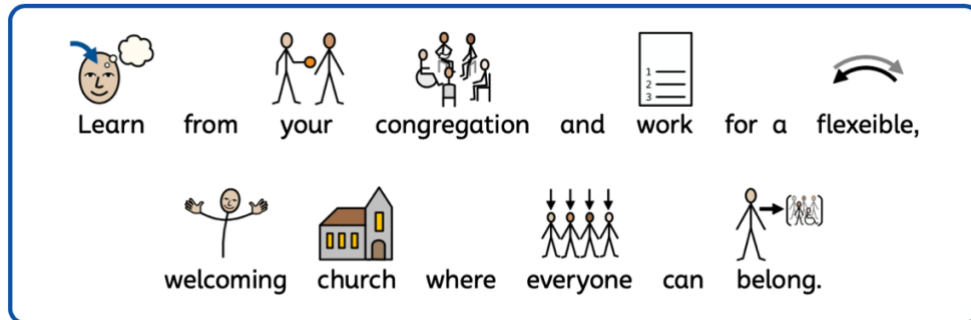




Making our church more accessible...
Where to begin?



Start by doing some reading, understanding for yourself the range of additional needs you could have in your congregation and remember that it will cover all ages. Physical disabilities, mental health, learning disabilities, neurodivergence (autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia etc), and medical conditions all impair people's ability to manage in a typically expected way. People try hard to 'fit in' and 'manage' but what if we created a flexible church experience that eased the pressure and made church a sanctuary from the struggles of the outside world? We can do it. It takes a willingness to listen and learn and the knowledge that you are never going to get it perfectly right for anyone! Disabilities change with age but the need for a welcoming attitude and a culture that makes everyone feel they belong is an ambition we can't afford not to have.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14 (NirV)

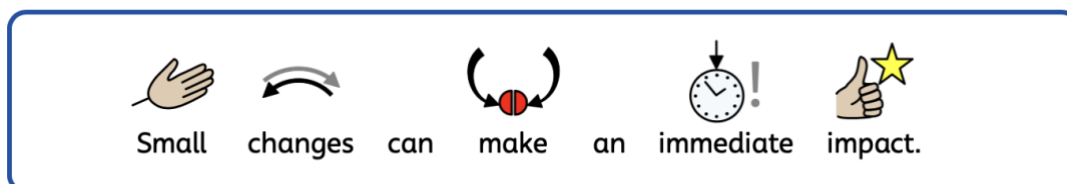
There is one body, but it has many parts. But all its many parts make up one body. It is the same with Christ. ¹We were all baptized by one Holy Spirit. And so we are formed into one body. It didn't matter whether we were Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free people. We were all given the same Spirit to drink. So the body is not made up of just one part. It has many parts.



1. Do an audit

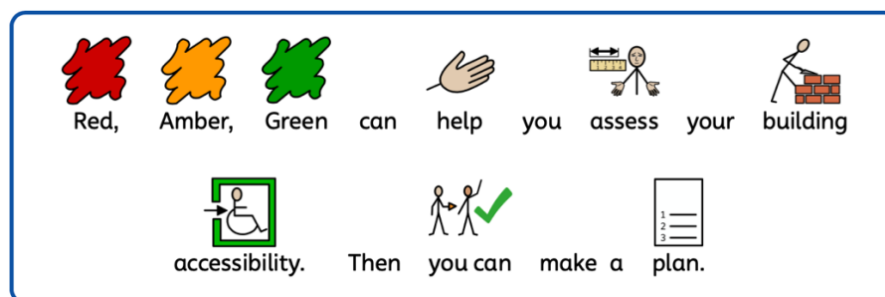
A simple audit of your congregation can be done in different ways.

- Start with those you already know and go round for a brew and chat about their church experience.
- You could do a talk and invite people (children, youth and adults) to arrange a chat with you, or with someone they know well and feedback to you.
- You could create a simple survey (make it accessible – clear language, spacing, options to record answers etc.)
- Have a Disability Awareness Sunday Service and make feedback part of the participation. (maybe a group mind mapping exercise or post it notes).
- Cover areas such as describing their needs, physical accessibility (entrance, seating, toilets etc), welcome and accessible information, accessing the worship and sermons, accessing social activity, relationships and friendships, being able to serve in the church, how well do people feel that they belong.
- Ask for suggestions about what would make church work better for them.



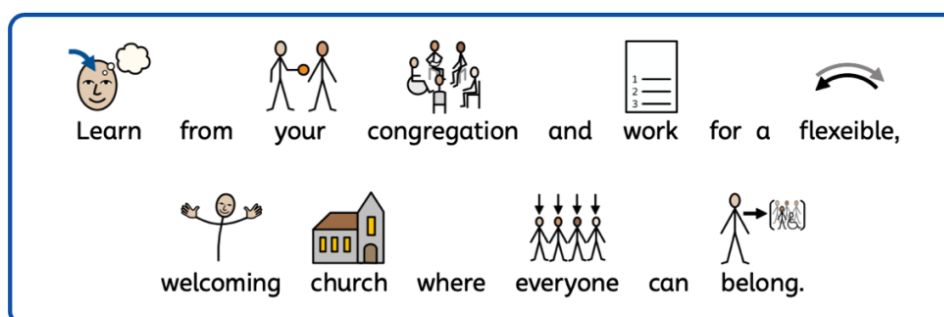
2. Start with something easy and general. Quick wins.

- In our church we started with making it okay to worship in any way that made it comfortable. It sounded awkward at first but generally we had a script for leaders, a bit like – “It’s time to worship. Please stand, sit or do what helps you to enter into this time of worship together.”
- If you use a power point check that all your song words are on clear contrasting backgrounds and remove any backgrounds that move or have a scene behind them.
- Have a bag or selection of fidget toys, quiet activities that anyone can access and mention that they are there from the front regularly.
- Agree a set of icons or symbols you can use on your notice boards, power points and newsletters to support people who struggle to read. EG. Every time you do prayer, there is a prayer symbol on the screen. In your newsletter there is the same symbol to show which part is the section about prayer.



3. Design your environment.

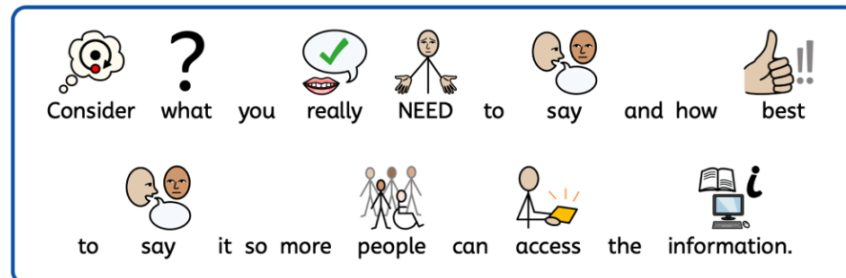
- Ask a wheelchair user to take you on a tour of your church's buildings. Do the same with a parent and child who struggles with sensory processing. And again, with someone visually impaired. This should identify some key issues you can make a list of.
- I use a Red, Amber, Green rating. Highlight in green what you already do well. Highlight in Amber what you could easily fix or change. Then the Red highlighted list is going to take more time, thought and resources. It is a good way to prioritise and do something, even if you cannot change your pews for chairs for a while yet.
- Do you have a hearing loop? Check it works. Involve the tech people to agree a sound level that should not be breached as too noisy is often a contributing factor to neurodivergent people leaving churches.
- Create a designated quiet area if you can. Also, an area where it is okay to move about. Guide the movers to designated areas (eg. cushions to crash on, or a line on the floor to follow with actions to do at various points, space allowing!). Make it okay to wear headphones, crochet or knit, doodle, write notes or lie down in church.
- Ask those with sensory issues about your seating, furnishings, lighting, corridors, toilets and accessing things like communion to see if there are any ways you can make these more accessible.



4. Work on your website and social media.

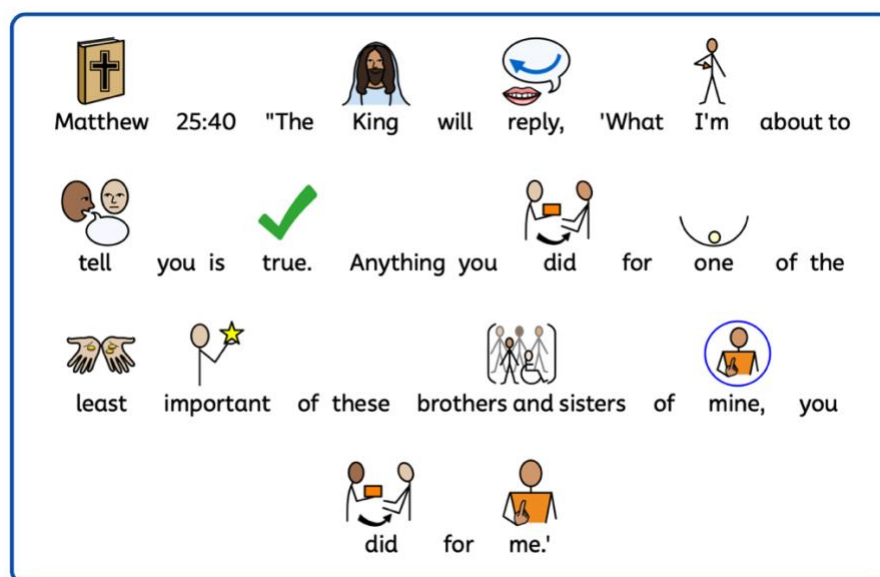
- This is often the first place people will get an impression of your church. So, make sure your photos show the diversity of people in your congregation. In our church the photos show people sitting and standing for worship. This proves we practice what we preach.

- Use alt text on all social media and website photos.
<https://www.rnib.org.uk/campaign-with-us/alt-text-campaign/how-can-i-write-alt-text/>
- Have a clear accessibility policy and information on your website but make sure it is accurate. Don't say you do something unless it always happens!



5. Think about how you do communication.

- Think about how much written material you give out. What alternatives are there if you can't read? Think about how small the text is. Think about the busy graphics that hide the text and make it clearer, using a strong contrast between text and background. Think about using a clear font (sans fonts work well) and spacing the text with white space between paragraphs. Use at least 16pt font and a clear contrast for those who may have sight impairments.
- Consider using software such as Widgit which makes it easy to produce symbol supported documents and handouts. These are good for children and adults with learning disabilities.
- Consider using Easy Read guidelines. If you feed the guidelines into your AI model it can do most of the work for you. (But always check, check, check before publishing.) Easy read covers people who may be dyslexic, who are poor readers, have learning disabilities and who may not understand English very well.
<https://easyreadstandard.org>
- Preachers can help by chunking their sermon into parts and making clear links. If possible, use a clear and key picture to illustrate your main point. The challenge is getting the teaching across without losing people who struggle with concentration or who cannot understand complex spiritual words. Every preacher has their own style but it is always good to explore whether your congregation are able to engage and remember the words and message of the Lord you are sharing.
- Some churches use Makaton or British Sign Language. We introduced Makaton slowly, signing one song each service which enabled our two adults with learning disabilities to find their confidence and be part of the service. We explained the Christian signs one by one and now many in the congregation love joining in signing during worship.
- Work with your welcome team to help them spot and know how to respectfully welcome existing and new people who may have additional needs. Start with the obvious – eg. speak to the person who is disabled directly, not ask their carer about them.



There is so much that can be done. Remember I said that you have to come to terms with the fact you will never achieve it all or ever be perfect for everyone. There will be compromises, grace and lots of humility needed. And that's okay. God is building his family, his body where all can belong and exercise their gifts. This tip sheet is just some advice on starting points. Do get in touch if you want to know more, want some training or someone to talk through your journey with you. Email me at includedbygrace14@gmail.com

Additional Support.

My own website has resources and links to other organisations across the UK –
www.includedbygrace.co.uk

Torch Trust how to support people with sight impairments.

<https://www.torchtrust.org/sight-loss-friendly-church/slfc-benefits/#slfc-resources>

Open Ears how to support people with hearing impairments.

<https://www.openeears.org.uk/helpful-resources>

Count Everyone In how to support adults with learning disabilities.

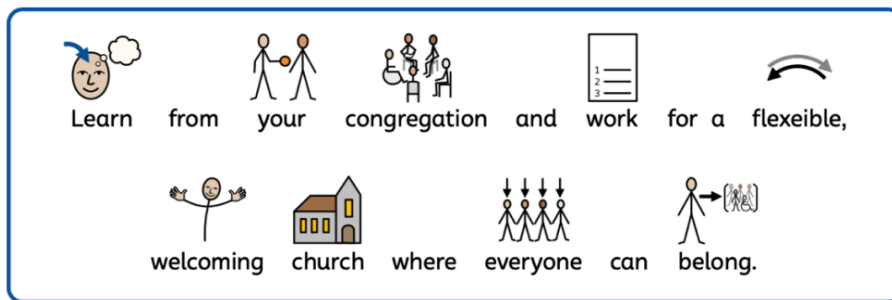
<https://www.counteveryonein.org.uk/ideas/>

Through the Roof how to support people with disabilities and the Roofbreaker (Disability Champion) scheme. <https://throughtheroof.org/forchurches/>

Mark Arnold Additional Needs Director at Urban Saints -

<https://www.urbansaints.org/about/support-streams/additional-needs>

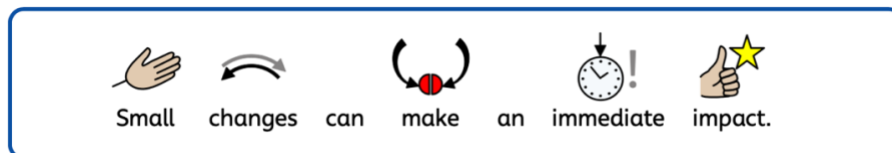
Kay Morgan-Gurr consultancy and training - <https://theponderingplatypus.com>



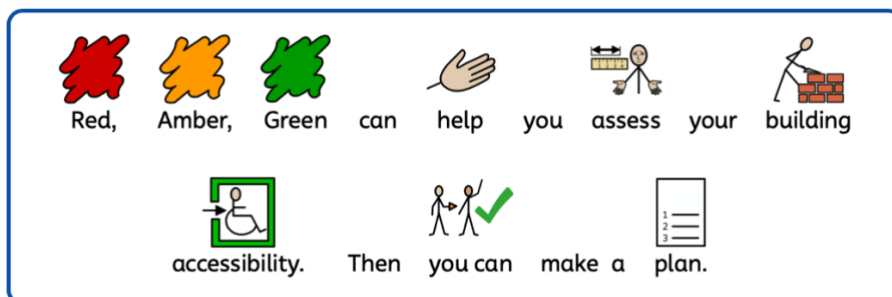
Learn from your congregation and work for a flexible, welcoming church where everyone can belong.



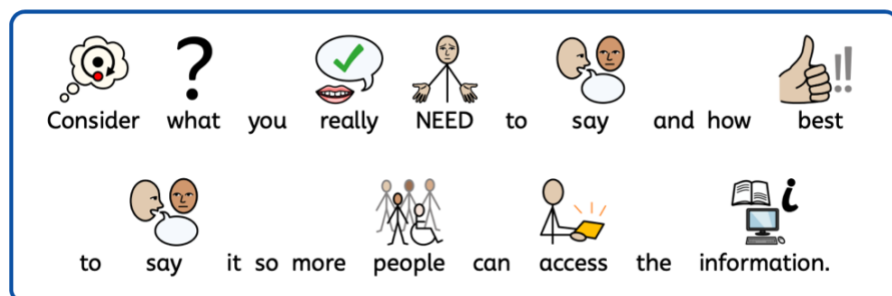
Find out what you do already and what is missing.



Small changes can make immediate impact.



Red, Amber, Green coding can help you assess you building accessibility. Then you can make a plan.



Consider what you really need to say and how best to say it so people can access the information.