As we begin the good work of bringing together people of multiple parishes we have a wonderful opportunity to fix some things that may have been lacking in regard to ministry to and with people within those groupings who live with a disability. Statistics provided by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability show that 20% of the people within any parish’s boundaries live with a disabling condition, and one family in three includes someone who has significant limitations. Approximately 58% of those with disabilities have a physical limitation; slightly less than 9% have a sensory disability; around 5% have a cognitive disability involving either mental retardation or mental illness; with the remaining 28% having a serious medical condition. These statistics suggest that a parish with 1000 members needs to give consideration to the special needs of approximately 200 parishioners.

For various reasons, parishes in the past often placed the needs of some of our most faithful sisters and brothers on the back burner. Now is the perfect opportunity to correct those oversights. And if we don’t make the effort now, at the beginning of the process, you know as well as I do that five years from now our attention will be drawn elsewhere, those with special needs will be forgotten, and we will be in the same boat we are in now. This is the perfect time to get our house in order (disability-wise).

I’ll offer one obvious example: If you are combining 4 parishes down to two campuses, how many handicapped parking places
are there total on all four campuses? How many in your “main” campus alone? How many more spaces will you need to add when you close those other campuses?

The physical design of our church buildings speak first and strongest about the value the parish community places on the inclusion of people with disabilities. This was forcefully described in detail in paragraphs 20 through 23 of the Pastoral Statement of the U. S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities whose 40th anniversary we celebrate on November 16.

“The most obvious obstacle to participation in parish activities faced by many people with disabilities is the physical design of parish buildings. Structurally inaccessible buildings are at once a sign and a guarantee of their isolation from the community… *Mere cost must never be the exclusive consideration, however, since the provisions of free access to religious functions for all interested people is a pastoral duty.*”

(my emphasis)

“It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to people with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the life of the Church, even by passive omission, is to deny the reality of that community.”

(The complete text of the Bishop’s Statement can be found here: [www.ncpd.org/views-news-policy/policy/church/bishops/pastoral](http://www.ncpd.org/views-news-policy/policy/church/bishops/pastoral)

For things beyond parking places, groupings might want to use this list to help choose campuses if they have not done so already. Include these in your considerations and if they do not currently exist put them in your initial plans. As was noted, if they are not done now they probably won’t get done five years from now:
- Access to the buildings. Ramps? Wide enough doors? Automatic doors?
- Handicapped accessible restrooms? Are there changing tables? Put some assist bars next to the commodes in the non-handicapped bathrooms, as well. You’d be surprised how many people need them!
- Where will people in wheelchairs sit? Pews cuts at various places throughout the church allows people to sit with their families. Remove a pew or two near the front, as well.
- Are there listening assist devices available for people who are hard of hearing? I even know of priests who use them! Add a listen assist transmitter and put signs up letting people know they are available by putting signs up. (And let the ushers know where to get them!)
- Is your sound system loud enough?
- Do you have large print worship aids? Do people know about them?
- Is your sanctuary accessible? If not, Can you add a ramp somewhere? (Even our priests as they age might appreciate this!) Do you need railings to help people get up steps to the ambo?
- Do you keep low-gluten hosts on hand? Do people know they are available? Do you have a system for distributing them? (Even something as simple as the ushers letting the priest know they will need one - in a separate pyx - and telling the person to go to the priest to receive communion.)
- Are there people on the autism spectrum or with other cognitive disorders in your new parish that would benefit from a Mass with minimal sensory overloads like loud music and incense. Can you include one in your schedule? Once a week? Twice a month?
These are the minimum things to consider. Attitudes are often shaped by the concept that including people with disabilities will cost money for renovations and additional services or create more work for parishioners. Some also are reticent to create barrier-free spaces for fear that architecture or art will be compromised by ramps, railings or other devices. Involving Catholics with disabilities in the development of short- and long-range planning may change attitudes and help address fears and concerns. Enlisting the help of professionals from the parish may also keep costs to a minimum and help educate even more parishioners.

Based on the statistics above and many anecdotal stories, we know that virtually every community includes people with disabilities. However, they may not attend a particular parish (or any parish) because they do not feel welcome and do not wish to feel singled out or as if they are “causing trouble.” People with disabilities desire to worship God as an equal in the community, not as an outsider who disrupts simply by being present.

Parishioners’ attitudes can be strongly influenced by the positive attitude of the pastor and other parish leaders. For example, if a person with a mental illness has minor outbursts during Mass, the pastor can tactfully assure people that this is not in any way “bothersome” to him, thus dispelling any notion that this is an “interruption” to Mass or that it is “distracting Father.” If the disruption becomes more severe, he can address the individual’s needs with family members or a care giver. A pastor or parish leader who is welcoming of altar servers with cog-
nitive disabilities, a reader who is in a wheelchair or a greeter who is blind will go a long way in emphasizing that God calls all people to use their gifts for the good of the community.

Speaking of which, it’s one thing to get people IN to the Mass but the final step is to consider how we can help them share their individual gifts and talents in the celebration of the Mass. Not just to do things FOR them but WITH them! Greeting and welcoming. Ushering. Serving. Music/cantoring/choir. Readers. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.
This list is a good place to start:

**10 Easy Ways to Make Your Parish Inclusive**

*From Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors, Pathways Awareness Foundation:*

123 North Wacker Drive - Chicago, Illinois 60606  
Tel: (800) 955-2445 - www.pathwaysawareness.org - Fax: (888) 795-5884

1. Include children, youth and adults with disabilities in Liturgy as an altar server, Eucharistic minister, lector, cantor, usher, musician, etc.
2. Form a well-rounded committee on inclusion to increase meaningful participation for persons with disabilities.
3. Hold focus groups or conduct a church survey to personalize church needs and to prioritize improvements.
4. Train ushers and lay leaders as role models to include and welcome persons with disabilities and their families.
5. Make prayers and petitions more inclusive of persons with disabilities.
6. Place an 'inclusion box' in the church with paper and pencils for church members to easily express suggestions for better inclusion.
7. Use large print prayer books, missals, bulletins.
8. Provide a sign-language interpreter at a regular Liturgy time.
9. Audio tape or print large-print homilies and promote them in the bulletin.
10. Include a person who uses a wheelchair, walker or crutches or a family member on the committee for planning renovations or additions to the church as well as on Pastoral Council.