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DisAbility Ministries Committee of The United Methodist Church

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The VOICE of the United Methodist Disability Connection

Greetings in Christ!

We hope those of you who faced a long, harsh winter are finally seeing the bitter weather come to an end as we linger in Lent and approach the rebirth of Easter.

This issue explores hidden disabilities which keep some of us isolated and unable to participate in church because of unknowing or unthinking actions on the part of others. Individuals who live with severe food or other allergies or who experience multiple chemical sensitivity can face life-threatening assaults in church. Residue from cleaning products, residual nut oils, fragrances from beauty products, and snacks with hidden allergens are present in our sanctuaries and fellowship halls every Sunday. People in their Sunday best with freshly laundered synthetic clothes and newly washed hair give off a variety of chemicals that most of us don't perceive. Add the chemicals from printed bulletins and the pollen from our flower arrangements and we create an unsafe situation for our members with allergies.

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This issue will help you learn to keep the air and food safe in your congregation so that all may receive the Good News of Easter and be in fellowship with each other. Thanks for all you do to make a difference.

Blessings,
Lynn Swedberg, Editor

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A Deacon's Heart for People with Invisible Disabilities

For most of my life I have served in United Methodist Church ministry settings, being born into a multiracial family with teaching missionary pastor parents in the foothills of Appalachia. I did not realize until my own adult life as a professional educator and teacher of teachers, that our emergency adoptive and foster care home that specialized in complex exceptional needs was really a case study in unconditional love centered around issues of compassion and justice. My 'Deacon's Heart' is to serve the at-risk, disadvantaged, and underserved populations. This fuels my passion to address the challenges of welcoming individuals with life-threatening invisible illnesses, such as allergies or chemical sensitivities, in the church setting and related church-sponsored activities beyond our walls. My own experiences while growing up in the church began when I developed a life-threatening response to cinnamon from an accidental overdose of homemade apple butter. Now during my adult life in ministry, I continue to find children and adults who need an advocate for a safe space for all members of the faith community and their guests to worship God and fully participate in all ministry activities of the church.



It is my belief and understanding that Jesus welcomes all to the Table. Indeed, the *Book of Discipline* (2012) speaks to the need for "openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world."¹ The *Discipline* also asserts the intent to "make all efforts to meet Americans with Disabilities (ADA) standards." From my experience, the Church looks primarily at physical and cognitive disabilities and misses the opportunity to focus on health-impairment disabilities that meet the criteria as a substantial limitation on a major life activity.² John Wesley called the faithful to fully experience the means of grace through prayer, worship, bible study, and Holy Communion. Yet, my sense of compassion and justice reaches the righteous anger "boiling" stage, just like Jesus cleaning out the Temple in John 2, when I observe that the very sacred acts that are intended to bring us into unity with God, our family of faith, and the world beyond our walls actually serve as acts of separation that leave behind those who have unique life-threatening invisible illnesses. These include allergies and chemical sensitivity/poison-responses to fragrances, cleaners, and other organic substances. How can we truly experience the love of God and love of neighbor when some of the "other" are feeling less than welcome and are unable to fully participate in God's mission of love?

The *Book of Discipline* reminds us that "The Church has a moral and spiritual obligation to nurture its nonparticipating members and indifferent members and to lead them into an active church relationship."⁴ If that disconnectedness is because of the fear and anxiety surrounding life-threatening invisible illnesses, then perhaps something positive can be done in the local church to change the dynamic to allow for healing and restoration of relationships. The *Book of Discipline* "urge[s] the Church and society to recognize and receive the gifts of the persons with disabilities to enable them to be full participants in the

community of faith" and "to be sensitive to, and advocate for. . .persons with all types and kinds of disabilities."⁴ I urge the community of faith to consider how we as a body truly welcome all to the Table by identifying and empowering Child / Member Care Invisible Illness Advocates who are willing to be the voice of the voiceless. In addition, I encourage all local churches to consider how to fold the unique concerns of those with invisible illnesses into Safe Sanctuary Policies and Disability Accommodation Plans.

References:

- 1 *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012*, ¶ 140
- 2 ADA §104.3 (j)(2)(i)(ii); ADA 29 C.F.R. § 1630.2(i)
- 3 *BOD*, ¶ 228
- 4 *BOD*, ¶ 162

Contributed by Nancy C. Grim Hunter, Ph.D, Certified Deacon Candidate in the Northern Illinois Conference. Pastor Nancy is the Director of Discipleship & Spiritual Growth at St. John's UMC of Oak Park with a specialized focus on Children's Ministry, and serves as Administrative Pastor - English Language Ministries for Elmwood Park UMC. She is Assistant Dean and Associate Professor at Chicago State University. Contact her by [email](#) for more information.

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Churches Show Hospitality Through Fragrance-Free Air

A friend wants to attend church but can't go inside without getting sick from the fragrances and chemicals, so she sits on the steps and tries to catch as much of the service as she can. A mother with asthma would love to be part of a local congregation but hasn't been able to sit through a worship service for fifteen years because of all the scented products used by members. A teenage daughter avoids the youth group because the fragrances worn by others give her a severe migraine headache. A son has severe allergic reactions from the pollen in the Easter lilies and has to stay home on Easter.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

For the health and consideration of other parishioners who attend this place of worship, please try to refrain from using perfume/cologne and other scented laundry or grooming and beauty products.

Thank you for your compassion.



FRAGRANCE FREE LIVING.COM

People with severe allergies and multiple chemical sensitivities have an invisible disability that is seldom considered when churches work to eliminate barriers to participation. People with sensitivities often report that their concerns are not taken seriously, and that members are offended when asked to avoid wearing perfume or using scented laundry products. How can we change the culture of our churches so that all of us can safely worship?

The Northern Alabama conference Disability Ministry team offers one possible model. They challenged churches to adopt a [Fragrance Reduction Policy](#) - essentially a covenant in which congregations commit to be fragrance free. Team convener Deb Wade introduced the issue in a recent newsletter article:

"Six percent of the U.S. population experiences medically diagnosed chemical sensitivity. Another fifteen percent self-reports this sensitivity. Did you know that 95% of the fragrances in colognes, perfumes, after-shave and hair care products, lotions, powders, some detergents and fabric softeners and other personal and clothing-care products are synthetic petrochemicals? The National Academy of Sciences has established that many of these chemicals are toxic."

A portion of the model policy reads "Whereas, we the people of Anywhere UMC take seriously the words of I Corinthians 12 that remind us that we are all one body in Christ Jesus and that, in order to be whole we need all parts of the body to be present; Whereas, we the people of Anywhere UMC understand that a growing number of our brothers and

sisters have diagnosed chemical sensitivities to fragrances we hereby covenant together to implement this policy for our church family."

Because a pastor's wife had severe sensitivities, [Boise First UMC](#) created a fragrance-free afternoon worship service. Worship took place in a stone chapel made with natural materials which could be cleaned differently than the main building. A more inclusive solution is to use a glassed-in "cry" room so participants can see the whole service. This room should be stripped of carpets and other off-gassing substances and natural flooring installed.

[Products to use](#) include stone, polished concrete, and ceramic tile. A separate ventilation system, or at least windows that open to a landscaped area other than a parking lot or street, help improve air quality. Posted signs request that only people who use no scented laundry or beauty products enter the room.



Several churches in Minnesota are working to eliminate the use of fragrances. [Moose Lake UMC](#) states their fragrance-free policy on the welcome page of their website, mentioning it in the context of their accessibility features. For the past nine years people attending worship have used fragrance-free products because they know it makes all the difference for several active church members. The church also avoids any use of fresh flowers. [Richfield UMC](#) (Minneapolis) includes this notice in their Sunday bulletin:

Fragrances: Many persons have allergies to fragrances. Because we want to make community life accessible to all, we ask that you refrain from wearing fragrance while at church. Additionally please note that the first 3 pews on the pulpit side of the sanctuary are reserved for those who are fragrance free.

Establishing a fragrance-free area in the sanctuary may help people with milder sensitivities and allergies. [Aldersgate UMC](#) in Carrollton, TX, marks their fragrance-free section with green ribbons. Education is ongoing in this and other churches, as it takes time to revise habits of a life-time. Parish nurses can be especially effective in teaching the congregation how to reduce fragrance and chemical use for the health of all of us.



Fragrances aren't the only consideration. Chemicals in photocopied bulletins, petroleum-based candles, scented/harsh cleaning products, and weed killer or pesticide applications can trigger symptoms in people who are sensitive. A fragrance-free policy must involve the trustees, custodian, church school teachers, kitchen committee, office manager, and anyone else who has authority to purchase or who uses chemical products. Success comes only when all parties understand and contribute to this ministry.

Churches that go the extra length to accommodate people with allergies, asthma, and chemical sensitivity have found they attract worshipers from a variety of backgrounds who are delighted to finally be able to worship in community without getting sick. Pastor Rich Edwards from Moose Lake, where four of the 30 regular worshipers have a sensitivity or severe allergies, said "The people with these sensitivities are extremely grateful to find a church that welcomes them and accommodates them."

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When a grade school boy developed anaphylactic shock and was hospitalized after touching a church door handle that had a bit of nut oil on it, Anderson UMC in Cincinnati, OH realized the need to develop a nut-free policy. Their [Nut-Free Campus](#) procedures have attracted more families with children with such allergies. The church website spells out the policy and lists many items to be avoided which contain nut products, but also notes that it is impossible to guarantee full compliance. Signs throughout the church remind people to avoid bringing food with nuts, and members instruct others new to the church in allergy-safe procedures.



A child with a severe nut allergy motivated Central UMC in Endicott, NY, to develop an [Allergy Aware](#) program and [policy](#). Parents of children with such allergies are required to provide an emergency plan with details on emergency treatment. The form is kept in the church kitchen as well as the child's classroom. The church also has a general food allergy emergency procedure. This church found some resistance to eliminating nuts, and realized the importance of providing alternative foods for people who need protein rather than sweet snacks who had relied on peanuts in the past. Once members understood the reason for the restrictions and the life-threatening nature of nut allergies they began to accept the changes.

The Arkansas Annual Conference considers [food allergy safety](#) a part of creating [Safe Sanctuaries](#) and has a policy and forms that can be adapted for local church use. An incident in a local church where a child had a severe allergic reaction stimulated a district superintendent to make allergy safety a priority. The [policy](#) was endorsed and issued by the bishop and cabinet, which led many churches to adopt an Allergy Awareness Policy and Action Plan. Karen Swales, conference Children's Ministries Coordinator emphasizes the need for food allergy planning when she gives workshops on vacation Bible School, and provides attendees with a list of generally safe snack foods in addition to teaching which foods to avoid.



Most adults can advocate for themselves and select safe foods if provided with ingredient information. Manito UMC in Spokane, WA, developed the "Potluck Alert" program with a series of wipe-off cards that clip to dishes to alert people of potential allergens. There are four different types of labels. In addition to Allergy Alert cards, which list the most common food allergens, there are Meat Alert labels helpful for vegetarians, Diet Alert cards to label items that are low-fat or gluten or dairy-free, and Special Alert cards for additional information or to attach the recipe. The biggest challenge is remembering to use the labels consistently. Several churches have realized the need for one or two individuals who assume ownership of the program and ensure that the food labels are available and visible for each event. Please download the [Potluck Alert program instructions](#) and [labels](#), which are free for use by any church.

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Prevention Strategies to Address Invisible Allergies/ Sensitivities

PLANNING AND TRAINING

- * Identify Child / Member Care Invisible Illness Advocate(s)
- * Train Ministry Staff / Laity / Advocates

- * Request and keep on file Individualized Emergency Action Plan / Health Care Plans
- * Create Event Strategy Plans for worship, Sunday school, activities, mission trips, church sponsored trips or activities scheduled in member's homes, etc.
- * Add language to Safe Sanctuary Policy to address restrictions on sharing food and chemical sensitivity triggers among children, etc.
- * Draft and follow a policy to eliminate chemical agents, solvents, perfumes, colognes, deodorizers, air fresheners, high-level pollen-producing plants, etc.
- * Develop Peer Parental / Member Compliance Programs to avoid triggers

PROCEDURES WHEN MEMBERS HAVE SERIOUS ALLERGIES

- * Replace the use of food as a reward or incentive in church discipleship activities
- * Avoid eating and drinking in the Sunday School classrooms / worship space
- * Teach members to immediately wash their hands after meals
- * Modify crafts that involve products with known triggers
- * Do not bring furry animals into classrooms; arrange safety-zones in the event that a service animal is part of the church community

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

- * Establish safety zones (rooms, tables, sections)
- * Using only environmentally-friendly cleaning agents, and apply only during non-program hours
- * Install and regularly maintain an air-purification system

Submitted by Dr. Nancy Grim Hunter

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Resources

[Accommodating Persons with Environmental Sensitivities: Challenges and Solutions](#) - webinar and articles from an ADA/ accessibility perspective

[Allergy Free Table](#) - provides free downloadable Nut-Free signs.

[Chemically Sensitive Find Sanctuary in Fragrance-Free Churches](#) - Huffington Post Article by Lynne Peeples

[Churches and MCS](#) - resources on multiple chemical sensitivity compiled by ADNet

[Cleaner Indoor Air Campaign](#) - articles on MCS and churches

[Food Allergy Research and Education](#) - site with links to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan forms and the CDC "Voluntary Guidelines for Managing Food Allergies in Schools and Early Care Education Programs."

[Fragrance-Free Environments](#) - helpful information for building congregational awareness

[Fragrance Free Living](#) - source for downloadable church poster and other information

[How to be Fragrance-Free](#) - general information and links

[Sample Fragrance Free School Policy](#) - from the American Lung Association

[Snack Policy](#) - from Annandale UMC (VA) Early Learning Program and Weekday Pre-School offers helpful lists of alternative snack options.

[Unscented and Fragrance-Free Product List](#) - personal care and laundry products

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Upcoming Events

Mar. 20, 2015 That All May Worship - 2015 Embracing Inclusion Virginia Beach, VA

National leaders in faith and disability present strategies for welcoming and including people with disabilities in your church. [Register here](#) for this annual ecumenical event.

Mar 30, Apr 27, Jun 29 Supporting Spirituality & Inclusive Congregational Supports

This free webinar series brings together panels of persons working in the field to discuss best practices for churches and agencies to reach out and include especially persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Register for upcoming sessions and access archives of the first two sessions at the [Collaborative on Faith and Disability website](#).

May 26-30 Summer Institute on Theology and Disability Atlanta, GA

The sixth annual Summer Institute brings together international academics, theologians, practitioners and others - people with and without labeled disabilities - to explore the inclusive intersections of theology and disabilities. For more information refer to the sponsoring [Bethesda Institute website](#).

July 2015 VIM mission trip Bolivia

This trip is especially seeking special educators to continue teaching local professionals and caregiver, following up on conferences given over the past several years. Contact [Rich Schultze](#) for more information and to sign up.

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Global Ministries Health News

The UM Association of Ministers with Disabilities

will hold a biennial meeting in Dallas on July 30 - August 1st. Refer to their [website](#) for registration information and a Call for Papers. Deadlines are soon approaching.

The UM Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries Committee

is beginning a newsletter and would love to add you to their list of subscribers, especially if your church has a ministry with Deaf people. Send an email to the committee address to be placed on the subscriber list. The Committee is eager to learn about all current Deaf ministries in UM churches. Learn more about their work on the committee [website](#).

The Health Ministry Network

is searching for faith community/ parish nurses and health ministries. Please take this [survey](#) if you are serving in a health ministry role so the Network can better serve you and your church. Contact Health Ministry consultant [Mary Slutz](#) to be added to the newsletter subscriber list.

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We thank the churches mentioned above for their pioneering work in this new facet of disability ministry. Please check out all the links above for useful policies, procedures, information sheets, and program examples. Some of the links, such as the Potluck Alert program, take you to a pdf document you can use immediately. If the links don't work you may need to open the newsletter in a different browser. Let us know if you cannot open the pdf files and need them in Word format. Much of this information and additional learning activities for increasing congregational awareness will be placed on our website.

We will be eager to hear what you do with the concepts introduced in this issue,

and hope you will share your ideas and successes so that others may learn from them. May the day come when all of us can find a safe place to worship and learn, when all of us can celebrate Easter in community.



DisAbility Ministries Committee of

The United Methodist Church

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