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Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law by President Bush in 1990. The ADA was created, in part, to assure that a person in a wheelchair is able to move from their car into a building, and access all public areas of the building without assistance. Most churches constructed prior to 1990 did not meet the design requirements of the ADA. Virtually every church, therefore, will need to consider the ADA when renovating existing facilities or building a new church.

Churches are finding that when they plan a building addition or renovation, local authorities will require the church to upgrade most, if not all, of their existing facilities to the ADA codes. An overview of some ADA requirements follows:

All required emergency exits must be wheelchair accessible with sidewalks out to the parking areas. Doors must be at least 3' wide with lever handles or panic bars. Any changes in elevation must be made by means of ramps of specific design or approved elevators. About 2% of the parking spaces should be 8' wide with 5' access lanes between spaces. Reserved space must be provided in the sanctuary for wheelchairs equal to two percent of the total seating. Restrooms must have a 5' x 5' stall with out-swinging door, grab bars, handicap toilet and sink.

Some of the ADA is subject to local interpretation. Some states interpret public areas to include the platform and baptistry areas. In some states, all restrooms must meet ADA codes, including those in nurseries or classrooms. Some states require fire alarms to be visible as well as audible.

Any church will benefit by making their building more accessible to the elderly and disabled. Remember, however, any renovation work involving the structural, electrical or mechanical systems of your church will probably require a building permit.

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