

Information Brief

Youth Voice: Access to Beliefs

By Aaron Westendorp

What happens when people with disabilities are denied their basic right to worship however they want? You don't have to imagine it; it's happening in the United States to this very day. All across this country, churches that were built in the 1940s and 50s aren't being modified to fit the needs of people who use wheelchairs and scooters. Also, what about the regular members of the congregation that may experience injuries that require casts or wheelchairs? In this brief, I will examine the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) clause that represents this issue, and share my own experience.

America is supposed to be the land of opportunity and freedom. There is a real disservice to people who need to access their place of worship by way of wheelchair or scooter. Title III of the ADA deals with public accommodations, which according to Section 302 "no individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of disability in the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities,

privileges, advantages, or accommodations of any place of public accommodation by any person who owns, leases (or leases to), or operates a place of public accommodation”

In that same clause, it almost sounds like a whole different world. Under section 307, there is a short paragraph that states “The provisions of this title shall not apply to private clubs or establishments exempted from coverage under title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or **to religious organizations or entities controlled by religious organizations, including places of worship.**” (1)

I understand the policy of separation of church and state, but I think there are cases where exceptions could be made. If church organizers want to attract the most people, it is necessary to make the appropriate accommodations.

However, it's understandable that not all churches have the proper funding to remodel. It's frustrating though, that it all comes down to the issue of finances. The Word of God should be accessible to everyone, no matter what. Why is this so hard to understand?

I attend a church called Solomon's Porch, which started above a small church in an urban area. Since it started six years ago, the community has moved to four locations, none of which has been accessible. This community is focused on bringing about the hopes and dreams of God in the World. Their services (called "gatherings") focus on the humanity aspect of religion.

This is very disturbing to me because if this church wanted to attract the most diverse population, wouldn't they modify it to fit the needs of people with disabilities? I think this is a great injustice for true believers not just in my own community, but around the world.

I would recommend that parish members contact the Religion department at the National Organization on Disabilities (see below for contact information.) There you can find books, resources, and links to other sites (also see below).

Resources

Text of the Americans with Disabilities Act:

<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/pubs/ada.txt>

Department of Religion at the National Organization on Disabilities:

www.nod.org/religion

Council for Jews with Special Needs: <http://www.cjsn.org/Home.asp>

The Center for Religion and Disability:

<http://www.religionanddisability.org/>

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD):

<http://www.ncpd.org/>

For more information on NCLD-Youth and the work that we do, please contact

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