

Accessibility in Hybrid Worship and Meetings: Applying Universal Design to Benefit All



Why hybrid services?

As our congregations make our way back into church buildings, we must decide whether to continue virtual options. Hybrid worship and meetings will serve more people and grow our reach, going back to our old habits will not! Better yet, by making a conscious effort to plan events to meet the needs of people with disabilities you will find that many other people are accommodated as well. The beauty of universal design is that changes made for one group benefit many others.

Online services and meetings allow participation by parents at home with sick children, travelers, and college students away from home in addition to people with medical and mobility challenges, especially in inclement weather. You may find that half or more of your viewers watch later in the day or week. Additionally, having a virtual component means we can plan creatively to include more diverse voices and stories in our events, including people unable to attend typical services.

Audio description

One best practice is to **provide an audio explanation for every visual element** of the service or meeting. For example, introducing each speaker helps people who have poor internet access or technology access and are limited to audio as much as it benefits people with visual loss who cannot see the screen or channel. Projected messages need to be read aloud. Pictures or actions should be briefly described so that all participants are included in the activity.

Captioning and signing

Captioning dialogue is necessary for people with hearing loss but beneficial for people for whom English is not the first language and for some neurodivergent people who process information better when they read it. Real time or edited captions are best as those generated by artificial intelligence often are inaccurate. Some churches supplement auto-generated captions by having a volunteer follow the feed, correct mistakes, and receive feedback from on-line viewers.

Providing a transcript, bulletin, or agenda to download or see during the activity is one possible alternative. Better yet is making those documents available ahead of time and along with your captioned recordings that are posted for later viewing. The UM Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries has more information on captioning to help you select the best options for your church – see the For More Information section below.

Most Deaf and some hard of hearing people prefer **American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation**, and some individuals with developmental disabilities find that it aids their understanding as well. Incorporating ASL allows us a chance to worship using our bodies and not be limited to our voices. While not every congregation can provide ASL, doing so expresses your welcome and appreciation for diversity. ASL interpreters may stand next to the speaker or

provide interpretation remotely and appear in a separate box overlay in one corner of the screen.

Accessible practices benefit all

Most inclusive practices are helpful to both in-person and the online audiences. All speakers need to use the microphone, face the camera and congregation, and keep their mouths visible while speaking to facilitate lip-reading and comprehension. Having a simple background and avoiding back-lighting make the speaker easier to see and understand. Using standard fonts and a strong contrast between words and background allow more people to participate. Avoiding flashing lights and images prevents triggering seizures and migraines. Sometimes we forget that catchy graphics, busy backgrounds, and moving images may appear creative but detract from our message.

Final check and affirmation

Finally, remember to test your media, sound, and processes before you go live. Show slides and videos to a variety of users and get feedback to ensure they are indeed legible and audible. Be assured that your extra work upfront will pay off in knowing that you have done all you could to provide access to worship and the work of the church. Providing hospitality and inclusion through universal design align our actions with our intentions and with the gospel message we bring to the world!

For more information

United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Ministries: [list of congregations known to have ASL, captioning, or hearing loops](#).

“Captions,” United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Ministries: <https://www.umdeaf.org/atech/caption.html>

“Inclusive on-line worship and group participation,” DMC: https://umcdmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/c19_worship.pdf

“Online and Virtual Gatherings: Inclusion for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Members,” by Rev. Leo Yates, Jr. 3/27/20: <https://umdisability.blogspot.com/2020/03/online-and-virtual-gatherings-inclusion.html>

“A guide to group video calling apps for hearing loss,” by Lisa Goldstein, 3/25/20: <https://www.hearinglikeme.com/guide-to-group-video-calling-apps-for-hearing-loss/>

“5 Accessibility actions you can take when you’re moving your conference or classes online,” by Elizabeth Neal, 3/17/20: <https://www.afb.org/blog/entry/accessibility-onlineconferences-classes>