

Disabilities and Inclusion - The Body of Christ Standing or Sitting

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What language do we use to be inclusive in asking people to participate in singing of hymns?

As a worship leader, it is always challenging to determine how to best invite worshippers in transitions for possible movements like standing for a hymn. There may be invitations projected on a screen or printed in an order of service. We want to ensure all are welcome and are aware but to suggest someone stand or rise in itself may be exclusionary for those for whom standing is not possible or is challenging. It can be so easy to create inequity due to our lack of consideration, or we have thought about it but have not found a solution. How many people using walkers discover someone removes their walker for the duration of the service, assuming it is best parked out of the way. People using wheelchairs or scooters have lots of situations of having a discussion with someone, forcing them to either look up to the speaker who is standing or to speak to their stomach, but that's another discussion for another day.

In my community of faith these words are projected and printed in the order of service:

- Rise in body or spirit (stand or remain sitting according to your comfort).

Is there some better wording than this?

Our print invitational wording assumes I can read the screen or order of service, or that I am following along closely, attentive to the details. If I can't see, and no verbal invitation is offered, than I may miss the movement and be miscued, or be left sitting wondering if I really should be sitting or standing and just what the rustling movement means. Something those sighted don't even consider as it is so natural to follow the visual flow and the audible cues make sense. Likewise someone not hearing, appreciates a visual cue to eliminate the confusion of not hearing something said verbally.

Many congregations might dismiss having these kinds of conversations, indicating they don't have "anyone like that" in their community of faith. That is a good conversation in itself. Why not?

People assume the right thing to do, for example, is to stand for a hymn, and that they may be judged or somehow questioned even if not directly for not participating when the invitation of standing is there, after all a break from sitting right? While some just don't have that privilege, there can be lots of reasons that someone might feel more comfortable to sit: care/supervision of another, safety for balance, comfort, exertion, energy, pain, not feeling well, insufficient space to comfortably stand, and a host of other reasons. For all communities of faith, no matter where they are at in discussions of equity, we all want visitors to come and to feel part of our worship. Visitors to any new environment want to know what is expected. Some sort of communication is needed in any worship service, thus inviting every community of faith to address this topic in some manner.

If I use a gesture such as raising my hand to provide visual guidance, it is not necessarily inclusive for those who cannot do so or those who will not see the invitational gesture. I have found it helpful as a worship leader to also offer verbal direction but what are the best words?

Verbally I tend to use one of these:

- Let us lift our voices in song as we sing hymn name and VU or MV #.
- Join me as we lift our voices in song as we sing hymn name and VU or MV #.
- Let's raise our voices in song as we sing hymn name and VU or MV #.
- I invite you to lift your spirits in song as we sing hymn name and VU or MV #.

In conversation with Dr. Thomas Reynolds of Emmanuel College, we continue to wrestle with words like **lift**, **raise**, and **rise** and the implications. Tom writes:

"...The only piece that remains awkward for me is the connotation that 'lifting' mean rising upward, which standing entails and which metaphorically conveys elevation/height as normative."

Tom has offered this invitation "please join in song, moving our bodies together in the spirit" and had the response of some sitting and some standing and the unexpected response of people joining hands for the singing.

Some may argue this is over-thinking about use of wording and implication, which is worth pondering. The conversation, however it goes, is about finding the most equitable way of inviting all to participate as the body of Christ.

Along with the equity of response to participate in the music is the desire to be inclusive in words spoken, read, prayed, and sung, do you have some suggestions?