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## BOOK REVIEW

**Accessible Faith: A Technical Guide for Accessibility in Houses of Worship** by Elizabeth A. Patterson & Neal A. Vogel (Chicago: Retirement Research Foundation, 2003); paperback, 52 pages; \$9.00. To order, contact Partners for Sacred Places at (215) 567-3234, ext. 13, or [tforrest@sacredplaces.org](mailto:tforrest@sacredplaces.org); also available free as a PDF at [www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org).

**Reviewed by the Rev. Ken Plattner**

Most churches, synagogues and mosques in the United States were built at a time that predates the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). These noble structures were traditionally buildings of splendid architectural design, elevated above the grade to create inspired spiritual expression. Houses of worship as described by late architect Ralph Adams Cram are “spiritual oases, set apart from the pedestrian environment through substantial, soaring walls and monumental stairs approaching impressive entrances well above the street.”

This definition of places of worship hardly describes the kinds of structures that are easily accessible to elders and people with disabilities. Into this milieu, Elizabeth A. Patterson and Neal A. Vogel, the authors of *Accessible Faith*, bring their unique vision. Patterson and Vogel ask readers to imagine a world where all people are welcomed into sacred worship space by the intentional removal of physical and cultural barriers.

In their masterful A-to-Z nuts-and-bolts technical manual addressing issues of accessibility in the construction of new houses of worship and the remodeling of old ones, Patterson and Vogel unapologetically state that “attitudinal, as well as architectural, barriers must be eliminated . . . The goal is to provide the highest level of access with the lowest level of impact.” Their book provides an excellent, methodical and comprehensive approach to making the changes necessary for buildings that are accessible to people with disabilities.

According to Patterson and Vogel, the process begins with rigorous planning that uses the Americans With Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines, which set forth the technical requirements under the ADA. With these guidelines forming the foundation of the building plan, a congregation can actively pursue a realistic accessibility survey. The survey assesses parking, walkways, ramps and railings; elevators, lifts and stairs; doors, doorways and thresholds; worship space, sound systems and lighting; and restrooms, water fountains, telephones and signage.

Once an accessibility survey has been completed, the next step is establishing design criteria, drawings and blueprints that will ultimately create an accessible structure. *Accessible Faith* provides a recommended format for this process. The authors also explain how to hire an archi-

tect, give an assessment of the costs of creating an accessible building and outline ways to address successful fundraising.

Patterson and Vogel quote John Dunne, former U.S. Assistant Attorney General, who noted during the congressional debate about the ADA that “it is easier for a person with a disability to get a beer at a bar than it is to enter a church to pray.”

The authors point out that people with disabilities are predominantly people of faith. The 2000 Harris Survey of Americans With Disabilities found that eight out of 10 people with disabilities consider their faith to be important, yet they are far less likely than those without disability to attend religious services (47% vs. 65%). The authors of *Accessible Faith* conjecture that the physical barriers common in religious buildings may be partly to blame for this gap between religious belief and attendance for people with disabilities.

In Chicago, where the authors are based, 75 percent of all congregations have been polled, and they have a strong positive intention to be free of barriers to elders and people with disabilities. Yet, according to Patterson and Vogel, only 6 percent of the existing houses of worship in Chicago are truly accessible under the standards of the Illinois Accessibility Code. And more than 50 percent of the existing congregations have as yet done nothing to improve accessibility.

*Accessible Faith* offers readers a glimpse of what an accessible house of worship might look like, then methodically walks them through a four-step process:

1. Determining what architectural barriers exist.
2. Developing safe, efficient and attractive ways to eliminate these barriers.
3. Raising funds for improvements in accessibility.
4. Seeing construction through to fruition.

This 52-page book is overflowing with clarity and wisdom for congregations that are serious about accessibility, the ADA guidelines, problem-solving and construction. *Accessible Faith* challenges readers to create accessible worship spaces, to open the doors of religious and spiritual communities to easy-access hospitality. This is a manual with a mission. In the powerful last sentence of the book, Patterson and Vogel reflect the image and conscience of a barrier-free church, synagogue or mosque with the words “that greet visitors at houses of worship everywhere: All are welcome.” ■

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