



Accessible Worship

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH



Orlando,
Florida



May
2024



Disability &
The Church



125
Ministry
Leaders



Many
Creative
Solutions

“Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!” - Psalm 67:5

The psalmist calls all people to worship and praise the Lord, without exception. Yet, many people with disabilities encounter barriers to this calling. Churches often struggle to develop fully accessible environments that encourage and support meaningful participation by all members of the body, including those with disabilities and their families. How might churches begin to address all aspects of accessible worship?

In May 2024, more than 120 ministry leaders from across the country gathered in Orlando, Florida at the Disability and the Church Conference for a “community conversation” on disability and the church. Participants included pastors, worship leaders, youth and children’s ministry leaders, disability ministry leaders, and others who are passionate about accessible and inclusive ministry. The leaders discussed their successes and challenges in local church ministry and suggested creative solutions to improve the full worship participation of people with disabilities.

This report contains numerous suggestions generated by the prompt: **“What could we do to make our worship services more accessible for every member of the body?”** These insights broaden our understanding of accessibility and invite us to imagine new pathways to full worship participation.

Gathering Overview

A “community conversation” is a structured approach for bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to address an important issue within their community. For this event, the conversation explored practical ways of addressing barriers that keep people with and without disabilities from participating together—fully and meaningfully—in the life of local churches.

The evening event lasted one hour and was organized around two rounds of small-group conversation. As people arrived, they signed in and sat around small tables with 4-6 fellow attendees. Erik Carter, Executive Director of the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities, welcomed everyone and provided a brief overview of the goals for the gathering. He highlighted the importance of faith in the lives of people with disabilities and their families, as well as the struggles they often encounter as they search for an accessible and supportive congregation. He also emphasized how the welcome and embrace of local churches can enable every member of the body to flourish together.

The remainder of the event involved facilitated table conversations related to accessible worship and belonging. This report contains insights related to the topic of accessible worship. The discussion generated responses to this core question:

What could we do to make worship services accessible for every member of the body?

Attendees shared their ideas aloud with others at their table. They drew upon their expertise to suggest how faith communities might gather, preach, teach, connect, and support one another in ways that promote greater inclusion and belonging. A facilitator at each table wrote down every idea offered by participants. In addition, attendees were encouraged to write their ideas on paper placemats.

At the close of the event, everyone completed a short survey. In addition to providing basic demographic information, each person shared what they considered to be primary barriers to accessible worship and belonging in churches.



**WHAT
COULD WE
DO TO MAKE
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Moving Toward Accessible Worship

The remainder of this guide highlights a sampling of the ideas that emerged during this unique conversation among ministry leaders from across the country. We have organized their recommendations according to 15 aspects of accessible worship identified in a recent¹ study of Christians with various disabilities:

- **ARCHITECTURE**
- **ATTITUDES**
- **COMMUNICATION**
- **CONTRIBUTIONS**
- **EXPECTATIONS**
- **INTERACTIONS**
- **LITURGY**
- **POSTURES**
- **SENSE OF COMMUNITY**
- **SENSORY FACTORS**
- **SUPPORTS**
- **TECHNOLOGY**
- **THEOLOGY**
- **TRANSPORTATION**
- **UNDERSTANDING**

Attending well to each of these areas can help ensure that every member of the Body can worship as one. Although not every suggestion will make sense for your context, this catalog of ideas can still spur your creative thinking.

Erik W. Carter, Michael Tuttle, Emilee Spann, Charis Ling, and Tiffany B. Jones (2024). Toward accessible worship: The experiences and insights of Christians with disabilities. *Journal of Religion & Disability*, 28(2), 189-219.

DISABILITY IS AN ORDINARY ASPECT OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

70,000,000

There are more than 70 million Americans with disabilities residing throughout every neighborhood throughout every state.



One in seven children under 18 is receiving special education services in their local schools.



One in four young people experience a serious mental health condition.



More than half of all adults over 65 report some form of impairment.



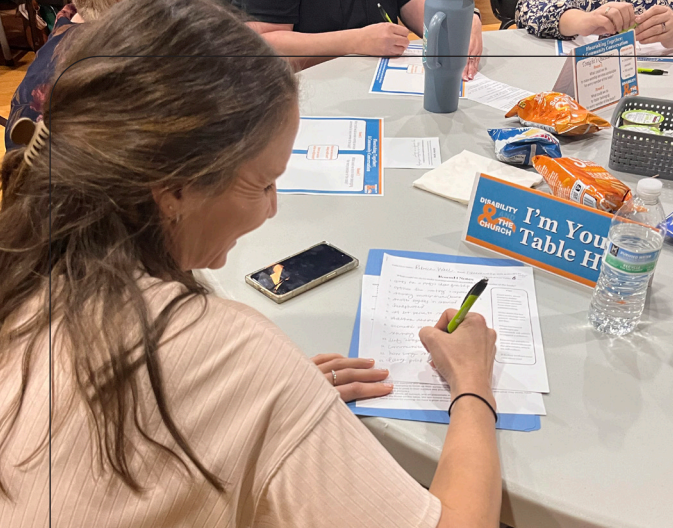
Photo by Emily Hoogerwerf on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

1 Architecture

The ways church buildings, classrooms, and other spaces are designed can impact who can come and how they participate. The physical layout and design of a sanctuary can either promote or prevent worshipping together as one community. For members and visitors with mobility impairments or other disabilities, ensuring every area of your church is easy to navigate and architecturally accessible is an essential practice.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Update your facilities so everything is accessible to people with an array of disabilities
- Incorporate universal design principles into your physical spaces so everyone can participate
- Ensure accessible parking is available and adequate
- Make sure buildings have multiple accessible entrances available
- Add covered entrances to your church
- Install automatic doors to all buildings
- Verify that every room is physically accessible for anyone who might use it
- Determine whether everything is at the right height for wheelchair users
- Update restrooms so they are all accessible
- Consider having a one-story building
- Install ramps and elevators
- Expand spaces to make room for any added supports
- Designate an open space in the sanctuary for members who need to move
- Create enough seating options for people with disabilities throughout the sanctuary
- Adjust aisles and pews to have adequate spacing
- Use rows with movable, rather than fixed, chairs
- Identify areas of accessible seating
- Offer accessible seating outdoors
- Confirm that the stage and baptismal can be accessed by everyone
- Add a ramp leading to the stage or platform
- Offer the sacraments in ways that every member can receive them
- Encourage worship leaders to stand or sit where they can be easily seen
- Designate an area of the sanctuary where anyone can go and pray



2 Attitudes

The views congregation members hold about disability can either draw people into community or push them away. Indeed, our attitudes shape our words or actions. Explore ways you can create an environment in which every person feels welcomed and valued.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Communicate that the presence of disabled people of all ages is desired
- Learn appropriate ways of interacting with people who have various disabilities
- Teach ministry volunteers about using language that is thoughtful and preferred (e.g., person-first language, disability-first language)
- Convey positive views about disability when advertising your church's inclusion efforts
- Use appropriate and inclusive language when talking about disability
- Select worship songs that use inclusive language
- Learn about disability and ways of supporting members well
- Educate the entire church about disabilities
- Encourage every person to treat one another with kindness and respect
- Host a Disability, Inclusion, or Access Sunday to promote awareness
- Ensure that all programs offered by the church include people with disabilities
- Assure parents that their children with disabilities are welcome and safe
- Invite children—including those with disabilities—to be part of the worship service
- Include people with disabilities into sermon stories/illustrations in helpful ways
- Allow people to move or stim during the worship service without judgment
- Communicate that worship services are important for everyone and no one should be excluded



"I believe that my pastor would knock down a brick wall for me if it stood in the way of getting me to the actual room where worship was going on."

Ryan, age 25

3 Communication

There are numerous ways to share and receive information. Consider how your church might increase engagement with a diverse membership by broadening the ways it conveys information verbally, visually, and in other formats.

Photo by Emily Hoogerwerf on Disability Is Beautiful
(disabilityisbeautiful.com)

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Find ways of helping people anticipate what will happen at church, especially when routines will change
- Present information on your website in clear and easy-to-understand ways
- Explain your ministries and what to expect on your website
- Add information about accessible parking locations on your website
- Explain the various ways people can take communion/participate in the Eucharist
- Post signs to clearly communicate how to navigate the church
- Incorporate both words and visual symbols on signage
- Add picture icons into the worship service to note what is happening now and next
- Embed icons into the church bulletin
- Post the order of the worship service using a visual schedule
- Use “first-then” boards for people who get anxious about changes or transitions
- Let people know in advance what worship songs will be sung
- Provide sermon notes, text, or other materials in advance
- Create an accessible notes page for use during sermons
- Send out or post the church bulletin in advance of the worship service
- Use straightforward, accessible language on church bulletins to reduce confusion
- Use high contrast on projection screens to ease reading
- Simplify worship slides (e.g., use fewer words, use a dark background)
- Select large fonts for all slides
- Ensure that all text and images projected on a screen are accessible and explained
- Provide written or verbal descriptions of all graphics

- Use simpler graphics and worship slides to reduce confusion and overstimulation
- Translate written material into different languages
- Provide interpreters or translation services
- Incorporate sign language interpretation into all aspects of the worship service
- Use hand motions to communicate
- Provide captioning of any auditory material
- Install hearing loops for people with hearing impairments
- Provide closed captioning during children's ministry activities
- Make materials and Bibles available in large print
- Provide materials and Scriptures in Braille
- Draw upon multiple translations of the Bible for accessibility
- Make unspoken expectations about participation more explicit (e.g., when to sit or stand)
- Share with members how they can indicate their need for support
- Communicate information creatively using various methods, including art
- Make people aware of available communication support by sharing a list



Baptism Photo by Jason Morrison on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

4 Contributions

Every person—without exception—has been given gifts that are needed by others in the church. Yet, people with disabilities are sometimes overlooked in the areas of leadership and service. Empower people with disabilities to participate in leading and serving in worship gatherings and other church activities.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Ensure that every person can serve within the church if they desire to do so
- Equip people with disabilities to serve as leaders
- Have a peer or adult support children with disabilities to serve in the church
- Involve people with disabilities in serving as greeters or ushers
- Encourage people with disabilities to take an active role in leading and serving during worship gatherings and other church activities.
- Invite people with disabilities to participate in Scripture readings
- Provide opportunities for those with disabilities to contribute to a worship service
- Encourage children and youth with disabilities to lead worship services
- Include musicians and vocalists with disabilities on the worship team
- Discuss how each person's spiritual gifts can be used meaningfully

5 Expectations

Every church has unspoken rules about how people should participate in worship services and other aspects of church life. Certain behaviors might be anticipated and encouraged, while others are discouraged or not allowed. Making these expectations more explicit can be helpful both for visitors and for people who have difficulty picking up on unstated expectations about participation.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Clearly state any expectations regarding church participation
- Communicate that varied ways of participating are both welcomed and encouraged
- Normalize diverse worship postures, encouraging people to be free to sit or stand
- Encourage a variety of acceptable ways to participate in worship, including singing verbally and worshiping silently in one's heart
- Simplify aspects of the worship service to reduce unspoken expectations
- Emphasize meaningful participation over appearances during worship services



6 Interactions

Corporate worship can provide multiple opportunities for people to meet and interact with others. However, the social interactions and conversations that occur before, during, or after a worship service might be challenging for some people. Explore ways of making those opportunities more supportive.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Equip your hospitality team to welcome people with disabilities well
- Foster an environment where everyone in the church is enthusiastic and genuinely eager to build meaningful relationships
- Recognize people's preferences when greeting them (e.g., touch versus no touch)
- Keep in mind that asking people to greet their neighbor during the service can be uncomfortable for some people
- Create other opportunities for meeting and mingling outside of the worship service



**“Christ meant for the whole
—for everybody—to be together.”**

- Sierra, age 35



7 Liturgy

The ways in which worship services are designed and conducted can impact people's participation. Reflect on the structure, sequence, activities, and predictability of worship services so that they are more inviting to anyone who participates.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Adopt a more consistent liturgical format to offer some predictability
- Return to familiar hymns and songs so that each one is not new
- Plan for smooth transitions between different aspects of the service
- Prepare a visual schedule of the church service so people can anticipate what happens next
- Provide a countdown clock so people know the time remaining in the service
- Try to keep each worship service around the same length
- Shorten worship sets or take frequent breaks
- Be attuned to how long the service lasts



"In every church, they should have folks with various disabilities lead because I think it gives the church a whole new perspective on the humanity of who we are."

- Jada, age 48

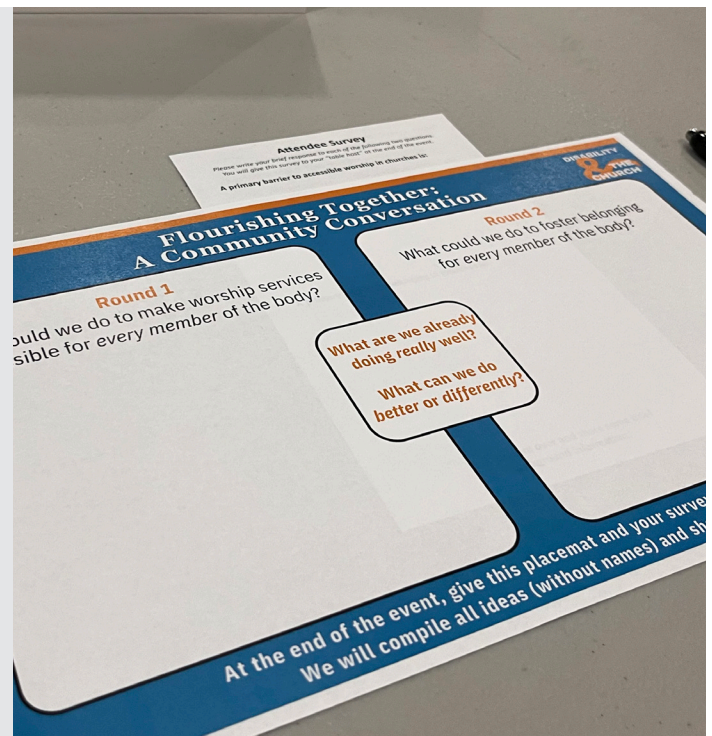




Photo by Disability Ministry on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

8 Postures

There are so many different ways to worship God individually and corporately. A willingness to be adaptable and accommodating when designing worship services ends up expanding who can participate. Assuming a more flexible posture introduces both creativity and accessibility into how we gather for worship.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Emphasize from the pulpit that the presence of people with disabilities is deeply desired
- Learn about supportive ways of including people with disabilities in worship services
- Seek out ways to be sensitive and inclusive
- Foster a church culture where people with disabilities are accepted and loved
- Learn how to foster belonging among people with and without disabilities
- Provide opportunities for staff and volunteers to learn about support for people with disabilities
- Take a class on incorporating ASL into worship
- Cultivate an environment of flexibility regarding church practices
- Be flexible with policies and structures so they are supportive of every member
- Remain eager and willing to learn
- Be open to exploring new approaches even when you are uncertain of what to try
- Think creatively when envisioning potential changes and new support
- Invite feedback from congregation members about changes that need to be made
- Ask people what they need and find supportive
- Seek the advice of people with disabilities
- Be mindful that there are various needs within your congregation
- Ensure the perspectives of people with disabilities are heard and valued
- Host discussion tables so people can share their experiences and learn from one another
- Model various ways of worshipping throughout the service
- Introduce alternatives to singing for people who are non-speaking
- Provide instruments for children and adults to use during worship

- Allow children to select the worship songs and incorporate motions
- Provide art supplies in the worship center
- Let greeters or hospitality team members know that movement is okay
- Withhold judgment when people move or make noise during the worship service
- Create an environment that is flexible and tolerant of different ways of participating
- Be mindful of members with social anxiety
- Be flexible in providing multiple ways of participating in each aspect of the worship service



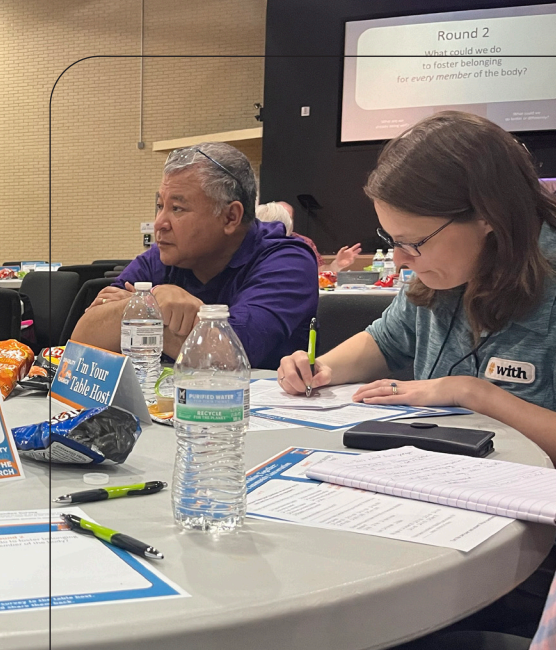
Photo by Emily Hoogerwerf on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

9 Sense of Community

We are called to be a community marked by love, care, and friendship. The friendships and assurance of belonging people have at church can impact their involvement. Fostering a sense of community among every member of the body can help strengthen the bonds among members.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Show a genuine interest in the lives of other people, including those with disabilities
- Build trust with parents of children with disabilities
- Encourage people to meet with families who cannot attend church in person
- Share stories with one another to foster empathy
- Offer support groups for church members
- Host game nights at church or in people's homes
- Encourage church members to support other members with disabilities
- Organize prayer meetings



10 Sensory Factors

Participation in a worship service involves encounters with a complex medley of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and more. Although some of these sensory aspects might go unnoticed by some people, they can be especially prominent for others. The intensity of noise, lighting, movement, and touch can impact participation and enjoyment for some members. Attending to these sensory factors can be an important aspect of making worship services more accessible.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Develop an understanding of sensory needs and arrange needed support
- Keep possible sensory sensitivities in mind when designing the worship service
- Create a sensory-friendly worship service
- Offer services with different worship styles
- Provide a calm entrance for people with sensory sensitivities
- Teach greeters and ushers about the sensory needs they may encounter
- Make sensory tools (for different age groups) available in a designated place
- Let people know that sensory tools are available
- Keep sensitivities to sound in mind when determining volume levels
- Ensure sound and lighting techs are aware of sensory needs
- Offer ear plugs and headphones for attendees with noise sensitivities
- Decrease the volume of the worship service
- Choose softer and quieter songs
- Eliminate background music when people are talking
- Incorporate moments of silence into the worship service



“The church has to have a good theology on disability for the person to really have access to that space in an equal way.”

- Emma,
age 21

- Provide a quiet area during the louder parts of a worship service
- Be willing to change the lighting or sound to help those with disabilities participate
- Announce when the volume or lighting is about to change
- Keep sensitivities to light in mind when choosing lighting
- Eliminate the use of flashing lights during the service
- Provide a section of the sanctuary with lower lights
- Place light covers over fluorescent lights
- Provide sunglasses for attendees with sensory sensitivities
- Remove distracting elements from the worship service
- Encourage the worship team to wear neutral colors
- Provide options and areas for people to take a short break from the worship service
- Create a sensory room that is welcoming for older children and adults
- Incorporate a variety of music styles and songs in the worship service
- Alter the length of songs (use some short and some long)
- Make ribbon wands available for use in worship
- Allow for movement within the service
- Incorporate breaks into the service
- Create multiple seating options, including bean bags, wobble chairs, firm chairs, and soft chairs



"God made us all and He created us all with our own...gifts to give. We have to figure out what they are and then it's up to them to help us to serve.

EVERYBODY'S IMPORTANT!"

- Elise, age 65



Photo by Ability Ministry on Disability Is Beautiful (disabilityisbeautiful.com)

11 Supports

The availability of support makes meaningful participation possible, whereas its absence can lead to exclusion from worship services. Offering support entails learning the individual needs of members and offering personalized assistance when needed to allow for increased and meaningful participation in the worship service.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Have greeters and ushers ensure accessibility by opening doors and helping people locate seating
- Recruit volunteers who can come alongside people who may need assistance to participate in church activities
- Equip your hospitality team and ministry volunteers to welcome people with disabilities
- Provide multiple ways people can participate in worship services
- Offer a variety of support options so people can choose what works best
- Provide the assistance people need to participate in communion
- Identify ways people can participate in the service without speaking or singing
- Incorporate attention to the multiple senses into worship
- Develop a buddy system to support children with disabilities during the worship service
- Highlight the best locations for people who are hard of hearing
- Offer gluten-free communion options
- Keep communion elements covered or sealed
- Select food options with food sensitivities and allergies in mind
- Provide accessible note pages for church attendees
- Create activity bags for children and adults who may have a difficult time staying engaged
- Make themed coloring books available
- Ask people what supports they would find to be most helpful
- Wear name tags
- Foster social supports
- Develop supports for families with members who have disabilities

- Schedule church events with these families in mind
- Provide respite care for families
- Be ready to care for people when they need it
- Install an adult changing table in one or more bathrooms
- Establish areas where service animals are and are not allowed
- Explore various ways of baptizing to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities
- Add rubber gripping to make the baptismal more accessible
- Notice when people seem uncomfortable and adjust accordingly
- Develop partnerships with community service providers



“I THINK LACK OF SUPPORT

is why being a part of a faith community is so discouraging for so many families, and even individuals who have a disability.”

- Emma, age 21



12 Technology

Technology is everywhere and ever-changing—including in most churches. As new software, apps, equipment, and other technology emerge, their thoughtful use can help support greater involvement in the life of the church. Consider the ways in which technology can help connect people to worship and to one another.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Livestream your worship service
- Caption speaking, singing, videos, and any other auditory material
- Use CART technology for attendees who are Deaf or hard of hearing
- Project videos and imagery to enrich preaching and worship
- Provide hymnbooks or song lyrics on tablets
- Adjust the contrast on screens to make reading easier
- Encourage the use of Bible apps like YouVersion
- Provide audible Bibles
- Stream worship service video and audio into your sensory room or cry room

13 Theology

Our theology directly shapes our practices and postures. What is preached from the pulpit or expressed in conversation can impact how people see themselves, view God, and relate to the church. Too often, the messages people share about disability are wounding and contrary to the Scriptures.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Develop and study a theology of disability based on Jesus' teachings
- Approach Scriptural topics related to disability with sound theology
- Consider how your theology of worship might contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of people with disabilities
- Preach a sermon series about disability

14 Transportation

Although conversations about accessible worship often focus on what happens inside the sanctuary, the absence of reliable transportation can keep some people with disabilities from ever arriving to church. Consider how you might help people get to and from church each week.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Ensure accessible parking spots are available and adequate
- Ask people how the church can help address their transportation needs
- Help people easily get from the parking lot to the church building

15 Understanding

Worship services often rely heavily on the written and spoken word. Yet, members of the same congregation can vary widely in their literacy and educational background. Likewise, people with cognitive impairments may have difficulty understanding all aspects of the worship service. Consider how you might make preaching, teaching, readings, and other aspects of the service more accessible for a diverse body of believers.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Preach and teach in a way that is accessible to various levels of cognitive abilities, biblical knowledge, and stages of life
- Incorporate dramatic presentations to enhance the worship service
- Maintain a pace throughout the service that is appropriate for people of varied abilities and backgrounds
- Use pictures and stories to support deeper learning
- Present biblical information in multiple and varied ways
- Communicate information in a simplified way whenever possible
- Incorporate concrete concepts and examples in the sermon
- Make the service more interactive to enhance understanding and engagement
- Provide a clear explanation of communion, and consider how people with varying intellectual and physical abilities can fully participate
- Use props to help explain difficult concepts in worship songs
- Embed interactive activities to reinforce the sermon message
- Select songs that correspond with the theme of the sermon



BAYLOR CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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For more information about this event and its findings, contact the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities at Baylor University.
<http://bcdd.soe.baylor.edu>

Reference:

Erik W. Carter, Kari Maddox, Madeline Pettit, Jason Le Shana, Ashley Westover, and Grace Casper. (2024). *Accessible worship: A community conversation on disability and the Church*. Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities.