

Make yours an

Accessible

Carol Service

Guide



**Churches for All**  
in association with Disability & Jesus



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# Introduction

Here's our guide to making your church's Carol Service accessible to disabled people.

More than one in five of our population live with one or more disabilities. There's a huge range of disabilities and everyone's experience of disability is unique. Disability can be physical, sensory, intellectual, and there are people with autism and mental health conditions too. In setting out to make your Carol Service accessible aim to think broadly about disability, considering access to the premises, access to the whole programme, and access to understanding.

## About this guide

This is neither a comprehensive nor authoritative guide to disability access. It is a distillation of knowledge and experience accumulated over years and set in the context of a single service in a local church setting. Of course we would love to think of it as being a step towards a consistent pattern of accessible church activities in more and more places. Churches for All offers a more comprehensive training programme for churches in its Enabling Church course. See [www.churchesforall.org.uk](http://www.churchesforall.org.uk) for more information about that.

## It's the thought that counts

Think first about the person, then the disability. This guide is structured around the activities and not organised disability by disability. Think through each aspect of your Carol Service to see what barriers to full inclusion might occur and then think creatively how each aspect can be made accessible to people experiencing full range of disabilities. Then crystallise your ideas by thinking about the specific disabilities of those you know who are likely to come.

## Getting Ready

More can be done to create an accessible service by good preparation than by what is done during the service. Plan the programme or Order of Service well ahead. This will allow time to make sure you have time to get the resources to make the service as accessible to disabled people as possible.

Think about the disabled people whom you know from the congregation or neighbourhood who would be interested and likely to come if access is good. A good



place to start is to talk with them. Ask them what they think would make the church and the service welcoming and accessible to them and other disabled people. If you are forming a team to plan and deliver the Carol Service, then include at least one disabled person in the team - to bring a different perspective and benefit from their contribution (rather than for tokenistic reasons).

## Publicity

How are you publicising the Christmas services? Whether it's through a church or community newsletter, by a leaflet drop or on the local radio, think about how you can make it known that disabled people are welcome and that accessibility has been considered. Disabled people in your community may have been to something in the church previously and found they couldn't get in or around, or couldn't join in, or simply didn't feel welcome.

Think about the routes by which disabled people get their information: day centres; local charities, community projects and residential care settings. Intentional 'word of mouth' communication – especially a personal invitation – is always important. Be ready with answers to queries about transport to church.

**Lifewords** has worked with **Livability**, **Count Everyone In** and **Biblica** (translator of the NIV and NIrV Bibles) to produce an excellent booklet called **Outside-in**. Using well-known Christmas readings interleaved with short comments, all in easy English it draws out the way outsiders become central to the Christmas narrative. It's also available from **Torch Trust** in large print, braille and audio formats. Consider distributing this with your Christmas Service invitations. And on **Lifewords** supporting webpage (<https://www.lifewords.global/shop/product/outsidein-animation>) you can download a free animation of the booklet with voice over and BSL interpretation.

## Prepare for everyone to join in

Everybody wants to join in with a Carol Service, so it's good to try to make sure that it is accessible as possible. Not everyone can read, and a surprising proportion of people cannot see enough to read standard print or words projected onto screens.

The great thing about Carol Services is that many of the songs/hymns are familiar. Nevertheless words will be provided by handouts or on screen(s) so we should make sure those who read using alternative formats have words they can read too. Some





people who cannot see enough to read even large print may welcome the Carol words being made available by email in advance, of the service so they can use the access features on their PC to read them in advance ready to join in.

Plan a physical handout, even if screens are used. Why not make all the handouts in Clear Print (at least 14point bold text, with uncluttered layout) the standard for everyone?

Some blind people read braille. With a bit of notice and planning your service sheet can be reproduced as a braille handout. Some people with sight loss can read neither braille nor large print. If they are known to you some may like the service sheet including song words emailed to them in advance so they can use the access tools on their home computer to get ready to join in the service.

**Torch Trust** can offer assistance with this and larger print options and, given reasonable notice, can produce a braille version of your handout. If you are using the Bethlehem Carol Sheets from **Embrace the Middle East** then contact **Torch Trust** for the braille and large print versions that they offer.

Plan a physical handout, even if screens are used. Why not make all the handouts in Clear Print (at least 14point bold text, with uncluttered layout) the standard for everyone. **Torch Trust** can offer assistance with this and larger print options and, given three weeks' notice, can produce a braille version of your handout. If you are using the Bethlehem Carol Sheets from **Embrace the Middle East** then contact **Torch Trust** for the braille and large print versions that they offer.

Are Deaf people (people whose first language is British Sign Language - BSL) invited/expected? If so, you will need to arrange for there to be BSL interpreters present. You may need to be prepared to pay for this service, or at least the interpreter's expenses. If you don't know of local BSL interpreters then you can contact **Signs of God** ([www.signsofgod.org.uk](http://www.signsofgod.org.uk)) well in advance. They hold a national list of interpreters via its Christian Interpreters' Network, and details of your service could be sent to these interpreters to see if anyone could be available. (Contact: [interpreting@signsofgod.org.uk](mailto:interpreting@signsofgod.org.uk))



The simpler sign language Makaton is better for including people with learning disabilities and encourages engagement whether or not people are deaf. Find out more from **Count Everyone In**.

Most churches will have a hearing (induction) loop system so do make sure it will be in use and confirm that it is working well beforehand. Either check it out with a hearing aid user in advance or obtain an induction loop test receiver (e.g. from [www.connevans.co.uk](http://www.connevans.co.uk)). Find out what area(s) of seating are served effectively by the hearing loop so you can let stewards know.

Display the loop 'ear' symbol prominently in a place where it will be seen by the congregation. You can also use the symbol to indicate seating served by the loop.

A very large number of people use hearing aids, though not everyone with hearing loss benefits from the loop system. If you have a projector and screen you can greatly aid the inclusion of many deafened people (and everyone) by using 'speech-to-text' (sometimes called sub-titles or captioning). This involves typing what is being communicated so that it is displayed shortly after it is said. Of course this is a skilled task that requires the involvement of someone capable of entering the text quickly enough. Even if you cannot find someone able to do this live, remember that much the content of a Christmas Carol service is known in advance: Bible readings, poems, links, notices, drama, etc. so it can be entered ready for projection – possibly even the sermon notes. BSL interpreters or Makaton signers will welcome having scripts and notes before the service.

If video content is to be used think how it will be received by people with hearing or sight loss. Are there subtitles or can they be added? Is an audio description available? If not, someone can be prepared to 'voice over' significant action that is necessary for understanding the presentation. Thoughtfully consider the Bible translation used for the readings. Here there's balance to be found between familiarity of traditional language and the clarity and freshness of recent translations. Choosing a version that is in straightforward English, such as the New International Readers Version (NIRV), will aid understanding for those with English as a second language as well as people with a learning disability. (See more on this topic below)



## Think ahead about the premises

If there are barriers to wheelchair access look for a creative solution. Maybe a ramp needs to be made, rented or purchased ready for the service. (See more information on this topic below).

With both access and capacity in mind it may be necessary to consider seating arrangements. Do you have some seats with arms? Offer choice to wheelchair users as to where they would like to be situated.

It's a good idea to review the signage in time to prepare any extra or improved signs, remembering to include symbols or images wherever possible.

Make sure you have some dog bowls ready to provide water for any assistance/service/guide dogs.

Lighting deserves consideration ahead of time. On this occasion more than most there is a tension between atmospheric and creative lighting (maybe candle light) and practical lighting that will enable members of the congregation to read handouts and get around safely. One way of resolving this is to vary the lighting to fit with the activities in the programme. Another option is to obtain little LED torches to give those who use large print handouts instead of the screens.

Never shine light into people's faces and avoid flashing lights (Advance warning should always be given before any use of flashing lights). Lighting should be flicker-free, so replace any faulty tubes/starters beforehand.

The person leading or speaking as well as any BSL interpreter and/or Makaton signer should be well lit at all times, even if other lighting in the church is switched off or dimmed.

If the church has toilet facilities these should include accessible toilets – even if it's the only toilet. Check the toilet well before the event. Too often it's used for storage that might prevent the toilet being used by a disabled person in the way intended. Commonly the space that's there for the wheelchair when transferring is occupied, typically, by a waste bin. Make sure it's not cluttered and that access is clear – also that signage is clearly visible, ideally using symbols rather than (or as well as) text.



Is there a room that can be set aside and signposted in readiness for anyone who finds the busyness or noise of the occasion overwhelming, a person with autism perhaps or for a parent with a disabled child who needs somewhere to retreat, without going out into the December cold?

## **Prepare the team**

Give some thought about who will participate in leading the service, in reading, bringing a talk or sermon, praying and supporting the event in a myriad other ways. Think about how people with disabilities who have relevant abilities and gifts can be included among the team? A Bible reading from braille, a welcomer with learning disability, a physically disabled person leading prayers, disabled people with musical gifts included within the music group, a Deaf person speaking through an interpreter are just a few examples to evidence an inclusive approach.

Ensure that welcomers, stewards and anyone involved in greeting people have been trained or at least been provided with a copy of these Accessible Carol Service guides in good time and briefed before the congregation arrives.

## **Access to the Premises**

### **Level access?**

Some disabled people get around using wheels. Steps are a barrier to wheelchair access. Not just wheelchair users: an increasing number of people use powered buggies to help them get around. Step free and even access is important for people who do not necessarily use a wheelchair but have reduced mobility, balance or sight.

Wheelchair use is about independent mobility so wherever possible wheelchair users should be able to get in and around the church without assistance. Some wheelchair users may welcome assistance but they may not – so always ask. If your church has one or two steps on the route into the church a simple ramp can provide a solution. These can be rented, purchased or made. The gradient should not exceed 1 in 12 (a 6inch or 15cm step requires of ramp of 1.8meters or 6ft in length).

The aim should be that everyone uses the same entrance(s) but some churches have no level or ramped access option other than to use another entrance route to get into the church. Make sure signage is clear and there is steward support for guiding and welcoming disabled people using this alternative route. And remember to ensure





there's also support from a steward at the alternative exit at the end of the service! An apology might well be appropriate. Or maybe the alternative entrance could become a main way in and out for this occasion – not just a route for disabled people.

In the event that there is simply no practical or dignified route into the church that would allow wheelchair or buggy access, then any publicity or invitations to the service should make this clear.

## **Parking**

If your church has parking, make sure there are spaces marked or reserved for holders of 'Blue Badges'. Make sure reserved bays are large enough to allow for access to doors and boot/hatch. It is helpful if stewards can ensure that those who need these spaces are able to access them.

If there is no parking – or the parking becomes congested – think about drop-off arrangements.

Check out the route from the parking or drop-off into the church: is it clear, wide enough for a person to walk with a guide alongside and level enough for a wheelchair. If the route is not obvious, prepare clear signage.

If the service is after dark, check there is lighting in the car park and on the route into the church. If not, make sure the stewards have a good torch handy.

## **Clear signage to venue?**

Signage supports independent access for people with sight loss and/or learning disability, people with hearing loss and anyone who doesn't read English.

Signs should be bold, clear, with high contrast and unambiguous – using symbols in preference to or in addition to text wherever possible.

## **Keeping everyone safe**

Safety is always a consideration, but safety should not be a reason for denying or compromising access for a disabled person. And access for disabled people should never compromise the safety of everyone.



When making adaptations to improve access consider both the safety of the disabled person and of all others involved or attending. It's always worth pursuing any tension between access and safety, creatively seeking a better solution that is both good for access and safe for everyone.

The implications of emergency evacuation should be considered. Any alarm system or arrangement should give visible as well as audible signals.

Stewards will need to be ready to offer assistance to people who need it on their way in (and out).

## Welcome and Stewarding

### Ready to welcome everyone

Stewards or welcomers (or whatever else your church calls them!) need to be prepared to receive disabled people. Make sure stewards are prepared and provided with information from these **Churches for All** resources beforehand. **Through the Roof** offers pocket-size **Stewards' Cards** that provide helpful top tips and reminders for Welcome teams. ([www.throughtheroof.org](http://www.throughtheroof.org))

Of course the welcome should be just as for anyone else - warm and friendly. But everyone who is greeting people should be ready to ask, as did Jesus of the blind man called Bartimaeus: 'what do you want me to do for you?' And do remember that not all disabilities are visible.

When a disabled person arrives with a guide or carer, be sure to address your welcome and offers of help to the disabled person, and not talk about them to their companion unless that's what the disabled person wants. Try to get to eye level when speaking to a wheelchair user. Keeping a seat handy is a good idea.

Have large print and any braille versions of words ready to offer. A person with sight loss can hardly be expected to see that they are available!

Be ready to guide a disabled person to a seat. Some wheelchair users welcome a push, others prefer to propel themselves. Always ask, and always treat the wheelchair as part of their personal space.



Ask where disabled people would like to sit. It's good if there's the flexibility for wheelchair users to sit with family and friends, but with fixed seating (pews) this can be difficult. Corridors must have adequate clearance for fire evacuation. And people who cannot stand may have their view of a screen blocked by those who stand in front of them. So it's good to keep some space clear at the front if that's what a wheelchair user prefers.

Ask wheelchair users if they would prefer to transfer to a seat. Be prepared for both options. Think ahead about nearby wheelchair storage and be ready to recover the wheelchair at the end of the service (or in the case of an evacuation). It's also a good idea to be ready with a place to park motorised buggies.

## **At the front**

Often a congregation leaves a front row or two vacant until every other seat is filled! There are various reasons why disabled people might prefer a seat at or near the front, mainly to do with sight and hearing, but also for those who cannot stand and whose view gets obscured by people standing up in front of them. So it's good to reserve some seats for people who will benefit from them.

People with sight loss may want to see what is happening or to get a close view of the projector screen. Deaf people will want to see a BSL interpreter at all times, as will people with learning disabilities who are following a Makaton signer.

People with hearing loss may be straining for the last decibel of leaders' voices or needing a clear line of sight so they can lip read. People with sight loss often appreciate some orientation (i.e. what is where). With sound systems in use it's not always easy to know where the person speaking is.

## **Getting comfortable**

Some people will welcome seats with arms. So if your church has them, include them in the seating mix and have stewards alert to offer them.

People who were helped or guided to a seat are likely to welcome assistance with their departure. If refreshments are served, offers of assistance are also likely to be welcomed.



## Just in case

In the unlikely event of an emergency evacuation, stewards need to be ready to help disabled people leave the building.

## Access to the programme

### What happens next?

Some people find it very helpful to know what is happening in advance and when. Consider having the programme or Order of Service available as a handout (perhaps with the Carol words included), offered to everyone as they enter. Give an expectation of the service finish time and of what happens at the end (Is there an invitation to refreshments, for example).

### Words

To join in like everyone else it's important that disabled people have access to the words. Many people - including many who would never call themselves 'disabled' - will have difficulty reading the sort of small print that is commonplace in churches. Make sure there is a large print version of carols and any other words that the congregation is expected to read. This applies even when the words are projected on a screen.

Screens and data projectors can be helpful, providing everything is set up well. The contrast should be maximised and the screen shaded from other sources of light. Text should be clear and bold, and as large as possible - never less than 26pt on an A4 equivalent slide master. Everyone's experience of sight loss is different, but as a general rule yellow or white text on a dark blue or green background is best for most. Pictures behind the text are extremely unhelpful. If you want to use pictures, devote a section of the screen to text on a plain background. The same applies to a screen used for 'speech to text'.

If the church has a sound system then make sure it is operated by experienced people and used by everyone taking a lead throughout the programme. Levels should be monitored and adjusted to provide effective reinforcement without 'ringing' or 'howling' and kept at comfortable and safe levels during music. Ensure that the loop system (previously checked out) is actually operating - there's usually some reassuring flickering lights somewhere on the box.





If you expect any loud sound during the service have ear defenders ready for use by adults or children who may find excessive sound disturbing, resulting in them not being able comfortably to access the event.

If you are going to include Deaf people who use British Sign Language (BSL) then a BSL interpreter is the ideal. They should be clearly visible and well lit. See also the comments above using Makaton, primarily, but not solely, to support people with learning disabilities. Makaton enhances involvement for many people.

## Guidance to those leading

Welcome everyone. In the welcoming remarks it's good to make clear what is going to be happening and to mention the relevant access provisions – that there's large print available and that there's a loop system active for example.

### Always remember:

Not everyone can move as you direct, not everyone can see what you show them, not everyone can hear everything you want them to hear, not everyone can read and not everyone can understand all you say.

Some people will find it difficult to stand, or stand for long periods. Invite rather than command: 'Please stand if you are comfortable to stand' instead of: 'All stand'.

People with sight loss can find silence disconcerting. If a period of silence is intentional and that is made clear, fine. But silence while the rest of the congregation is engaged visually leaves some wondering what is going on. Simply ensure there's an audio description of the activity. Multi-sensory engagement is good and is an opportunity for creativity.

## Access to Understanding

Among a mix of ages and abilities there will be people whose understanding will be hindered by unnecessarily complex language.

Choosing a clear plain English Bible translation will aid understanding but this has to be balanced with the familiar cadence of more traditional versions. Ideal for an Accessible Carol Service is the New International Readers Version (NIRV) easy-English translation published by **Biblica**, available in print and also downloadable from the



Bible Gateway website. It has much in common with the familiar NIV translation, but with shorter, clearer sentences and simpler vocabulary. For New Testament readings it is worth getting hold of the large print (16pt) Accessible Edition New Testament (NIrV-AB). It has been produced in association with **Torch Trust, Livability** and **Urban Saints**. With its grey tinted paper and rated as reading age 7, this is not a 'children's Bible' but its use has been shown to aid the understanding not only of adults with learning disability but also people with dyslexia, other forms of sight loss, children and those for whom English is a second language.

Carols are by nature poetic and maybe not totally understood by any participant! A few well-chosen words of introduction can be appropriate.

A message/talk/sermon can combine depth with ease of understanding by carefully choosing words of introduction and closing. Consider making the closing section a recap in straightforward language of the key message(s). Short attention spans can present a barrier to understanding, especially for people whose only experience of church in an entire year may be this one service, so be concise and multi-sensory if possible. Everyone will benefit.

Stories, illustrations and metaphors can reinforce any message, but poorly chosen or presented metaphors can also lead to some very strange interpretations.

### **There's a message here ...**

The Christmas narrative in the gospels is itself one that draws people from the margins into the centre of God's activity in the world. This is the theme of the Christmas give-away booklet from **Lifewords** mentioned in the Getting Ready section above. Here's a quote about from **Lifewords**:

*'The Christmas story is full of unlikely characters. Those on the edges are drawn to the heart of the action. Everyone is invited in. We hope you'll join us in finding ways to share that invitation this year – to welcome people in to the good news of the Christmas story.'*



## After the service

If refreshments are offered make sure disabled people are provided for. This will mean taking refreshments to some, offering a choice of what's available to those who cannot see, making sure that those who can't stand and hold two things at once have a seat and a place to put things down.

Make sure disabled people are not left isolated but have the opportunity to be fully included in conversations. This is a time of opportunity – to make sure disabled people feel truly welcome and included within the church community.

## A final word

In most church situations you will not be able to do everything recommended in this guide for this one service. But each step you take is likely to be appreciated. Be sure of one thing: that the thought that goes in will make the service better for everyone.

The key to disability access and inclusion is to involve disabled people. If nothing else from this guide sticks in your mind, remember this: 'Always ask'.

This guide comes with a prayer: that God will bless you in preparing and running an Accessible Carol Service and that through your service many people, including disabled people, will be blessed.

*Compiled by Churches for All, the UK network of Christian disability-engaged organisations - enabling churches where disabled people belong. Visit [www.churchesforall.org.uk](http://www.churchesforall.org.uk) for details of, and links to network member organisations.*

