

Supporting people with disabilities in your church



LeVa
Pasifika within Te Pou



Why is this information important?

People with disabilities or impairments are an important part of our communities. They have just as much right to participate in all aspects of life as anyone, including attending church. Providing an environment which is accessible for everyone is not only beneficial for people with disabilities, but is also a legal requirement.

As leaders of our communities, Church Ministers can play an important role in ensuring that people with disabilities are included and made to feel welcome in our churches. Many of our older people will eventually have some form of age-related disability, so it is important that Church leaders ensure that everyone's needs are taken care of.

What is a disability?

A disability is a long-term impairment (i.e. six months or longer) which may be physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, or psychological. People with disabilities face barriers to participating in our society. These barriers are in the physical environment and sometimes in people's attitudes.



A church minister's pastoral responsibilities for the flock is for all people, including those with disabilities.

*- Reverend Elder Fitifiti Luatua,
Moderator of Fono Samoa
(all Samoan PIC churches
in New Zealand)*

Pacific people with disabilities in New Zealand

Approximately 11 per cent of Pacific people in New Zealand have a disability. This equates to 24,800 people. However, this is only an estimate and many believe this number is much higher¹.

Statistics also show that:

- nearly all Pacific people with a disability live in the community (only two percent live in residential facilities)
- Pacific people with a disability are most likely to receive support from informal carers, such as family
- nearly two-thirds of Pacific adults with a disability have a physical disability
- 41 per cent of Pacific adults face difficulties in speaking, learning, remembering and doing everyday activities
- about one-third of Pacific adults with a disability experience sensory disabilities such as hearing or seeing
- more than half of Pacific people with a disability have more than one disability
- nearly three-quarters of Pacific adults with a disability live in lower socioeconomic areas.

¹ Statistics New Zealand. (2007). *2006 Disability Survey*. Wellington: Statistics New Zealand.

Including people with disabilities in church life

Churches are welcoming and encourage families to participate fully and meaningfully. This includes people with disabilities. People with disabilities have so much to contribute, and can be supported to participate in all aspects of church life.

One way to support them is by having an awareness of the issues surrounding disabilities, understanding accessibility needs, and communicating in a way that everyone can understand your messages.

Being aware of the issues

Some of the issues surrounding Pacific people with disabilities or impairments are:

Language

The language you and your church use when talking about disabilities or impairments is important. Some of the words and terms we use can stigmatise people with disabilities and sound very negative to a person with a disability or impairment.

Find positive words and terms that are respectful in both in English and Pacific languages and promote the use of these words in your church.

- For example, a person in a wheelchair is not “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound”. They use a wheelchair for mobility.

Society

It is society (us) that often creates barriers for people with impairments by not addressing everyone’s needs – thus disabling them.

Perceptions

- A disability or impairment does not define who a person is.
- People with disabilities are not necessarily at church to be sheltered, ‘healed’ or pitied. They are people with spiritual needs like any other member of the congregation.
- Disabled people also have gifts which they can use to serve God and others. Not only will others benefit, but they will have the opportunity to develop spiritually through their contributions.

Enabling physical access for all

Improving access for people with disabilities means they are more likely to attend and participate. If there are members of your church who have disabilities, talk to them first to see what could be done to create a better and more accessible environment for them.

How buildings are designed and where furniture is placed is the most obvious barrier facing people with disabilities. The Building Act 2004 and the Building Code require all buildings to which the public are admitted (whether for free or by charge) to have reasonable and adequate facilities for disabled people to visit, work, and carry out normal activities there. The code must be complied to when building new buildings or making modifications to existing buildings.

Some things to consider when enabling physical access for all in your church

- The size of access ways, keeping them clear and free from obstacles which may impede someone with a disability.
- Access to all areas of the church including the main worship area, podium and stage, as well as restrooms, kitchens and other areas.
- Comfortable seating options, seats with arm rests for people who find it difficult to stand from a chair, and places for wheelchairs (not just segregated at the back – give wheelchair users a choice for where they can sit).
- Provide seating near the front of the church for those who lip-read, or near loud speakers for those who are hard of hearing.
- Provide handrails to assist those using steps or ramps, and consider adding non-slip strips and colour contrast on steps.
- Ensure fire and evacuation procedures take into account members of your church who have disabilities.
- Maintain good lighting in your church for people with partial sight.
- Guide dogs are allowed to accompany their owners to most public places – this right is outlined in the Human Rights Act 1993 and the Dog Control Act 1996. Permitting guide dogs in your church allows people with vision impairments to operate independently and with dignity.

Communication needs for people with disabilities

For communication to be effective, messages should be understood by all. With a little work you can ensure your communications are accessible to all members.

- Effective communication makes the person the focus rather than the disability. Use language that shows respect, and that emphasises the value of the person.
- Address any questions or comments to people with disabilities directly to them in the first instance rather than their support person or caregiver.
- If you would like to provide any assistance to a person with a disability, ask first before providing this.
- If you have a person with vision impairment in your church, provide printed information such as newsletters or programmes in alternative formats like large print, or in audio format. If overheads or PowerPoint presentations are used, provide individual copies.
- When presenting visual material to the church, describe what is being presented.
- Deafness is often “an invisible impairment” that can be difficult for churches to accommodate. Where possible, churches should have people available to translate using New Zealand Sign Language. However, not all people with hearing impairments are deaf or require interpreters.
- Provide the main points of a sermon or message on a PowerPoint presentation or on overheads. Use pictures to illustrate the sermon point. Provide printed copies of readings so that people can follow along if they are unable to hear.
- Ensure everyone speaking uses the microphone, and if people are lip reading, encourage speakers to ensure their mouths are visible and to speak clearly.



For more information

To find help and more information for people with disabilities within your church:

- **Le Va's Disability Support Services Guides** are easy to read guides to help people access disability support services. They are printed in English, Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Fijian, Niuean and Tokelauan languages. Find them on our website www.leva.co.nz.
- **Vaka Tautua** is the Disability Information and Advice Service (DIAS) for Pacific people in New Zealand. Contact them on 0800 825 282.
- **Needs Assessment Service Coordination** (NASC) services provide assessments for people with disabilities, to see what support services they are eligible for. You can be referred by your family, a doctor or health professional, or someone from a disability or community organisation. You can also refer yourself. To find your local NASC, call 0800 693 342.
- Equipment and modification services may be able to provide assistance where a disability makes performing everyday tasks difficult. For more information contact:
 - **Accessible** (if you live in Auckland or Northland) on 0508 001 002 or visit www.accessable.co.nz
 - **Enable New Zealand** (if you live in the rest of New Zealand) on 0800 171 981 or visit www.disabilityfunding.co.nz.

For your church:

- For more information on improving accessibility of the built environment, see the **Office for Disability Issues'** website <http://www.odi.govt.nz/what-we-do/built-environment/index.html>.
- **Be. Accessible** is a New Zealand social change initiative and a holistic framework for accessibility with a mission to create a truly accessible country for us all. For more information visit www.beaccessible.org.nz.

About Le Va

This publication has been provided by Le Va. Le Va is New Zealand's national coordination service and workforce development programme for Pacific mental health, addictions, disabilities and public health. For more information, visit www.leva.co.nz.

