





## Toward Accessible Worship: The Experiences and Insights of Christians with Disabilities

Erik W. Carter<sup>a</sup> , Michael Tuttle<sup>b</sup> , Emilee Spann<sup>b</sup>, Charis Ling<sup>b</sup> and Tiffany B. Jones<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA; <sup>c</sup>Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

### ABSTRACT

The call on churches to be places of inclusion and full participation for people with disabilities is clear. Yet many congregations still struggle to design worship services in ways that are accessible to everyone in their faith community. This qualitative study identified salient aspects of Christian worship services that require consideration within churches that are striving to ensure broad accessibility. Though interviews with 37 people with varied disabilities (e.g., autism, hearing impairments, intellectual disability, physical disabilities, visual impairment), we identified 15 dimensions of worship services that warrant careful attention: postures, communication, sense of community, architecture, contributions, attitudes, expectations, technology, supports, interactions, sensory factors, liturgy, understanding, theology, and transportation. We discuss the implications of these findings for worship leaders and suggest avenues for future research aimed at promoting accessible worship services.

### KEYWORDS

Disabilities; worship; inclusion; accessibility

Worship is at the heart of the local church. Although variations abound across time, traditions, and communities, regular worship services often comprise a time when a body of believers gathers for praise, petition, prayer, singing, teaching, reflecting, offering, confession, and/or communion. The scriptures are replete with calls for Christians to join together for corporate worship—calls that still come without exceptions. This regular time of gathering can also be embedded and surrounded with opportunities for fellow church members to meet, connect with, and encourage one another. Prior to the current COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half (45%) of Americans attended religious services at least monthly; another 20% attended a few times per year (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Worship is equally important for Christians with disabilities. More than one in five Americans identify as having a disability (Taylor, 2018). These

85 million children and adults reside in every community across the United States and are represented across every demographic category (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status). Any church committed to reaching, loving, and receiving *all* of their neighbors must know that their community is filled with people with disabilities; their church quite likely is as well. Indeed, faith holds an equally prominent place in the lives of people with disabilities and their families (Carter, 2021; Hodge & Reynolds, 2019; National Organization on Disability, 2004).

Yet studies addressing the religious participation of people with disabilities in the United States indicate the existence of a sizable participation gap in the area of church attendance (e.g., Idler & Kasl, 1997; Lee et al., 2008; Whitehead, 2018). Specifically, children and adults with disabilities attend worship services considerably less often than people without disabilities. For example, one nationally representative study found that 45% of individuals who identified as having a significant disability reported attending a place of worship at least monthly, compared to 57% of individuals without disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2010). A growing body of research has also examined the array of barriers that can coalesce to impact the involvement of people with disabilities who do attend worship services and other church activities (see reviews by Carter, 2023; Schultz, 2012). In other words, diminished involvement in worship services should not be attributed to diminished interest or commitment among people with disabilities—other factors are likely more influential.

Collectively, these myriad studies prompt a critical question for churches committed to welcoming the presence and participation of people with disabilities: What does it mean for worship services to be truly accessible to those impacted by disability? Unfortunately, this remains a place of considerable uncertainty for many pastors and worship leaders (Ault et al., 2023; Stewart-Ginsburg et al., 2020). Indeed, most seminaries still devote limited attention to the topic of disability within the curriculum (Barton, 2021; Webb, 2020). In their national study of theological education, Annandale and Carter (2014) found that only 29% of school leaders said that graduates of their seminary were adequately or highly prepared to integrate people with disabilities into corporate worship. Research addressing the worship experiences of people with a variety of disabilities could provide much-needed insights into how to ensure broad accessibility.

To date, there have been no empirical studies focused narrowly on the accessibility of Christian worship services. Historically, efforts to promote “accessible worship” have focused on three main areas: architecture, attitudes, and communication. Initially, the physical features of sanctuaries and other church facilities were emphasized to ensure people with disabilities could be present during worship services (e.g., Holland et al., 2016; Vierkant et al., 2006). The national *Accessible Congregations Campaign*

of the late 1990s embodied this architectural accent in response to some churches' resistance to the Americans with Disabilities Act (Herzog, 2008). Likewise, several denominations promoted the use of accessibility audits to guide local reflection on these physical features. At the same time, emphasis was also placed on addressing the prevailing attitudes of church leaders and congregation members (McNair, 2007; McNair & Sanchez, 2008; Treloar, 2002). Raising awareness and changing mindsets were advocated as critical to ensuring the barriers of both stares and stairs were addressed concurrently. Finally, efforts to address communication have focused on the avenues through which information is shared during worship. Although these three areas are undoubtedly important, other aspects of worship may also warrant consideration.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify salient aspects of Christian worship services that require careful consideration when striving toward greater accessibility. We foregrounded the experiences of Christians with disabilities who could speak firsthand about the factors that impacted their involvement in worship. Moreover, we strived to develop a practical framework that church leaders could use for reflecting on their own church's worship services.

## Method

### *Participants*

We interviewed 37 adults with varied disabilities. To participate in the study, participants must have (a) had a disability, (b) attended a local church, (c) been old enough to consent (i.e., at least 18 years old), and (d) lived in Tennessee. Their average age was 36.7 years (range, 20 to 67) and most were female (62%). Their primary disabilities were autism spectrum disorders ( $n=7$ ), hearing impairment ( $n=5$ ), intellectual disability ( $n=8$ ), physical disability ( $n=7$ ), and visual impairment ( $n=10$ ); 24.3% had additional disabilities (e.g., mental health conditions, learning disabilities). Most participants reported they attended worship services fairly frequently (94.6% agreed that "I consider myself to be active in my faith or congregation.") and all considered their faith to be an important aspect of their lives ("I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life."). Participants affiliated with churches from multiple denominations, including: Catholic, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church of Christ, Church of God in Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Covenant Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, Greek Orthodox, Missionary Baptist, Presbyterian Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Society of Friends, and Southern Baptist. [Table 1](#) displays demographics.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Variable	All participants ( <i>n</i> = 37)	Autism ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Hearing impairment ( <i>n</i> = 5)	Intellectual disability ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Physical disability ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Visual impairment ( <i>n</i> = 10)
Sex <sup>a</sup>						
Male	37.8% (14)	42.8% (3)	60.0% (3)	37.5% (3)	28.6% (2)	30.0% (3)
Female	62.2% (23)	57.1% (4)	40.0% (2)	62.5% (5)	71.4% (5)	70.0% (7)
Age <sup>b</sup>	36.7 (14.1)	32.6 (12.4)	44.4 (14.1)	23.8 (2.8)	42.1 (11.8)	42.6 (13.9)
Race/ethnicity <sup>b</sup>						
European American	83.7% (31)	85.7% (6)	80.0% (4)	87.5% (7)	85.7% (6)	80.0% (8)
African American	13.5% (5)	14.3% (1)	20.0% (1)	12.5% (1)	0% (0)	20.0% (2)
Other	2.7% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	14.3% (1)	0% (0)
Highest level of education <sup>a</sup>						
High school or less	8.1% (3)	14.3% (1)	0% (0)	25.0% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Some college	32.4% (12)	28.6% (2)	40.0% (2)	75.0% (6)	14.3% (1)	10.0% (1)
Four-year college degree	27.0% (10)	42.9% (4)	40.0% (2)	0% (0)	14.3% (1)	40.0% (4)
Graduate degree	32.4% (12)	14.3% (1)	20.0% (1)	0% (0)	71.4% (5)	50.0% (5)
Congregation size <sup>a</sup>						
Less than 100	13.5% (5)	0% (0)	40.0% (2)	12.5% (1)	14.3% (1)	20.0% (2)
100 to 299	24.3% (9)	57.1% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	40.0% (4)
300 to 499	13.5% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)	25.0% (2)	28.6% (1)	10.0% (1)
500 to 999	16.2% (6)	14.3% (1)	0% (0)	25.0% (2)	42.9% (3)	0% (0)
More than 999	24.3% (9)	28.6% (2)	60.0% (3)	0% (0)	14.3% (1)	30.0% (3)
I don't know	8.1% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	37.5% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Church membership-length <sup>b</sup>	9.0 (10.3)	10.6 (10.5)	5.0 (5.3)	9.4 (7.7)	13.6 (16.1)	6.5 (6.6)
Church attendance <sup>a</sup>						
Several times weekly	13.5% (5)	14.3%	0% (0)	37.5% (3)	0% (0)	10.0% (1)
Weekly	62.1% (23)	85.7%	80.0% (4)	37.5% (3)	71.4% (5)	50.0% (5)
Several times a month	8.1% (3)	0%	20.0% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	20.0% (2)
Once a month	2.7% (1)	0%	0% (0)	12.5% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Several times a year	8.1% (3)	0%	0% (0)	0% (0)	14.3% (1)	20.0% (2)
Once or twice a year	5.4% (2)	0%	0% (0)	12.5% (1)	14.3% (1)	0% (0)

<sup>a</sup>*n* (%).<sup>b</sup>*M* (*SD*).

## Recruitment

After securing Institutional Review Board approval, we partnered with multiple area disability organizations and programs to disseminate study announcements to their stakeholders and clients with disabilities. These groups included area chapters of disability-specific organizations (e.g., Arc, Autism society, Brain Injury Association, Down Syndrome Association, Epilepsy Foundation, Mental Health Alliance), therapeutic programs, regional Centers for Independent Living, employment and residential providers, special recreation programs, and a university center on disability. We provided these groups with multiple types of study announcements (i.e., print flyer, email invitation, newsletter blurbs, social media posting) and encouraged them to use the avenues they felt would reach the most people. All recruitment materials explained the study purpose, its inclusion criteria, the nature of the interview, and the honorarium (\$50USD). Interested persons were directed to a website where they completed a short screening survey to confirm their eligibility. We reached out to provide additional information, answer questions, obtain informed consent, and schedule the interview.

### **Data collection**

We conducted individual interviews with each participant. The overarching project focused on exploring the participation of individuals with disabilities in worship and their experiences of accessibility within the church. To this end, our semi-structured interview protocol addressed the church they attended, the nature of their involvement, their experiences in worship services, their views regarding accessibility, their sense of belonging, and their recommendations for churches. The most salient questions included: *In what ways (if any) does your disability impact your involvement in worship? Are the aspects of the service in which your own participation is more difficult or might look somewhat different from most others in the church? Has there been a time when you felt excluded from some aspect of worship or were not able to participate? What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “accessible worship”? Based on this definition [of accessible worship], what would be your overall description of how accessible worship is at your church? In what ways could these aspects of worship be more accessible for you personally?* However, most participants addressed accessibility throughout their entire interviews. We used follow-up questions and probes for clarification, elaboration, and to obtain more detail. The full protocol is available by request. The interviews lasted an average of 50 min (range, 20–80 min).

We conducted interviews in locations determined by each of the participants (e.g., home, church, coffee shops); one interview took place over Zoom. A member of the project team facilitated each interview, which included one faculty member and four graduate students whose work addressed disability from different disciplines (i.e., divinity, special education, physical therapy, audiology). Two participants with intellectual disability and one with a visual impairment asked that one or both parents attend the interview. In these cases, all questions were still directed to the individual with disabilities with only occasional input or clarification from parents. One participant with complex communication needs submitted written responses to our questions. We audio recorded the interviews and had them professionally transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

Our team-based analytic approach involved four people: a faculty member and graduate student who conducted the interviews, as well as an undergraduate and graduate student who contributed to coding. We used thematic analysis (Patton, 2015) to identify salient features of worship services that impacted (e.g., hindered, facilitated) accessibility for congregants with disabilities. We used the constant comparison method, in which coders frequently compared code applications within and across transcripts to ensure consistent coding, generate new codes, or revise definitions of codes

(Strauss & Corbin, 2008). We checked all transcripts, de-identified them, and imported them into Dedoose. The entire team coded the first four transcripts and met three times to discuss coded passages relevant to our research question. The remaining 33 transcripts were coded in pairs. Coding partners rotated every 2–4 transcripts.

During the first stage of analysis, team members identified passages within transcripts that addressed the research question and assigned open codes to passages. Codes were applied to passages within the transcripts that ranged from short phrases to several paragraphs. Open codes were short quotes or phrases that summarized suggestions offered by participants. Second, we used the open codes to identify themes and develop a coding framework. Team members met to revise and reach a consensus on an initial coding framework. Open codes were merged into revised axial codes. The students examined all the axial code applications to ensure consistent application of the coding framework. A team discussion was held to reach a consensus on code applications and revise definitions of codes. Finally, we applied the axial codes to the remaining transcripts. After the transcripts were coded, a final team discussion was held to reach a consensus on code applications and finalize revisions to the axial codes.

We took several steps to address the trustworthiness of our findings. First, we used purposeful sampling to ensure each participant had experiences and insights related to accessibility within the church. At the same time, we involved participants with a range of disabilities, demographics, denominational backgrounds, and church sizes to enhance the transferability of our results. Second, we adopted a collaborative, consensus-based approach and negative case analysis to help diminish the influence of our own individual biases in each step of our analyses. Third, we kept a detailed audit trail for all interviews (i.e., dates, times, locations, attendees) and data analyses (i.e., processes, codebook iterations, consensus meetings).

## Findings

Participants identified 15 different aspects of regular worship services that can affect the full participation of people with disabilities. Table 2 displays these areas, along with the percentage of participants who raised each area and the number of distinct references each area received. In the following sections, we discuss each dimension of worship and present quotes (both brief and extended) to illustrate its salience and impact. The age and disability (i.e., A, H, I, P, V; see Table 2) of participants are indicated in parentheses along with their pseudonym. We order the dimensions based on the total number of participants who addressed each area (Table 3).

**Table 2.** References to key dimensions of accessible worship.

Aspect	All participants (n = 37)		Autism (A) (n = 7)		Hearing impairment (H) (n = 5)		Intellectual disability (I) (n = 8)		Physical disability (P) (n = 7)		Visual impairment (V) (n = 10)	
	Total	References	Total	References	Total	References	Total	References	Total	References	Total	References
Postures	30	90	7	21	4	19	3	13	6	13	10	22
Communication	29	136	3	9	5	51	6	12	5	12	10	52
Sense of community	29	73	5	20	4	8	7	21	4	4	9	20
Architecture	28	106	5	26	1	3	6	17	7	41	9	19
Contributions	26	41	4	8	4	4	6	12	5	8	7	9
Attitudes	24	74	6	15	4	8	3	9	4	6	7	34
Expectations	23	32	5	7	3	3	3	3	5	6	7	13
Technology	22	59	2	3	4	16	3	3	4	9	9	27
Supports	20	51	3	12	1	1	4	5	4	6	8	26
Interactions	20	43	4	12	2	7	4	5	2	4	8	15
Sensory factors	16	56	5	34	2	6	2	3	4	7	3	6
Liturgy	15	34	3	4	2	7	0	0	4	5	6	18
Understanding	14	21	4	4	3	7	5	8	1	1	1	1
Theology	14	21	3	5	2	2	0	0	4	5	5	9
Transportation	10	26	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	7	22

Note. **Total** column addresses the number of participants who mentioned each aspect of worship. **References** column addresses the total number of times each aspect of worship was mentioned across participants.

**Table 3.** Summary of fifteen dimension of accessible worship.

Dimension	Description
Postures	The overall stance regarding flexibility and adaptability within worship services
Communication	The ways in which information is imparted or exchanged throughout worship services
Sense of community	Having deep affiliation, friendships, and/or belonging within one's faith community
Architecture	The physical features and layout of a church, as well as the ease with which the sanctuary can be navigated
Contributions	Opportunities to share one's gifts or serve others within the context of regular worship services
Attitudes	Views regarding disability that are expressed in words or actions
Expectations	Unspoken assumptions or rules regarding which behaviors are expected, encouraged, or allowed
Technology	The array of tools, devices, and apps that can enable or enhance participation
Supports	Individualized assistance that enables full and meaningful participation in worship services
Interactions	The social exchanges and conversations that take place before, during, and after worship services
Sensory factors	Volume, lighting, textural or tactile input, temperature, and other sensory elements that impact participation
Liturgy	The structure, sequence, activities, and predictability of worship services
Understanding	The extent to which preaching, readings, and other information are shared in clear and understandable ways
Theology	Religious beliefs related to disability or statements about how God views disability or disabled people
Transportation	The extent to which people have a reliable way of getting to and from worship services

### Postures

The congregation's overall stance of flexibility and adaptability during worship services received considerable attention. The postures of church members and leaders were evidenced in their willingness to approach things differently so that *everyone* could participate more fully. Indeed, the word "willing" was peppered throughout the interviews (e.g., "willing to make those changes," "always willing to help," "willing to have the conversations," "willing to learn," "willing to try new things," "more than willing"). Some postures evidenced deep commitment ("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, 25 V), while others reflected overall resistance to change ("Not everybody's willing to put their needs aside." Sierra, 35 A).

Most participants described the prevailing postures in their current church as quite positive. When it came to making needed changes to various aspects of their worship services, some described their congregation as open-minded and fully invested (e.g., "They're like, 'We'll do whatever!'" "Everyone is all in!" "They're all about including everyone."). Several participants said this stance was especially evident among their church's leadership. As Anaya (40 V) explained:

I think that they're all about serving people and making sure that the people are not being limited, not having the ability to worship when they want to worship. They're all about breaking down those barriers for people to allow them to worship.



Similarly, Paige (30 I) indicated, “The leadership at my church is very approachable. They’re very down-to-earth people and they want to know and make sure that needs are being met.”

This willing posture, however, was not always accompanied by needed knowledge. In such cases, participants praised any eagerness to learn. Ewan (46 H) described the response of his pastor when asked about launching a new interpreter program for Deaf members. “Fortunately, [he] had a heart. He said, ‘I don’t know how to do this, but I’m willing to learn. You guys show me how to do it.’ He was wide open. That was a real blessing for us.” Emma (21 A) noted this requires “intentional humility and welcoming input on the part of the pastor.” She continued:

[It] totally starts with standing on stage in the pulpit—whatever the front of your church looks like—and from a place of authority saying, “I don’t know everything. And you as congregants have valuable perspective on what this church experience is like. And I’m going to make office hours, or coffee hours, or where I am hanging out here. And I want you to come talk to me.”

In other words, participants did not anticipate the church would always know how to move forward; but they still expected movement.

In contrast, other participants shared examples of limited flexibility within their congregation or an unwillingness to move in ways that could widen the welcome. Such postures were often revealed when individual needs were shared. As Emma (21 A) explained, “I think a lot of saying ‘this church is accessible or not’ comes down to how they respond in those real-life situations.” For example, participants described feeling “brushed off” when asking about available supports (Elise, 65 V), suggested that “people aren’t willing” to meet existing needs (Cora, 59 A), or reported hearing “That’s not how we do it up in here” (Jada, 48 V). Some attributed this posture to limited awareness of accessibility needs. Speaking about the megachurch he previously attended, Ryan (25 V) wondered what made it so hard to find the sense of community and connection he desired:

I think it was the size of the church. And I think, also, it was a little bit of the uniformity of the church. The church had a tendency to put blinders on—to say, “We’re all the same.” And, really, that did a couple of things to hurt the congregation, I think. Because not a single one of us are the same.

According to Emma (21 A), who also attended a larger church, leaders only see surface-level needs: “I think they see themselves as doing a lot already and don’t see the need. If I’m able to show up appropriately dressed, sit in the pew, and attend the service—then what’s wrong?” Others felt this posture might be rooted in the desire to retain longstanding traditions. For example, Jada (48 V) spoke of the resistance to change among some fellow members: “So yeah, you’re going to have that kind of friction because it is: what we do is what we do. This is how we do it.”

Sierra (35 A) also spoke of the challenges amidst these conversations and the need to push toward unity:

You have people who get so stuck in their ways—or think that this is how it needs to be—that it’s like you forget that we’re all here for a reason. We’re all here for one purpose, and that’s unity. Christ meant for the whole—for everybody—to be together.

### **Communication**

The ways in which information was imparted or exchanged throughout worship services was a prominent concern. Participants referenced the inaccessibility of bulletins, sermon notes, flyers, handouts, announcements, pictures and videos on projection screens, and the absence of interpreters as impacting their experiences. When worship leaders overlooked this area, participants like Charles (65 H) felt “[left] to sit there and wonder what’s happening” or they “didn’t feel like that was worship for me.” Conversations with participants about effective communication during worship services also brought recommendations for specific improvements (e.g., “It would be interesting to have...”, “I wish there was...”, “Every church should have something like...”). For example, participants emphasized sharing information in multiple formats, including providing information in braille, large print, electronic formats, and sign language; describing images; and captioning videos. As Paige (30 I) stated, having information in a format that is accessible to all congregants is the only way they can “fully participate in the service.” Many participants also advocated for incorporating more technology. Finally, some participants recommended providing information (e.g., order of worship, song lyrics, sermon notes) in advance of all worship services (“The ability to have access to the words of praise beforehand is perfect.” Ryan, 25 V). As Kelsey (23 V) explained:

My favorite part is singing...I mean, I love that part of worship. Which is interesting, because that’s the part I’m most often left out of. But if it’s a song that I know, then I can sing it and it’s fine. But then if it’s not one that I know, then I’m just kind of there.

At the same time, some participants addressed inadvertent drawbacks of certain approaches to accessibility. For Charles (65 H), who was Deaf, relying on video screens for live captioning created a sense of separation: “When I’m depending fully on that screen, I’m disconnected from the congregation. You don’t feel a part of the group. You feel like, oh yeah, I’m reading the screen, but there’s no connection.” A similar sentiment was expressed by others who used sign language interpreters. As Ewan (46H) described his experience:

Sometimes I feel like I need to look at the pastor from time to time, as opposed to just looking at the interpreter...I'm looking like this, everybody else is looking that way. I don't like that...it just bothers me if I'm looking a totally different direction than everybody else is.

Others were grateful for communication support from family, friends, and other congregants, but acknowledged some shortcomings. As Evelyn (50 H) explained, "There was a lady who was happy to help me follow along in the verses of the Bible, but I still missed a lot of information."

### ***Sense of community***

The degree to which people experience a sense of community was said to impact involvement in worship. Participants spoke of the importance of feeling deep affiliations or belonging within their faith community. Those who felt this tight connection described their church as "welcoming," "warm," "feel[ing] like home," a "close-knit community," and having "a friendly atmosphere." Participants also discussed the relationships they had with other congregants (e.g., "I love my friends, my friends in church." Zoe, 24 I), the actions that others took to create a sense of community (e.g., "After the prayer requests, they'll text me." Rachel, 39H), and a feeling of belonging among their congregations (e.g., "I've never felt like I didn't belong there, which is a wonderful feeling." Paige, 30 I). They also highlighted their desire to feel "a part," "talked to," "known," "remembered," "missed," and "accepted." This relational component was seen as critical. As Trevon (23 A) explained, "I know God is with me, but I just need to be around people that love God too." Kelsey (23 V) also described the difference in watching a service and being a part of a worshiping community:

If I still wanted to listen to a sermon or listen to worship music, I could do that at my house and it would be so much easier than being the odd one out. And so I think that people forget that there is this deep longing for community.... I'm not there to just sit in a pew and I'm not there to check a box every week or to make my parents happy. I'm there because I really want to be there.

Sierra (35 A) summed up the need for community, "People want to belong. They want to feel like they're important and like they mean something to somebody."

Sense of community was often experienced through relationships with fellow members of their congregation. Friendships with fellow worshipers were often emphasized: "Oh, my gosh. I had such a community of friends there" (Elise, 65 V), and "They help me study and they help me learn about God and how to live" (DeShawn, 22 H). Aaron (45 V) highlighted just how friendships impact his experience at church: "[Church is] a lot

about community and feeling that you're part of that community. So far, for me at church, you know people like [my friend] have kind of made that happen." Quite often, a specific person was linked to descriptions of this sense of community.

Certainty about one's integral place within their faith community was found when people were truly noticed and known by others (e.g., "They know me. They know what's going on in my life." Ryan, 25 V; "I never have to worry about feeling like I'm alone there. Everybody knows me at that church very well." Paige, 30I). Sierra (35 A) described the impact of being recognized in her church: "People remembered my name, and it was just...it made me emotional in this way. Because oftentimes you go to a church and people don't necessarily connect with you like that." It was also evident when congregants were intentional about including and supporting them. Lilith (67 V) loved that "People greet me when I come in. People sometimes sit with me. They assist me in getting to communion. They'll sit and chat with me after the service and before the service." When people were truly known, the prayers and support of others were personal.

Being part of a community meant feeling like an equal member. Paige described just such a situation, "I just feel like a human being there. It's like disability is put on the wayside." Anna (41 V) also wanted to be welcomed in her church just like any other person would be welcomed:

I sense that I'm viewed as, oh, somebody to carefully help and aid; and not as an equal. So I feel like I am part, but...I'm not welcomed in the way I would want to be welcomed. I don't want to be viewed as just somebody that needs help. We all need help. We all need help. We wouldn't be going to church. We wouldn't be seeking out faith guidance if we had it all under control for ourselves. We're there because we need God to help us out. So don't make me out to be even more feeble or less than anybody else. Welcome me the way you would other people. Respect that I want to be part of things.

Some participants described the negative impact of *not* having a sense of community. Those who lacked community felt like they didn't "fit in," were "not equal," were "unsupported," and experienced "isolation." Elise (65 V) expressed concern over her tenuous connection to her congregation, "It's just online. So, it's like if a catastrophe happened, I don't have anybody." Nicole (33 P) also lost this sense of community when health challenges limited her ability to attend church:

Unless you're there all the time, every week, being immersed in the community, there is no parishioners coming to your house and checking on you sort of thing. There is a strong community, but it comes with a set of rules. And I found that a little disappointing. Because I was such a big part of the community before I got sick, and then there was really only one parishioner who ever reached out to me.

## Architecture

The physical features of a church and its sanctuary also impact both presence and participation in worship. Brittany (30 P) punctuated the importance of architecture by emphasizing that all people need “access to *every* part of the building that *any* other person would have access to so that they can participate in *anything*.” Conversations about this dimension often referenced parking spaces, ramps, elevators, seating arrangements, doors, handrails, and bathrooms as examples of salient features of the environment. Inaccessibility in these and other areas was said to convey a clear message about who did and did not belong. For example, Hugh (62 P) described his experiences visiting numerous churches over the years: “They have a ramp for you to get up and they are in compliance with the ADA. But as far as them upgrading their facility, nah. It’ll make you say, ‘Nah, I’m not coming back here.’” Participants pointed out the abundance of inaccessible features within their own churches. Olivia (25 A) stated, “It’s very difficult for somebody who gets around with a wheelchair or power chair, or somebody who uses a mobility device, like a cane.” Several, like Ashley (33 P), noted that restrooms were the “number one place that I’ve noticed inaccessibility, even in churches that are otherwise accessible,” Hugh (62 P), who uses a wheelchair, found that some fellow church members were oblivious to these barriers:

They’ll say, “Well, I haven’t seen you. Why you don’t come back over there?” Then I’ll address the situation like, “Well, I had to use the restroom and you all’s restroom is downstairs and it’s hard for me to get downstairs.” If I take my cane, then it takes me longer to get there.

Such appraisals, however, were sometimes balanced with affirmations of their church’s efforts in this area. For example, Nicole (33 P) noted, “I really like the fact that they already have a ramp built in at my church... and they have a nice handrail, which is really helpful for me.”

One strand within this dimension focused on the ease with which people could navigate the entire worship space. Several participants noted it was difficult or impossible to sing with the choir, read scripture, speak from the pulpit, or use the baptismal in the absence of ramps to the stage. A second strand related to the physical layout of the sanctuary, which made it challenging for some people with visual impairments to navigate. As Lilith (67 V) explained, “My experience in larger churches is I tend more to get lost.” A third strand related to line of sight and acoustics, which could impact whether people could see or hear during worship. Liz (34 P) stated, “I’m limited on where I can sit and then limited on what I can see as well.”

## Contributions

For many participants, worship was not a passive endeavor defined merely by attendance. Instead, they sought opportunities to share their gifts or serve others within the context of the weekly worship service. These contributions provided an avenue through which worship could be experienced more fully and meaningfully. Liz (34 P) emphasized the importance of active participation and “being able to *actually do* ministries, programs—to be able to take a leadership role—whatever that means for you.” Examples of current contributions were abundant and included singing in the choir, playing drums, giving testimony, serving on a welcome team, reading scripture, serving food, standing in prayer with the interpreter, or just being given things to do in the service. As Ethan (23 I) explained, “I like to be involved, because I don’t like to go to a church that you just sit there.”

Most participants said they experienced no constraints on the ways in which they could contribute: “I do feel like there’s a place for my voice to be heard” (Emma, 21 A) and “I feel like I’m fully able to share my gifts and talents with the church” (Trevon, 23 A). Even if they were not serving presently, they anticipated there would be no barriers to doing so (e.g., “There’s nothing at my church that I couldn’t be involved in.” Paige, 30 I; “I think they would have allowed me to participate in the way I wanted to and whatever way that I think.” Jacob, 38 V). Some participants, like Aaron (45 V), encouraged actively inviting people to serve, “If there was a person like [my friend] who said, ‘Hey, we’re going to put you over here and we need to figure out how you’re going to do it,’ you know that would probably be helpful.” Others welcomed guidance on figuring out how to connect their gifts and talents with congregational needs and opportunities. Elise (65 V) explained, “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!” Individual initiative was also emphasized. For example, Paige (30 I) explained how she approached her pastor to express her desire to serve.

I just talked to him. I said I loved to sing...And I just approach it from that standpoint—that “Hey! I want to sing. I can sing. So can you let me sing?” kind-of-thing. He was very receptive to it.

In contrast, a few participants indicated they had felt left out of these opportunities. However, some did mention specific barriers—such as architecture or communication—that could hinder their active contributions. For example, Rachel (39 H) noted that volunteering could be hard because, “You don’t know if it’s going to be accessible as far as your being able to hear.” Likewise, Ashley (33 P) pointed to the inaccessibility of the sanctuary, “I think if I had any sort of talent, playing in the [worship] band would

be really hard because I couldn't get on the stage. But I have no talent, so we're safe in that regard."

These opportunities to contribute were not only meaningful to the individuals with whom we spoke, but they impacted the entire congregation. For Ryan (25 V), serving as a greeter demonstrated that his church embraced *all* people, "That always serves the people in multiple ways. [It] serves them in a sense of, 'Oh, a blind guy's greeting me. I must be welcome in everyone's eyes.'" Malik (24 I) said he served during worship "because I love being a blessing to one another, to others." Finally, Jada (48 V) was adamant that acts of service transformed perspectives, "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."

### **Attitudes**

Prevailing attitudes regarding disability were addressed frequently; often with great emotion. Participants illustrated the many and various ways in which the views others held about disability were expressed in words or actions. Encounters with these attitudes impacted the degree to which participants felt welcomed, wanted, or wounded. Such attitudes—whether affirming or diminishing—also impacted whether or not someone wanted to remain part of that worshiping community ("I don't know if I want to come here anymore." Kelsey, 23 V). Reflecting on the uneven attitudes evident each Sunday, Anna (41 V) remarked,

Even when there's some good intentions, there's so much ignorance. And it's just like I'm finding it to be more of a time when I'm having to feel stress—[to] be in "education" mode. And that's not what I want if I'm going to take me and my family to church.

Some participants referenced the entire congregation more broadly, while others, like Liz (34 P) addressed the attitudes of leaders specifically: "I've noticed that a lot of it has to do with the leadership of the church. How do they perceive you? How did they perceive disability?" But most references focused on individuals within personal encounters. As Jacob (38 V) saw it, "When you are interacting with somebody one on one, that's the real true test of it!"

Several possible roots of these attitudes were raised. Some, like Kelsey (23 V) suggested the age of fellow church members may be a factor, "When I do interact with older people just in general, that's kind of a common theme." Others, like Anna (41 V), wondered whether these attitudes reflected prevailing societal views seeping into the church:

That's something I experienced just out in the community, period. I mean, at restaurants, at movie theaters—things like that. And I was like, "Wow! Even at a church?" It feels bad. You have a higher standard for the church for being welcoming.

Some also named theological beliefs as a possible source of these attitudes (e.g., “some sign of disfavor,” “implying that [disability] makes me broken”). Jacob (38 V) questioned such beliefs, “I think people need to throw their preconceptions of other people out the window and work on that more. It’s 2020 and there are still people out there that still feel like they need to pray for my sight!” Kelsey (23 V) was certain about the attitudes, but more equivocal about the source:

I’ve definitely felt like people viewed my capabilities as less and someone who needed to be taken care of or kept safe. I don’t know if those came from the Bible or not, because a lot of people have those in general.

The language participants used to describe the concerning attitudes they encountered was wide ranging. Some focused on the views people held, such as “preconceived notions,” “ingrained perceptions,” “pity and saviorism,” “ignorance,” “misunderstanding,” “pretty limited knowledge,” “stigma around disability,” and being “perceived as a burden.” Many others, however, described the ways those views were expressed or experienced. For example, participants spoke about times when other congregants would “ignore,” be “judgmental,” or see them as an “inconvenience.” Aaron (45 V) felt that he was held to different expectations (“If they hold other people to a higher standard, then I’d like to be held to that standard too!”) and Emma (21 A) expressed she was simply not welcomed (“You’re not wanted there.”). Interactions were described as being marked by hesitation (“If anything, the barrier would be people being hesitant to talk to me because maybe they see that I walk differently and they don’t know what’s up.” Brittany, 30 P), obligation (“You walk into a church and someone will instantly try to make you feel good about yourself, but you know it’s obligatory.” Nicole, 33 P), or even condescension (“Because there is this very real perception of like, ‘Oh, it’s sweet little blind girl.’” Kelsey, 23 V). As Ewan (46H) succinctly shared, “Yeah, it’s disappointing to see that in church.”

Across these disappointing descriptions, participants were often quite charitable and generous when describing people’s motivations. Some assumed that people acted with good intentions (“They mean well, they really do.” Amy, 34 V), were trying to be kind (“There again, they’re trying to be nice.” Jacob, 38 V), or wanted to respond differently (“I think people are just generally very uncomfortable with disability, but they don’t want to be.” Nicole, 33 P). People were never described as malicious or intentionally cruel in this area, but neither were they excused from the need to change.

At the same time, depictions of accepting attitudes were also abundant. Participants described being appreciated (“That they value me. That they want me to be involved.” Aaron, 45 V), noticed (“It just makes me happy to know that people with disabilities are not overlooked there and that



they play an active role in the church, I think it's very important." Paige, 30 I), accepted ("I belong...everyone accepts me as I am." Trevon, 23 A), and embraced ("Welcomed just not like a special person or a guest, but just as another member." Amy, 34 V). Fellow congregation members were described as hospitable, informed, and quick to advocate for their needs. Liz (34 P) found acceptance in the absence of limits:

Thankfully, I can honestly say that the leadership that I've dealt with has been super encouraging regarding me being involved...I've never felt like I couldn't be involved in something. I've even been recruited for stuff. I teach Sunday school because I was recruited to teach Sunday school. It gets to the point now where I'm like, "Oh, someone's coming towards me. And I think they're gonna try to recruit me for something."

### **Expectations**

Participants also discussed difficulties related to navigating some of the unspoken assumptions or "unwritten rules" regarding expected or encouraged behaviors during worship. In some cases, they related to not "making noises" or being too "loud" relative to other congregants (e.g., "The Spirit of God would hit me, and I'd get to shouting." Trevon, 23 A). Some spoke of breaking from typical ways of participating because of their disability: "I guess that's the only expectation, you are expected to stand." (Brittany, 30 P) and "People [with visual impairments] are expected to sing along with the hymnal" (Olivia, 25 A). Others shared that they were often unaware of prevailing expectations. This sometimes introduced uncertainty, self-consciousness, or frustration. Jacob (38 V) shared how "there was a few people that were saying stuff" after observing him during worship. Kelsey (23 V), who could not see song lyrics projected on the screen, wondered aloud, "Do the people around me, are they aware that I'm not singing? What are they thinking about me not participating or whatever?" Anna (41 V) described a certain disconnect between invitations and actual expectations.

They'll say, "Oh, welcome, welcome, welcome! Yes, oh, we just love all people of all sorts!" And then you go to the church and then the actual service, and then they're like, "Oh wait, no. We need you to fix this and conform to just this narrow interpretation of what we mean and what we want out of you, not what you want out of us."

The experiences of most participants related to this dimension described its negative impact. As Cora explained, "I feel more isolated...It's more than just not being able to participate. It's a really unpleasant, uncomfortable experience." Elise (65 V) shared the story of a mother with a son who has autism:

She took him to a church, and they said he was very loud. He was autistic, but he was very loud, and he would get very excited about worship and jump up and down and wave his hands and everything. And some pretty strait-laced lady came over and told them that he didn't belong there.

However, other participants described how their church was much less rigid in their expectations during worship services. They affirmed that their church “allows you to be yourself” (Evelyn, 50 H) or is “really good about strategies and making it work” (Rachel, 39 H). They described the explicit flexibility communicated by leaders (e.g., “Rise in body or in spirit.” or “Take your prayer position; kneel, sit, or stand.” For Liz (34 P), this meant that “nobody’s made me feel like it’s bad that I can’t stand during worship”. Emma (21 A) illustrated how worship leaders could call the congregation to respond differently, “For a pastor to even just stand up and say, ‘That is them worshipping God in the way that He made them. So, we welcome that here.’ Then you’ve set the standard.” Ashley (33 P) summarized this sentiment well:

I feel like our churches, more than any other place, should be a place of there aren’t rules about how perfect you have to sit. And I think making that culture of the church in the worship and it would be such a beautiful picture of what I think Christ, what his church would look like.

### **Technology**

When discussing the ways in which technology impacted accessibility, participants discussed an array of tools, devices, and features that enabled or enhanced their participation in worship, including screens, apps, websites, sound systems, streaming services online, and closed captioning. Such mentions were particularly prominent among people with sensory disabilities (i.e., hearing, visual impairments) and physical disabilities. They described the ways they benefited from technology (e.g., “It is helpful that at my particular church there are TV monitors that I can look at.” Ayana, 40 V; “They actually had, I think, a place where you could download a lot of the worship music too. So, that was helpful.” Elise, 65 V). As Anna (41 V) stated, “There’s so many more people that could be reached if [churches] could just utilize that technology.”

Participants generally discussed technology in three ways. First, they identified ubiquitous technology already present in their churches (e.g., television monitors, screens, microphones, sound equipment, apps). Each was available to anyone, but especially vital for those with disabilities. For example, Ashley (62 P) shared how technology enabled participation in worship services:

[We have] a big stage. Then up above [the stage] is where they baptize people. Then there are, I would say, three big screens...the reason [the service] is accessible is because I can visualize [the stage]...I can visualize it a lot better, because of the televisions.

Ryan (25 V) described another way technology facilitated participation in worship, “A lot of the times, the words to their songs or call to worship are posted beforehand... So, I have a time to listen to them, [to] have

my computer read them to me.” Anna (41 A) pointed out the universal benefits of these technology features, “If [my church] were to post [the message] on the website ... that would make it accessible to anyone, really.”

Second, participants addressed how technology could meet the specific needs of people with disabilities. For example, “closed captioning,” “hearing assist devices,” “enhanced audio earbuds,” and “video interpreting” were instrumental for the Deaf or people who are hard of hearing. Aaron (40 V) explained how he found worship songs using a phone app or recited verses using his handheld media player. Sophie (25I) relied on an “accessible bible” on her phone.

Third, several participants emphasized the importance of online streaming when they could not attend live services. For those with transportation or health challenges, regular attendance can be difficult. Yet, participants still wanted to join with others in worship. For example, Nicole (33 P) described the role online services could have played for her, “The biggest thing was when I had the health challenges and couldn’t leave home. There was no, ‘This is going to be recorded and shared for you later on that you can watch online, or in some way.’”

### **Supports**

For some participants, individualized assistance was essential to their full participation in worship. Participants sometimes referenced specific supports, such as social supports (“introduce me to a couple of people...” Emma, 21 A), assistance with seating or moving around (“show me where I could sit,” Elise, 65 V; “assist me in getting to communion,” Lilith, 67 V), or providing cues for visual information (“tell me when to kneel down and when someone was coming,” Kelsey, 23 V). Other times, participants expressed difficulty in identifying the areas where they needed support or just desired support more generally (e.g., someone to “make sure that I’m being included,” Aaron, 45 V). Supports were sometimes provided by a family member or friend; other times by another church member (e.g., ushers, volunteers, “people sitting near me”).

Many participants’ descriptions of worship were filled with examples of helpful supports that reflected the church’s commitment to their presence. However, most participants, like Emma (21 A), indicated they currently lacked desired supports: “I don’t have that social support. I really need some help.” She added:

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. Because you go in and you find out after being there for a month that they’re not going to truly support you or provide for your needs so that you’re able to worship in the same context.

Kelsey (23 V) described the absence of support as uncomfortable (“I just kind of, I’m awkwardly there”), confusing (“I don’t know what I’m doing”), and isolating (“I’m sitting by myself”).

Some participants worried that requesting help might place a burden on fellow church members. A reoccurring suggestion was for churches to facilitate connections between individuals with disabilities and other congregants. Some suggested this as a formal ministry, while others suggested more informal introductions. In all cases, the dignity of individuals should always be upheld. Emma (21 A) described how the young adult pastor connected her to social support without revealing her disability:

[He] always made sure to introduce me to a couple of people so there were a few people at every event that I knew by name. That's simple. It didn't out me to everyone—which I don't mind being outed—but it's not his place to do that.

Likewise, churches should ask about support and avoid assumptions. As Jada (48 V) shared:

I guess you could say [the church has] an awareness. And in that awareness, they know how to assist and they want to assist. But they also know just to ask if you need assistance and not just assume you need it.

### **Interactions**

The social interactions that take place throughout and beyond the worship service also mattered to participants. They spoke about the mix of “greetings,” “small talk,” “mingling,” “conversations,” “fellowship,” “hugs,” and “handshakes” that permeate Sunday gatherings. Worship was seen as a thoroughly communal experience that was permeated by various interactions. As Emma (21 A) explained, “A huge part of [church] is fellowship. Otherwise, listen to a sermon in your car and sing songs when you're at your house.” The interpersonal experiences of participants were marked by positive and negative moments.

The company of fellow congregation members was clearly valued. As Paige (30I) shared, “I never have to worry about feeling like I'm alone here. Everybody knows me at church very well, so they always come up to me, talk to me.” Being greeted made participants feel “noticed,” “known,” and “welcomed.” Participants emphasized the warmth and geniality of others in their midst. Trevon (23 A) described the kindness of his church leaders, “There's a few elders that are good people to me. They encourage me, and I love them dearly for that.”

In contrast, negative interactions were also part of these church stories. Ewan (46H) felt isolated when ignored by long-time members, “I meet with you every week and you don't know who I am because I don't talk in the group setting.” Others described their interactions with others as “uncomfortable,” “awkward,” “frustrating,” or “intimidating.” Difficulties discerning social cues and reading social situations made interactions during structured (e.g., passing of the peace, social hour) and unstructured

situations (e.g., mingling, greetings) challenging, particularly for participants with autism. Emma (21 A) explained, “I’m so bad at small talk. I can’t figure out what you’re supposed to say. And then someone says something to you and I don’t know how you’re supposed to respond. I don’t want to disappoint or frustrate people.” For Sierra, (35A), this uncertainty about social situations led to avoidance:

The call to get up and say hello to whoever—I just sit in my seat. Because, otherwise, I don’t know who to start with. That’s a lot of people, and I’m just, depending on who’s walking around, I’m like, uh?

Some participants with visual impairments described similar challenges. Elise (65 V) explained, “A lot of times, I won’t say anything to somebody, even if they’re standing right in front of me. Because I’m thinking they’re going to leave and I don’t want to be talking to myself.”

### **Sensory factors**

Some participants, particularly those with autism, described the way that various sensory elements (e.g., volume, lighting, textural or tactile input, temperature) adversely impacted their ability to comfortably participate in worship. Several highlighted the need for personal stimulation (e.g., “It’s hard for some kids [with disabilities] to sit still.” Rachel, 39 H) and personal space. Others noted the volume of music and sound during worship (e.g., “It is just too loud for me.” Sierra, 35 A”), lighting (“Fix the lighting, where it’s not so bright.” (Paige, 30 I), the expectation of physical interaction, (“You take communion by intinction, and then we join hands in a circle around the sanctuary. That can be a little bit of a sensory nightmare for me.” Olivia, 25 A), and temperature (“Visual and temperature tend to be the things that leave me feeling completely overwhelmed and distracted.” Emma, 21 A). Participants also described feeling “overwhelmed” or “overloaded” in their sensory experiences (“It sometimes feels like I’m at a rock concert!” Paige, 30I). As such, these factors were often considered when deciding whether to stay at or leave a church. As Sierra explained, “It would become sensory overload for me. And so I had actually thought about moving to a different church.”). Cora (59 A) described the personal impact of sensory overload: “It keeps me away from the church and the fellowship in the life of it, the social life...it’s the deciding factor of whether or not I go.”

Participants recommended multiple ways that the church could better support people’s sensory needs. The primary idea surrounded some kind of “quiet place,” “sensory room,” “sensory area,” or “calming space” that congregants could choose to go to as needed. Brittany (30 P) suggested having a designated room where people could watch the worship service on a screen, “allowing them a space where they can still be a part of that

worship experience, but be able to provide whatever it is they are needing sensory wise.” Olivia (25 A) went further by proposing that churches “normalize fidgeting or moving around.” Cora (59 A) described the importance of raising awareness about sensory needs:

It’s not something that gets lot of attention. I think a lot of people that I know, that I’ve had these conversations with about that, they don’t speak up about it. They don’t know about it. They don’t know that it’s, they don’t realize that it’s a social justice issue...That they have a right to find their space and go, ‘Hey, this is not okay. You know, I can’t participate in this if I’m being bombarded with sensory overload.’

## **Liturgy**

Participants sometimes described how the structure, sequence, or specific activities that comprised worship services impacted their participation. Besides communion, participants also highlighted the call and response, the passing of the peace, and baptism as activities that could be challenging. The knowledge and awareness of the order of worship, or lack thereof, was the primary concern in this area. For Kelsey (23 V), anticipating what comes next was difficult: “I just won’t know unless someone tells me.” Elise (65 V) described the impact of this uncertainty:

It’s hard, because you want to be able to stand when everybody stands and sit when everybody sits. And unless you’re really listening, sometimes you might not pick up on stuff like that. So, I think that’s one of the reasons I don’t go [to church] by myself.

Some participants described the consistency of the liturgy in their church as helpful. For example, Andrew (26 A) appreciated the predictable structure of weekly Mass, “You always know what to...expect for every Mass. It’s always the same. And that’s really cool.” Participants affirmed familiarity within services (“The parts that stay the same throughout the quarter, I’m able to do.” Lilith, 67 V), services with an intuitive flow (“You can walk in and pretty much figure out what’s going on.” Olivia, 25 A), and having someone to cue participation (“Someone will offer his or her arm to go to communion, so that works out real well.” Lilith, 67 V).

Other participants offered different descriptors: “fatiguing,” “stressful,” “embarrassing,” “nervous,” and “challenging.” They struggled when the liturgy was unpredictable, lacked procedures, or was wholly inaccessible. For example, participants with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and autism struggled when they had to rely solely on environmental cues during worship. Ewan (46 H) worried about praying out of turn:

I’ve been in situations where, “Anybody feels led to pray, just speak out.” I won’t ever pray in those situations because I don’t know am I talking over somebody right now. Because once I start talking, I can’t hear them. If I’m quiet, I might be able to hear somebody else talking. “Somebody’s praying right now.” Then as soon

as they're done, I'm like, "Are they done? Should I start now, or has somebody else already started? Okay" I just let it go.

Similarly, aspects of the service that lacked explicit procedures were difficult, such as the social components (e.g., greetings, passing of the peace) or infrequent activities (e.g., baptisms, family services). Communion was a common challenge. Olivia (25 A) described how her church strived to include people with disabilities, "For people with limited mobility, it's a challenge. I mean, they're still included. Communion is brought to them after everybody else has been served." However, everyone else participated in "circle communion where you go up to the pastor, you take communion by intinction, and then we join hands in a circle."

### **Understanding**

Some participants described how the clarity and understanding of preaching, readings, and other information impacted their involvement in certain aspects of the worship services. Their descriptions were often centered around their ability to understand and "get the message." As Cora (59 A) explained, "Accessibility is not just about getting people in the door and making sure they can see," but that "understanding what's really happening" is also essential. The importance of being able to grasp the teachings was emphasized by Evelyn (50H):

It's really important for us to understand. And many Deaf people don't know the Bible. That's what's important—for us to understand what the Bible talks about, and what God wants us to do on this earth. What His purpose for our life is.

The experiences of participants in this area were quite mixed. Some commended their pastors, saying they preached "in ways I understand" (Paige, 30 I) or they do "a good job of explaining everything" (Sophie, 25 I). They appreciated when their pastor was detailed and direct in delivering the message. Others found that "pictures," "verses up on the screen," "resources," and "notes" were all helpful for guiding their attention in worship services. An equal number of participants said that sermons were sometimes "hard to understand" (Zoe, 24 I) or of a length that made it "a little hard to focus" (Thomas, 39 A). Understanding was more difficult when pastors spoke quickly ("I didn't understand what was going on. It was too fast." Evelyn, 50 H), used confusing language ("My pastor tends to use big words." Ayana, 40 V), or deviated from their main points ("When they go off on rabbit trails, it's harder. I prefer more direct." Charles 65 H).

### **Theology**

Differing beliefs about how God views disability were evident in what pastors preached from the pulpit, as well as revealed during interactions

with fellow church members. The examples they shared, however, were almost always described as harmful in impact: “It’s a horrible feeling” (Lilith, 67 V) and “I feel very uncomfortable” (Kelsey, 23 V). Jacob (38 V) forcefully rejected theological beliefs that in any way diminished people with disabilities, “We’re not charity cases. We are not miracles. And how dare somebody do that to the Lord? That’s an insult to God because God made us the way we are.” When defining accessible worship, Emma (21 A) emphasized that “the church has to have a good theology on [disability] for the person to really have access to that space in an equal way.”

Participants with physical disabilities or visual impairments, in particular, frequently addressed theology in connection with healing. They referenced congregants who “[felt] like they need to pray for my sight” (Jacob, 38 V), “tried to heal me as a visitor” (Ashley, 33 P), or “would always want to pray for my healing” (Lilith, 67 V). These offers of healing were always unsolicited and usually unwanted. Anna (41 V) spurned what she considered to be unwarranted offers: “I’m not broken. I don’t need to be fixed.” But the anticipation of future overtures remained. For example, Liz (34 P) shared, “When I first started going to the Orthodox church and found out that we had a healing service, I was like: ‘Aw, crap! Here we go. Someone’s going to try to heal me or something again.’” She later described her reaction when discovering that a time of healing was scheduled at the end of a worship service she was attending:

So when you go to a service like this, they have people stationed, kind of these ushers that are stationed around different places. And their job is to basically to watch people, watch for people and identify people...And 100% of the time, if you have a visible disability, they’re coming over to you. A hundred percent of the time! I can guarantee you—it will happen.

Several participants stressed how these experiences were deciding factors in which church they would or would not attend. Underlying this inclination to heal was an assumed connection between disability and sin. For example, Lilith (67 V) described the beliefs within churches she had previously attended, “They think that you need to be healed, should want to be healed, and—if you’re not healed—your faith isn’t strong enough.” Ashley (33 P) directly challenged such views regarding disability, “I don’t think Christ can be any more clear in the Bible that it’s not based on your sin or anything like that.” She later addressed how wounding such views could be for individuals whose own theology was less grounded, “If I didn’t know or didn’t feel really sure of God and who He is and His goodness and all of those things, this would be so hard.”

Several conversations also turned to the topic of disability in Scripture. Some, like Aaron (45 V) mentioned their own wrestling with how such passages should be faithfully interpreted: “Maybe the reference to disability in the Bible in general can be a little bit, you know, a little bit confusing.”



But it was the ways in which others so often interpreted references to disability that were perhaps most wounding. Kelsey (23 V) described the preaching she had heard growing up:

Very often in the sermons, even if it had nothing to do with the actual topic, blindness would come up in some way, and [it] made me uncomfortable. And talking about blindness being a curse. Or how they believe that everyone's going to be blind in hell, because that's one of the worst things that could ever happen.

This mattered because such sermons impacted how people engaged her in real life. She recounted a number of interactions at her former church related to her disability and illness:

I had multiple people say that God was doing it because I was being disobedient, or because I was not listening or whatever, and so: "Why are you surprised that this is happening?"...And I'm like, I don't really think that that's how God works. But it still would hit weird because it's like, oh, these people have known me for a long time and for them to think that God's punishing me in this way is like, *ouch*. ... Because it's not that the actual idea itself is what bothers me. Because I'm like, I can really quickly discount that and be like, oh, I don't think that's the nature of God. I think that we live in a world where things like this just happen. But where the hurt comes from is like, oh, there are people who believe this about me?

Participants emphasized the need for more careful and contextual conversations surrounding disability in scripture. Ruth (55 P) noted that, "I do find occasionally the use of metaphors that make me cringe." She emphasized the need "to be careful not to use those metaphors as a way of equating disability with sin and lostness."

Several participants also referenced their own beliefs regarding how God views disability and its implications (e.g., "I think God is about including and accepting and loving people." Charles, 65 H; "I think recognizing disability as a gift also is important." Cora, 59 A). Emma (21 A) was quite clear about how her own theology of disability should inform church practices:

God fully expects [people with disabilities] to be given access to worship too. And that if you're a worship leader and you are not providing access to people who are not like you, God is probably not pleased with that. So, that's a bit of a judge-y perspective, but legitimately there's the standard that all of His children should be given space to come to Him, to talk to Him, and to feel connected and a part of a church community. Yeah, by the same standard that churches shouldn't be separated by color, they certainly shouldn't be separated by types of ability, or cognitive function, or social skills, or any of that.

### **Transportation**

Participation in corporate worship is predicated on getting to church. Several participants with visual impairments or intellectual disability who could not drive raised this challenge. The flexibility of transportation options also affected

whether someone could serve on a worship team or join other church activities (e.g., Sunday school, potlucks, social conversations). When asked whether she can fully share her gifts and talents with her church, Nicole (33 P) replied, “No, no, I do not. That’s mostly been because it’s been impossible for me to get there. If you can’t *be there*, you can’t be a part of the church.”

The transportation supports used by participants were varied. As Anna (41 V) explained, “I have a husband that drives, but I know a lot of people that don’t have access to transportation.” Some spoke of friends or family members who provided regular rides, others described how their church invited members to sign-up to provide rides, and some rode on church vans. Recognition of this need was key to the provision of supports. As Elise (65 V) explained, “I think most of them would [provide transportation], I think, if they knew. I think sometimes they’re just not aware.” Reliability was another consideration for some participants. Kelsey (23 V) described how numerous people initially signed up to drive her to church when she first joined. Over time, however, their faithfulness in doing so waned.

It was kind of between two different couples who were driving me. It had really narrowed down, and so they would just alternate. And then, moving forward from there, getting a ride started to become a problem of like one person would say they could pick me up, and then it was time for them to be there, and they would text and be like, “Oh, I’m running late. I’m not going to be able to come pick you up.” Or, “something last minute happened, see if you can find another ride.” And I would ask half a dozen other people, and no one would be able to get me.

A few participants turned to public transportation (when available) or ride sharing services. However, the costs of doing so becomes substantial. As Amy (41 V) explained:

Some of us have to prioritize our budget to getting to and from work and don’t have enough money to go on Saturday or Sunday to those extra [worship] services or Wednesday night or whenever they all are. And that gets really expensive.

Although watching services online was commended as an option when “you can’t always get out” (Ayana, 40 V), it was not considered a sufficient substitute for coming together in worship. As Elise (65 V) shared, “I’ve gotten so comfortable just listening to the sermons online. But I miss the community part of it!”

## Discussion

Every community—and every church—across the United States is comprised of members who experience disability. The impact of these disabilities ranges from slight to substantial, from narrow to broad. However, the ubiquity of disability has relevance for every church committed to ensuring there are no barriers to worship. We interviewed 37 Christians with disabilities about their

experiences in the worship practices of their church and their insights regarding “accessible worship.” This study extends the literature in several ways.

First, our findings introduce a new and practical lens through which to reflect on current worship practices. Across the interviews, fifteen dimensions of worship emerged as facets that warrant careful consideration: postures, communication, sense of community, architecture, contributions, attitudes, expectations, technology, supports, interactions, sensory factors, liturgy, understanding, theology, and transportation. This framework brings a helpful specificity to the concept of “accessible worship,” which is often described in quite general ways throughout the professional and lay literature. Although most church leaders and members would likely affirm that worship services should be accessible, they have less certainty about whether their own practices fully meet this description. As a result, they may assume their worship services are already accessible, address accessibility in limited ways, or wonder what else must still be addressed. This framework for accessible worship also pushes beyond the areas of architecture, attitude, and communication that have traditionally received the most emphasis. Although these three issues are essential, churches must also consider the other twelve areas that can impact whether and how people participate, as well as their experience of belonging. Inattention to any one of these dimensions could impact meaningful participation.

Second, the experiences and priorities of participants varied widely across these 15 dimensions of worship services. Indeed, no singular experience of accessible worship emerged from our 37 interviews. This is not altogether surprising, as the churches they each attended differed in many ways (e.g., denomination, size, locale, culture, worship style). Although some dimensions of accessible worship received more overall attention than others (e.g., postures, sense of community, communication, architecture, contributions), we noticed intriguing variations within and across disability groups. For example, individuals with hearing impairments emphasized communication and technology; individuals with autism, sensory factors and postures; individuals with physical disabilities, architecture and theology; individuals with visual impairments, communication and attitudes; and individuals with intellectual disability, sense of community and contributions. In some cases, these areas of accent align with a defining feature of each type of disability (e.g., hearing and visual impairments can directly impact communication). At other times, they seemed more specific to an individual’s circumstances and context. Ensuring that worship services are accessible for the diversity of people with (and without) disabilities in their midst may require church leaders to reflect more intentionally on how they plan corporate gatherings.

Third, prevailing practices may be leaving some people left out or on the peripheries of corporate worship. The stories of the individuals we

interviewed were punctuated with myriad examples of times when worship services seemed to be designed without them in mind. This included both small moments and major segments of the service. It also included actions that were sometimes characterized as an oversight and at other times felt overt. At the same time, most individuals also described practices and postures that enhanced their experiences or promoted their participation during worship services. Overall, most of the churches they attended seemed to be uneven in their accessibility—fine in some areas, lacking in others. This portrait is consistent with the few other qualitative studies that address the church experiences of individuals with disabilities (e.g., King, 1998; Minton & Dodder, 2003; Treloar, 2002). It is also important to note that we only sampled individuals with disabilities who were currently active in a church, rather than those who had permanently left the Church. The stories of this latter group are likely to be much more disheartening.

Fourth, the experiences and insights of people with disabilities should also be solicited locally. Many of the issues raised by participants were said to have gone unnoticed or unaddressed for quite some time at their churches. In the absence of local voices or intentional team-based reflection, church leaders are unlikely to change worship practices that are assumed to be working just fine. Although our findings highlight salient dimensions of worship that are likely to be raised elsewhere, each of the 300,000 churches across the United States differs with regard to how and with whom members gather. Therefore, it is important that churches establish effective ways of reaching out within their own faith communities to determine what works well and what requires refinement. A number of practical approaches have been suggested for this churchwide reflection, including the use of accessibility audits (see Carter, 2017).

### ***Limitations and future research***

Several limitations in this study should be addressed in future studies. First, our study sampled only a small number of the millions of Christians with disabilities who attend a local church in the United States. Although we continued recruiting until we reached saturation with regard to identifying new dimensions of worship, we would likely have heard many additional and different examples of issues that fall within these 15 areas had we sampled more widely. Future studies should explore this topic with larger numbers of individuals whose disabilities, demographics, and denominations differ from those who participated in this initial study. Second, we limited our look at “accessible worship” to the vantage point of people with disabilities. Although prioritizing this perspective is

essential, it would also be instructive to hear from pastors, worship leaders, and other congregation members regarding their own views on and understanding of accessibility. Future studies should ask these stakeholders about the things that would lead them toward (or away from) addressing accessibility in each of these 15 areas. Third, we opted to recruit participants from across multiple churches, rather than inviting multiple participants from within the same church. Although we think this was the right starting point for this line of inquiry, it is quite likely that different people within the same congregation will view accessibility in diverse ways. Indeed, practices that promote participation for some people might hinder participation for others. Future studies should explore how recommended changes to worship practices are perceived by individuals with a range of disabilities, as well as by members without disabilities. Fourth, we relied only on individual interviews in the absence of in-person observations of worship services. A richer understanding of accessible worship might emerge from integrating information gathered through both personal interviews and direct observations. Fifth, our interviews took place just prior to the global pandemic. Further research is needed to explore whether and how the rapid expansion of streaming options for worship introduced additional considerations warranting attention.

Accessible worship is increasingly advocated, but rarely defined. This study provided new insights into those aspects of weekly worship services that should be considered when striving to remove barriers to meaningful participation for everyone in a congregation. Church leaders can draw upon these findings to inform and reflect upon their current worship practices. At the same time, they should invite the input of local congregants with disabilities as a way of identifying aspects of worship that should be retained or refined so that all may worship as one.

### **Author contributions**

The first author conceptualized the study. The first, second, and fifth authors contributed to data collection. The first through fourth authors conducted the analyses and contributed to writing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### **Authors' note**

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### **Competing interests**

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## Ethics approval and consent

The study was conducted in line with procedures approved by the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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## ORCID

Erik W. Carter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7153-2782>

Michael Tuttle  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4787-4955>

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