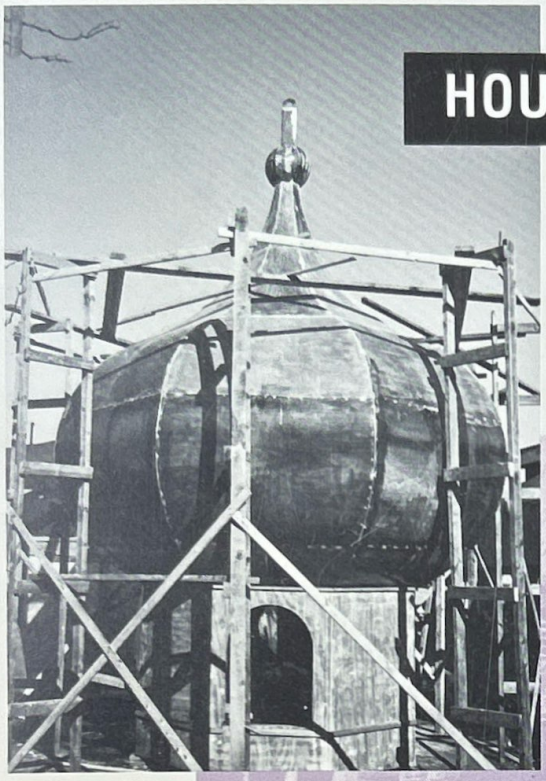
HOUSES OF WORSHIP OPEN TO ALL



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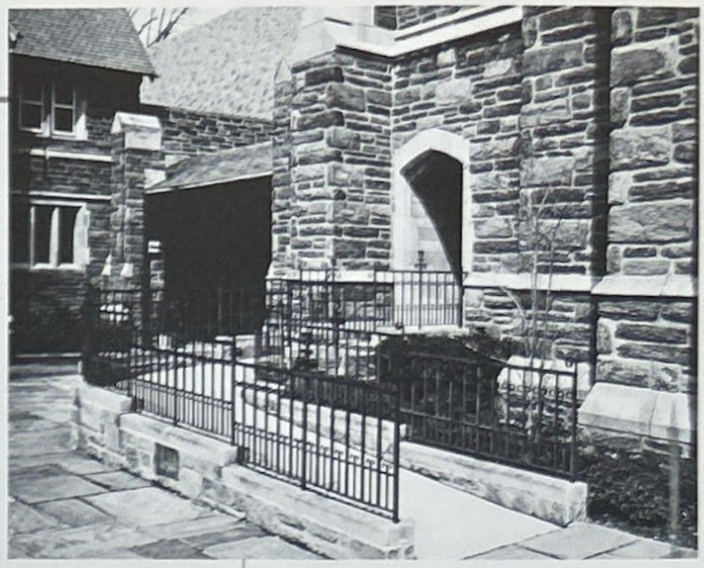
INSPIRED

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION DEVOTED TO THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

Vol. VI No. 1 Spring 1991

says. "Most congregations say that it's something they simply did not think of." He adds however, that once recommendations are made, movement toward implementation is often very slow because of fiscal considerations.



Above: At Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, a handsomely designed ramp has been incorporated into the facade's side entrance. (J. Randall Cotton)

Opposite: A diagram from *Accessibility Audit for Churches* illustrates the many physical barriers persons with disabilities may encounter in a religious building.

MOVEMENT TOWARD ACCESSIBILITY

While new religious structures must comply to current building codes, all of which include requirements for handicapped accessibility, the ADA does not require religious structures to comply to handicapped accessibility standards. There are two exceptions to this rule. First, if a religious property owner receives federal funding for its programs, it will be required to comply with the federal accessibility standards. Second, if a portion of the religious building is rented or donated to a separate organization for a non-religious controlled use, such as an independent day care, senior citizens center, or performance arts theater, that non-religious entity which uses the space may be subject to accessibility standards. However, for example, religious-sponsored day care or seniors citizens programs will not be required to comply.

A number of congregations have recognized accessibility as part of their mission to minister to everyone, whether or not they can negotiate the steps up to the front door. A publication produced by the Lutheran Church in America, *Space for Physically Impaired Persons*, makes the point clearly:

> Our church buildings, in the best tradition, witness to our theology. Through stone and brick and wood, they proclaim to the one who experiences them the message of God's grace through Jesus Christ, offered freely to all persons. The very broad general category of all persons must include persons with handicapping conditions.

In 1980, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church resolved that monies it provided exclusively for the construction of churches, camps, colleges, or church-related facilities must "meet minimum guidelines in their plans for barrier-free construction."

At Philadelphia's Arch Street Friends Meeting House, Director Helen File says that nothing was required of the 1804-vintage brick meeting house, but the Meeting recognized that the building needed to accommodate all members. The building's steps proved difficult for members in wheelchairs, but also for "older members who have trouble bending their knees," says File. In 1968, Arch Street installed an elevator and accessible toilet stalls but went even further in 1989

continued on next page

Elements Within A Handicapped Needs Assessment

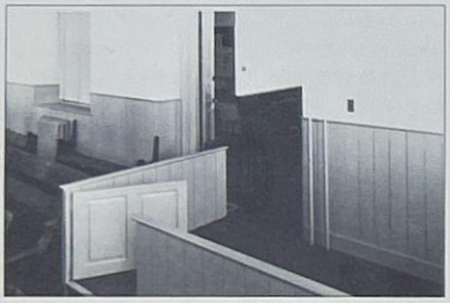
Exterior	Interior
Parking	Assembly Seating
Stairs	Corridors and Doors
Doors	Elevators
Walks	Stairs
Ramps	Restrooms
	Signs and Alarms
	Telephones
	Water Fountains
	Kitchens

HOUSES OF WORSHIP OPEN TO ALL

MAKING OLDER RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS ACCESSIBLE TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

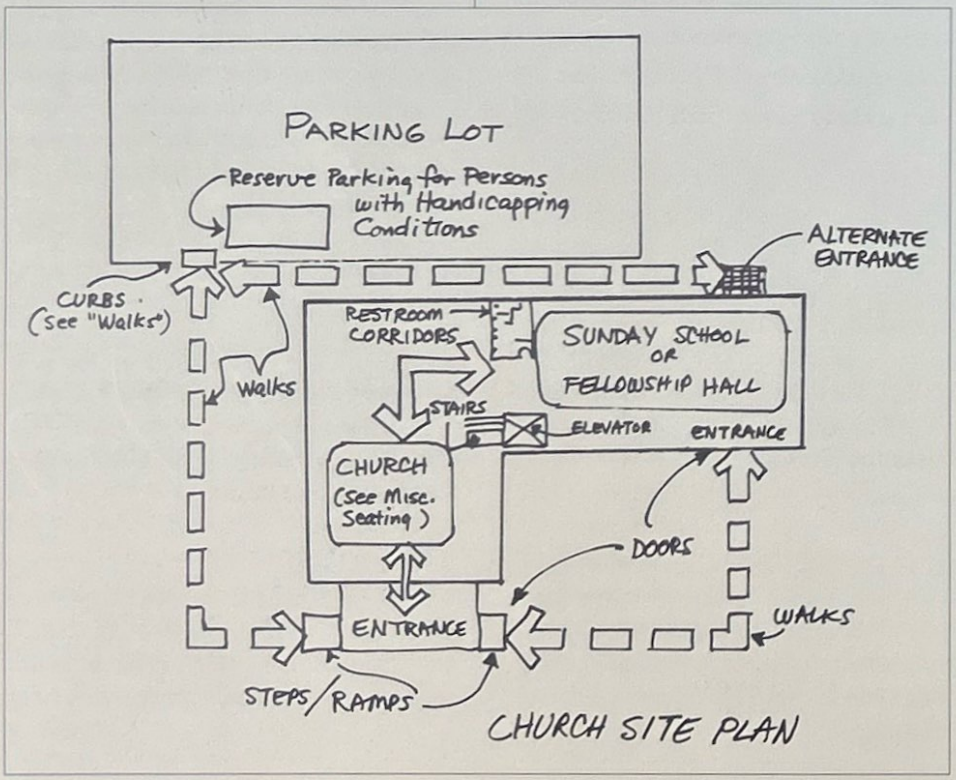
by Martin H. McNamara

Martin H. McNamara is a freelance writer in Philadelphia

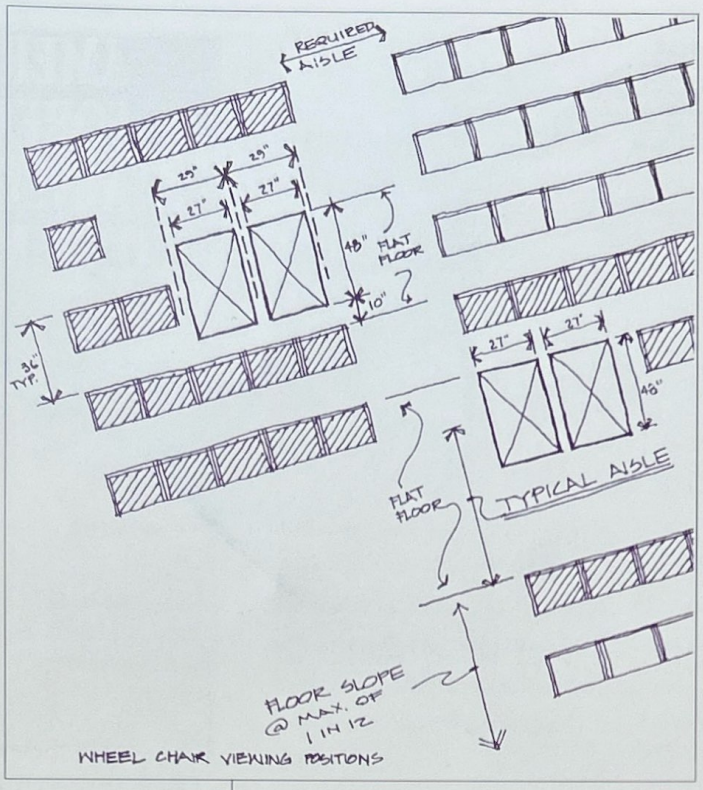


This platform at Arch Street Friends Meeting House in Philadelphia allows people in wheelchairs to participate in the service. (J. Randall Cotton)

On July 26, 1990, President George Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), legislation which is expected be a watershed in the development of rights for persons with disabilities. It is intended to do for the rights of 43 million disabled Americans what the Civil Rights Act did for the rights of minorities. The ADA will have an enormous impact, directly affecting communication, transportation, accommodations, and employment environments. By preventing discrimination on the basis of a disability, it is hoped that the legislation will allow persons with handicaps to more easily join the mainstream of American society. Yet, one area where the ADA will have an uncertain impact is on the spiritual lives of persons with disabilities. Because of the separation of church and state, there are no provisions within the legislation to address the physical barriers in the nation's historic religious buildings. "Every church can expect to have one out of four members of its congregation handicapped at some point in their life," reports the *Accessibility Audit for Churches*, produced by the United Methodist Church. This figure may be surprising to those who attend religious services regularly, but many disabilities — such as heart, respiratory, vision or auditory difficulties — are not immediately apparent. Shirley Bouquin, chairman of the religious-accessibility subcommittee for the nonprofit Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy, Inc., adds that about 90% of persons with disabilities are not active in religious congregations, largely because of the physical barriers they encounter, particularly in older buildings. Bouquin sees a sad irony in the fact that most other segments of society have moved forward with accessibility ahead of religious institutions. "These are the places where it should have started, yet churches are the last institutions to address this issue." In the churches' defense, Architect Sam Harris, of The Philadelphia firm of Kieran Timberlake and Harris, cites lack of professional planning and lack of funding as the main reasons that owners of older religious buildings are not moving toward accessibility. Harris explains that his firm is frequently contacted to examine the fabric of religious buildings and recommend needed repairs. As part of his firm's services, Harris usually suggests that they examine code compliance, including curren standards for accessibility.



"The response is usually very positive," he



This diagram from *Accessible Church Buildings* shows how pews may be removed to create space for wheelchairs in the worship space.

when they added an exterior ramp in the rear of the building and made improvements to the rest room facilities.

Precise requirements for required accessibility will vary from state to state and, in some cases, from city to city. Most regulations are based on design standards developed by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), an independent organization which develops standards for a wide range of professions and industries. However, Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) are to be used as interim standards for meeting ADA requirements, especially when considering the removal of architectural barriers to provide access.

ANSI guidelines have been incorporated into many local, state, and federal regulations since 1961, and a religious institution may consult them for general guidance. However, a local building officer and architect should also be consulted to be sure that local code is accurately interpreted.

IMPLEMENTING ACCESSIBILITY

Congregations should address some internal questions when they decide to make their church handicapped accessible: Who is handicapped? What parts or aspects of our building are currently not sensitive to people with disabilities? How do we correct these deficiencies?

The answer to "Who is handicapped?" may seem obvious. To many, the idea of a "handicapped" individual suggests a wheelchair. This is a very incomplete view of the term. *Space for Physically Impaired Persons* defines persons with disabilities, in addition to people in wheelchairs, as those "who encounter barriers to buildings and programs":

- People who walk with difficulty;
- Individuals who use braces, crutches, and canes;
- Amputees, arthritics, and persons who have pulmonary or cardiac illnesses;
- People who are blind or have impaired vision;
- People who are deaf or have impaired hearing; and
- People who have coordination disabilities.

"Much of what is written regarding accessibility is aimed at wheelchairs." says Architect Walker Johnson, of the Chicago firm Holabird & Root. He recommends that a congregation's first step should be to assemble a committee which represents all persons with handicaps.

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