

Launching a Disability Concerns Committee in Your Annual Conference



Disability Ministries
The United Methodist Church



The Mandate for and Responsibilities of a Disabilities Concerns Committee

The Book of Discipline of the UMC 2016 provides that every annual conference will have a committee that addresses disabilities, or its responsibilities will be delegated to another body:

Paragraph 653. *There shall be in each annual conference a **committee on Disability Concerns** or other structure to provide for the functions of this ministry and maintain the connectional relationships.*

1. *The basic membership of the committee shall be nominated and elected by the established procedures of the respective annual conference. Each annual conference shall determine the number and composition of total membership. Membership shall include persons with physical disabilities and persons with mental disabilities. (p.503)*

2. *It shall be the responsibility of this committee:*

- a) *To be aware of, and advocate for, the role of persons with disabilities in ministry, including ordained and diaconal ministries and local church and annual conference leadership positions.*
- b) *To advocate for and help develop programs within the annual conference that meet the needs of persons with disabilities.*
- c) *To be informed about current ministries within the annual conference that are related to persons with disabilities.*
- d) *To develop ways to sensitize persons in leadership positions on issues that affect persons with disabilities and therefore the entire Church.*
- e) *To foster cooperation among ministries with the annual conference that focus on specific disabilities (deaf, deafened, hard of hearing, developmental disabilities, mental retardation (sic), mental illness, visual impairment, physical disabilities, etc.)*
- f) *To be a resource for local churches who are attempting to develop ministries that are attitudinally and architecturally accessible.*
- g) *To promote the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of the local church and the annual conference.*
- h) *To participate in jurisdictional accessibility associations in the sharing of knowledge and resources. (p. 504)*

Action Steps: The following steps are suggestions to get you started, not prescriptions. The steps may be carried out in the sequence that best meets your needs and time constraints, and may be combined, postponed, or eliminated.

Step One: Gather like-minded people

Undergird your efforts with prayer, asking that God will bring together the people needed to launch the ministry needed by your annual conference.

Reach out on available media, e.g. your conference newsletter, website, and social media, asking people to contact you.

Host a display table at your annual conference session and include a sheet where interested persons can sign up for the Disability Ministries Committee newsletter and to receive more information about conference ministries and plans.

Post a message on the Disability Ministries Committee Facebook page.

Contact the Disability Ministries Committee to request support and to determine if there are resource persons or members of the UM Association of Ministers with Disabilities in your area.

Reach out to other annual conferences in your Episcopal Area or to nearby conferences, if appropriate, and join forces until you are ready to go out on your own.

Start, promote, and maintain your own conference Disability ministry Facebook group or page.

Contact your conference United Women in Faith leadership to access persons who led the Mission u study on *The Church and People with Disabilities*.

Step Two: Research committee models and information

Determine if your conference needs would be best served by an independent committee, being under the umbrella of a conference ministry work area, or starting a grass roots group loosely connected with the conference.

Read how one conference re-established this ministry: “God Makes a Way – Building a Conference Disability Task Force” by Sharon McCart: <https://archives.gcah.org/handle/10516/9673> *New World Outlook*, May/June 2014. Note that you will need to download the whole issue.

Look through the listing of Annual Conference Disability Concerns Committees by state: <https://umcdmc.org/Disability-ministries/Disability-groups-by-state> to see what other annual conferences are doing. Conference committee sites to explore include the following, which are included as examples of some more active committees:

East Ohio: <http://www.eocumc.com/disabilities/index.html>

Illinois Great Rivers: <https://www.igrc.org/accessibilityministries>

Mountain Sky: <https://www.mtnskyumc.org/Disabilityvisionsabilitymatters>

North Alabama: <https://www.umcna.org/DisabilityMinistries>

Step Three: Provide support at annual conference sessions and other conference events

Remind your conference leadership that annual conference sessions and other events should be designed to be accessible to all, per *BOD* Paragraphs 603.4, 610.4, and 715.2.

Ask to have a representative of your committee on the Conference Sessions Planning Committee. Provide the committee with a copy of the Accessibility Planning Checklist, found at <https://umcdmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Events-Accessibility-Checklist-pdf-LS.pdf> and provide education and advocacy as needed.

Ensure that conference and district event registration materials include an option for people with disabilities to request accommodations. Offer to contact persons requesting support to determine specific needs ahead of time, and then ensure that the accommodations are provided.

Staff an "Accessibility and Accommodations" table at conference events so people who need accommodations can check in and ask for support as needed.

Provide the planning committee with written feedback after the event. Describe what went well and what might be improved for next time.

Step Four: Determine needs and strengths of congregations, districts, camps, and agencies

Establish relationships and communication channels.

Survey or interview the target groups to determine strengths, assets, and potential support needed.

Offer support to conference boards of Discipleship (camping, Christian education), Global Ministries (disaster and mission programs, health-care institutions), and Older Adult Ministries to help them ensure that their ministries promote full participation for persons with disabilities.

Step Five: Promote and provide disability resources

Have committee members attend as many conference events as possible to raise awareness that the committee exists and wants to help churches and other entities.

Use conference media channels and the media resource center to promote Disability resources and options for carrying out Disability-related requirements from the Book of Discipline, e.g.

- Disability Awareness Sunday (*BOD*, Paragraph 265.4) - See resources at <https://umcdmc.org/worship>
- The Annual Accessibility Audit for Churches (*BOD*, Paragraph 2532.6) See resources at <https://umcdmc.org/resources/accessibility-and-united-methodist-churches/accessibility-audit>

Promote the materials provided by the Disability Ministries Committee as appropriate.

Offer workshops and or information tables at district training events, clergy gatherings, and United Women of Faith annual meetings.