

## Access in the Portico: The Case for Accessibility

by Rev. Mel Martinez

*“After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I’m a making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.” (John 5:1-9, NRSV)*

*Accessibility is a process that begins in our hearts, with a recognition of and desire to eliminate existing attitudinal and physical barriers and to replace them with attitudes of welcome and acceptance. ~ UUA<sup>1</sup>*

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Welcome and acceptance live in the heart of Metropolitan Community Churches. As a global community, we are well versed in the Gospel of all-inclusive love and the prophetic words of Rev. Elder Troy D. Perry that “God has no STEP-sons or STEP-daughters.” We yearn for inclusion in the Body of Christ, and we found our churches on the idea that such inclusion - our special glimpse into the Realm of God – is possible in the here and now, inasmuch as it is yet to come.

Still, in the arena of inclusivity there exists a great chasm of unrealized equality and unjust exclusion; the arena of accessibility.

We have largely ignored accessibility as part of our social justice platform. Our social location as former outsiders who have scraped and fought our way into authorized recognition in Christendom narrows our vision to the “us” as a self-actualizing and proud people. We do not accept weakness well. We do not accept lack well. In effect, we do not stoop to admit that weakness or lack might be natural states of being, much less that in-ability may have as much to teach us as ability.

The story from John, Chapter 5 focuses on the reality of one with access challenges in a time and place of severe inequality regarding health and wholeness. The story centers at a cultural mishmash of beliefs about healing and wholeness, all focused at the temple at Bethsaida (Beth-zatha). Bethsaida was well known among many cultures and religious beliefs, and carried the message that healing was possible for those who suffer.<sup>2</sup> At the time of Jesus’ attendance, the porticos were safe zones for the people who suffered with physical ailments. Traditionally, the waters were known to render healing for those who entered upon the stirring of the waters by an angel. Whoever entered the water immediately upon stirring would receive the best benefit of healing.<sup>3</sup>

The man residing at the portico for 38 years was unable to attend to his own healing, though he surely sat ready at the portico for each stirring that occurred. His inability was not due to his affliction. Rather, he was unable because others with the ability to access the pool faster would step in front of him to receive the blessing of the pool. He spent a lifetime watching for the stirring, readying himself to access the pool, and then seeing those with greater ability than he quash his access to healing.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uua.org/accessibility/57761.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Sanctity of Time and Space in Tradition and Modernity, p. 82-84. Edited by Alberdina Houtman, M. J. H. M. Poorthuis, Joshua J. Schwartz.

<sup>3</sup> <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/5-4.htm>

This story is acted out in MCC congregations and at MCC events each time we gather. While we hope always to offer access to the Gospel, we also lack the awareness, and sometimes the heart, for assisting others. We have been so starved for the Bread of Life, so thirsty for the Water of Life, that when we see the banquet revealed in our worship and gathering, we become distracted from the needs of others. We are the omni-abled, so excited at the potential of the blessing of our own inclusion, step into the pool of angel-stirred healing water ahead of those unnoticed, unspeaking, and underserved. We do not mean to exclude, and the very idea that we might intentionally leave someone out causes our spirits trouble. We may even reject the idea altogether.

Yet, consider...

- When we show the cool new inspirational video ahead of worship that utilizes words on the screen with beautiful music in the background, but does not speak the words aloud, we have excluded those with challenges reading and/or learning disorders.
- When we neglect to offer a changing table in our (presumed) gender-neutral bathrooms, we exclude families with infants who are uncomfortable changing their child in public.
- When we step on the elevator ahead of a scooter-bound person, we communicate our lack of care or consideration for their lived reality.
- When we neglect to assign an usher to deliver communion to the (presumed) "Accessible" areas of our sanctuary, we withhold the nourishment of Eucharist.
- When we douse ourselves with cologne or perfume to attract that special someone, we risk the very breath of a person with asthma.

The examples are endless. Every church falters because every church is made up of imperfect people. That said, a "falter" becomes "exclusion" when no attempt is made and no compassion is rendered IN ADVANCE for anyone who might enter our community and desire to take part.

The Unitarian Universalist Association aptly notes, "Accessibility is a process that begins in our hearts." Accessibility is not a checklist of standard requirements to be met in order to minimally exact passive "inclusion". Accessibility is the recognition of the world beyond the pool; an acknowledgement that the porticos are also centers of healing. After all, it is in the portico that Jesus did his work.

In order to mend this chasm of service, our compassion must drive us into making change for the sake of those who are not yet with us. We change our building access for wheelchairs and walkers not yet needed. We adjust the height of our toilets and place grab bars on the walls for the unsteady person not yet with us. We add an audio track to printed word in videos so that even the tired hearing person may find convenience and comfort.

Christ utilized his gift of healing to mend the man in the portico in a way often beyond our grasp. Others in the portico now wait for our differently-abled family to ensure that the message of inclusive love reaches them, too. We are the Body of Christ. Let us open this heart we share for God's people, ALL God's people, and make easy the path to inclusion that was once so difficult for us.

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For further reading, consider:

["The Importance of Accessibility: A Drive Time Essay"](#)

[Etiquette for People with Intellectual Disabilities](#)

[Accessibility Checklist](#)

[Accessibility in Worship Architecture: Does Your Church Welcome Everyone?](#)

