

A Welcoming Library

Hospitality and Accessibility

“I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.”

– Revelation 3:20, New Revised
Standard Version Updated Edition

CARISSE MICKEY BERRYHILL

Since suffering a back injury, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of accessibility in public places. I recently spent a week at an academic conference at a grand old hotel, which, because of its “historic building” status, is mainly exempt from many current regulations about accessibility accommodations. I was constantly distracted by the numerous small discomforts and adjustments I had to make just to meet my needs and to navigate around using my walker. This required energy that, in a more considerate setting, could have been better invested in attention to the purposes of the conference.

While it’s true that there are often legal accessibility requirements in municipalities and states, those rules can be unevenly

applied or even absent. In locations affected by war or disaster, library staff must be sensitive to guests who have suffered debilitating injuries. Theological librarians are not dependent on laws to be hospitable. We have compelling ethical and spiritual resources that can be thoughtfully and prayerfully applied to improve access to library spaces, collections, and services. Among these resources, the principles of hospitality help ensure that libraries are welcoming spaces for visitors who have various limitations.

Principles of hospitality can be creatively adapted to various library settings, even when resources are scarce or local regulations are absent. Fundamentally, hospitality imagines the library experience differently by putting oneself in the guest's place.

To develop hospitable thinking, theological librarians attend to their own core values. Because theological communities value human life and virtues, librarians affiliated with these communities query their spiritual resources for principles of service to all readers. Welcome, not mere legal compliance, promotes the flourishing of the community as a whole.

1. **Principles of hospitality** enable the library to be gracious to its guests. Hospitality developed in antiquity as a social code to protect both villagers and traveling strangers. As sojourners, guests enter a social situation where they are not at home. Both the guest and the host are vulnerable because they are unknown to each other. Ancient humane principles of hospitality have guided hosts and guests around the world and throughout history in homes and communities. They are useful today in libraries, too.
2. The **principle of trust** protects both the guest and the host, providing confidence that the “do no harm” principle applies equally. The decision to trust is based on a social contract negotiated at entry. Both guest and host agree not to abuse that trust. In antiquity, the social contract was negotiated by testing the guest. A guest who passed the test was received into protected status. In modern societies, credentials or registration serve the function of identifying the guest. Reciprocally, the library provides access to the resources the guest seeks and protects confidential information about the guest.

3. The **principle of welcome** receives the presence of the guest as a gift, not a problem. In antiquity, the sojourner brought news, perhaps tales of adventures, or ballads. Theological librarians have the spiritual capacity to see every person as created by God and endowed with unique gifts. As the Lord said, “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me” (NRSVUE, Rev. 3:20). The phrase, “and you with me,” shows hospitality is not one-way. In the divine economy, it is reciprocal. The guest brings a blessing. A librarian who understands this principle welcomes each guest.
4. The **principle of imagination** seeks attentive understanding of what the guest’s needs might be by imagining oneself as the guest, carefully observing the library’s spaces, decentering the librarian’s own experience, and centering the potential guest’s experience of the spaces and services. There are many resources to which a librarian can turn for help (see the list at the end of this chapter and the following essays). But the most important resource is the librarian’s commitment to imagining how a guest might experience the library so that a thoughtful welcome will meet the needs of the library’s visitors.
5. The **principle of independence** pre-considers strategies of accommodation so that the guest will not be required to ask for help to access the library and its resources. Autonomy and dignity go together. If instruction about the use of library tools is needed, the goal is to prepare the guest to function as independently as possible. A hospitable library has physical arrangements that liberate its guests to focus their energy not on gaining access but on achieving their information goals, consulting with the librarian if desired about sources useful to that end.

Spaces

As we consider hospitable thinking, the place to begin is with the physical spaces of the library, imagining ourselves with whatever

mobility, sensory, and communicative differences may characterize the guests we will welcome to the library.

If we stand outside the library, it is useful to ask the following: What approach to the library's doors is available for a mobility-limited visitor? Is that access route clearly marked? Are there stairs at the front of the library, or is there a ramp to the door? If not, can we imagine how to smooth the path for a visitor with mobility limitations? Is there an automatic door opener at the entry? If not, is there a doorbell to request entry? Failing that, can a library worker see that someone is at the door and go open the door? At the entry, is directional signage clearly visible, with good visual contrast? Are directional signs posted in local languages?

Once inside the library, can we visually identify the main service point? Does that service point have a lowered counter section so the guest can sit directly across from or beside a library worker? Are interior signs that direct visitors to emergency exits, restrooms, service points, collection areas, and worktables clear, posted at a visible height for a wheelchair user, and in local languages? If there is a separate help desk, does it have appropriate signage, seating, and consultation space?

As we imagine settling in to work, we evaluate whether readers' tables are at a height a wheelchair will fit under. Is there sufficient clearance around the tables for a visitor's assistive device, such as a scooter, wheelchair, walker, or crutches? Or are there too many chairs around tables? If so, who will notice that problem and move some chairs aside? If the guest is in a section of the library not visible from the help desk, can they request assistance via cell phone or a library pager?

At break time, are the restrooms accessible to people with disabilities? Are toilet compartments large enough for wheelchair entry and transfer? Are there handrails beside the toilets? Can a guest in a wheelchair reach the sink, the hand soap, and the paper towels? If the library is in an area where such fixtures are not required by law, assistance must be improvised. The library could even supply a trained gender-appropriate helper if the physical design of the building is inadequate for independent use.

Collections

Access to the library's collections must also be hospitably imagined from the perspective of the guest who may have mobility, sensory, or communicative differences. Most print collections are shelved in stacks that require reaching, lifting, or bending to get a book. How tall are the stacks? Are the aisles between ranges of shelves wide enough for access? Are library collections shelved on more than one floor? If so, is there an elevator or ramp? If not, how can a guest request help retrieving a book? Is there an alternative to patron retrieval, such as a paper call slip or a request system accessible through a cell phone? Does the catalog software provide an option to generate a list and send it to the library desk for retrieval?

Are sources available in local languages? Is directional signage available in local languages? Are descriptive materials about exhibits, services, and the building available in local languages in print or online? Is signage in large print with high contrast?

Electronic and media collections present significant challenges to people with sensory limitations, such as impaired vision. If we provide electronic collections, what assistive technologies should accompany them? If the library cannot afford assistive technologies, imagine how library staff will be trained to work effectively alongside guests. Is the library's catalog online? Where are the terminals to access the catalog? Do they require standing, or can a seated user reach them?

Even a small collection of children's books and child-sized furniture offer a welcome to a visiting parent and children who accompany them. I used to keep a box of small dime-store plastic critters—dinosaurs, reptiles, bugs—in a bottom drawer to give to children. As the parent and child left the library, the parent would report that the child had behaved well. I would open the drawer and say, "Pick the one that will gross out your mother the most." That produced giggles and continued good behavior on the next visit.

Services

For many librarians, the traditional "reference interview" is central to providing hospitable service. Library visitors, however, may think

asking for help is “interrupting.” A seated librarian may look “too busy” to be interrupted, barricaded behind a counter and computer monitor. Access and welcome are communicated not only by eye contact and a smile, but also by furniture placement that facilitates side-by-side conversation. Counter height can be a significant barrier, especially for guests who use wheelchairs. So, we must imagine creative ways to present ourselves as welcoming.

Imagine how different the welcome would be if a library staff member were to meet guests at the door and walk a little way with them into the library. Such a conversation will naturally lead to learning what the visitor has come to accomplish, guiding the guest to good resources, and assisting their getting settled at a workstation to search the library’s catalog or databases. This library welcome is also very useful in understanding what accessibility needs the guest may have, without the guest having to point them out.

When libraries provide programs, hospitality requires exhibits, special programs, and instructional sessions be thoughtfully designed to engage all guests, including those with sensory limitations such as impaired sight or hearing, mobility issues, or communicative differences. In some cases, programs may need to be presented in more than one language, with a translator present to provide sign language or oral interpretation. Illustrative materials should be designed for low vision or color blindness. A guest with speech difficulties might prefer to participate by writing or drawing. Library programs should not only be useful but also accessible to a wide range of guests. It might be effective to ask attendees to register in advance and to indicate which accommodations, if any, would be helpful.

In general, legal codes require architectural adaptations to ensure accessibility by large assistive devices, such as ramps for wheelchairs, wider doors, and electric door openers, among other measures. But where such remedies are not legally required, we must imagine a plan to create a welcoming space where the visitor can be as independent as possible. When the welcome requires direct assistance, the library staff provides it graciously and immediately. No one is too busy to be considerate.

Guests with disabilities may sometimes be accompanied by a caregiver. Librarians should communicate directly with the guest first, and only secondarily with the caregiver. People with accessibility limitations often prefer to help themselves and may even refuse offered help. Therefore, librarians, respecting the principle of

independence, need to have the sensitivity and imagination to have already, in advance, arranged the library's spaces and services so self-help is possible.

Some librarians may fear accessibility is expensive. The expenses of library hospitality may be less than expected. Even if funds may not allow for modifications of the building or shelving or the purchase of high-end technology, librarians with hospitable imaginations may use thoughtful furniture arrangement, a wooden ramp, some printed or hand-lettered signs with high contrast, cell phone apps, and—most of all—courteous interest to bridge the gaps between a guest's limitations and their successful use of the library. Where there are not sufficient financial resources to carry out physical modifications to the building, staff training and imagination can still welcome the guest with courtesy and dignity.

Training library staff for assistance to library guests should be routine. For example, library staff should try to navigate the library's entry, workspaces, restrooms, and stacks in a wheelchair or with crutches so their imaginations are informed by physical rehearsal. The librarian will incorporate accessibility training into the orientation of new library staff, such as seminary students. Asking student employees to conduct periodic accessibility audits will help them learn to see and correct impediments.

Employees of the library and library volunteers may themselves have mobility, sensory, or communicative limitations, either temporary or permanent. I know of one library whose most efficient shelver for many years was a barely verbal volunteer. In another case, a volunteer with severe mobility limitations cataloged hundreds of items. Attentive conversation and collaboration with such library workers will significantly help the librarian imagine how spaces, collections, and services can be more accessible.

The theological librarian's commitment to the principles of hospitality sets the tone for all the library's services, as manifested in its resources and physical layout. This commitment springs not merely from legal requirements but from the librarian's spiritual and ethical values, which affirm human dignity and agency. The hospitality principles of trust, welcome, imagination, and independence empower the librarian to welcome each guest as a blessing.

Recommended open-access resources

Library Accessibility Alliance. 2024. *Resources*. <https://libraryaccessibility.org/resources>.

Sherman, Melina. 2022. *Accessibility in Libraries: A Landscape Review*. American Library Association and Knology. <https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/tools/content/230317-ppo-ltc-access-landscape-review-UPDATE.pdf>.

Winkelstein, Julie A., and Nancy Bolt, eds. 2024. *IFLA Guidelines for Making Libraries Accessible for People with Disabilities*. IFLA Equitable and Accessible Library Services Section. <https://repository.ifla.org/handle/20.500.14598/3719>.

World Health Organization and World Bank. 2011. *World Report on Disability*. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/44575>.

Related material by Carisse Mickey Berryhill

Berryhill, Carisse M. 2005. "From Dreaded Guest to Welcoming Host: Paul and Hospitality in the Book of Acts." In *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement*, edited by Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann. Wipf and Stock.

Berryhill, Carisse M. 2013. "The Guest Brings the Blessing: Hospitality in Theological Librarianship." *Summary of Proceedings: Sixty-seventh Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association*: 84-89. <https://serials.atla.com/proceedings/issue/view/43>.