

in the life of their community. Some congregations are still in the planning stages, others have demonstrated a strong and lasting investment in the lives of people with disabilities. The National Organization on Disability's (NOD's) *Journey of a Congregation* offers one approach for considering where along this continuum a congregation finds itself, as well as where it envisions itself going (see Table 2.1). Early efforts often are characterized by growing awareness of barriers present within the congregation, a stirring among members to remove these obstacles, an articulation of the desire to be more welcoming, and initial conversations about proper starting points. As congregations deepen their commitment, plans give way to actions. New invitations to participate are extended, alterations are made to usual practices, attitudes begin to shift, and growth in the number of

**Table 2.1.** Journey of a congregation self-assessment tool

Level	Examples
Awareness	Recognition exists in some congregation members or the leadership that certain barriers are preventing children or adults with physical, sensory, or mental disabilities from gaining access to a full life of faith.
Internal advocacy	Advocacy is growing within the congregation to welcome people with disabilities as full participants and to remove barriers to this participation is evident.
Discussions	Concerns are raised about the ability of the congregation to meet these challenges and—with input from people with disabilities and other experts—solutions are identified.
Plans	Invitations are extended to people with disabilities to join the congregation as full members, action plans are devised to achieve barrier-removing goals, and formal commitments are made to welcome people with disabilities.
Accommodations	Accommodations are made to improve the participation of people with disabilities.
Welcoming environment	Appreciation is expressed for the changes being made and friendships are extended to people with disabilities and their family members.
Hurdles	Identification of architectural, communication, transportation, financial, or other barriers are made and ways are found to move forward in spite of them.
Inclusion	Increased participation of people with disabilities in worship, study, and service to others is seen, as well as increased comfort levels of members with a more diverse congregation.
Local outreach	Options are explored and action plans formulated for partnership opportunities with local agencies and organizations serving people with disabilities.

Level	Examples
Leadership	Lay members with disabilities are recruited for leadership roles within the congregation and willingness to accept and accommodate an ordained leader with disability is demonstrated.
Transformation	Ongoing transformation of the congregation into a place where children and adults with disabilities are welcomed, fully included, and treated with respect occurs.
External advocacy	An expanded advocacy role is evidenced for congregation members regarding the needs and rights of people with disabilities in the community at large.
Outreach	Successful strategies, insights, and effective practices are compiled and shared with other congregations and communities.
Sharing the story	The story of the transformation of the congregation is publicized through articles, presentations, and/or media events.

Adapted from National Organization on Disability. (2001). *The journey of a congregation*. Washington, DC: Author; adapted by permission.

people with disabilities in the congregation becomes apparent. Eventually, an entire congregation can be transformed. People with disabilities are woven throughout congregational life, new relationships are forged, and passive participation gives way to true membership. Recognizing the impact on their own community, congregations often begin reaching out to guide others interested in undertaking this same journey.

Most congregations are still in the beginning stages of this journey (LaRoque & Eisengood, 2005). But, point of entry is probably less important than the direction and pace at which you are moving. More than two thousand congregations have committed to embarking on this journey, as evidenced by their decision to join the NOD's *Accessible Congregations Campaign*. Each participating congregation affirms the inherent worth of all people as created in the image of God, commits to removing barriers that hinder people with disabilities from participating actively in the life of the congregation, and encourages all of its members to share their faith, gifts, and talents fully in the life of the congregation. Where on this journey is your congregation? Are you still waiting to embark? Can you yet catch a glimpse of your destination?

### **Beginning Your Journey: How Welcoming Is Your Congregation?**

Until this point, this chapter has focused on some of the marks of a welcoming congregation and the ways in which one's welcome might evolve.