



How to walk 6: What a wheelchair-user is thinking when they go to church

By Elizabeth Starr

Ok, I'm really not the most experienced person to write a blog like this as I've not used a wheelchair for very long. Every disabled person has a different experience of church, so ask them! Here are some of the things I'm paying attention to:

When I see any public building from the outside, my eyes will look for the access. Nothing says 'disabled people are welcome here' like a disabled car-parking space and step-free access. I like my entrance to be as average as possible eg I'd like to go into the front like everybody else. I know some buildings have ramps they can put out on request, but I'd still have a little thrill of belonging to see a ramp ready and waiting.

When I'm inside, I'll always notice if the building has a lift or not. (I know they are super-hard and expensive to install in old buildings, so don't worry, I get why many don't). An obvious accessible toilet is a beauty, and a space in the main hall as inclusive as possible. I'll quietly get myself to my seat with as little fuss as possible, looking (and feeling) for level-access. And if I'm in a manual wheelchair and I want to be pushed, I will ask someone, probably a friend. Otherwise, I'm fine and don't require help.

When I get to my place, I would just like to stay seated in my wheelchair, though many people would want to transfer into a normal chair. This is not because I'm afraid of making a mistake and falling when changing chairs but because I don't want the FUSS caused if I accidentally fall. I don't care if I randomly hit my elbow, I care if everyone frets on my behalf (embarrassing!). I'd rather avoid the possibility and not transfer.

I'm also initially subconsciously alert incase I'm accosted by a 'kindly prayer warrior' who may be lurking in the wings, ready to pounce with their prayer for my healing. If this does happen and they go ahead with praying for my ability to walk (won't work, the problem is in my brain, not my legs!), it's okay because I can pray to God as well. Two can play at that game ("God, ignore what they want you to do. Do what *you* want to do"). I know God can do whatever he wants, I'm ready for it, but please don't pray for something unless you feel super-super-*super*-specifically called to it, and even then, ask me! See what I want prayer for! Chances are it won't be prayer for healing.

Now I know most churches these days have good access and good teaching about prayer, and so for you guys I'd say just keep treating your disabled people as normal! We're not fragile Fabergé eggs or unfeeling cybermen, just average citizens trying to live our lives. And to everyone who has been my friend, and treats everyone the same, thank you.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is my church inclusive architecturally and emotionally in welcoming people to the building?
- Am I treating everyone equally?